

Reflection on the AEC Annual Meeting for International Coordinators 2018 - looking back at the past while imagining the future of internationalization of Higher Music Education

Introduction - the role of the International Relations Coordinators in the AEC

The International Relations Coordinators (IRCs) of the AEC member institutions have been gathering on annual basis since 2001, when the first IRCs Meeting took place at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater “Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy” in Leipzig, thus establishing the first official AEC annual meeting of other constituencies than Conservatoires’ Directors. While the latter have been gathering at the AEC Congress and General Assembly since the AEC foundation (1953), the importance of the role played by international relations coordinators in Higher Music Education Institutions (HMEIs) started emerging only in the 90s when professional music training institutions entered the ERASMUS programme by establishing the **first networks** of Inter-University Cooperation Projects in music. The AEC therefore started supporting the meetings of the IRCs active in such networks to discuss current and future projects¹. Over the years these gatherings expanded in scope and size and acted as catalysts to produce extremely useful **tools and guidelines** for the day-to-day running of international offices in Conservatoires as well as for the international curriculum development and international strategies. The variety of material produced in the last two decades varies from “Code of Good Practice for European programme management in European Conservatoires”, to the handbooks and guidelines on Erasmus+ Mobility Actions², [Joint Programmes](#), the [Standard Forms for Erasmus in Music](#) until the creation of digital tools such as the [AEC Job Vacancy Platform](#) and [EASY - the Online Application System for Mobility among Higher Music Education Institutions](#). Furthermore, hands-on workshops organized in connection with the Annual Meeting for IRCs have ensured the **continuing professional development** of hundreds of IRCs on core topics such as project writing, international policy and internationalization of curricula. The creation of such a complex subject-specific body of resources has been possible thanks to the work of the [IRCs working group](#), which, over the years, has gathered IRC professionals belonging to the AEC community to work towards promotion and development of the internationalization of HME both from the operational and the strategic points of view.

Besides this impressive amount of tangible outputs, the **networking** aspect of the IRCs gatherings is often underestimated especially by Conservatoires senior managers who, in some cases, struggle seeing the added value of face-to-face relations, which need an important investment in terms of time and financial resources. All IRCs strongly affirm that having the opportunity to meet in person with the colleagues from other institution is a fundamental asset to strengthen the international network of their institution. As a matter of fact, “networking opportunities” always come on top of the IRC’s motivations to come to the AEC annual meeting, closely followed by the exchange of good practices and the need of updates on new developments in the field. Listening to inspiring speeches and bringing back fresh ideas to their home institutions is what participants of the IRCs meeting expect from the conference. Building long-lasting, healthy relationships with international partners based on mutual trust, awareness, but also personal connections and shared experiences is one of the main goals of the AEC IRCs Annual Meeting: the AEC is honoured to have played a prominent role over the last two decades in building up and nurturing such a rich community of individuals and professionals who contributed in strengthening the HME sector in Europe.

¹ M. Prchal, *Publication on the AEC 50th Anniversary*, September 2003

² On this topic please see the AEC Step by Step Guide to Erasmus Mobility in Music can be found at <https://www.aec-music.eu/services/for-ircs/step-by-step>

The IRCs Meeting 2018 in Birmingham - from ethical challenges to international strategies

The 18th edition of the [AEC Annual Meeting for International Relations Coordinators \(IRC's Meeting\) took place in Birmingham from 13 to 16 September 2018](#). This event has been the first of a four-year pattern supported by the EU Creative Europe funded project [AEC - Strengthening Music in Society \(SMS\)](#). The Project includes a strand on “Internationalization and Transnational Mobility” aimed at helping music students and teachers to internationalize their careers and activities. The meeting in Birmingham has attracted **208 international relations coordinators from 132 HMEI in 35 different countries** all over the world for 4 days of intensive work featuring workshops, seminars, plenary speeches, discussion groups, parallel sessions on international projects, information forum, networking and musical moments. Debates focused on the need of today's graduates to get extended skills, awareness, and knowledge to find their personal and professional way into a complex and interconnected world.

