

Critical Friends 2016-2020

AN OVERALL ANALYSIS OF CRITICAL FRIEND VISITS FOR THE:

- BACHELOR OF MUSIC
- MASTER OF MUSIC
- MASTER OF SONOLOGY

∞Royal Conservatoire The Hague, Quality Culture, 2021∞

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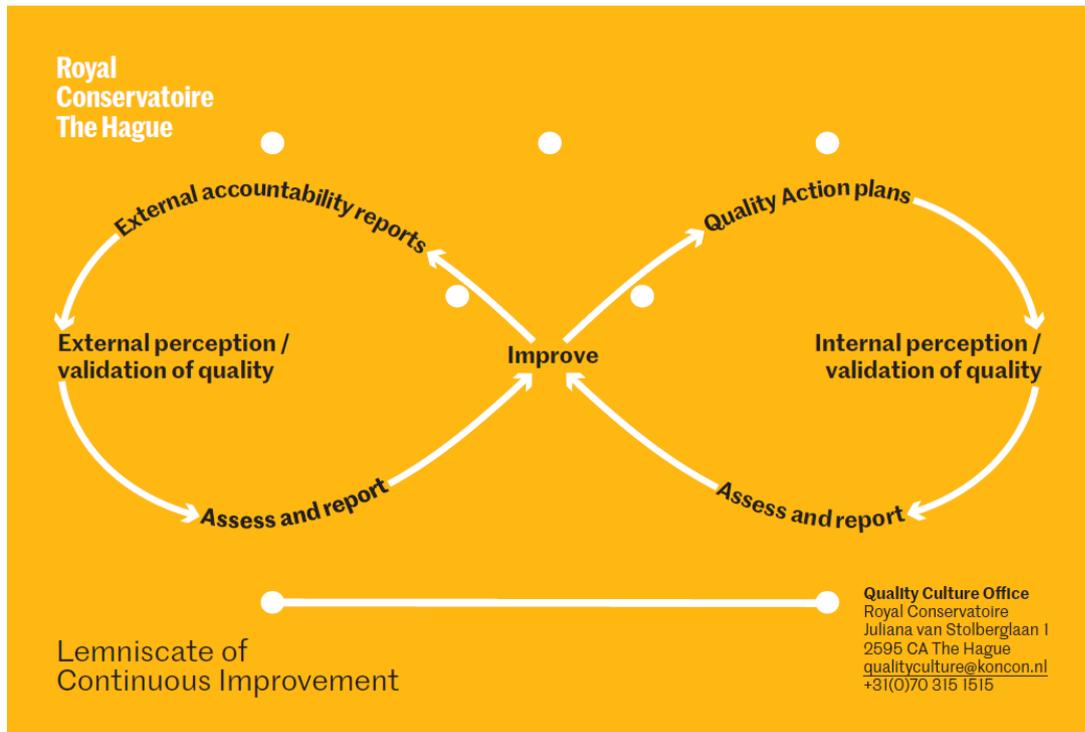
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Introduction.

The Critical Friend approach is an important instrument in linking the internal and external quality assurance cycles designed to integrate the Royal Conservatoire's envisaged quality culture within the institution. The Royal Conservatoire's strategy for developing a quality culture is illustrated by the Lemniscate of Continuous Improvement (see below).



A visit by a Critical Friend is an opportunity for a department to secure feedback with the active involvement of the head of department, the teachers and the students. In contrast to a regular accreditation visit, which covers entire programmes, a Critical Friend is a respected professional peer whose visit focuses entirely on the performance of a specific department. Consequently, the results of the visit and the feedback are more specific, more personal and more recognisable. The Royal Conservatoire has consciously chosen to adopt the system of using Critical Friends as its response to the – often technocratic – focus on quality assurance in Dutch higher education, and in order to pave the way for the development of a genuine quality culture as described in the action plan for the coming years.¹ Furthermore, the report of the Critical Friend allows us to incorporate external perceptions of the quality of the programme in the internal quality assurance cycle, for example through the views expressed by a Critical Friend (on the basis of their personal frame of reference) as a result of discussions with teachers and students regarding the quality of specific aspects of the programme, such as assessments and the curriculum.

