

Developing a ‘Cantus Firmus’ in European quality assurance by building bridges between national contexts and subject-specific European-level initiatives: observations and experiences from the field of music

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Introduction

Several publications and previous EQAF articles published by the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC) advocate the need to add a subject-specific and European dimension to existing national quality assurance procedures. This is in particular relevant for disciplines with specific characteristics (e.g. higher music education) that need to be taken into consideration when being reviewed or accredited. With this fact in mind and in line with European developments in the field of quality assurance, the AEC produced in 2007 a set of criteria and procedures for quality assurance and accreditation activities in higher music education institutions. The Framework Document *Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Music Education: Characteristics, Criteria and Procedures* recalls the specific characteristics of the music sector, lists the AEC criteria and suggests the procedures to be used in the evaluation of higher music education institutions. This framework document is being used in the *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme*, giving AEC member institutions the opportunity to request a peer review visit resulting in an advisory report with recommendations for improvement written by international specialists in the relevant musical fields. During 2010, 7 of such AEC Review visits took place, including one in the Far East.

As a more recent feature, the AEC has started to develop bilateral collaborations with various national quality assurance and accreditation agencies, adding a European-level subject-specific dimension to the national quality assurance and accreditation procedures. The scope of these collaborations varies according to the partner agency, ranging from AEC only suggesting international experts, to AEC undertaking the entire procedure.

This article will explore the effects of such collaborations in more detail. It will describe, in line with the theme of the 5th European Quality Assurance Forum, how to make sense of quality assurance in a European context by building bridges between national contexts and subject-specific European-level initiatives. This will be done by giving information about the collaboration activities that have taken place during 2009 and 2010, and in particular the collaboration with the Swiss Agency OAQ as a case study.

Building bridges between national contexts and subject-specific European-level initiatives

During 2010, the following types of bilateral collaborations between national accreditation agencies and the AEC were set up and implemented, resulting in 9 joint accreditation procedures in several academies of music in Switzerland, Romania, Lithuania and Germany, in which more than 40 programmes were reviewed:

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- The collaborations with the Organ für Akkreditierung und Qualitätssicherung der Schweizerischen Hochschulen (OAQ), the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) and the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) were prepared by an in-depth comparative analysis and a subsequent merge of the national criteria used by the agency and the European-level subject-specific criteria used by the AEC. These merged sets of criteria then served as a basis for the accreditation and review procedures of several academies of music. In addition, the AEC was in charge of appointing foreign experts: in the case of OAQ and the CQAHE, entire teams were appointed by the AEC in consultation with the agencies, whereas in the case of ARACIS two foreign experts were appointed to work in parallel with national teams of reviewers.
- In a collaboration with the German accreditation agency ZEvA (Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur), the AEC was given the responsibility of implementing the evaluation process of several higher music education programmes in the same academy of music. This included formulating a set of merged criteria, composing an international review team, organising and performing the review visit, writing the experts' report and handing in to ZEvA the final experts' report.
- The German accreditation agency ACQUIN (Akkreditierungs-, Zertifizierungs- und Qualitätssicherungs-Instituts ACQUIN) included an expert proposed by the AEC in the accreditation panels appointed to evaluate two academies of music; the expert was in charge of ensuring that AEC criteria were taken into consideration in addition to ACQUIN's criteria and of bringing an international dimension to the panel.

Case study: the collaboration between AEC and the Swiss agency OAQ

As an example of how the above-mentioned collaborations actually function, further information is given here on the accreditation procedure of several Master programmes in music, which took place under the joint auspices of the OAQ and AEC during the academic year 2009-2010. With the aim to provide perspectives from various stakeholders, the experiences of one of the external experts, one of the accredited institutions and the quality assurance agency are described below.

An external expert's perspective

A key aspect of the joint OAQ/AEC approach was the preliminary work carried out to map the existing quality standards of the two organisations onto one another. The standards and their sequence in the document were essentially those of the OAQ procedure, with which many of those in the AEC procedure overlapped. But in addition, thanks to a system of yellow highlighting, it was possible to see at a glance those AEC standards for which no direct correspondence existed in the OAQ procedure.

The groups of experts assembled for each of the exercises were commendably diverse in terms of geographical background, with a good balance between local knowledge and dispassionate objectivity. A particular strength of the formulation of the groups was the presence of student members – in each case, students from other Swiss conservatoires. The students had received prior briefing and training by the OAQ and were in every case full participants in the group and invaluable for the particular perspective which they brought to the exercise.