Moving from the 2017 theme “Diversity: independently together”, symbolically debated in the furthest location the IRCs Meeting has ever taken place (Tbilisi, Georgia), the Birmingham contributions looked further to the Far East, where countries like China (but not only) are, in their turn, shaping and influencing the present and the future of European HMEI's in terms of composition of the student body, curricula, teaching methods, projects, international collaborations and ways of perceiving the music profession as a whole³. According to Dandan Zhu, IRC at Shanghai Conservatory of Music and keynote speaker at the conference, the interaction of music (education) and culture is something that has always been there. But today's interconnected educational community is bringing up unprecedented **ethical implication and challenges** to managers, administrators, teachers and students dealing with different cultures and political instabilities within (Brexit) and beyond Europe. During the conference, risk scenarios, crisis management and emergency plans have been discussed for the first time in the framework of an IRCs meeting. The topic has been very well received by the participants, who have to deal with ever more ethical dilemmas and security challenges, ranging from terrorist attacks and natural disasters, to sexual-related and psychological issues. The balance between students coming from Europe and those coming from outside Europe, especially from China, has been one of the most debated issue, as it brings along many other issues related to (but not limited to) language skills, way of living and of interacting with fellow students, teaching body and local society outside the institution⁴. Intercultural challenges and implications within HMEI are addressed by the AEC within the SMS project by a working group devoted to the “Diversity and Inclusiveness” strand. Because of the high interest showed by the IRCs in Birmingham, the IRCs working group is going to explore synergies with the “Diversity and Inclusiveness” strand in order to deepen the topic in the upcoming IRCs Meeting editions.

Among the risks resulting from political uncertainty, Brexit played an obvious role in the Birmingham discussions, thanks to the input from Vivienne Stern from Universities UK, who encouraged international colleagues to keep in mind the essential collaborative nature of creative disciplines and the need to keep on working together with the UK colleagues in spite of the political instability. Another significant contribution from the UK came from Lamberto Coccioli, Associate Principal of the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (RBC) who, two months after the IRCs meeting at his home institution, conveyed a message from the IRCs to the AEC Congress participants in Graz about the importance of placing the **international strategy at the core of all institutional activities**. He explained how, at his institution, this approach facilitates rapid reaction to opportunities coming from outside and smooth allocation of resources and how it helps getting an international perspective when it comes to all institutional decisions. This way of thinking is shared among the teaching staff, so that when a teacher goes on a visit abroad, he/she understands immediately the strategic value of it and can connect his/her experience with activities taking

³ S. Primiterra, B. Pereira, L. Coccioli, *Teaser of the AEC Annual Meeting 2018*, www.aec-music.eu/irc2018

⁴ These topics have also been addressed by the plenary session on Case Studies on the Internationalization of Curricula by Marianne Jacobsen and Lars Andersson

place “at home”, ultimately bringing more value to the visit itself. Furthermore, he underlined that a healthy international strategy means building equal partnerships with institutions all over the world: in today's changed HME landscape, focusing only on students' recruitment is likely to damage institutional reputation and, in the long term, also the ability of the institution to recruit students. In fact, the reason to have a good international strategy is strictly linked to the need of students to get support and opportunities to develop their global careers.

Internationalization at the core of the institutional strategy

A new perspective for internationalisation in higher education was presented with the launch of the new ERASMUS+ Programme in 2014: a clear link between European cooperation activities and the core elements of higher education was made. This link is confirmed by requirements for the European Charter for Higher Education (ECHE), which very explicitly asks institutions to describe how their European activities would influence institutional policies with regards to curriculum development and the enhancement of the quality of education. In 2015, a new definition of internationalisation in higher education was presented in a report by the European Parliament on this topic, which stated that internationalisation in higher education is “*the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society*”. These statements show a **clear shift of focus from mobility to how internationalization can improve the core business of Conservatoires**. The introduction of Strategic Partnerships in the Erasmus+ programme was another clear signal that the focus of modern higher education institutions should now be on developing new content and tools for education instead of just bringing students and teachers together. The Strategic Partnership projects presented in Birmingham all aim at the development of top-quality international study programmes in which institutions share expertise and resources. This perspective changes the meaning of “international dimension”: if this term was once linked to having students and teachers coming from other countries, nowadays this term can be associated with institutions engaged in an intense exchange of persons as well as ideas with institutions in other countries by exchanging students rather than just recruiting them; by engaging in joint curriculum development at European level; or by using international tools in institutional quality assurance policies⁵. To ensure that the programmes are continually updated, in line with the requirements of international professional practice, it is not only important that there be foreign students and teachers present in the institution, but also that the study programmes are continuously benchmarked at international level. International cross-institutional assessment can provide valuable information as to a programme's outcomes in relation to international artistic standards⁶.

