

Final Report submitted to the Kosovo Accreditation Agency
on a site visit to inspect

AKADEMIE EVOLUCION

18 MAY 2016

The purpose of the visit was to consider reaccreditation of the following programmes:

- BA Fashion Design
- BA Communication Design
- BA Interior Design
- MA Fashion Design

The Expert Team (ET) was also to consider initial accreditation of two proposed programmes:

- Interior Design (MA)
- Design and Advertising (MA)

Expert team

- Prof. Alan Brickwood, Higher Education consultant, Warwick, UK
- Mr. Stroud Cornock, Higher Education consultant, London, UK

Introduction

The expert team (ET) received a Self Assessment Report (SAR) and staff curricula vitae prior to the site visit, were able to see the Academy's accommodation and facilities and meet with both staff and students.

The ET received additional documentation promptly following the visit comprising annual report summaries for the previous three sessions.

General

Initial discussions with Akademie Evolucion's leadership were very open and positive.

The Academy had seen a 50% growth in its student population since the previous site visit. The ET was particularly pleased to learn that a new customised comprehensive student administration system had been developed to maintain data and that there was a willingness to further develop the collection and presentation of data to facilitate improved quality and resource management.

Typically, for quality assurance, that would include the kind of information provided by the Academy comprising relatively straightforward cohort analyses that show student progression and enrolment compared to admissions on a year -on-year basis. This can be expanded further to include age, gender, employment and refined with detailed profiles of student intake and employment providing valuable indicators of performance upon which action can be taken and monitored. The Academy has continued to run its original data management system while migrating data onto a new system, so as to compile and test the new service.

Recruitment statistics were reported to be so healthy that the Academy had not needed to advertise for the past 5 years. The decision to apply to the Academy was mostly based on word-of-mouth recommendations with 60% of applicants having made Evolucion their first choice. Employment statistics for graduates had been encouraging, with a very high 90% of all students already employed during their final year of study.

It was noted that a significant 20% of the academic staff are graduates of the Academy. The ET learned that the Academy had also made a strategic decision to make some changes so as to bring in 'new blood'. It was reported that a Design Studio (various references to such studios appear in the SAR, without explanation) was now run by a group of academic staff. A particularly important topic was provision for staff development. The ET was told that 10% of the Academy's turnover has been devoted to both student and staff research and development funding to provide subsidies for exhibitions, shows and international collaboration. This is a significant figure and is designed to also encourage co-funding. An example of the benefit to students of this appeared to be where the Academy had met some of the costs of masters' projects. It was noted that staff have travelled overseas to undertake doctoral studies.

During a wider meeting with academic staff a valuable comment made concerned the need to develop an intellectual community – within the Academy and among its network of contacts.

Academic programmes and student management

CURRICULUM

The ET met with programme leaders, wider course team members and with a significant number of students from all years and programmes and the ET was generally impressed by the consistency and clarity with which the rationale, aims, and design of curricula were presented and understood across all programmes.

It became apparent, however, that there is as yet limited scope for the incremental development of programmes through changes to course specifications. The ET was therefore unable to scrutinise the history of consideration, by the teaching team or institutional management, of proposed amendments to individual modules, whether as a result of ET reports, student feedback or staff experience of course delivery. This became particularly evident to the ET when discussing with the teaching team the need for curriculum and subjects to remain up-to-date, especially where programmes aim to prepare students for careers in highly innovative and fast moving industries such as fashion and communications. Certainly, some parts of some documentation left an impression that what was being taught was out of date and unsuitable for what was happening today - let alone what could be predicted for tomorrow. Such impressions gained from the documentation, along with a number of apparent omissions, were readily dealt with and concerns were allayed during discussions with teaching staff and students.

The ET sought to encourage, within the bounds of what is possible, an ambitious approach to curriculum development. In this context the actions reported regarding Interior Design (see page 6, final paragraph, below) do just this, and provide a good example.

A general problem faced by course teams is the limited availability of important texts that have been translated into the Albanian language. However, students do benefit from the increasing availability of relevant information accessible through the internet and social media.

Another topic arising from consideration of the documentation was a seemingly simple inability of teaching teams to meet the requirement that they specify Learning Outcomes (LOs) effectively. This is a requirement that assumes staff have learnt how to do this themselves as a result of staff development opportunities and reference materials.