Over the past four years, we have learned that Critical Friends provide a valuable contribution to the monitoring and subsequent enhancement of the quality of the study programmes. Because they are experts in the field, they can relate to teachers and students and make the connection between artistic standards and educational quality. The involvement and ownership of teachers and students within the departments has notably increased over the

¹ This strategy is described in detail in 'Quality Culture KC, 2020 and beyond'.

last years and has stimulated a productive discussion on the quality of the study programmes. With their background, Critical Friends can easily identify what goes well and what could be improved, and they can provide the departments with very specific feedback that can be taken to heart and used to enhance the quality of the educational programmes. This document provides an overall analysis of the feedback provided by Critical Friends who have visited the departments of the Conservatoire between 2016 and 2020, and refers to responses by the departments and actions that have been taken because of this feedback. This analysis aims to give an overview of the perceived quality of the study programmes that are taught within the departments, namely:

- Bachelor of Music
- Master of Music
- Master of Sonology

We refer to the individual reports and their responses for a complete overview of findings per department and improvement plans resulting from this feedback.

Before we go into this overarching analysis, it is important to briefly describe the development over the past four years of this specific tool. Choosing an approach where the Critical Friend visits a department works well, because it allows for a perspective that is very specific for the field. For instance, an expert in Early Music and Higher Music Education can visit the Early Music Department and have content-based discussions with students and teachers. This makes the approach very different from the traditional review and accreditation processes. The traditional approach tends to be more generic because the focus is on an entire study programme, such as the Bachelor of Music (including Early Music, Jazz, Composition, etc.). However, the Critical Friend approach also creates a challenge, namely, to consciously diversify between bachelor's and master's, not only during the visit, but also when writing the report. This is something we started to realise during the first visits by Critical Friends and is now actively addressed during the preparatory stage of a visit.

Another important observation was that by inviting only one Critical Friend, although a renowned expert, there sometimes may be too much emphasis on the particular perspective of this Critical Friend than there would have been in the context of an entire review panel. There have been situations where the department could not completely recognise itself in the feedback provided, or simply did not agree with specific observations. In fact, we have learned that this is not (and should not) be a problem. The point of inviting a Critical Friend and the resulting report is not to gain approval of everything we are doing, but to create a point of reference to which the department can relate. This can also mean that the department has good reasons not to follow up on a specific suggestion for improvement, as long as they can substantiate why. This reasoning process is also a manifestation of the quality culture we are aiming for at the Royal Conservatoire.

Unfortunately, there has been one situation where we consider the Critical Friend visit as unsuccessful. Although the discussions induced by the visit of a Critical Friend to the ArtScience Interfaculty were considered meaningful and created food for thought, unfortunately, they did not result in a sensible feedback report, and attempts to attain more structure and content-related feedback have failed.² Because of the discussions with and between students and teachers that took place during the visit, the process was not entirely in vain. In the end, we had no alternative than to decide to approach a different Critical Friend for a future visit. The entire situation made us realise that it is very important to point out the goal of the visit to Critical Friends, the processes around it, and what kind of feedback we are specifically asking for. Because of this, we now offer an externally organised peer reviewers training to all Critical Friends before their visit.³

² Report Critical Friend ArtScience, 2020.

³ <http://www.musique-qe.eu/review-team/training-for-peer-reviewers>.

Over the years, we have realised that selecting Critical Friends ourselves makes the approach, and more specifically the results of the approach, seem less objective than they should be. After all, since we would like to use the Critical Friends' reports as a substitute for the existing programme accreditation process, we should be able to prove without a doubt that these visits are both completely independent as well as reproducible and comparable between the departments. Based on these findings, we have taken two important steps to further strengthen the Critical Friend approach and its implementation within the study programmes.

