11th European Quality Assurance Forum

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Quality in context – embedding improvement

Paper proposal form

Deadline 25 July 2016

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Martin Prchal is vice-principal at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague, the Netherlands, with responsibilities for curriculum development, quality assurance and international relations. Trained as a musician of Czech origin, he holds teaching and performance diplomas (violoncello) and a MA in musicology. In his previous position as Chief Executive of the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC), Martin developed a substantial expertise on EU project management through his involvement in several music projects in various EU programmes and on the implications of the Bologna Process on higher music education in Europe. Martin has served as reviewer for quality assurance agencies in various countries and has been member of the boards for the Swiss agency OAQ (now AAQ) and the Flemish agency VLUHR KZ. Currently he is also chair of the board of *MusiQuE* – Music Quality Enhancement, a European-level Foundation for Quality Enhancement and Accreditation in Higher Music Education registered on EQAR.

Name: Linda Messas

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Short bio (150 words max):

Linda Messas is General Manager of the European Association of Conservatoires (Association Européenne des Conservatoires – AEC). She is running the Association together with the Chief Executive Officer. She is also coordinating *MusiQuE* – Music Quality

Enhancement, the EQAR-registered Foundation for Quality Enhancement and Accreditation in Higher Music Education since its establishment in 2014. Linda has been involved in the development of several quality assurance activities in the AEC through the coordination of various projects. This has included the development of standards and procedures for the AEC Quality Enhancement Process that eventually led to the establishment of *MusiQuE*, cooperative activities with the National Association of School of Music (NASM), a subject-specific accreditation agency in the field of music in the US, and the implementation of several joint accreditation procedures with national quality assurance agencies across Europe. She has also participated as secretary in several review visits of higher music education institutions.

Martin Prchal will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.

Proposal

Title: How to make quality assurance processes more meaningful to teaching staff – a proposal from the field of music.

Abstract (150 words max):
This paper addresses a challenge that is often referred to in quality assurance processes: the involvement in these processes of teaching staff. The authors suggest that this challenge can be approached effectively by creating a common language based on a concept of quality culture, which addresses both (artistic) standards and educational quality. Furthermore, an understanding of a diversity of disciplines and the need for a diversity of quality assurance tools supporting this understanding are described as essential elements to increase the relevance of quality assurance processes to teachers. The paper describes the work done in the field of higher music education in this regard, ranging from the development and use of European-level subject-specific standards, procedures and frameworks, to the new and experimental 'critical friend' approach, which can be used alongside more traditional models of external review and which could also be useful to other academic disciplines.

The paper is based on: practice

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

As has been the case with other institutions in higher education, conservatoires have seen a strong development in quality assurance during the past few years. Quality assurance systems have been implemented by many institutions in which various stakeholders play an important role. For example, contributions by external peers and representatives from the profession are essential in many external quality assurance processes. The role of students has been on the agenda for some time and their presence on quality assurance committees and review panels is no longer questioned. Student feedback on study programmes, modules or services is being collected through regular surveys as part of institutional quality assurance systems. Quality assurance experts have been appointed and quality assurance offices established to develop and implement such systems. Members of institutional management teams have been usually strongly involved in all these developments.

Nevertheless, the involvement of one important stakeholders' group still poses challenges, which is the stakeholders' group of teachers and academics. In conservatoires, teachers are typically top-level musicians with teaching positions alongside busy performance careers. In general they are less involved in institutional policies, not just because of their part-time positions but also because of a strong focus on their area of specialisation and the development of the artistic and instrumental or vocal skills of their students. It is from this stakeholders' group that resistance or a lack of interest has been observed towards the development of quality assurance processes.

This situation in the conservatoire sector seems to resonate with debates held during previous editions of EQAF, during which the involvement of teachers and academics was mentioned as a challenging issue to many quality assurance systems in higher education generally. In this article, the authors describe concepts and tools which have been developed and tested in the field of higher music education, but which could be translated to other areas in higher education. These concepts and tools are based on the assumption that an understanding of the diversity of disciplines and the need to develop diverse quality assurance tools supporting this understanding are essential elements to increase the involvement of teachers in quality assurance processes.