One of the great strengths of involving a European sectoral organisation in accreditation procedures is its access to a large pool of experts from across a range of countries, with linguistic capabilities to suit a variety of local situations and with specialisms within the discipline that cover a wide spectrum. All panels showed the benefits of this with, for example, a specialism as specific as Dalcroze Rhythmics being addressed by an external expert well-versed in this technique but sufficiently removed from the internal colleagues who were delivering the programme in question to retain objectivity. Naturally,

there were some existing acquaintances between external experts and internal staff – in a discipline as small and intrinsically international as music this could hardly be otherwise. Nevertheless, overall, there was a highly satisfactory balance between this and the phenomenon of individuals meeting one another for the first time. This also led to greater candour in discussions, and therefore strengthened, rather than undermined, the depth of scrutiny that was possible within a few tightly-scheduled days.

Within each site visit, there were various opportunities to hear students performing. For a panel of musical experts, this offered an excellent opportunity to judge whether the rhetoric of the institution's self-evaluation document matched the musical reality. In dealing with Masters programmes in particular, it provided an invaluable window into the extent to which taught postgraduate musicians were truly incorporating reflection and a research-oriented mentality into their performance. Such things can be talked about but, ultimately, are revealed only in the act of music-making – and then only to those with extensive musical experience themselves. It is not suggested here that it would have been impossible for a panel including specialists from non-musical disciplines to tease out the same information and interpret it in a similar manner. However, it is felt that a group of experts composed of musicians, and rendered objective by being drawn from a truly Europe-wide pool, made its way more rapidly and efficiently to conclusions than would have been the case otherwise.

The perspective of the quality assurance agency OAQ

Programme accreditation at the Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) in Switzerland is obligatory and the Conservatories or higher education music schools under review are nowadays affiliated to or incorporated into Swiss UAS. As a precondition for engaging in this joint procedure, the compliance by the OAQ and the AEC with the European Standards and Guidelines was of crucial relevance. A comparative analysis of the procedures and criteria for the assessment applied by the two organisations was carried out in a first feasibility phase. The comparison showed a high degree of compatibility of the procedures and criteria for the assessment applied by the two organisations. In the implementation phase, a main instrument was developed: an ad-hoc set of standards integrating the European-level discipline-specific AEC standards with the national OAQ general standards, which served as basis for both the self-evaluation reports and the external evaluation reports. Four jointly coordinated site-visits of three to four days each took place, resulting in four external evaluation reports.

From the point of view of the OAQ, the benefits of this joint procedure could be outlined in five main points:

1. Selection of experts – The OAQ could access a rich pool of outstanding international experts in the field of music, who turned out to be highly experienced persons in quality assurance processes and true professionals of the field. Furthermore, their international profile guaranteed the presence of intercultural competences, which is essential when evaluating a foreign system and still being able to give valuable recommendations. The quality of the experts and their preparation was outstanding.
2. The added value for the institutions – With an ad-hoc set of standards adapted to higher music education and a panel of experts of international reputation, the institution could add specific value to the programme accreditation mandated nationally, optimizing the resources invested in the accreditation procedure and maximizing its potential benefits. This resulted in an increase of motivation in the institutions involved, which had a positive impact on the work of the agency as well.
3. Visibility – The joint procedure increased the visibility and image of the accredited programmes internationally, implying by consequence an impact on the reputation of the OAQ and its versatility.

to serve the purposes of higher education institutions, while respecting the highest procedural quality with an approach always oriented towards quality improvement.

4. A Learning Outcomes oriented approach – Being able to work with the *AEC Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Higher Music Education*, which is based on learning outcomes to be acquired at completion of the 1st and 2nd cycles in music and is fully compatible with the European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education, and with experts well informed about this sectoral framework, the OAQ could benefit from expertise on how to address the assessment of intended learning outcomes when evaluating the quality of a programme. This is particularly fruitful in view of current European developments towards this type of assessments.
5. Respect of the national legal framework – Thanks to the cooperative approach and flexibility of the AEC, the jointly-coordinated work could be carried out in a creative and enriching atmosphere in full respect of the Swiss accreditation system.

An institutional perspective

These reflections follow the accreditation of several study programmes in Switzerland conducted by the OAQ in collaboration with AEC. An important aspect of the involvement of the AEC in national procedures is its music-specific approach. The AEC criteria were complementary to the national standards used for accreditation in Switzerland: their use lead to a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach and were more attuned to the Conservatoires' specific field of study and research. The institution also appreciated the level of competence and professionalism of the international experts, their diversity of specializations and experiences and, above all, their understanding of the sector.

