

AEC Response to European Commission Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education



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Introduction

In this document, the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC) would like to respond to the European Commission report on the progress in quality assurance in higher education. This document is in two sections and has the following two purposes:

1. Sharing information on the experiences with the European-level subject-specific approach to quality assurance in higher music education.
2. Responding to the suggestions made by the European Commission report.

Quality assurance and accreditation in the field of music

The AEC started to address quality assurance and accreditation in music in 2002 within the framework of the project 'Music Study, Mobility and Accountability'¹ undertaken in co-operation with the National Association of Schools of Music (a formal accrediting body in higher music education in the US)² and with support of the EU/USA programme. This project gave the Association the unique possibility to gain insight into issues of specialised accreditation in music. This was followed by the project 'Accreditation in European Professional Music Training'³ initiated in 2006 with support from the SOCRATES programme, which aimed at the development of a European and music-specific approach to quality assurance and accreditation through the establishment of a European Quality Label in higher music education. The project produced a comprehensive framework document entitled *Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Music Education: Characteristics, Criteria and Procedures*⁴ with characteristics, reference points, criteria⁵, procedures, and a register of experts for external quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education. This led to the establishment of the *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme*, which was tested through trial review visits to institutions in Weimar, Oslo, Prague and Trieste during the spring of 2007. Since 2007, the Accreditation Working Group created within the ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia'⁶, is in charge of promoting, monitoring and further developing the use of the scheme.

This *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme* is now being used in two contexts:

1. It is being used as a European subject-specific peer review system in the music field in the form of review visits performed by panels of experts with the aim to provide assistance to higher music education institutions in their quality enhancement activities. During the autumn of 2007, the AEC reviewed five music academies in Bosnia-and-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia within the framework of a project financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency Sida⁷. This was followed by two review visits in the Netherlands and Spain during the spring of 2008 within the framework of the 'Polifonia' Network. For 2010, reviews of 1 institution in the UK, 4 in Poland, 1 in Portugal, 1 in Singapore and 1 in Cyprus are scheduled. As the AEC is not recognised as

¹ See for more information about this project <http://msma.arts-accredit.org/>.

² For more information about NASM, see <http://nasm.arts-accredit.org/>.

³ See for more information about this project www.bologna-and-music.org/accreditation.

⁴ This document can be found at www.bologna-and-music.org/reviewscheme.

⁵ Please note that criteria for both institutional and programme reviews have been developed and included in the AEC Framework Document.

⁶ See for more information about the 'Polifonia' project <http://www.polifonia-tn.org>.

⁷ See for more information about this project www.aecinfo.org/sida.

an official quality assurance or accreditation agency, the current status of these reviews is informal without any formal accreditation decision at the national level. For the AEC reviews to be recognised formally in national quality assurance contexts, a listing on the European Quality Assurance Register would be required. The AEC is planning to launch a study in 2010 on whether a listing of the *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme* on the EQAR would be desirable and feasible.

2. In addition to the informal procedures performed through this scheme, the AEC framework is increasingly being used by national quality assurance or accreditation authorities in the preparation of formal quality assurance or accreditation procedures in higher music education at the national level. The AEC has established several types of bilateral cooperation with national quality assurance agencies in Europe:
 - For certain procedures, the criteria of both the AEC and the national agency are compared and merged, and the AEC advises on international experts. The agency then executes the procedure with the use of these criteria and experts. Such cooperation is currently in place with the Swiss Accreditation Agency OAQ, the Romanian Accreditation Agency ARACIS and the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education in Lithuania for formal accreditation procedures in 2009 and 2010.
 - In other procedures, the criteria are firstly merged, after which the AEC assembles a committee of international experts, executes the review visit and produces the final report of the visit to be submitted to the national agency for the accreditation decision. Such a cooperation is in place with the German accreditation agencies ACQUIN and ZEVA, and was implemented for the first time for a review of a joint European programme in Germany in April 2009.

As a result, this model is somewhat different from other European Quality Seals mentioned in the report of the Commission, as the AEC scheme is being used both in European-level reviews organised by the AEC itself and in procedures implemented by national agencies, showing a model that is based on cooperation and not on competition with existing national quality assurance agencies. We believe this model is well suited to the current situation in quality assurance and accreditation in Europe.

Apart from these activities in the framework of the *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme*, various members of the AEC community have been involved as peer experts in national quality assurance procedures in higher music education in various countries, e.g. the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, Austria and Belgium. The experiences gained in these procedures are reported back to the Accreditation Working Group⁸, which has the task of monitoring quality assurance or accreditation procedures in- and outside the AEC. This way, a wealth of information on national developments is being collected, compared and analysed, helping the AEC to oversee the European quality assurance and accreditation landscape.

What are the experiences with the AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme?

Based on the activities undertaken, the following first observations can be reported:

Positive feedback from all stakeholders

For all procedures undertaken, both in formal and informal contexts, all stakeholders involved in these procedures have provided positive feedback:

1. The institutions visited provided positive feedback about the reviews and in particular regarding the competence of the experts in the music fields, the relevance of the AEC criteria, the experts' questions, remarks and suggestions to the institution, the European dimension, as well as the supportive atmosphere created by the critical but friendly panels. It is clear that because of its subject-specific focus, the AEC Scheme is providing a truly bottom-up approach to external quality assurance and accreditation, which is

⁸ See for more information about the 'Polifonia' Accreditation Working Group <http://www.polfonia-tn.org/accreditation>.

appealing to teachers and students, and can bridge the gap between the reality in the institutions and the requirements of the quality assurance procedures.