In this perspective, the **internationalization of curricula** has been addressed as prominent topic at the IRCs Meeting 2018, as well as in previous editions, during a dedicated pre-conference workshop. Literature on the topic describes internationalization of curricula as “a means to prepare graduates to live and work in a globalised world”⁷. The IRCs in Birmingham agreed that the international dimension isn't an optional feature of the learning experience anymore but has become a key factor for a successful career and the development of a mindful global citizenship. Accordingly, the focus of internationalization in higher music education institutions needs to shift towards the curriculum. The curriculum connects the broader institutional strategy with the student experience, thus playing a paramount role in the success or failure of the institution's internationalization agenda as well as on the global employment opportunities of future professional musicians. At the workshop in Birmingham, Jan-Gerd Krüger, IRC at the Prins Claus

⁵ M. Prchal, *European Cooperation in Higher Music Education - from Individual Mobility to Institutional Development*

⁶ L. Messas, M. Prchal, *How to support Quality through International Activities - Case studies from the field of higher music education*, 2015

⁷ H. de Wit et al., *Internationalization of Higher Education*, 2015, p. 50

Conservatoire in Groningen, provided a theoretical framework advising institutions to make the international parts of the curriculum explicit, to introduce a learning path designed around internationalization and to focus on music-related international competences alongside intercultural competences in order to get teachers on board. Elsa Ferreira from the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague underlined the importance of the compliance of programmes and institutions to the European-level, subject-specific qualification framework provided by the [AEC Learning Outcomes](#) and the [Polifonia/Dublin Descriptors](#) as the basis of an internationalized curriculum. Examples of practical implementation of internationalization of curricula in HME have been given during the workshop with presentations of [EUJAM](#) and [ECMAster](#) and during the conference with the presentations of the joint modules and international curriculum development examples in the framework of the Erasmus + Strategic Partnership projects [METRIC](#), [RENEW](#), [NEXT MOVE](#) and [VOXearlyMUS](#). The workshop, in particular, has been quite successful, and the participants expressed the wish to address the theme again but with a less theoretical and more hands-on approach. The IRCs working group would like to explore synergies with the SMS's strand on "Learning and Teaching" to address the topic of internationalization of curricula from the pedagogical point of view in the upcoming IRCs meeting edition.

During the workshop, participants discussed also about the importance of the development of an international learning environment "at home" as a prominent step towards internationalization. The presence of international students and teachers and the use of **international tools for review and accreditation procedures and international external examiners**⁸ have been considered as one of the most precious international tool for the development of institutions; outgoing mobility opportunities can be used in a complementary way, as a tool for professional and personal profile enhancement. In fact, following the general higher education trend, also HMEI are increasingly paying more attention to the "**internationalization at home**". As stated by the [European Association of International Education \(EAIE\)](#), "internationalisation at home touches upon everything - from the academic curriculum, to the interactions between local students and international students and faculty, to the cultivation of internationally-focused research topics, to innovative uses for digital technology. Most importantly, it focuses on all students reaping the benefits of international higher education, not just those who are mobile"⁹. In particular, international external examiners¹⁰ are an opportunity to address artistic standards through international cooperation. International evaluations and accreditations can have a positive impact on the quality of programmes and institutions, because they can compare themselves internationally through internationally informed feedback¹¹.

Going digital

This shift of focus from 'abroad' to 'at home' is becoming increasingly popular also thanks to the use of improved and fast-growing **distance learning** technologies: high speed networks such as LoLa and Polycom are intensively used by many AEC members institutions to enhance international collaborations and facilitate lectures and interactions with teaching staff from international partners. The establishment of virtual learning environments made **virtual and blended mobility** (the latter being a combination of virtual mobility and short-stay physical mobility) possible. Practical examples of implementation of these kinds of mobility is taking place in the framework projects such as [INTERMUSIC](#) and [ARCO](#), which have been presented in Birmingham. Virtual mobility is becoming increasingly popular as it can help reducing socio-economic barriers for students and teachers who cannot travel for financial or personal reasons, as well as physical barriers as in the

⁸ This topic has been addressed more in depth during the parallel session [How to link internationalisation and quality assurance: presentation by MusiQuE - Music Quality Enhancement](#)

⁹ <https://www.eaie.org/community/expert-communities/internationalisation-home.html>

¹⁰ On this topic please see the AEC publication [International External Examiners in Higher Music Education: Role, Purpose and Case Studies](#)

¹¹ On this topic please see the AEC publication [Learning From Each Other: Sharing Good Practice Through Benchmarking](#)

case of disabled students who cannot physically travel or live independently in other countries; if we look at it at large, it also helps lowering the environmental impact of the increasing number of trips related to physical mobility; finally it can also be used as information channel to prepare the students for the physical exchange programme. Virtual and blended mobility can therefore play an important role in reaching the Bologna objectives (international competitiveness, mobility, employability) in a cost-effective and innovative way and can be used to target specific learning and teaching goals. This technological shift has also an impact on pedagogical models, encouraging institutions to adapt and further develop them around new available technologies. This topic is addressed by the AEC within the SMS project by the working groups exploring the “Digitization” and “Learning and Teaching” strands but also by several EU-funded projects within Erasmus+ and Creative Europe carried out by AEC member institutions, such as [INTERMUSIC](#), [SWING](#) (Erasmus + Strategic Partnership), [DEMUSIS](#) (Erasmus + Capacity Building) [Opera Out of Opera](#) (Creative Europe) and many others, involving AEC member institutions. All these projects will be presented at the next edition of the AEC IRCs Meeting and Congress.

