

## To the Board of MusiQuE

# **MusiQuE's External Evaluator's Report 2019**

### **PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE REPORT**

The underlying Report is the **fourth External Evaluator's Report** (EER) based on an evaluation of the QA & related activities of Music Quality Enhancement (MusiQuE), a sector-specific European quality assurance agency, following a mandate from the Board of MusiQuE, renewed in its Board meeting of 22-23 March 2018.

This report relates to the second mandate of the EE, which was defined as follows:

- to critically analyse the quality of the work of MusiQuE, on the basis of its publicly available working tools and documents, and comment on its general functioning as an organization (QA agency)

This mandate entails a more systematic follow-up of MusiQuE's activities, and the impact they have on the 'customers' and stakeholders of MusiQuE. An analysis of the quality of MusiQuE (as seen from an outsider's point of view) and its capacity to address the issues flagged in the 2015 external review, which is to feed in the self-evaluation report (SER) in preparation of the 2020 external evaluation of MusiQuE, in view of its renewal on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

This report is exclusively based on the observations and reflections following the EE's participation, in the capacity of observer, in an external review exercise in which MusiQuE is involved, as an organizer/facilitator, on behalf of the Dutch-Flemish QAA (NVAO). It was agreed with MusiQuE's management that this would be the 'limited programme assessment' of 'Master of Music' at the 'Conservatorium Maastricht (NL), in the framework of a MusiQuE - NVAO Programme Accreditation Review, with a participation in a site visit taking place on 27-29 November 2019. The review of the Conservatoire of Maastricht is part of a 'cluster accreditation procedure' with two other (Dutch) conservatoires.

### **SCHEDULE OF THE ON-SITE REVIEW AT CONSERVATOIRE MAASTRICHT**

(cf. enclosed programme of the review visit)

1. preparatory meeting of the review team on Wedn. 27 November 2019

18.30 – 21.00 hrs, with online participation of one panel member

2. Thursday 28 November:

9.00- 14.00 hrs: meeting of the review team with various panels: management & programme leaders, senior admin staff, professors & teachers, with in between debriefings.

14.30 – 16.30 hrs: class observations, meeting with students, overall debriefing.

### 3. Friday 29 November

9.00 – 12.30 hrs: review team meeting on overall result, agree on sharing conclusions & recommendations with the staff & management; meeting with alumni, employers, stakeholder organizations.

12.30 – 14.00 hrs: feedback & sharing conclusions, in plenary session, & final discussion with the management ('development dialogue').

## **EXTERNAL EVALUATOR'S OBSERVATIONS**

### **Overall impression**

Organization-wise my general impression is that there was a thorough communication and good working relationship between the MusiQuE coordinator, the review team, the formal accreditation body (NVAO-NL), though on the side of the reviewed institution some flaws were observed. The preparatory meeting brought to light the 'disorganized way of sending out the information', with some information sent out late, the overabundance of 'appendices', which were sent in a 'drip-feed manner' (not in batches). However, most issues were clarified during the review sessions, with attenuating circumstances stated. In spite of the review time being reduced to a minimum (one and a half days, the times for feedback and de-briefing sessions of the review team included), the whole exercise gave the impression of a finished job, and what is most important a job well done, and with clear outcomes.

This is undoubtedly due to the leadership capacities of the chair, a highly professional team, with complementary competencies of its members, and an experienced Secretary. Also the diligence and the work attitude of the MusiQuE coordinator need to be mentioned, with a crucial role in the preparatory phase of the review.

### **On various aspects or parts of the exercise, based on mere observation of the exercise**

The following are observations and reflections on the appropriateness of the review procedures used by MusiQuE, jointly with a national QAA, and in second instance on the benefits from an enhancement-led approach for the institution/programme under review.

#### **During the preparatory (& debriefing) meetings**

- On the evening before the actual review visit, a long briefing meeting served the purpose of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, according to the criteria used in the merged NVAO-MusiQuE framework, and on the basis of the SER produced by the Conservatoire.
- In this preparatory meeting, the interactive discussion in the review team resulted into five areas being determined for thorough examination, throughout the review sessions. They were: identification of research at the Conservatoire; attention for a balance between the student's personal development and his or her craftsmanship; balance between guidance by the 'institution' (the Conservatoire) and the amount of freedom given to the student; strengths and weaknesses of

communication, both internal and external; the balance between international reach-out and local 'embedding'. Each team member was given the responsibility to 'observe and examine' one of these five areas, in the different panel interviews, according to their relevance for the panels in question. The general idea was to address these topics for their relevance for the NVAO/MusiQuE standards.