First, to guarantee the necessary objectivity in the assessment, the Royal Conservatoire decided to delegate the selection of Critical Friends as well as the organisation and monitoring of the process to the European accreditation and evaluation agency MusiQuE, Music Quality Enhancement. Second, we have developed the *Handbook for a Critical Friend Review*, which describes the steps required for organising an effective procedure in detail, including all relevant reference and policy documents.⁴

In cooperation with MusiQuE, we have developed a set of guidelines for structuring the Critical Friend's feedback. These guidelines are derived from the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and the MusiQuE framework document for programme reviews,⁵ which makes them fully compatible with the most relevant formal criteria and frameworks in the area of quality assurance in higher (music) education.

Additionally, we have made a point of describing the rationale of the approach itself and the way it fits into existing internal policy cycles. An example of how this integration of existing policy with Quality Culture processes works is described below:

Based on feedback from the first Critical Friend visit, and further discussions in Student Panel meetings, the Classical Department devised an action plan for chamber music,⁶ which was further elaborated in the *Quality Agreements*.⁷ This has resulted in a new chamber music programme for bachelor's students, a programme for more permanent ensembles, an ensemble-in-residence programme, and participation in the European Chamber Music Academy (ECMA). To quote the Critical Friend's feedback report after his return visit: "Teams are being set up, roles and responsibilities are clarified: there is real significant progress in the planning and follow-up. Good results and higher motivation are to be expected in the next few years as these are implemented. The reserved attitudes against chamber music among some of the students I met, show that there actually is ground to be cultivated."⁸ This quote perfectly illustrates the importance of a return visit, during which progress can be monitored and additional observations and suggestions provided.

We will actively continue to finetune this approach. Only recently we have concluded that the response to the second visit by a Critical Friend could perhaps be more interwoven with existing policy processes, as to reduce the administrative workload for the heads of department. This is something that we will further explore in the coming years.

⁴ Quality Culture KC: Handbook for a Critical Friend Review, 2019.

⁵ <http://www.musique-qe.eu/reviews/accreditation-processes-for-institutions-programmes-and-joint-programmes>.

⁶ Reaction to the report Critical Friend Classical, 2018.

⁷ Quality Agreements: The University of the Arts The Hague has developed these agreements in 2019, based on the government's decision that the funds released as a result of the abolition of student grants are linked to 'Quality Agreements' – agreements on targets for improving the quality of education in the period from 2019 until the end of 2024.

⁸ Report Critical Friend Classical, 2020.

Guideline 1: Goals, Design and Delivery of the Study Programmes

The clarity of the goals and rationale of the study programmes

We find that our Critical Friends conclude that the aim of the programme is clearly expressed within the departments, and that the goals are aligned with the Royal Conservatoire's positioning. Both the institution and departments are described as influential centres in shaping the next generation of professional musical life both in the Netherlands and internationally. The variety of programmes at the Conservatoire is often mentioned as an important contribution to the quality of the master's programmes. Although **the goals and rationale** of most master's curricula are clear, there seemed to be the need to develop a more effective way of explaining certain topics to the students in some departments (Composition, Classical, Jazz, Art of Sound), such as what the master's adds to the bachelor's programme, or the rationale behind certain assessment criteria and the structure of the curriculum. These are areas for improvement that were not only further discussed and developed within the departments themselves, but also influenced the overall Quality Culture activities in the Conservatoire.⁹ Topics such as these have, for instance, been integrated in several surveys, discussed in Student Panels, with teachers and the Education Committee.

Where in some cases, the need for further clarification or improvement is identified, in others, our Critical Friends provide us with useful suggestions for innovation. The Critical Friend of the Art of Sound Department, for instance, encouraged creating a master's programme after her first visit in 2017.¹⁰ This master's programme was realised during subsequent years, and this development was assessed by the same Critical Friend in 2020. While she expressed her appreciation for what had been achieved since her last visit, she also continued to make valuable contributions to the further development of the master's programme in the coming years. The added value of a Critical Friend returning after three years was thus very tangible for the department.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Art of Sound Department, 2020: *Rather than try to define the direction of the exiting master's program for Art of Sound from within, it is time to do outside research to help the faculty define and take ownership of the amount and level of course work for a master's degree. It is important to involve the core team of faculty in this process – all of whom are very invested in the future of this program.*¹¹

The content, structure and international orientation of the study programmes, its methods of delivery, how it encourages students to shape their own learning environment (student-centred learning), and how it provides them with performance opportunities.