The role of technologies in the mobility picture has been somehow officialised in the Paris Communiqué, resulted from the European Higher Education Area Ministerial Conference that took place in Paris in May 2018, which explicitly mentions that the mobility of the students and graduates should be supported by digitization initiatives. Within the SMS project, while the “Digitization” strand is mostly looking at the pedagogical implications of the use of digital technologies in HME, the IRCs working group is monitoring and further developing **digital tools supporting the management of study and working mobility of staff and students**: the AEC Job Vacancy Platform, the AEC Website Database and EASY - the Online Application System for Mobility among HMEIs. The progressive digitization of the sector is therefore touching both pedagogical and managerial aspects¹², but the latter has been announced by the European Commission as one of the main features of the next generation of funding in the field of education through the campaign “Erasmus Goes Digital”, and therefore deserves special attention by the AEC and the IRCs community. The digitization of Erasmus procedure is something that has been on the table since many years with the project [Erasmus Without Papers](#) (EWP) carried out by the [European University Foundation](#) (EUF), which AEC has signed a memorandum of cooperation with. While embracing the Erasmus Without Papers initiative, AEC has made clear that HME has some specificity that needs to be considered when designing new tools and procedures. The main and primary reason why the Erasmus application procedures for HMEI are different than in other type of HEI is the one-to-one tuition format, which influences the rationale behind institutional mobility actions and strategies as well as students’ motivations; secondly, the low number of students enrolled in HMEIs and, consequently, the low Erasmus mobility flows that HMEIs have compared to big multi-subject universities. The IRCs community of the AEC can be considered as a pioneer in the field of digitization of Erasmus procedures: during IRCs meetings, since 2010, participants have been suggesting that AEC could develop a common European online applications system for ERASMUS and other mobility schemes to overcome various obstacles such as the amount of paperwork and the proliferation of different online applications systems and procedures. A standardization and digitization of the main steps of the Erasmus application procedure in one place is what the IRCs asked to the AEC in the perspective of a progressive digitization of the entire process. This is how [EASY - the Online Application System for Mobility among Higher Music Education Institutions](#) was born. Tested during the academic year 2016-2017 by the 41 AEC member institutions which took part in the first pilot phase, the system has been fine-tuned during Summer 2017. 67 institutions joined for the academic year 2017-18 and 78 joined in 2018-19. The system, originally conceived to manage Student Mobility for the Study of music disciplines, is being currently piloted for other arts disciplines and is exploring possibilities for the management of student traineeships and teachers’ mobility. To our knowledge, EASY represents the first and only multi-national and subject-specific application system in Europe and beyond and has been accepted to be presented as

¹² The complementarity between digital tools for management and for learning and teaching will be explored in the coming years of the SMS projects.

best practice in several international conferences¹³. The continuing development of digital tools supporting mobility within HME comes on top of the AEC and IRCs agenda for the coming years.

The future of internationalization

Starting from the discussions and topics addressed in Birmingham and extensively tackled in this reflection, the IRCs working group, renewed in its composition and tasks within the SMS project, has indicated some priorities to be addressed by the IRCs community in the coming years, namely:

- Intercultural and ethical challenges involved in internationalization
- Internationalization of curricula
- Internationalisation at home
- Digitization of procedures
- E-learning, virtual and blended mobility
- Joint Programmes and initiatives (including the [European University Initiative](#))
- International cross-disciplinary collaborations
- Strategic Partnerships Projects (Erasmus+ KA2)
- Changing character of mobilities and demands (need for short mobilities, demand for more international internships than traditional study mobility, demand for art projects rather than study projects)
- Funding schemes for HMEI beyond Erasmus (including Creative Europe and overseas programmes)
- Recognition
- Continuing professional development opportunities for IRCs at AEC IRCs meetings (through hands-on workshops on strategic and practical issues)
- Financial, administrative and environmental sustainability of internationalization activities

As pointed out in Birmingham by Bruno Pereira, chairman of the IRCs working group, the IRCs community should bear in mind both the **operational and the strategic aspects of the work of international relations offices**. This tension should be explored when tackling the issues above, trying at the same time to distinguish and link those two sides of the coin.