#### Reaching the verdict, argumentation when coming to a final conclusion

- The final judgment or conclusion of the review rests upon the level of compliance with the NVAO/MusiQuE Standards. NVAO proposes three options for assessing compliance with its four Standards: *positive conclusion*, *partial positive conclusion*, *negative conclusion*. NVAO accepts a maximum of two partially conclusive assessments, and no negative conclusions for each of the four NVAO standards.

MusiQuE, when judging the attainment of its own criteria under each NVAO Standard, uses the terms full compliance, partial and non-compliance. According to NVAO directives there is also a possibility to impose 'conditions', which enables the institution/programme under review to introduce corrective measures, within a limited period of time. Positive accreditation with conditions attached can only be made, if it is obvious or evidenced that the Standard can be complied with within a period of two years, otherwise it is considered as non-compliant/a negative conclusion. Two partial compliances (with conditions) are already a strong message to the institution (and the accreditation body).

Though the system looks complex, there is a clear distinction between the normative (formal) assessment under the NVAO Standards, and the enhancement-driven sub-standards used by MusiQuE.

It was however not always obvious to the EE as to what the consequences are for non-compliance to MusiQuE criteria, when coming to an overall conclusion for each NVAO Standard.

The review team members were considered to be informed of the different assessment methodologies & criteria. Nevertheless at some point during one of the debriefings a clarification became necessary.

#### Concurrence of a formal assessment, in view of an accreditation, and the enhancement part of the review

- The division of roles between the formal accrediting body (NVAO) & the review coordinator (MusiQuE), is based on a Contractual agreement, which takes into account the national and cultural context and any legislative & regulatory matters of the country in question. For the programme under review the distinction is not always evident, and it is clear that the formal context is given a greater importance.

- On the other hand, the additional value of a subject-specific evaluation appears (and is thus obvious for the reviewed institution/programme), in that it contributes to a fairer judgment based on disciplinary expertise and more customer-oriented approach.
- The NVAO standards and MusiQuE standards have been merged, for the purpose of the review, and the reviewers make simultaneously a judgment on the two types of standards (MusiQuE standards headed under/mapped against the NVAO standards, on the basis of their convergence); a first judgement is on NVAO standards, which may impact on the assessment of the MusiQuE standards. In terms of formal assessment (fulfilled or not?) the NVAO standards are the norm, and the MusiQuE standards serve the purpose of an enhancement-driven evaluation.
- Absence of SER & other relevant information (for reason of their confidentiality) made it difficult for the EE to get a complete insight into the arguments used by the review team when making a first judgement on meeting the standards. The information provided during the panel interviews partly resolved this issue.

## **COMMENDATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS TO MUSIQUE**

### **On the Preparation & Set-up**

- Certainly in the case of (extremely) short review exercises as is the case with 'limited programme review' it is worthwhile to have a preliminary one-day visit to the institution by one or two review team members, with a limited assignment, in order to get an insight into its organization & workings, and also its degree of preparedness for the on-site visit. This may result in a gain of time for the actual review visit, remove possible stress and enable a co-constructive approach from the side of the institution. This was actually the case here, as one of the review team members had participated in a preliminary visit, which helped get further insight of the fitness for purpose of the programme's assessment of research.

### **On the Procedures**

- The sequel of the different interview sessions (the subsequent 'panels') is crucial in reaching a multi-faceted insight into the 'domains' under investigation (governance, 'customer' satisfaction, correlation of the institution's vision and its execution, etc.). The list of interviewees included, successively, the management, the senior administrators & programme coordinators, the teaching staff, students, alumni, employers & other stakeholders, which allowed to shift the attention from a general overview to focusing on the most relevant details that will have an impact on the final verdict.

- The preparatory meeting of the team (the evening before the actual visit), the different interview sessions, each time followed by a debriefing of the review team, the feedback session to the institution, including a 'constructive dialogue', though in rapid succession, showed a well-balanced time allocation to the different parts. The time constraints however left little time for maneuvering and could bring about stress moments, in view of reaching a joint final verdict, and of producing a written version with the input of the entire review team.
- A two-day visit (including the preparatory review team meeting) would provide more comfort to both the review team and the institution under review. Should this be difficult to organize, and the one and a half-day on-site visit remains the rule, then a brief pre-visit involving at least one review panel member proves a suitable alternative. It has the additional advantage of demonstrating the enhancement role of MusiQuE's engagement, as this example has proven.
- It was very helpful that for the interviews guiding questions had been developed for each of the interview panels (by the Secretary), based on an analysis of the Self Evaluation Report (SER), and, and then further broken down according to the areas (research, identity, internationalization, freedom & guidance, communication) assigned to the members of the review team, but it was left to the discretion of each person to actually incorporate them, so their usage varied.