Such opportunities and materials did not appear to be generally available. Some LOs in the documentation were SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) but the majority did not meet those criteria and there was often a degree of confusion between 'aims' and 'objectives'. The ET's concern was to stress to both management and to staff that a well-specified LO is a useful tool that assists teams in identifying appropriate learning opportunities and assessment strategies and helps students to appreciate what is important. The ET welcomed recognition of the importance of this topic by the Acting Academic Director.

Recommendation

The Academy should identify sources of guidance on the specification and practical use of SMART LOs (online; published documents; seminar opportunities) and encourage cross-programme workshops.

The ET examined in detail the nature of the undergraduate programmes in terms of balance between breadth and depth and, in particular, how the masters' programmes (existing and proposed) provided 'additionality', not just 'more of the same'. In discussions on the character of postgraduate studies generally, a contrast was drawn between the provision of a specialist and predominantly taught programme on the one hand, and a much broader approach that provides an opportunity for students to develop their practice through project work. The Interior Design team declared that its policy was to encourage specialisation (in growing fields such as lighting, conservation and restoration) on a taught, rather than project-based, Master's programme. The Design and Advertising team shared similar intentions for that team's MA proposal, that is, for it to be outward facing, with specialisms in areas such as consumer behaviour.

An area of the curriculum given attention throughout course documentation is the study of Drawing. There is, however a problem posed by the advent of affordable photographic equipment and accelerated by the increasing sophistication of mobile phones. It is therefore important to determine whether drawing should be regarded as a foundation skill in fields of art and design (just as mathematics is in engineering and the sciences) or has some other rationale.

It was confirmed that language support is provided, particularly where students are better able to understand than to speak in English.

ELECTIVES

The actual positioning of electives within a student's teaching and learning experience was unclear – especially with regard to how they fitted in with the assessment of a student's performance, progression and award.

BEST PEDAGOGIC PRACTICE

The ET is highly optimistic that a visitor to the Academy in 5 years from now should expect to see a high measure of best pedagogic practice comparable to similar institutions internationally.

INDEPENDENT STUDY

For reasons discussed elsewhere in this report, access to design and lifestyle magazines is limited. Students gave mixed reports on the scope for online access to such sources. Most staff and students pointed to the free and open access of the internet as a source.

STAFF

Staff retention was reported to be high although the ET were informed of a strategic decision to bring new blood into the teaching teams resulting in changes to 50% of the interior design teaching team. Such change, generally welcome, not only reflects well on able and confident leadership at course team level, but helps to ensure that the Academy 'owns' the teaching. It is important to be clear what is expected of each post holder with programme documentation setting out clearly, for an incoming member of the teaching staff, the learning outcomes that are expected, how they are assessed, and so on.

The ET welcomed an assurance that departments have regular opportunities to meet to discuss course delivery, and that there are also cross-department meetings to share information and experience. The ET was also informed that most staff had been involved in the review of earlier ET reports and in the preparation of the current SAR.

VISITING SPEAKERS

The ET found the listing of staff in the documentation confusing due largely to the manner in which academic staff have had to be defined and listed.

More importantly, the overall impression gained by the ET was of competent and highly appropriate teaching teams, as evidenced by CVs provided and from the quality of discussions during the visit. All teaching teams comprise a good complementary mix of full and part time academic staff and occasional visitors, the latter often providing some of the more specialised inputs.

GENDER

Data provided by the Academy shows a fairly typical gender distribution, taking into account the shape of its portfolio, current

dominance of fashion design and current enrolment numbers. It comprises around twice as many females to males overall at present.

Students

NUMBERS AND ADMISSIONS

The ET was highly appreciative of efforts made by the leadership to provide the statistical information contained in the SAR and the cohort analyses provided as additional documentation following the site visit. This kind of statistical information, backed-up by analysis, forms exactly the kind of valuable information needed for critical evaluation and review of the academic health of programmes.

In addition to the Academy not having a need to advertise over the past few years, it received more applications than available places and was the first choice institution for 60% of applicants. The ET was also informed that the Academy offered beneficial arrangements for early enrolment. These were enjoyed by 60% of the students it enrolls and comprise financial discounts and opportunities for students to undertake remedial and bridging preparations.

Target groups and admission requirements for all programmes were well articulated.