Commitment to **internationalisation as a tool for development** is one of the fundamental strategic values of internationalisation and it also relates to institutional quality enhancement.

Conservatoires often use their international profile as an expression of quality and excellence, but what does this really mean? Do international students really improve our quality? How? How do we engage with each other in the debate on quality at international level? The implementation of international examiners and the development of the curriculum through joint programmes and joint modules could be key tools to use internationalization for quality enhancement and development¹⁴.

Recognition is another important issue to be tackled by the IRCs in the coming years. The increasing reality of the ‘portfolio career’ of musicians puts the recognition of qualifications in the spotlight (which traditionally never received much attention in the music profession)¹⁵.

Furthermore, the ongoing debate at European level about the principle of ‘automatic recognition’ is often misunderstood by Conservatoires who think they will be obliged to accept any student without entrance exams. The way this principle should be applied is rather that, once an institution admits a student with prior qualifications from somewhere else in Europe, those are automatically recognised by the institution. The [AEC Learning Outcomes](#) (reviewed in 2017) could play an

¹³ Presentations have been given at the 2018 [ELIA](#) Biannual Conference in Rotterdam at the [Groningen Declaration Annual](#) Meeting 2019 in Puebla, Mexico

¹⁴ AEC members can be assisted in this by [MusiQue](#), the independent European-level external evaluation body which aims to assist higher music education institutions in their own quality-enhancement and to improve the quality of higher music education across Europe and beyond.

¹⁵ M. Prchal, *European Cooperation in Higher Music Education - from Individual Mobility to Institutional Development*

important role in this matter. In the coming years, the IRCs community should embrace the AEC Learning Outcomes in order to facilitate the international recognition of studies, and therefore, transnational mobility. Furthermore, the IRCs should try to get the commitment from their institutions to take the AEC Learning Outcomes into account when designing and updating their curricula. If more institutions do that, international recognition and cooperation would be much easier.

All this should be put in a context of **general uncertainty about the future of Erasmus** and internationalization of HME in general. Besides the news about the budget (which has been announced to double to 30 million euros for the period 2021 - 2027 with the aim to provide learning and mobility opportunities to 12 million people, in comparison to 4 million people in the current programme), many other important details are still unknown, including the administrative implications of managing the expected huge increase of people involved in Erasmus mobility. Even before the start of the new programme period, some institutions are already facing the challenge that, while Erasmus mobility funds are rising, the number of students interested in exchanges is not following but rather even decreasing. Other question marks are related to the digitization of Erasmus procedures: which part of the process will be officially digitalized as from 2021? Which degree of autonomy will the institution(s) have in this process? To which degree will the tools developed by the EU Commission become compulsory for everyone? How would the costs of the digitization shift be covered? All this is still unknown. Another incognita comes from the **re-establishment of short-term mobilities**. After the cancellation of the very valuable Intensive Programme (replaced by similar activities within the few funded Strategic Partnerships in the music education sector), AEC and other stakeholders have strongly argued for their return. The [AEC Position Paper on ERASMUS+ beyond 2020](#)¹⁶, issued in May 2018, pushes for the provision of short-term mobilities (from one to six weeks), to allow the students to participate in masterclasses, summer schools and artistic projects run by partner institutions abroad. This short term mobility should be ideally financed involving two or more partners, rather than three or more and, together with numbers related to virtual mobility, should be taken into account as indicators by the Erasmus National Agencies evaluating the institutional performance in relation to mobility. Hopefully this will be re-introduced in the programme, as well as simplified application and administrative procedures, which have become increasingly complicated over the years instead of the (announced) opposite. Access to other programmes and funding schemes, such as sponsors and patrons, national funding opportunities, should be explored, as well as the music-tailored opportunities within Creative Europe, in order to lower the dependency of HMEI on Erasmus funds.

Opportunities to discuss all this will be provided in the upcoming editions of the AEC Annual Meeting for International Relations Coordinators. We are thrilled to welcome all IRCs of the AEC (top management staff and students are also very welcome) in Prague on 19 - 22 September 2019 to keep on exchanging thoughts on the future of internationalization of Higher Music Education with a continuously renewed energy.

2nd April 2019, The IRCs Working Group

¹⁶ Short-term exchanges through Erasmus funds have been removed in 2013 without an alternative. Re-establishing Erasmus+ short-term stays would address one of the key recommendations made by a study commissioned by the CULT Committee of the European Parliament and it is also the main recommendation stated in the AEC Position Paper.