According to most Critical Friends, the **content and structure** of the study programmes are generally seen as balanced and consistent. The content of the bachelor's and master's programmes is reported to be well-adapted to general and specific needs of students, and there is a good balance between main subject lessons, theory subjects, general courses and electives. The structure of the curriculum is deemed to work well, as it develops students' knowledge of the repertoire at the beginning of the bachelor's towards the development of a critically reflective practice, where the students can choose a variety of paths and projects. This structure continues in more depth at master's level. Suggestions for improvements were also made, for instance, by changing the

⁹ More information can be found in the annual reports of the Quality Culture Office.

¹⁰ Critical Friend report Art of Sound, 2017.

¹¹ Critical Friend report Art of Sound, 2020.

structure or order of some of the subjects, by adding other (elective) courses to the curriculum, and by intensifying the integration of practice and theory.

Although feedback from Critical Friends is directed towards the specific departments they are visiting, many times we see an interesting overlap and suggestions for improvement relevant for the entire bachelor's or master's programme. The suggestion to strengthen and increase relations with alumni (Jazz, Classical, Composition, Art of Sound) is an example of this. This is something that is now, some years later, common practice in the Conservatoire.¹² Extending and intensifying cross-disciplinary cooperation between departments (Vocal, Classical, Composition, Early Music, Jazz) is another suggestion that was often made.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Jazz Department, 2018: *Even though there are some very valuable collaboration examples between the Jazz and other Departments such as the Art of Sound Department and the Classical Department, more can be done in order to take full advantage of the intense and creative environment of The Royal Conservatoire in The Hague.*¹³

This feedback had an important influence on the recent restructuring of the master's curriculum. Designing Master Circles with participants from all departments is one of the outcomes, which allows students from different musical backgrounds to work together and learn from each other's experiences, as the Critical Friend of the Classical Department concluded after his return visit: "Some of the barriers between departments have been lowered, and cross-disciplinary tendencies are strengthened. In 2016, especially the Early Music seemed quite isolated from the classical instrumental studies. Now more flexible practices have been established between the classical department and the Early Music department."¹⁴

The development and implementation of an education module in the bachelor's curriculum in 2019/2020 is yet another example of action taken partially as a result of feedback from several Critical Friends, as was the development of a Professional Integration module in the master's programme.

Critical Friends invariably acknowledge that the programmes have a strong **international orientation**, not only because of the experience of the teaching staff, but also because of the varied nationalities of the students.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Classical Department, 2016: *The international dimension of all activities in KC is a kind of a cantus firmus, a red line going through all visions, declarations and handbooks. The constant flow in the exchange of students, teachers and staff is stressed in every document, and is seen as a basic tool for developing the institution. [...] This strategic, extensive prioritization of international relations was not only strongly praised by most teachers but was seen as self-evident.*¹⁵

A distinctive characteristic often mentioned is the supportive interaction between teachers, students and the surrounding artistic community. The mobility of the teachers (often teaching in several institutions) is another guarantee for this international standard. This constant flow in the exchange of students, teachers and staff is stressed in every feedback report.

¹² <https://www.koncon.nl/alumni>.

¹³ Report Critical Friend Jazz, 2018.

¹⁴ Report Critical Friend Classical, 2019.

¹⁵ Report Critical Friend Classical, 2016.

