

Response of the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC) to the Consultation Paper of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Science and Research on the Development of External Quality Assurance in Higher Education



Introduction

In this document, the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC)¹, the leading representative European organisation of the higher music education sector, would like to respond to the consultation of the BMWF on the development of external quality assurance in higher education. This document will:

1. Give details about the activities of the AEC in the field of quality assurance and accreditation in various European countries
2. Describe some brief observations following these activities
3. Propose a set of concrete recommendations to the Austrian situation.

Quality assurance and accreditation in the field of music

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 than other higher education institutions. The features that distinguish music from other academic disciplines are clearly described in the document *Higher Music Education – Summary of Tuning Findings*², which has been published by the *Tuning Project* earlier this year. Music is also a discipline that has taken a pro-active approach towards quality assurance and accreditation: through the *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme*³ and its close collaboration with various national quality assurance and accreditation agencies, the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC), has developed substantial expertise in this field.

The *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme* contains an introduction to the subject area, a set of criteria for the review of institutions and programmes that take into account the special features of higher music education, a register of experts with various artistic, educational and linguistic backgrounds, and a set of procedures for reviews in higher music education. The scheme is being used in the following contexts:

1. As a service to the AEC membership, giving institutions the possibility to receive advice from 'critical friends' as a tool for quality enhancement.
2. As a supporting mechanism to provide subject-specific and European-level expertise to national quality assurance and accreditation authorities. The AEC cooperates, at the request of its member institutions, with various national agencies in different European countries to support formal national quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education, for which the criteria and experts of the AEC Scheme are being used. Such collaborations are currently in place with ACQUIN and ZEVA (Germany), NVAO (Flanders), OAQ (Switzerland), ARACIS (Romania) and the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (Lithuania) for procedures taking place in 2010.

The experiences gained in these activities are carefully collected and analysed, helping the AEC to oversee the European quality assurance landscape, and the developments at national level.

¹ For more information about the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC), see <http://www.aecinfo.org>.

² 'Polifonia' Bologna Working Group; Linda Messas & Martin Prchal (eds.) (2009): *Higher Music Education. Summary of Tuning Findings*. AEC. Utrecht.

³ See for more information about this scheme <http://www.bologna-and-music.org/reviewscheme>.

What have we learned from our experiences?

Based on these activities and experiences, a set of observations can be formulated that have formed our opinion about how quality assurance or accreditation procedures should be developed in relation to the higher music education sector in Europe.

Using the term 'quality'

When addressing the term quality, a certain distinction of the various types of and approaches to quality in higher education can be identified: e.g. the quality of products, the quality of processes or the quality of structures. In music, the main focus has traditionally been on the first type of quality: achievements in music are being discussed and judged in assessment approaches that are typically based on collective discussions and decisions on artistic and academic quality (e.g. in audition panels, competitions committees and admission procedures). However, some quality assurance systems, and especially those that operate at the institutional level, mainly seem to focus on the second and third types of quality. This leads to a separation of process and content that for subject-specific institutions seems to be superficial: in their context, the content usually defines the process. Therefore, the presence of subject-specific expertise on review panels is essential in any procedure in such institutions, so that misunderstandings between existing traditions and cultures on the one hand, and new approaches and systems on the other, can be avoided.

Being sensitive to disciplinary, cultural and contextual diversity

Taking into account that in Austria various specialist higher education institutions exist 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 external quality assurance and accreditation processes for such institutions. Systems that are generic and use the same procedure for specialised institutions as for multidisciplinary higher education institutions with non-specialist experts (as recently witnessed in the UK), should be avoided. Such an approach forces specialised institutions to invest a disproportioned part of their budget to install a form of 'total quality management' with heavy quality control structures that may slow down institutional development and be alien to their highly specific internal quality culture.

Balancing assurance and enhancement

Experiences with the Dutch accreditation system at the programme level show, how quality assurance agencies often mainly focus on the compliance with existing criteria, without giving much attention to recommendations how situations could be improved. We fully agree that autonomous institutions have to be accountable, but they should also be encouraged to improve themselves according to what a review panel has found. Therefore, again, the presence of subject-specific expertise on the review panels is essential in any procedure in such institutions.

Understanding the need for a stronger European dimension

Not only in small countries, but also in small disciplines it can sometimes be a challenge to find truly objective peers without preset opinions. Seen from the perspective of a discipline with a highly international character, 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.

Our recommendations to the BMWF

Following these experiences and observations, we would like to suggest the following recommendations to the BMWF, which have been consulted with the Austrian members of the AEC:

- 1. We note that the proposal for an external quality assurance system for the Austrian higher education sector is consistent with systems used in other**

- 2. We invite the AAQA, once established, to use, at the request of the institution, the expertise developed by the AEC (e.g. the use of criteria for the review of institutions and programmes that take into account the special features of higher music education and the register of European experts) for procedures in higher music education institutions, be it institutional audit, institutional accreditation or programme accreditation.**
- 3. We suggest to the BMWF to consider inviting an expert in quality and assurance from the AEC community to be a member of the AAQA Board, so that an understanding of institutional and disciplinary diversity in higher education, as well as the presence of expertise on this diversity, is ensured.**

For more information about this document, do not hesitate to contact Mr Martin Prchal (AEC Chief Executive) through martinprchal@aecinfo.org.

AEC, November 2009