

### 3. THE STANDARDS OF PROFESSION IN CURRENT APPROACHES TO ASSESSING QUALITY IN ROMANIAN ARTS HIGHER EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** *It introduces an analytical approach to assessment of quality in arts higher education in Romania, with a focus on academic standards for university teaching staff. Should a similar view over professional standards apply to artists in higher education as it does for other academics, or better yet should their work be reviewed on another set of professional standards? A comparative perspective on approaches to assessment in arts higher education in other countries informs the argument presented here, proposing a critical view on what is local/universal in practices of arts higher education and, implicitly, in approaches to assessment for quality in this type of academic activity.*

**Key words:** *assessment, arts, higher education, standards.*

The required standards for quality assurance in higher education in Europe have been agreed upon by ministers of higher education in 2005. They are stated in the *Report on Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. The standard for teaching is that “Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students are qualified and competent to do so. They should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented upon in reports” (ENQA Report, 2009, p.18). Apart from stating the standard, the report also provides general guidelines to practice, not differentiating between the type or contents of learning in higher education. The general statement of requirement is that of acknowledging the importance of certain features of teaching in higher education : the teachers are generally expected to “have a full knowledge and understanding of the subject they are teaching, have the necessary skills and experience to transmit their knowledge and understanding effectively to students in a range of teaching contexts, and [can] access feedback on their own performance”(idem).

#### **Problem statement**

Matching perfectly current trends on nurturing a cost-efficiency rationale in assessing quality in higher education, the ENQA standard and general guidelines translated into increased control and practices of evidence subjecting to standardization and quantitative approaches to measuring performance and quality in all learning areas, irrespective of the traditions, values and practices in various academic disciplines. In the pitfalls of this approach the arts higher education institutions seem to have caught tightest.

In a comparative report on quality assurance and accreditation of higher music education institutions in Europe published in 2008, the Association Européenne de Conservatoires (AEC) explains the situation created by the

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standardization approach in a manner applicable to all arts disciplines: “The vast majority of substantial work in music predates the assessment movement of the latter half of this century that calls for the substantial collection and comparison of data, reliance on quantitative benchmarks, use of large-scale technical review systems, and the production of symbols that reduce complexities so that results can be understood by all, irrespective of expertise. Such simple indicators are intended to confirm what students should know, what they should learn, what they have learned, and thus what teachers should teach. The cry for accountability of this kind has become commonplace. One result is the need to describe, codify, and explain past, current, and evolving practice based on the different natures of fields and professions. It is important to be cautious and aware, however, because wrong decisions about assessment policy can reduce the effectiveness of higher education. Two important issues to keep in mind are: (1) higher education is ever changing, and to assess in one common way that which changes constantly is overwhelming, if unrealistic given the fact that changes are ongoing in many disciplines and institutions; and (2) that which is important to be assessed can be easily lost in the concept, rhetoric, and operation of an overly-standardized review procedure” (2008, p.10).

The concern expressed in the AEC’s report is comprehensive of a number of aspects concerning the quality of teaching and learning experiences in the arts higher education, with which Romanian faculty staff in arts universities are often in a position to declare shared views and worries. Faculty in Romanian arts higher education have been responding to a national methodology of assessment with similar requirements of quality and an equal focus on quantitative markers of academic performance for all types of academic institutions and their teaching staff, irrespective of the discipline or content-related specificities of learning in those institutions. Often admitting to feelings of irrelevance and lack of efficacy in the face of what the governmental take on assessment of their academic work quality was, faculty in the arts feel their work with the students in concertos, recitals, in theatre shows or in visual production of any kind is something simply left out of the scope of quality markers like: number of published papers in peer reviewed publications, ISI indexed or else, number of international conferences attended etc. It thus become relevant to voice and pursue the question: should a similar view over professional standards apply to artists in higher education as it does for other academics, or better yet should their work be reviewed on another set of professional standards?