#### On the review panel

- The advantage of having proper linguistic skills in the review team, with at least one native speaker and/or persons with proficient linguistic capacities (in English, this being the sole language used in this review) is considered essential, especially for the (oral) feedback session & development dialogue. Sensitive issues need to be approached in an appropriate language and style, where the choice of words, intonation, etc. are important. The review team in question was fortunate to have this option (native English person), English being the language used in the review.
- Complementarity of review team members: persons with (former) management positions, programme directors, music scholars, etc. with full 'understanding' of the challenges of arts education per se and of the competition drive of the institutions, which may bring about an embellishment of the state of the art of the institution under review.
- The presence of a student member with experience and expertise in assessments, while still in the position of a student, makes such interviews more 'customer-oriented', and also provides a mirror of the effectiveness of the achievements presented by the institution under review.

#### On the Involvement of the party under review

- Are they (the object of the review) sufficiently aware of the enhancement opportunities offered by the enhancement-led philosophy, when it happens in the context of an accreditation review (of which the first objective is a more or less binding proposal for an accreditation decision) ? How to increase such awareness in the institution and among panel members?

### On Reaching a conclusion

- An engaging way of reaching a final conclusion by the review team after thorough examination of the attainment of the four imposed (NVAO) standards, starting with a shared verdict ('a solid pass'), followed by a translation of strengths and weaknesses as part of the formal assessment, weighing the pros and cons of the judgements of each standard, while making a judicious choice of the 'enhancement options' available ('recommendations', 'conditions').

### **On a subject-specific review approach in general, and on MusiQuE's involvement in accreditation reviews:**

The following to show the pertinence and relevance of subject specific reviews, as part of service to the HE community, the stakeholders & the professional field.

#### Comparing audit approach and enhancement-led approach:

There is a formal distinctive feature, with the former (audit) usually taking place on the institutional level, and the latter (enhancement-led approach) on the level of programmes or teaching units (faculty, department). Nevertheless the division is not always straightforward, and in a programmatic approach invariably audit elements come to the foreground, when touching subjects like financing, governance, relation with subsidiary bodies, cross-disciplinary approaches & cooperation. Sometimes the terminology is the main distinctive character between the two, and interference of one level with the other becomes most apparent in discussions with the students and alumni, as the former are on the interface between the two levels, sometimes having recourse to the programme/faculty level (content, programming), sometimes to the institutional level (extra-curricular activities, student counselling & other student services). A possible mismatch between the two levels is therefore most visible through panel discussions/interviews involving students.

#### For the HEI and the music sector:

Without the international benchmarking brought by the involvement with MusiQuE as a quality enhancement and review body, the programme review would have limited referencing possibilities. The following are items that came under discussion in this particular review, some of which were crucial in reaching unbiased and 'informed' decisions:

- The various forms of individual student portfolios or 'student chapters' (NVAO terminology), their assessment and overall quality;
- The cultural context of the grading systems in use in music education, including the relevance of the grading outside the 'school context' ("no one ever asked for our grades after graduation");
- Criteria for 'research' in arts education (compared to other disciplines); differentiation between first and second cycle (BA vs MA), in terms of research requirements, with 'informed artistic practice' at MA level; as distinguished from 'scientific research' on Doctor's level ('transformative role of research');

- The predominance of either the identity focus of a programme (individual student's development of a musician's personality) or the craftsmanship (excellence model);
- Interdisciplinary nature of artistic practice a must in music education; the same for entrepreneurial education ('art as a business');
- Leverages the music (HE) sector has to increase employability prospects of graduates

For MusiQuE':

- MusiQuE's prestige is certainly enhanced by being a preferential partner in the field of music programmes evaluations, for national and European/global QA & accreditation bodies. It is a well-deserved recognition, after years of continuous investment of time and resources.
- In an exercise of the style and format I was able to observe (shared programme review), I had expected a greater visibility of the role and responsibility of MusiQuE, towards the institution under review, the national authorities, the general public. I understand this is only part of the whole process, with the accreditation decision still to be made, and published, and the publication of the full report on the institution's and NVAO's website.
- The discussion points listed above could feed into a depository of Trends Reports, Compendiums of summaries of Review Reports over a given period (a Decade of MusiQuE review reports ?), which would demonstrate transversal trends and other crosscutting issues, for the benefit of the Higher Music Institutions, music practitioners and the entire sector.

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6 December 2019

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