It can be concluded, according to the Critical Friends, that the Conservatoire is supportive of students' individual learning process, responsively and responsibly underpinning student initiatives and personal motivation. **Student-centred learning** is confirmed to be at the heart of the departments. Knowledge is provided by formal lectures as well as by workshops and rehearsals, where students learn how to interact with technology and musicians in order to shape their own artistic expression. In their conversations with students, Critical Friends found confirmation that students feel enabled to shape their individual learning environments to a significant extent. However, improvements have also been suggested in these talks (Composition, Art of Sound, Jazz), including new facilities and innovations such as adding a digital dimension.

The relation between the quality of the graduating students (Learning Outcomes) and the requirements of the discipline and of the (international) professional field.

With their background in the discipline and their knowledge of the (international) field, Critical Friends are well-equipped to assess the relation between the Learning Outcomes and the requirements of the discipline, and can make very specific suggestions for improvement.

In most cases, with a practice in the professional field, teachers are reported to have extensive knowledge on the subject they are teaching and they are sensitive to the constant changes in the professional life of the musicians, modifying the contents of courses from year to year where appropriate. Critical Friends find there is a good emphasis on the course's Learning Outcomes and available professional links articulating with the profession in the areas of the department's activities.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Early Music Department, 2017: *I observed the O18C¹⁶ principal flute player spend time after one rehearsal, using the concert hall space, to explain about projection and tonal control in a solo passage that had just been rehearsed. The student played the passage over a number of times, experiential learning was enhanced with feedback and advice from the orchestral member, bringing added value beyond the formal session. The student played that same passage in concert the following day reinforcing the learning that had taken place. The principal oboe also offered some reflections on that same passage in the context of his experience of orchestral playing. This was an excellent example of the quality and depth of experience that side-by-side projects can bring.*¹⁷

However, there are also examples where Critical Friends have suggestions for further improvement. Following the visit from the Critical Friend of the Composition Department, for instance, the head of department took initiative to redefine the Learning Outcomes of both the bachelor's and master's programmes.¹⁸ This was done in consultation with a selection of students acting as representatives of their fellow students within the department. These newly defined Learning Outcomes were subsequently discussed and finetuned with teachers, and have recently been presented to the other departments. The next step will be a formal discussion with the entire student population of the Composition Department in the spring of 2021, followed by a meeting with representatives from the profession, assessing the connection of the Learning Outcomes with the requirements of the professional field.

Finally, the level of the graduating students is reported to be high and meeting the requirements of the discipline and the international professional field.

¹⁶ O18C= Orchestra of the 18th Century.

¹⁷ Report Critical Friend Early Music, 2017.

¹⁸ Report Critical Friend Composition, 2018-2019.

Quote by the Critical Friend of the Institute for Sonology, 2017: *Luc Döbereiner, who became the Critical Friend's doctoral student in 2010 and who finished his studies at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz with the thesis "The Concept of Compositional Model" in 2013. The broad field of subjects that he learned at Sonology laid the ground not only for his excellent dissertation, but also for unfolding his artistic development which I am still following with great interest.*¹⁹

The role of (artistic) research in the programmes

Critical Friends acknowledge that artistic research is a key feature in the educational programmes. At the Conservatoire, the Master of Music and the Master of Sonology programmes have substantial research elements. The close collaboration with Leiden University (offering the third cycle) has also enabled the master's programmes to reach fargoining results in research. Research training has already been put into action in the bachelor's programme, and the reflective attitude of the student is now indicated and assessed in the applications for the master's programmes. Although the Critical Friends have concluded that the Conservatoire is doing well when it comes to the research in the programmes, they have also suggested that directing the students to digital examples of artistic research (for example at the Orpheus Institute or in the online Research Catalogue)²⁰ might be helpful. Students could be further stimulated towards additional research activities, especially through organisation and participation in conferences, talks, recordings, publications, and other research-driven activities.