Paraphrasing AEC’s stance on music, it is simply common sense to admitting that arts go far back in the history of human interests and occupations, whereas the study and practice of arts within and among nations is stable and carried forth in a peaceful, cooperative spirit. As arts production, forms of consumption and learning diversified immensely, the arts higher education institutions promoted approaches to learning heavily building on the tenets of increased mobility of students and teachers among organizations, practices and traditions across and within countries. It is thus often the case that most arts higher education faculty will find it legitimate to either voice or simply resonate

with those questioning the promised increased efficiency of current centralization and standardization trends in delivering an approach to assessment that favors increased professional performance, creativity and higher visibility and sustainability of best practice. In their view, it is not in the value of bottom line profits, business plans, and centralized assessment mechanisms that the increased quality of arts education lies, but in the locally responsive articulation of knowledge, experience and creativity that teachers and students in arts bring forth in their activities.

This type of critical view on current assessment policies and practices in higher education is purposefully demising the stance of those placing faith in the scientific certainty in assessment. In the view of the latter, a system of assessment building on non-discipline specific methodology will help monitor, guide and most efficiently regulate against high quality academic standards the activity of every teacher and student in every university, making curricular routes and learning experiences comparable, transferable and mutually recognizable in a labor market that is increasingly open to mobility of working force.

Criticizing this call for accountability is mainly shaped in the voice of arts representatives in the argument that these approaches have merely the benefit of eliciting general information about the learning processes, applicable at a general level and missing out on many of the most important, definitive features of learning and its outcomes in the academic experience of studying the arts. Efficiency is found in the assessment instruments and methodologies that stem out of the specificities of “the discipline itself and its nuances. To assess a discipline fairly and truly, one must know its subject matter and its ways of working” (AEC, 2008).

However relevant, the viewpoint that the general ought to be replaced entirely by the local and particular one must consider in its own possible pitfalls of which the greatest seems to be isolation and incapacity to translate and calibrate its own discourse to other academic or non-academic discursive practices. The possibility of regarding learning in the arts as much an esoteric activity that it becomes a closed-in discourse, missing out on meaning and power of communication, proclaiming and pursuing the familiar and limiting what was most guarded after in the first place – the creative value of arts – is very much a possibility.

In the AEC’s report a compromise is found in the balance between what external and internal assessment exercises is desired to be about. The externally conducted assessment of quality in the arts academic proposals of learning is expected to perform a function of “explain[ing] in the larger vernacular of higher education so that all can be more assured that assessment is taking place and evolving as it always has” (AEC, 2008). Internally conducted assessment exercises should “be pursued with new refinements as a service so that paths, available to assist institutions to promote, develop, and advance the knowledge base of students and teachers, are explored and pursued with a focus on the pursuit of excellence”(idem). Thus, the outcome of both types of assessment

should be oriented towards *improvement*. Yet, disappointingly enough, current approaches to assessment are understood by the same author, to be regarded as a panacea, a quantitative support for funding decision making and a guiding instrument in the orientation process of new-comers to the university education in their deciding over which program to enroll in, and a discursive tool for nations to set and maintain competitive advantages against other nations. Accused to simply ignore the voices of experts in the arts fields to the benefit of best pursuing their purposes, these assessment practices are considered to be counter-productive to quality and efficiency, whilst un-tailored to “specific discipline, and work consistent with terms, approaches, and habits of mind indigenous to that discipline”(AEC,2008).

This critique in particular, eloquently articulated in AEC’s report published in 2008 finds its counterpart in the Romanian criticism voiced in the academic practice by the professionals working in arts universities, a discourse which I became familiar with in my own experience of working at the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Arts “George Enescu” Iasi. In the following I will try to briefly analyze the context, the nature of critical discourse arising in the academic assessment exercise, proposed solutions at local level and possible ways ahead.

## **Findings**

Every academic year each university in Romania goes through an assessment and reporting exercise which is part of the quality assurance policy in the national system of higher education since 1990. With the establishment, in 2005, of a national agency for quality assurance in higher education, Romania moved into the European landscape of quality policies, itself growing to new horizons of globalization and transferability of educational credits and work, set in motion with the Bologna process in 1999.