Our accreditation process also demonstrated that there are at least two conceptions of accreditation: the minimal conception and the extended conception. Under the minimal conception, the purpose of accreditation is to check whether a given higher education institution (or a specific part such as one or more study programmes) meets a pre-determined set of key standards of satisfactory quality. The second and more ambitious conception envisages accreditation procedures to be less about quality control than about quality development. Standards are primarily considered tools for critical analysis; they are tools that should help institutions to become more articulate about their merits and their challenges, to be able to analyse processes better and to arrive at informed decisions regarding the setting of goals and choosing of appropriate means and methods. The extended conception emphasizes the quality enhancement aspect of quality assurance and accreditation, and encourages external evaluations to take into consideration the institution's specific societal and historical contexts as well as its cultural visions and aspirations. In theory, it should be possible for an accreditation procedure to combine those purposes, but in practical terms this can be challenging, as was evident from the joint OAQ/AEC procedure in our institution: while the use of the national accreditation criteria, responsible for accrediting all universities across Switzerland, leaned towards the minimal conception, the joint procedure tended to promote the extended conception. Nevertheless, in our specific case the expert report states that in terms of the report's formal recommendations as to accreditation, the national Swiss standards were the main points of reference. The importance of the national accreditation standards alone suggests that the assessment procedure should adhere to the first conception, yet the discussions and reports itself tended to oscillate between the narrower and wider approach.

In order to make such an exercise helpful and clear for the institution, it is critical to clarify from the outset the purpose and scope of the exercise. An institution, on the minimal conception, will do everything it thinks necessary to get the accreditation, i.e. the passing grade. This might encourage institutions to mention all the good-making factors and leave out or minimize the problematic ones. The panel of experts will be seen as 'judges' who together will issue one of three possible verdicts: "Yes",

“No” or “Yes, under the condition that...”. Although there may be circumstances which might make it reasonable for an institution to seek a conditional “yes”; it is difficult to imagine that any institution would want anything less than a resounding “yes”. Under the extended conception, external experts will consider themselves as ‘critical friends’ rather than ‘impartial judges’. Institutions will feel encouraged to explain their situation as it is, without embellishment or being economical with the truth.

In the further development of such joint procedures during the coming years, this is an issue that will need further consideration. Although theoretically speaking both conceptions could be complementary to each other, it will require great care and further experimentation to develop single procedures combining the two in a fruitful way. In some contexts or situations, both institutions and expert panels may also prefer to clarify from the outset which conception is to be followed and then adhere to this particular conception throughout the process.

Overall strengths and challenges of the collaborations

When looking back at the joint procedures in general, some first observations can already be formulated, although the AEC and the agencies are still in the process of evaluating the procedures through questionnaires sent to institutions and experts. As can be seen in the contributions by the various stakeholders in the joint OAQ-AEC procedure above, the international dimension and the subject-specific approach were seen as helpful and effective from all sides.

Respondents to the feedback questionnaires also brought up several challenges. First of all, the international experts appointed by the AEC for accreditation panels had to be provided with additional information during the on-site visit in order to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of the national higher education systems in which the institutions to be evaluated were situated. However, contrary to the reviews taking place in the framework of the *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme* that exclusively involves foreign visiting teams, the accreditation panels were efficiently supported by representatives of the national agencies with their expertise of the national systems. In addition, language turned out to be an issue in some cases: translation of the institution’s documentation entailed additional costs for some institutions as well as shortened deadlines to finalise the materials; simultaneous translation when needed also reduced the actual amount of time available for discussion.

Observed differences between the national and European-level subject-specific criteria

While working with the various national agencies, differences were also observed between the various national procedures, as well as between the national procedures and the AEC procedure. For example, it was interesting to notice the absence of criteria relating to international strategies or European cooperation in most national procedures; usually only student mobility was referred to without any further specification. Furthermore, differences between countries were observed in relation to the level of interference the procedure is expected to have: in some countries strict guidelines exist on details such as a minimum ECTS points per module where in other countries there are none. The balance between quality enhancement and compliance with national quality assurance criteria, so well described from an institutional point of view in the above-mentioned case study, is another issue that differs noticeably from country to country. Finally, in relation to the procedures being used and the role of the experts in these procedures, it is interesting to see, despite the presence of the overarching European Standards and Guidelines, the great variety of procedures being used in the different European countries. In any case, by regularly working together with agencies in national contexts, the AEC has the unique opportunity to develop a good overview of the various systems in place and further develop its own expertise based on these experiences.

Finally...

Contrary to some of the European Quality Seals developed during recent years, the AEC model favours cooperation rather than competition with national quality assurance agencies. Although some challenges remain, this model has proven to function well in the eyes of the experts and the agencies involved, and to benefit the visited institutions.

This development shows the slow but steady emergence of a 'Cantus Firmus' for European quality assurance, referring to the musical term that describes a composition practice in Gregorian Chant and medieval music, which used a fixed melody against which other tunes were set in counterpoint. This musical term can serve as a powerful analogy to the practice described in this article, in which criteria developed at the European-level with subject-specific expertise can serve as a backdrop to a variety of national quality assurance and accreditation procedures.

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