As mentioned previously, there had been a 50% growth in the student population at the Academy since the previous site visit. Fashion Design had continued to attract the largest number of students with 30% studying on the MA being serving school teachers. In the field of Communications Design the intake target had been set at 20 students. There had been scope for modest growth, and the class size had moved to 25.

Commenting on a decline in admissions during the 2014-15 session, the Interior Design teaching team gave a constructive analysis of the economic circumstances and changes introduced by other providers in Kosovo that impinged on the Academy recruitment.

In response to a query by the ET on the likely shape of the Academy in, say, 5 years time when new programmes had settled down, the leadership accepted that the balance between the different programmes would probably be more even than in 2016.

MEETING WITH STUDENTS AND FEEDBACK

A meeting with a substantial number of students provided evidence of the responsiveness of the Academy to student feedback. There appeared to be different approaches to the gathering of student

feedback in different departments - which seems acceptable, providing comparisons can be made when required.

In discussions with the ET, students demonstrated their general conviction that the cost, in money and in time spent, of postgraduate study at the Academy was justified taking into account its standing. For them it represented good value for money.

Research & international

PARTNERSHIP WITH INDUSTRY

The Academy is to be applauded for its efforts to develop and maintain collaborative relationships with the industries that its programmes aim to support. Internships feature in all programmes. External collaboration via staff contacts, alumni, student project and internships is well established to the clear complementary advantage of all concerned.

To cite some examples, the ET were told that all students studying in the final year of the BA Communication Design programme were working with industry and that all students in the final years of the BA and MA Fashion Design programmes already had jobs to go to.

In scrutinising the case for the approval of further Masters studies, the ET looked at evidence of market research. It was noted that the Academy has, for example, sustained contact with a large interior design company in the region that expresses support for the postgraduate studies in the field. The implications were wide and included the prospect that employees would be allowed, and perhaps encouraged, to enrol on such programmes and that the company would provide internships for students.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

It was noted that the Interior Design Department has established professional contact with the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London.

With reference to more general international cooperation, it was reported that, while there are continuing visa problems for staff and students wishing to visit a partner institution in Italy.

The Academy puts a lot of energy into fostering its links with its partner, Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University in Istanbul, Turkey and this has prospered.

RESEARCH

The Interior Design team spoke of a fast-changing world that is reflected in, and currently driven by, online social media.

The ET appreciates the fact that the conduct of academic research in Kosovo will continue to present a challenge for some time to come. Restrictions on travel, the limited availability of research funding and a language barrier put a premium on individual initiative and ingenuity. An example provided by a member of academic staff was the Academy's efforts to draw on the empirical efforts of specialists in regional companies, particularly where they can be encouraged to document knowledge that is not market sensitive.

A subordinate but nonetheless important aspect of an academic environment is scholarship and discipline. Institutions are expected to set an example through, for example, the way in which bibliographic references are laid out, and guidance given to students on protocols to be observed when citing sources consulted. This has become more problematic in the last 15 years with the enormous rise in the citation (often highly inaccurate) of online sources by students who are less inclined to visit physical libraries.

It should also be noted that art and design higher education has a growing interest in, and need of access to, materials library facilities. The proliferation of synthetic materials with a growing range of properties and appearances makes access to samples valuable.

Recommendation

The Academy should explore opportunities for access to materials library facilities with external partners such as local schools of architecture, and local architectural practices.

Conclusions

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *The ET recommends that the BA Fashion Design should be reaccredited for a period of five years, subject to recommendations set out in the foregoing report.*
2. *The ET recommends that the BA Communication Design should be reaccredited for a period of five years, subject to recommendations set out in the foregoing report.*
3. *The ET recommends that the BA Interior Design should be reaccredited for a period of five years, subject to recommendations set out in the foregoing report.*

4. *The ET recommends that the MA Fashion Design should be reaccredited for a period of five years, subject to recommendations set out in the foregoing report.*
5. *The ET recommends that the proposal for an MA in Interior Design should be accredited for a period of three years, subject to recommendations set out in the foregoing report.*
6. *The ET recommends that the proposal for an MA in Design and Advertising should be accredited for a period of three years, subject to recommendations set out in the foregoing report*

The ET is indebted to Akademie Evolucion for facilitating the site visit. The discussions and the opportunity to see examples of student work, studio and facilities were particularly valuable. The ET would also like to thank the Academy for its hospitality.

The ET is grateful for the support and hospitality of officers of the Kosovo Accreditation Agency and its office.