The assessment of the quality of work a faculty member in the arts (albeit drama department, music or visual arts and design) was subjected to measurement of the degree in which the work done was matching standards common to all academic disciplines and fields of study. Instruments of documentation of professional outcomes and performance obliged the institution to report in numeric data what has been done, in respect of academic standards nominated by the Ministry of Education and imposed to all universities in the country in the same format and with the same methodology and guidelines. In effect, many of faculty’s self-reports on their work at the university, especially the work of those faculty members working on performing arts curriculum (i.e. orchestra classes, acting classes, painting, sculpting, photo and video production, textile design etc.), were left out of the institutional reports due to irrelevance in regard of what the national bodies of control and assessment were requiring. Whilst concertos, performance shows and exhibitions with relevant numbers of members in the audience and good coverage in the cultural and social press where there to be reported by faculty members having worked with their students to prepare and perform, in the yearly academic assessment exercises

there was no governmental interest in them, as research grants and peer assessed publications in academic journals and well established publishing houses were the single most relevant academic performance standards. The mannerist, highly quantitative manner of reporting was also found to be disregarding the nature of what was internally valued as quality feature of academic activity in the arts. For example, the art performing activity in and of itself is considered a field of continuous assessment. Lessons with instructors, individual practice, rehearsals, juries, and performances – each is thought of as fertile with opportunities for critique and improvement. These are common experiences for all arts people. It was thus, a major mishap on the part of the academic assessment methodology to ignore the fact that the basis for all reviewing, reflecting, improving of the quality of learning and teaching in arts lays in these very opportunities to individually and collectively produce art and reflect upon its making. The intricacies of this type of discursive practices were missed out on the assessment exercises emphasizing on the written word and operating with a language and forms of producing meaning alienated from the day-to-day practices of teaching and learning in the arts.

The instruments used in the assessment practice are divided between a peer/collegial assessment report form requiring people to express on a quantitative scale from 1-5 (where 5 is “excellent”) their appreciation of their fellow colleagues’ conduct in the department (supportive, collegial, respectful, on time, reliable, responsible, promoter of quality academic activities, team player, active in the academic community), an assessment form requiring students to appreciate their teacher’s work (again a quantitative 5 point scale report on clarity and coherence, attractiveness of teaching, fairness and objectivity in assessment and participation in extra-curricular activities) and a self-reporting instrument requiring faculties to detail their work on five major criteria: teaching, research, national and international recognition, activity with the students and participation in the academic community. Albeit on the self-reporting form the national standards were amended on most criteria to better fit the specificities of the work of arts faculties, these amendments are usually written in the form of footnotes, detailing or proposing alternatives to the main criterion featured in the form. For instance in the form there is the criteria of “authored course-books for undergraduate disciplines/ re-edited course-books” (in the section of teaching) which is marked by a footnote explaining solely that work no older than three years can be reported in this section, with no mentioning in whether those who teach an orchestra class, or painting, or acting class for instance are excepted from the criterion, or their manner of transposing the contents of learning in the discipline they conduct is valued for a different type of expression, other than the written, printed discourse. Further, criteria such as “having published books, monographic studies or compendia at well established publishing houses” (in the Research section of assessment) is amended by a footnote explaining that “directing, writing, choreography projects, other than those presented to students/ research projects or projects of artistic production financed by other institutions” are acceptable as well.

What can be mainly observed in the discourse of these assessment tools are two main features: a primacy of quantitative over qualitative appreciation of value in most aspects of assessment, and a hierarchical type of positioning in respect of what ought to be guiding a faculty's perspective on professional performance, placing in a rather more favorable light the fulfillment of traditional academic performance markers, focusing on a written type of discourse and general, trans-disciplinary categories.