2. The agencies (as well as national ministries if informed about the procedures) gave positive reactions, as they felt supported in their work by the subject-specific expertise and European dimension provided through the involvement of the AEC.
3. The higher music education sector in Europe as a whole is increasingly feeling supported by the developments of such quality assurance arrangements, as they are developed on the basis of an understanding of the special characteristics of the discipline and therefore show sensitivity to the existing institutional and disciplinary diversity of the European higher education landscape, without compromising rigorous approaches that are essential to any quality assurance procedures.

Disciplinary and institutional diversity

Music is one of those academic disciplines that exemplify the diversity of the European higher education landscape: most Conservatoires, Musikhochschulen, Music Universities and Music Academies are independent institutions, which, although being firmly embedded in the higher education systems, are set up differently from other higher education institutions. The same applies to music departments and faculties in multidisciplinary higher education institutions. The features that distinguish music from other academic and indeed artistic disciplines are clearly described in the document *Higher Music Education – Summary of Tuning Findings*⁹, which has recently been published by the ‘Tuning’ Project.

Various projects and initiatives have made reference to the need for taking disciplinary, cultural and contextual diversity into account in quality assurance and accreditation processes. Already in 2005, an *AEC-NASM statement on the characteristics of an effective evaluation system for music schools and conservatoires* was produced as one of the outcomes of the ‘Music Study, Mobility and Accountability’ project. This statement emphasised that in order to be effective in reviewing conservatoires with respect to music content and institutional mission, a review entity must “*respect the natures, achievements, aspirations, and structures of individual institutions*”¹⁰.

More recently, EUA’s ‘QAHECA’ project formulated the following statement as its first recommendation based on the findings of the project:

*“Quality assurance must, first of foremost, always be context sensitive and thus individualised. When developing quality assurance processes HEIs and QA agencies need to take into account disciplinary characteristics, various organisational cultures, the historical position of the institution as well as the national context they work in”.*¹¹

Taking a view from a disciplinary perspective and based on the reality that in Europe there are still many hundreds if not thousands of independent specialist higher education institutions as well as specialised departments in multidisciplinary higher education institutions that focus on one or a few disciplines, it is clear that an understanding of diversity in relation to discipline, culture and context is essential in quality assurance processes.

The European dimension in quality assurance

Much has been said about the need for strict objectivity in any quality assurance or accreditation procedure. Not only in small countries, but also in small disciplines it can

⁹ ‘Polifonia’ Bologna Working Group; Linda Messas & Martin Prchal (eds.) (2009): Higher Music Education. Summary of Tuning Findings. AEC. Utrecht.

¹⁰ AEC & NASM (2004): Music Study, Mobility, and Accountability Project - Characteristics of an Effective Evaluation System for Music Schools and Conservatoires. Page 4.

¹¹ EUA (2009): Improving quality, enhancing creativity – Change processes in European higher education institutions. Final Report of Quality Assurance for the Higher Education Change Agenda (QAHECA) Project. Page 17.

sometimes be a challenge to find truly objective peers without preset opinions. Seen from the perspective of a European organisation, this issue can easily be resolved by involving peers from abroad. Apart from heightened objectivity, involving foreign peers can bring fresh and new insights based on different perspectives, which can assist institutions in their further development. Nevertheless, as has been noticed in the *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme* that mainly uses international experts, information about the national higher education system needs to be provided to the expert team. In order to resolve this issue, the AEC has developed extensive descriptions of national higher music education systems in more than 40 countries worldwide, which can support the work of foreign experts. Furthermore, the issue of language in such European-level procedures is one that needs further consideration. In any case, it is a strange paradox that while higher education institutions are being asked in the framework of the Bologna process to increase their European dimension and students and staff are encouraged to do European exchanges and mobility, the quality assurance or accreditation procedures are still mainly nationally based.

A response to the suggestions made in the European Commission report

Based on these experiences, we feel competent to formulate the following responses to the suggestions made by the European Commission in its progress report:

1. We support the European Commission in its efforts to give higher education institutions a wider choice of quality assurance agencies. This choice reflects the diversity of higher education disciplines and institutions, and will at the same time avoid complacency on the level of the national quality assurance agencies, as is already being observed in some EU member states. It is essential that an increasing number of national ministries of education allow institutions to make a choice from the agencies listed on the EQAR. This will also offer new opportunities for quality assurance oversight of joint European programmes, which is currently being severely complicated through complex and incompatible national regulatory frameworks.
2. We would like to encourage the European Commission to continue its support to European-level subject-specific approaches to external quality assurance in various higher education disciplines, e.g. through the European Quality Seals. Through their subject-specific bottom-up development, they will strengthen the involvement of students and teachers in such procedures, and a European and subject-specific dimension will be added to national external quality assurance and accreditation procedures.
3. We support the European Commission in its opinion that the European Standards and Guidelines should be developed further. This, however, should be done through widespread consultation and debate. While on the one hand some issues in our opinion should be added to the ESG as additional aspects (e.g. the 3-cycle system and the compatibility of the curricula with the Dublin Descriptors and the EQF for Lifelong Learning), enough flexibility should also be left to ensure that the aforementioned sensitivity to institutional and disciplinary diversity is upheld, and that institutional autonomy is not under threat. A concrete way of addressing a possible revision of the ESG could be to form a small European-level taskforce with experts in the field to reflect on this issue from various viewpoints.
4. We take note of the efforts made by the European Commission to support the development of transparency tools complementing quality assurance, such as the classification of European higher education institutions and the multi-dimensional global university ranking system. The AEC is involved in both projects in an advisory capacity and therefore well informed about these initiatives. Experiences with the development of the classification system show that such initiatives can only succeed when criteria and indicators are being formulated that indeed take into account the diversity of institutions and disciplines, and are not based on narrow interests or pre-set views.

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