Several initiatives have been made since then, such as implementing obligatory research-based modules in the Bachelor of Music. As a result, there is a clear learning line throughout the Bachelor and Master of Music programmes that is supporting students in becoming reflective practitioners. After successful completion of a master's programme, students can apply for a PhD programme in docARTES at the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts (ACPA) at Leiden University, and enrol for a doctoral programme geared to their artistic practice.²¹ In other words, the Conservatoire now offers a continuous learning trajectory that can continue beyond the awarding of a master's degree. Another example is the significant contribution by the Critical Friend from the Art of Sound Department on the development of (artistic) research in the programme as was discussed earlier in this document, resulting in a master's degree

Overall, Critical Friends observe that the master's curricula provide a good basis for research, and that this is also observed in the master's theses of the graduates. They report that the research papers they have seen are of a high quality, with high levels of academic rigour and a thorough technique. The Critical Friend of the Composition Department reported that this felt like a very strong preparation for doctoral level.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Classical Department, 2019: *The preparation for the master thesis – research training courses, writing and presentations – is very convincing, and the Research Catalogue seems to be an excellent tool for sharing findings, update and follow tracks of the students.*²²

¹⁹ Report Critical Friend Sonology, 2017.

²⁰ Researchcatalogue.net

²¹ DocARTES is a joint venture of the Orpheus Institute in Ghent, Leiden University, University of Leuven and the conservatoires of Amsterdam, Antwerp, Leuven and The Hague.

²² Report Critical Friend Classical, 2019.

How assessment methods demonstrate achievement of Learning Outcomes.

The means of assessment are mainly judged as satisfactory and realistic, and the assessment methods are suitable to the nature of the individual modules. In general, there has been reported to be a healthy focus on formative rather than summative work.

Another illustration of how the feedback from Critical Friends is used to improve assessment is described below:

Reaction from the head of the Classical Department to the report of the Critical Friend: *We have taken these remarks (of the Critical Friend) seriously and have implemented a set of measures to strengthen assessment practices. First, we have introduced a rubric of assessment criteria that are used during the examinations. These criteria are also included in the students' Curriculum Handbooks, so as to familiarise them with the criteria applied by the jury. Second, the current head and deputy head of department have planned to visit and divide between them entrance exams and bachelor's and master's exams of the different instrument groups in the upcoming five years. In this manner, monitoring the level of the exams will be an iterative process between comparing entrance exam levels with outcomes during the course of the bachelor's and master's courses, a process in which department management can intervene when necessary. Third, we plan to introduce new methods of assessment so that exams carry more benefits for those involved. These methods include involving a student member in examination juries, asking students to co-assess their own exam by means of submitting a self-reflection report, and by using multiple, independently operating juries to assess one exam as a way to avoid groupthink. These measures have already been initiated and will be further implemented during the 2018/2019 academic year.*²³

In almost every feedback report, the policy to use (international) external examiners is perceived as a good way to ensure that the perspectives of the professional field are taken into account, as well as objectifying the assessment process, as was stated by the Critical Friend of the Institute of Sonology: "The assessment system has been recently improved by reducing the number of internal teachers in the committee. [...] This provides a much better evaluation when independent voices from outside [external jury members] can express their unbiased comments which in turn makes the grading not only more just, but also more objective."²⁴

Some reconsideration of grading and the exam mechanism has been suggested (Jazz, Vocal, Composition). It was recommended to be more consistent in and refine module specifications regarding the nature of assessment (criteria) and the relative proportions of assessment marks.

As was stated by the Critical Friend of the Jazz Department in 2018: "The Master final exams did not reflect clearly the students' artistic research process that took place during the Programme. If the research topics allow, a more profound articulation between research and performance areas during the Master could help differentiate both Programmes (Bachelor and Master) and shape differently the Master final exam."²⁵ This specific feedback has been very useful in working on improvement within the Jazz Department, where work has been done on including more jazz musicians in the assessment of jazz research projects. The assessment criteria for the Jazz

²³ Reaction to the report of the Critical Friend Classical, 2016.

²⁴ Report Critical Friend Sonology, 2017.

²⁵ Report Critical friend Jazz, 2018.

Department's bachelor's programme were renewed in 2019, adding a descriptive value for each category in the matrix. Separate assessment criteria were formulated for the Jazz Department's master's programme.²⁶

Although much work has been done over the years on assessment and grading, we realise that this is still work in progress, and for the coming years this topic needs to stay high on the agenda, even more so because of the challenging situation the COVID-19 pandemic has brought us in.

The selection of suitable students, the monitoring and review of their progression, achievement and subsequent (international) employability.

Critical Friends judge the **selection process** for the bachelor's and master's programmes as thorough. They perceive the student population enrolled in the bachelor's and masters' programmes at the Conservatoire to be of a large variety of nationalities and highly qualified. The reflective attitude of the student has already been indicated and assessed in the application for the master's programmes. In the fourth year of the bachelor's programme, the Personal Activity Plan functions not only as a preparation for the professional life, but also as a bridge to master's studies.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Jazz Department, 2018: *Given that Jazz music business is getting more and more competitive and the number of job opportunities is shrinking, and even though there are no official numbers, graduates from The Royal Conservatoire in The Hague seem have reasonable employability, when compared to graduates from other schools in Europe and America. After graduating, some international students have the chance to stay living and working in the business in The Netherlands, which is a very good indicator.*²⁷

The **monitoring and review** of students' progression is reported to be carefully done at various levels. There is formative feedback and review throughout the course of the programme. Critical Friends report they have noticed through conversations with students that there is a deep sense of respect for the teachers and how they help the students review their own progress. In terms of progression through the programme, students feel enabled to strengthen practical and academic aspects of their study. Progression thresholds across the different levels of the programme are clearly expressed within the module specifications. Students following the programme confirmed that they can shape their individual learning environments to a significant extent, and that an acceleration of the programme is occasionally permitted only when strict criteria have been met across a range of competencies. However, Critical Friends also suggest that the monitoring system could be explored more in detail. This is something that we have seriously considered for all study programmes and discussed in management and staff meetings, as well as in the Education Committee. Possibilities for improvement have been identified and implemented. These are clearly visible not only in the Annual Plans of the departments, but also in the Faculty Plan of the Conservatoire.

Quote from the Critical friend of the Composition Department, 2018: *From a monitoring perspective, for difficult students, I would encourage the teachers to refer to the criteria every so often in individual meetings, well ahead of the end exams, just to informally remind the students of how their work will be assessed at the end and if they are 'on track' or not. The importance of feeding back student process to the regular team meetings is essential, and if appropriate the staff/student meetings might be a place to remind students of the criteria for end*

²⁶ Reaction to the report of the Critical Friend Jazz, 2019.

²⁷ Report Critical Friend Jazz, 2018.

*exams. I should stress again that this should not be a replacement for the excellent professional feedback the students get: it is merely a supportive mechanism to help the students' progress.*²⁸

Overall, Critical Friends confirm that students develop themselves into professionals in their field, their **employability** is seen as evident. As the Critical Friend from the Institute of Sonology reflected: "The range of skills the students acquire through the study programme is indeed impressive. It covers a broad range from 'hard skills' like sound engineering, software development, and hardware construction to 'soft skills' like project management and concert organisation to 'artistic skills' like composition, improvisation, and performance. This enables graduates to work in different fields of the 'music industry' and the arts, not only as musicians/artists but also has technicians/scientists." ²⁹

²⁸ Report Critical Friend Composition, 2018.

²⁹ Report Critical Friend Sonology, 2017.

Guideline 2: Teaching & Learning Environment

The quality and number of teaching staff and their (international) qualifications for their role (artists/pedagogues/researchers).

All Critical Friends reported that the teaching and learning environment was positive and student-centred, and that they experienced the existing atmosphere as open. The relationships between students, teachers and staff were mentioned as important ground for developing musical skills. The **level of teaching** is high and communication with the students is engaging and encouraging. The number of teachers seems appropriate to the number of students, and the teaching staff is reported to be of a high quality and with a solid (international) career in the music industry.