### **Discussion of findings**

The question I have proposed addressing in this analytical exercise was: *Should a similar view over professional standards apply to artists in higher education as it does for other academics, or better yet should their work be reviewed on another set of professional standards?* In looking at partisan literature I could learn that having assessment criteria and methodologies that are rooted in the specificities of learning, teaching and producing arts locally, and with high sensitivity to disciplinary idiosyncrasies is highly desired by some representatives of arts higher education. In looking at what the assessment instruments for arts faculty in the university where I work look like, I have learned that a focus on quantitative and a primacy of operating on the basis of an overly generalized assessment discourse, where traditional criteria and categories are prioritized by position and ratio are characteristics of current practices of quality and professional performance in arts higher education in Romania. These features alone could very well justify the increasingly acid criticism to national practices of quality assessment and accreditation on the part of arts faculty members, voicing a constant complaint of assessment being overly beaurocratic and lacking relevance for quality improvement in art higher education. So, it is simply justified to attempt finding possible remedies to the situation and propose a critically informed position on assessment for quality in arts education.

### **Concluding remarks**

Assessment is useful if it advises experts in content and operations as they map and plan next phases, both locally and on a broader scale. Assessment focused on and designed for the discipline and applied with respect for local knowledge and prerogatives, in the end advances arts culture, preserves conditions for innovation, and further strengthens civilization. If designed to ensure such attention, assessment procedures and the information they can provide can be extremely helpful and enlightening (AEC, 2008).

For most assessment practices, what needs to be recognized and taken into consideration is revising and parting ways with modern post-industrialization conceptions of knowledge and learning, placing focus on the mechanization, transmission and general control on knowledge production. With this, it needs to be acknowledged not only that the learning and work of an arts faculty member is specific and requires to be assessed as such, but a recognition that a faculty member's commitment to his or her creative work (production, expression,

research, etc.) should be regarded as the same as that of academic practitioners in other disciplines, and simply analogous to publication in other fields.

The criteria for promotion, retention, and tenure for art faculty members need to reflect the institutionally proposed conception of knowledge and learning and needs to mirror at all times the mission statement of the organization providing educational services in the arts. Professional achievement, teaching effectiveness, and service to the college and/or university criteria is recommendable to be explained in assessment instruments in a language that best expresses that continuity.

The professional activities related to research or creative production and the relative importance of activities under those headings require to be made clear and in writing to the faculty and appropriate administrators. The writing of assessment criteria is far from innocent as previously noted. Professionals' reading of the document is not lacking in positioning and in meaning making that takes into account all aspects of communication, including semantic, syntactical and graphical ones.

While student evaluations are meaningful aids in determining teaching effectiveness, those involved with the faculty review could also consider the following and other items, usually present in the assessment practices of various academic sites in Europe and USA: peer reviews of teaching, course syllabi, teaching awards, innovative pedagogy, student portfolios and achievements, and student awards. Documentation of teaching, including but not limited to: teaching evaluations, lists of courses taught, teaching innovations, teaching awards, teaching portfolios (including documentation of student work and sample syllabi), etc, visual documentation of creative work, research, and/or scholarly activity, in a format agreed upon in the institution, documentation of collaborative artworks, situated artworks, online work, commissions, consultations, and/or curatorial work, documentation of collaborative art efforts with clarification and identification about the candidate's role in the collaborative efforts, documentation assessing creative output, including reviews or articles about the candidate's work, press releases, award notifications, grant applications, periodical references, curatorial letters, and/or other notifications – they all could just as well complete the repertoire of procedures and items relevant for quality assessment in arts higher education, as indicated in the practices of various arts higher education organizations for which data on relevant documents, procedures and practices has been gathered, scrutinized and compared for the purposes of this paper.

Simply noticing that current approaches to assessment in higher education do not manage to capture all that is specific and local in the practices of learning and producing knowledge in various sites of education is neither original, nor is it comprehensive of the whole problem. Neither should criticizing the over-generalization of standard assessment criteria and procedures for their lack of responsiveness when faced with the idiosyncrasies of various forms and practices of knowledge production, be limited to legitimizing overly localized, esoteric practices, failing to meet the potential to promote actual advancements

and improvements in culture and knowledge. This antithesis between generally academic and art or discipline –specific would better yet be of value to increasing quality and performance, should it elicit a focus on the quality of the assessment activity in all its aspects: its goals, procedures, markers, discursive practices overall. In this paper, suggestions as to how such a focus can be made visible in assessment practices have been put forth.

## References

1. European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, *ENQA report on Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 3rd edition, 2009, Helsinki, <http://www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso>