ADMISSION AND ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION

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FOREWORD:
THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIVIDUAL ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION

Summary:
- Individual assessment is crucial because of the unique and individual nature of musical achievement
- It requires assessors with a combination of acute artistic sensitivity, consistency of judgement and awareness of benchmark levels of student achievement in Higher Education
- It is needed at every stage from admissions to final awards
- It is needed at each progression point from one cycle to the next (see also the Tuning Template)
- This handbook therefore covers assessment in all these stages

This handbook is primarily about the issue of assessment in Higher Music Education. It attempts to set assessment within the context of contemporary developments in higher education, especially those relating to the Bologna Process. However, it also addresses the question of admissions insofar as making an *assessment* of an applicant's musical achievement prior to entering higher education, and of their potential to progress still further in a higher education environment, lies at the heart of admissions processes.

Whether at the point of admission or during a programme of Higher Music Education study, the unique and highly individual nature of musical endeavour and achievement means that assessment procedures and attitudes must be correspondingly individualised and flexible. Those of us working this field share certain ideas of musical excellence in principle, but we must always remain open to the possibility of encountering individual manifestations of excellence that challenge or re-define those notions. Assessors, whether in entry auditions or in examinations which form part of the programme, must possess acute artistic sensitivity so as to recognise excellence in unfamiliar, as well as familiar, guises.

At the same time, Higher Music Education, like any other discipline, requires its assessors to be consistent in their judgements and to benchmark these against widely acknowledged standards. Consistency is important because it underpins the principle of fairness in how applicants and students are treated. Fairness is a laudable principle in itself, but a fairness that can be clearly demonstrated in practice, and which is therefore based upon clearly-accountable procedures, is also becoming increasingly important. As students' expectations of receiving satisfactory information about the reasons behind assessment judgements grow stronger – and, to some extent, become hardened into legal rights through access to information legislation – so the pressure increases to be able to show that no one student has been either penalised or specially favoured in comparison with others. Consistency may be applied laterally (across one year-group of applicants or students) and longitudinally (from one year-group to the next) as will be discussed in Chapter 7 of Section One of this handbook.

Benchmarking, whether of threshold or 'mean' standards, is also important because, even if an individual may perform spectacularly better than the threshold benchmark or an institution believe itself to be operating at a higher level than others in the sector, referencing assessment verdicts against widely-recognised standards promotes a broad understanding of achievement levels. From this flows the readability of awards and the reduced barriers to mobility that are cornerstone principles of the Bologna Declaration.

Assessment forms a constant accompaniment to each student's developmental trajectory: it is the gateway to study; it provides a series of reference points along the study journey; and it enables the final judgement to be passed upon the achievements of that journey and the precise nature of the destination finally reached. It is not therefore detached from learning but, on the contrary, forms its complementary counterpart and has a role to play at every stage of learning. However, carrying out an assessment does interrupt the learning process, and therefore the balance between learning and assessment must be carefully maintained. Equally, the nature of each assessment event must be matched to what it is trying to measure - whether it is determining entry, progress or terminal achievement. Chapters 2-4 of Section One will explore the relationship between assessment and learning in greater detail, while Chapters 5-8 will examine the ways in which a student's progress and final outcome are assessed in what are broadly referred to as the formative and summative aspects of assessment.

Of course, a terminal assessment in one phase or cycle of study may be used as part - or all - of the admissions assessment procedure for the next cycle. This is another reason why benchmarking is important; one institution's summative assessment may play a role in another's admissions scrutiny. In some countries, the Bologna Process has been interpreted as meaning that success in one cycle of higher education actually *entitles* a student to enter the next cycle. More usually, it is seen as meaning that the student is *eligible* to enter the next cycle and likely to be able to meet its challenges, but still subject to a decision process as to whether he or she should be accepted. This is important if institutions are to retain control of student numbers. In Higher Music Education, issues of balance between instrumental numbers and a whole host of other factors make it doubly important that institutions can select from among the eligible students applying to them.

Tools such as the **Dublin Descriptors**, and cycle-based Learning Outcomes derived from these, are deliberately constructed in the manner of a ladder, where each rung marks both a successful completion of one step and a platform from which to advance to the next. They are therefore useful in constructing assessments that serve this dual function. As well as the material in this handbook, it may therefore be helpful to consult the document *Summary of Tuning Findings - Higher Music Education*[1] which deals with the relationship between the Dublin Descriptors and more discipline-specific measurement scales.

Section One of this handbook deals mainly with the *principles* of assessment; in Section Two a set of ten case-studies is presented, each of them relating in some way to an issue discussed in the first section. These case-studies are deliberately drawn from a range of current practice as it is found in institutions across Europe. Some represent more traditional approaches, others newer innovations. The intention is not to present any of them necessarily as 'best practice' but, rather, to use them collectively as a means of pointing up the relationship between principles and practice. I am very

[1] 'Polifonia' 'Bologna' Working Group; Messas, L. & Prchal, M. (eds.) (2009): Reference points for the Design and Delivery of Degree Programmes in Music. Tuning Educational Structures in Europe. Deusto.

grateful to my colleagues in the 'Polifonia' Bologna Working Group for providing examples from their own institutions to build up this portfolio of case-studies, and for their invaluable editorial assistance during the preparation of the document.

Hopefully, each individual reader of this handbook will find some resonances between both the ideas and the examples given here and his or her own experience. Ideally, the handbook will serve as a spur to further thought about why we assess the way we do and how we might constantly strive to make our assessments fitter for purpose – more relevant, more consistent and less intrusive into the all-important process of learning. Those thought processes, as many of us are aware, are not ones that can ever be regarded as finished once-and-for-all; like the quest for learning itself, the search for the optimum way to assess learning is one of the goals that drive us forward constantly as we try to make our institutions the best possible environments for the professional preparation and personal development of our young musicians.

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