



Reaction of the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC) to the EU Commission Staff Working Document “Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning”

Preamble

The European Commission published a Commission Staff Working Document “Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning” on 8 July 2005. On the basis of this Working Document a European-wide consultation is taking place among policy makers, social partners, stakeholders and experts in qualifications systems.

The *Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen* (AEC) is one such stakeholder. The AEC represents the music sector in European higher education with a membership of 226 institutions that train for the music profession, covering all European countries (including the new member states, the accession countries and European countries outside the EU). Most of these institutions have higher education status and are participating fully in the developments initiated by the Bologna Declaration Process. The AEC sees it as one of its most important objectives to pursue an active policy towards the Bologna Declaration developments, which is reflected by the extensive AEC On-line Bologna Handbook¹, where a large amount of information can be found developed with the needs of the professional music training sector in mind.

The AEC therefore welcomes this opportunity to react to the Working Document. This response has been formulated for the AEC by the ‘Tuning’ Working Group, which has been established in the ERASMUS Thematic Network for Music ‘Polifonia’. This working group has the aim to study relevant European issues in relation to higher education from the perspective of professional music training and make recommendations on the implementation of these issues in the sector. The Thematic Network ‘Polifonia’² is coordinated by the AEC.

Before responding to the questions that are the most relevant for the higher music education sector, it is important to point out a few important specificities of this particular sector:

- The European institutions offering higher music education form an integral part of the European Higher Education Area. They offer first, in many cases second and, in some, third cycle degree programmes. They have recently agreed a common set of generalised Descriptions of Learning Outcomes that are not only relevant to the sector and the music profession, but also compatible with the Shared Dublin Descriptors³.
- There are, however, some peculiarities in higher music education when compared to other sectors of higher education. Among these are:
 1. the different lengths of time typically required for different types of musical training
 2. the highly individual nature of musical talent and the correspondingly individual teaching and learning processes

¹ The AEC On-line Bologna Handbook can be visited in English, French and German at www.aecinfo.org/bologna

² More information about ‘Polifonia’ can be found at www.polifonia-tn.org

³ These descriptions of learning outcomes can be found on the AEC On-line Bologna Handbook: www.aecinfo.org/bologna

3. the competitive basis upon which musicians are generally employed;
 4. (international) mobility is already one of the key features of the musical profession.
- Tools such as the EQF will never fully be able to catch the essence of professional music training where students are constantly striving for the highest artistic levels in ways that are often unique to them as individuals. A qualifications framework may provide a useful, even necessary context in which to locate their learning, but it can never capture the range of factors that would be necessary to ensure excellence in higher music education is maintained.

Bearing this in mind we will now respond to the questions formulated for the consultation process.

The rationale of an EQF

- *Are the most important objectives and functions to be fulfilled by an EQF those set out in the consultation document?*

When approaching the objectives and the functions of the EQF from the perspective of the professional music training sector in Europe, it is important to understand that this sector has a high level of diversity, as it is in many ways linked to national cultural traditions. This situation has both an advantage and a disadvantage:

- The advantage is the richness of diverse traditions and approaches, which is unique in the world. The AEC therefore finds it especially crucial that the intention of the EQF is to function as a meta-framework, rather than replacing existing national and/or sectoral frameworks. National and sectoral frameworks are necessary to preserve the unique diversity of European higher music education. To put it in EQF's own words: for the EQF, a "best fit match" is important, but should not be turned into "precise sets of outcomes for each specific level". This is important for two reasons. Firstly, the music sector and the labour markets for professional musicians in various countries have their own, wide-ranging characteristics, and this diversity cannot be accounted for in one overarching framework. Secondly, it is precisely this diversity that forms one of the core strengths of the European music profession - it keeps the profession vital, which is one of its "unique selling points" and attracts the best musicians from all over the world.
- The disadvantage of this cultural diversity, however, is that it results in many problems with the recognition and comparability of studies and qualifications, caused by a strong diversity of educational systems, study programmes and diplomas. One can expect that the Bologna Declaration Process will have a positive impact by making this diverse situation more comparable, but as in some countries professional music training is not recognised at the higher education level or professional music training institutions exist at other levels in addition to the higher education level, the Bologna Declaration Process is only partly relevant to this situation. The levels, as described in the EQF, can therefore be of great use, in particular when taking into account that the importance of qualifications in the music sector will increase due to changes in the profession.

- *What is needed to make the EQF work in practical terms (for individual citizens, education and training systems, the labour market)?*

The most important point is that it should be kept simple and readable. Already, with the Bologna Declaration Process taking shape, we are seeing the first effects of the implementation of the 3-cycle structure in higher education. It is to be expected that this will result into a higher level of transparency and comparability of professional music training

studies and qualifications at higher education level. At the same time, however, we also see that this transparency and comparability may be complicated by differences of length and exact titles (e.g. for 1st cycle degrees, names such as Bachelor of Music, Bachelor of Arts in Music, Licence, etc are being used) of the various cycles. The EQF will facilitate the comparability of such degrees.

The reference levels and descriptors

• *Does the 8-level reference structure sufficiently capture the complexity of lifelong learning in Europe?*

Seen from the perspective of the music sector, the 8-level reference structure is an interesting approach, as it indeed attempts to capture the complexity of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is a natural phenomenon in the field of music. Professional musicians start learning their art often at a very young age and continue to learn and teach music up to (and in many cases even after) their retirement; this makes a career in music the ultimate example of lifelong learning. With this in mind, the following remarks can be made.

- The 8-level reference structure does sufficiently capture the complexity of lifelong learning in relation to higher music education, which encompasses levels 5-8. We would like to point out, however, that in drawing upon the Shared Dublin Descriptors it is very important to do so fully and completely. The Dublin Descriptors were conceived to capture all kinds of higher education, potentially including higher music education. They therefore contain footnotes and a glossary, both of which widen the perspective of the descriptors. These, or their equivalent, should become an integral part of the EQF. It could even be considered to refer to versions of the Dublin Descriptors that have been adapted for use in particular disciplines, such as music: an example are the 'Dublin/Polifonia Descriptors for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle awards in higher music education', which have been annexed to this document in a first draft version.
- When looking at the relation between the levels of education leading to higher music education and higher music education itself, a remark must be made. In many countries, this relationship is less straightforward than it would be in other disciplines. Musical training prior to higher music education often cannot be characterised as formal education taking place within regular schools, but as informal and non-formal education taking place in public or private music schools, with private teachers or even autonomously. The concept of 'earlier acquired competencies' is therefore of critical importance. However, we consider it questionable whether it is possible to use ECTS in relation to non-formal and informal educational settings and would therefore recommend a shift of attention from the use of ECTS to the use of learning outcomes and competencies for the recognition of such 'earlier acquired competencies'.
- For most musicians, training does not stop at first, second or third cycle level. After graduating from higher education, they enter the profession but will carry on studying and learning for the rest of their lives. However, it remains a question whether lifelong learning activities following an education at the highest levels will be easily captured in the current EQF.

• *Do the level descriptors, in table 1, adequately capture learning outcomes and their progression in levels?*

In general, we can say that in principle they do, but considering the importance of informal and non-formal training in music education and considering the individuality of the learning processes in music, any standardisation should be taken to be approximate.

More specifically, we would like to refer in this context to the relationship between the learning outcomes as described in the 8 levels of the EQF and the Key Competences as developed in the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme⁴. One of these 8 Key Competences is cultural expression. As this Key Competence is obviously relevant for our sector, we do find it important to point out that, although the Commission document states on page 29 that this is one of the competences that have been integrated in the 'personal and professional competences' of the EQF level descriptors, the word 'cultural' does not feature even once in the level descriptors, whereas 'social and 'ethical' issues are mentioned several times. We would recommend making the references to the key competence cultural expression more direct, as it is clear that respect for cultural diversity and the need for intercultural dialogue and understanding are one of the corner stones of European integration.

- *What should be the content and role of the 'supporting and indicative information' on education, training and learning structures and input (table 2)?*

It should be formulated in the broadest possible terms in order to encompass informal and non-formal training, which are of utmost importance for music training.

- *How can your national and sectoral qualifications be matched to the proposed EQF levels and descriptors of learning outcomes?*

Sectoral qualifications in music can be matched on the higher education level. This will be one the objectives for the 'Tuning' Working Group in the framework of the 'Polifonia' project in the near future. The lower levels, however, may need other kinds of validation in many countries.

National Qualifications Frameworks

- *How can a National Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning be developed in your country – reflecting the principles of the EQF-be established?*

Since the AEC is a European organisation, it cannot answer this question directly. The AEC does, however, offer support on national and institutional levels and will use the EQF to foster European co-operation and comparability, as it uses the Dublin Descriptors at present in this respect and has developed a common set of descriptions of learning outcomes for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles in higher music education.

- *How, and within which timescale, can your national qualifications systems be developed towards a learning outcomes approach?*

Again, this is not something that the AEC can answer. It will differ from country to country and is the responsibility of national governments, national associations and individual institutions.

⁴ See "Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning", European Commission November 2005

Sectoral qualifications

- *To which extent can the EQF become a catalyst for developments at sector level?*

For higher music education, the EQF will function not so much as a catalyst, but more as supporting tool for actions and activities that are already ongoing - e.g. the work being done by the 'Tuning' Working Group in the ERASMUS Thematic Network for Music 'Polifonia'. In some countries, however, it may lead to reflection on the lower levels of qualification and their relation to formal, informal and non-formal learning, as well as to the relation between higher music education and lifelong learning in general.

- *How can the EQF be used to pursue a more systematic development of knowledge, skills and competences at sector level?*

EQF will not, in itself, foster a systematic development of knowledge, skills and wider competences, but it will definitely foster a more systematic description of these.

- *How can stakeholders at sector level be involved in supporting the implementation of the EQF?*

Stakeholders should be involved in a dialogue with higher music education institutes. The more precise nature of this dialogue will differ from country to country. On a European level, the AEC already fosters the dialogue with various stakeholders, e.g. by involving them in international projects.

- *How can the link between sectors development and national qualifications be improved?*

Dialogue of the kind that was prompted by the AEC's development of sector-wide learning outcomes encourages institutions to be equally aware of the common ground they share at the deepest levels as they are of the more surface-level diversity that exists nationally.

Mutual trust

- *How can the EQF contribute to the development of mutual trust (e.g. based on common principles for quality assurance) between stakeholders involved in lifelong learning-at European, national, sectoral and local levels?*

Precisely by including common principles for quality assurance. We stress, however, that in the case of higher music education 'clear and measurable objectives and standards' are only to be attained by 'intersubjective' methods. For remarks on quality assurance in higher music education we refer to the document 'AEC – NASM Statement on the Characteristics for Quality Assurance in the field of Music'⁵.

- *How can the EQF become a reference to improve the quality of all levels of lifelong Learning?*

EQF in itself will improve the quality of all levels of lifelong learning by fostering systematic description.

⁵ This document can be downloaded from the AEC On-line Bologna Handbook (www.aecinfo.org/bologna) from the page for policy documents in the Bologna & Music section