The importance of speaking the same language when addressing quality

In their previous paper presented at EQAF in 2015, the authors describe a concept of quality culture which addresses both *standards* and *educational quality*, i.e. standards in a particular academic or artistic discipline on the one hand and educational quality that includes generic issues (such as the organisation and management of the curriculum, governance, assessment procedures, students feedback mechanisms, internal and external communication, etc.) on the other. Whereas in conservatoires an attention on educational quality has developed only recently influenced by the emergence of quality assurance as part of the Bologna process, for decades the main focus of the conservatoire sector has been on (artistic) standards. One could even say that in conservatoires, systems for quality assurance have been in place for quite some time through the existence of robust examination systems. These examination systems are, however, entirely focused on the assessment of and debate on artistic standards: the performance and creative skills of the students are assessed and discussed by assessment panels of teachers (and sometimes external experts) using a collective and inter-subjective approach during assessments that are public performances at the same time.

It is this reality that has often been overlooked in the development of quality assurance systems. In many institutions these have been introduced by quality assurance experts without a background in the discipline of the study programmes. In the emergence of these systems, the focus on quality was often introduced as something completely new, which led to confusion (and irritation) among teachers who were under the impression they had been doing nothing else than focusing on quality all along. This resulted in a fundamental misunderstanding: when discussing 'quality', teachers meant (artistic) *standards*, while managers and quality assurance experts meant *educational quality*.

In the development of quality assurance systems it is therefore essential to use tools that address both standards and educational quality, and, as a result, make more sense to the daily work of teachers. These tools should be based on a common language when addressing 'quality' and on qualitative rather than quantitative methods.

The importance of an understanding of disciplinary diversity in external QA

This need to speak the same language extends to external quality assurance processes. Almost all European countries have by now set up quality assurance or accreditation agencies responsible for evaluating higher education institutions within their national

frameworks. As a first step, it has been logical for such agencies to be organised on a national basis and linked to the particular governmental and legal systems under which the institutions function. However, the paradigm around which such national agencies base their procedures is generally that of the multi-disciplinary university, combining scientific subjects with those in the arts and humanities, and exercising many of its quality assurance systems at the level of the institution – and therefore above that of its individual disciplines.

Most conservatoires are exceptions to such a paradigm in two ways: they deal exclusively with a highly specialised and minority subject and, because they focus on this one subject, distinctions between the institution- and discipline-based domains of quality assurance are not always relevant and can even be unhelpful. Where conservatoires are now being merged with other arts-based institutions into universities of the arts, this second aspect may be reduced in significance, but the shared focus on the arts in such institutions still makes them special and distinctive in terms of higher education more generally.

The consequence of this situation has been that conservatoires have often been faced with national procedures for evaluation or accreditation that are not always entirely fit for purpose in terms of the assumptions about quality embedded within them. In some cases, the procedures do not take into account the specificities of the sector (e.g. in terms of educational processes such as the prominence of 1-to-1 teaching by skilled practitioners who only spend a small proportion of their time within the institution); in others their panels do not involve a sufficient amount of music specialists (which is sometimes due to the difficulty of finding impartial expert reviewers within a small, specialist national sector). Some procedures also focus on the national context when considering the outward-facing aspects of an institution's operation but do not address issues linked to internationalisation which, for conservatoires, has always been an important aspect of quality.

These considerations have been at the core of the decision for the establishment of a dedicated European-level quality assurance agency for music entitled *MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement. MusiQuE* addresses many of the issues previously mentioned. Firstly, the discipline-based approach of *MusiQuE* is based on the conviction that the enhancement of quality in the sector is undoubtedly best served through an interaction with trained peer-specialists that speak the same language as those working and studying in the institutions. For a review or accreditation procedure that focusses upon a discipline such as higher music education to be accurate as well as fair, it is necessary to consider

the way that quality emerges from the special characteristics of that discipline. A quality assurance process that derives from a generic QA perspective will undoubtedly have some value when applied to music, but it will also have limitations. These may arise from a variety of factors: the actual framework used; the balance of expertise to be found among Review Team members; and, not least, the likely scepticism with which musicians working in conservatoires as teachers will regard a process that is not informed from first to last by musical knowledge and understanding.

Secondly, in order to facilitate understanding of what it tries to achieve in terms of quality assurance and quality enhancement, *MusiQuE* has developed a set of subject-specific standards, which will assist institutions with the introduction of external quality assurance processes to internal stakeholders. In a way, these standards have been devised as 'a musical version' of the ESG, with which *MusiQuE's* standards and procedures must be compatible, not the least in order to gain recognition on EQAR[1]. By using such a subject-specific 'translation', the understanding of students and teachers of standards and procedures in external quality assurance will be facilitated.

Thirdly, in its ambition to 'translate' generic frameworks to a common language that will be understood by music students and teachers, *MusiQuE* encourages institutions to use European-level subject-specific qualification frameworks that have been developed for the development and description of curricula. Much work has been done across the community of higher music education institutions to develop a shared understanding of the learning and teaching characteristics applicable to music and the relationship between these and generic tools such as the 'Dublin Descriptors'. Subject-specific versions of these tools, such as the 'Polifonia/Dublin Descriptors' and the 'AEC/Polifonia Learning Outcomes for 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle studies in music' have been created and incorporated in the publication 'Reference Points for the Design and Delivery of Degree Programmes in Music' published by the Tuning Project. From these tools and documents, a strong yet flexible consensus has developed at the European level as to expectations of students graduating in music at Bachelor, Master and 3rd Cycle levels and the key common areas that music curricula should address. It is an important strength of *MusiQuE* that it can draw upon an encompassing European-level subject-specific framework that ranges from a disciplinary approach to how study programmes should be described in terms of learning outcomes and levels, up to a disciplinary approach to how these study programmes should be reviewed externally. This

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[1] The registration of *MusiQuE* on EQAR was approved in June 2016

will support the aim of 'speaking the same language' as described above and facilitate understanding of such frameworks by students and teachers.

Lastly, *MusiQuE* embraces the abovementioned concept of a quality culture that combines artistic standards and educational quality. This is reflected through its procedures, in which visits to lessons, concerts and examinations, as well as a sampling of recordings of student performances are seen as an essential part of the external quality assurance process. In doing so, it tries to connect to teachers in a very direct way by showing interest in their work during the review visit. At the same time, *MusiQuE* also addresses in its procedures all aspects related to educational quality as required by the ESG. To be able to do so, it is essential that the reviews are done by peers that have a background both in music as well as in educational management.

The importance of a diversity in quality assurance tools
This need for understanding disciplinary diversity and 'speaking the same language' also gives quality assurance actors the responsibility to look closely at the tools they use. As part of its ambition to continuously improve its relevance and effectiveness, *MusiQuE* has started to offer institutions a new experimental approach to external review in addition to the 'classic' external review model, which typically consists of a review visit by an external panel every 5-6 years and which is used by most quality assurance agencies. In this new approach, annual visits by 'critical friends' are combined with a lighter version of *MusiQuE's* regular review visits.

A 'critical friend' is an external expert who is considered to be an international authority with regard to the content of the programme(s) that are being reviewed. The 'critical friend' is asked to review one or more programme(s) during a visit of approximately three days. During this visit, the 'critical friend' will speak with management, teachers, students and non-academic staff (e.g. quality assurance officers) both personally and in small groups, visit classes, performances and examinations, sample written work and study relevant materials in order to get an impression of the quality of the programmes both in terms of artistic standards and educational quality. After such a visit, the 'critical friend' will formulate his or her findings in a concise report of about 5 to 7 pages, which should include a set of concrete recommendations. This report will be structured along the *MusiQuE* Standards for Programme Review, and will be handed over to the institution for its internal quality enhancement purposes. Each programme (or group of similar programmes) will be

visited by a different 'critical friend' with specific expertise on the content of the courses offered by the programme(s). Over a period of several years, all programmes offered by the institution in a particular discipline will be visited more than once, so that developments can be monitored.

Following these visits, the 'classic' review visit by an external review panel will take place, which will take into account the reports of the 'critical friends'. By doing so, a lighter touch can be applied in terms of the preparations an institution has to undertake for such 'classic' review visits: instead of the usual self-evaluation report, the institution can submit the reports written by the 'critical friends' with brief responses from the institution containing information on what has been done with the recommendations made by the 'critical friends'[2]. In addition to these reports, an annotated list can be provided of all existing documentation relevant to the external review panel, such as curriculum overviews, module descriptions, quality assurance reports and various management information.

This 'critical friend' approach can be effective with regards to creating a stronger involvement of teachers in quality assurance processes. The first experiences with the approach at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague show as an important advantage that the presence of the 'critical friend' provides ample opportunities for meaningful exchanges with teachers: while visiting classes, performances and examinations, the 'critical friend' will have the possibility to observe and meet several teachers in their professional context and not just during the usual one-hour meeting as part of the 'classic' review visit. As a result, not only can a better impression of the actual quality of teaching be gained, but teachers will also be confronted with a quality assurance method that will be based on personal contact and a content dialogue with a peer. At the same time, the management will be provided with qualified feedback on the quality of teaching of its faculty, which in the conservatoire context is a sensitive issue: because of the 1-to-1 teaching approaches (assuming a close contact between teacher and student in a 'master-apprentice' setting), it is difficult to collect feedback from students on the quality of individual teachers.

The 'critical friend' also embodies the previously mentioned concept of quality culture addressing both standards and educational quality. Because he/she will attend both examinations as well as the deliberations of the assessment panels, he/she will be able to

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[2] This is consistent with ESG 3.2, which states that external quality processes should include "a self-assessment or equivalent".

assess both the musical quality of the student performances (standards), as well as how the assessment procedures are formalised and executed (educational quality). By doing so, he/she will engage directly with an area that is essential for the daily reality of the teachers and be able to give feedback on what has been observed.

The first experiments with the 'critical friend' approach also show other advantages in addition to creating a closer connection to the teaching faculty:

- The approach provides a solution to the ever-present search for a balance between quality enhancement and quality control in external quality assurance processes. Even if the 'critical friends' are asked to use the *MusiQuE* standards, their visits are mainly focused on quality enhancement, whereas the regular 'classic' review visits can be more focused on the assessment of formal (national) standards and requirements.

- The institution's workload for the preparation for external review will be much more evenly spread over several years instead of the usual 'accreditation stress' programmes and institutions experience every 5-6 years in the 'classic' review model. It will also help institutions to implement a more permanent approach to quality enhancement.

- For quality assurance experts and offices, the approach will not only mean a more evenly spread workload as previously mentioned, but by being involved in its organisation, they will also be placed into a more central position towards departments, students and teachers. Even if certain quantitative quality assurance activities may need to be done anyway due to legal requirements (e.g. an annual student satisfaction survey), this approach will move the quality assurance offices closer to the reality of the study programmes by shifting the focus from purely quantitative approaches based on the use of surveys to a more qualitative approach. At the Royal Conservatoire, experience has shown that with this shift, the feedback collected is much more relevant with regards to the artistic and academic content of the study programmes, especially when the 'critical friend' approach is used in combination with student focus groups that can be organised during and outside the visits of 'critical friends'.

- Finally, this approach fits well with the trend of a gradual development towards external quality assurance processes at institutional level, which is visible in many European countries. In this trend, institutions are given more responsibility to develop their own internal quality assurance processes at programme and departmental level, the working of which they will need to explain in the institutional level review procedures. *MusiQuE's* combined approach of the 'critical friends' and the 'classic' review visit can very well serve as an effective model for the quality assurance of programmes or

departments within multi-disciplinary higher education institutions, which will in fact have the status of being an internal quality assurance procedure within the institutional level review process but one with a strong external dimension.

Despite the fact that the content of this paper has been described on the basis of experiences in the field of music, it is easy to see how these experiences can be extrapolated to other disciplines in higher education. In fact, the 'critical friend' model can be used in any disciplinary setting and will almost certainly lead to a stronger involvement of all stakeholders in quality assurance, including teachers and academics.

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Discussion questions:

1. Would you agree that the concept of a quality culture addressing both standards and education quality as described in this article is applicable to other academic disciplines?

2. Which approaches can you share that are aimed at a greater involvement of teaching staff in quality assurance processes?

3. Do you think that the 'critical friends' approach would make sense in your institution or academic discipline?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 25 July 2016 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.