Quote by the Critical Friend of the Composition Department, 2018: *The staff comprises world-leading, innovative artists and incredibly supportive teachers, which is both very rare and healthy! There are some positive developments regarding artistic research, with the award of recent doctorates. There is an excellent interchange between practice and research in the Department. The students and support staff both commented on the excellence of the teachers in support of projects.*³⁰

The staff development programme The Artist as Teacher³¹ was seen as supportive and useful. Critical Friends express their appreciation for the learning opportunities for the teachers, sometimes leading to a master's degree or doctorate.

Quote by the Critical Friend of the Classical Department, 2016: *Another positive feature in KC is the resources spent on professional development of the staff. Not only the courses for teachers, providing an equivalent to a master degree, is to be commended (a national initiative), but perhaps even more, the teachers' pedagogic seminars, resulting in Basic Certificate Didactic Capacity, which is an offspring of the ICON seminars. In any conservatory, a seminar like this is bound to strengthen the internal discussion on assessment, didactic problems and student-centred teaching methods. It provides the best ground for an innovative learning environment and engaged faculty members. The input from the management is a clever investment.*³²

The level to which facilities, resources and support staff constitute a coherent and optimal teaching-learning environment for the students.

The level of the **facilities, resources and support staff** was deemed satisfactory to good.

Of course, the relatively outdated lecture rooms have been mentioned, as well as the necessity of moving to a new building. Still, overall, Critical Friends are positive about the facilities offered to students. The concerts and rehearsal facilities together with the technical/production support are seen as specifically good. Some Critical Friends, however (Composition, Art of Sound, Early Music), reported feedback from students who have some concern about the access arrangements and availability of specific rooms on site (e.g. for the storage of instruments). Critical Friends praise the elaborate library and archive of the Conservatoire and the well-functioning

³⁰ Report Critical Friend Composition, 2018.

³¹ The Artist as Teacher: The Conservatoire has developed a course for teachers that aims to give participants at any stage of their career stimulating learning experiences through which knowledge and skills in the field of education, research and production will be developed further. Successful participation leads to a Didactic Skills Qualification and Qualification to act as Examiner for Teachers in Dutch Higher Education.

³² Report Critical Friend Classical, 2016.

room booking system (Asimut). However, providing more digital, video and audio materials was suggested. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this is something that has been identified with high priority.

Quote by the Critical Friend of the Institute of Sonology, 2017: *The learning environment of Sonology has a big asset, the Analogue Studio, probably the largest in the world. It connects seamlessly to the heroic pioneer phase of electronic music such as the WDR studio in Cologne which was run Stockhausen, Eimert and Koenig in the 1950ies. At Sonology, students can learn and experience the basic techniques of electronic music production „hands on“ which provides a different and maybe also more comprehensive approach then using software or computer languages.*³³

The support staff is described as having a good knowledge, skill and loyalty. Although the administration is functioning, the administration of teaching and projects is complex and could be improved, specifically when it comes to the roles and systems in and between departments.

Quote by the Critical Friend of the Composition Department, 2019: *In terms of support staff, there is a tremendous knowledge, skill and loyalty in the team to make the very best experience possible. The technical/production support for concerts is outstanding and KC is a place where concerts happen as a core part of learning, with all staff connecting to make this happen. The administration of the teaching and the projects can sometimes place a large burden upon the support staff. There is also a lack of clarity about systems and roles that can place stress upon support staff 'behind the scenes'. This lack of clarity is sometimes felt by students as well.*³⁴

These observations are issues that cannot be addressed only within the departments. We try to address these cross-departmental issues in a collective manner by discussing all feedback reports from Critical Friends in staff and management meetings.

Quote by the Critical Friend of the Early Music Department, 2017: *It was very gratifying to see, in my meetings, that administrative staff had an equal voice with academics, their views were recognised and appreciated. This is a productive environment, giving administrative staff the confidence to step forward and assume responsibility, and take initiative. The professionalism of all of the administrators I encountered was highly commendable; their commitment to students, colleagues and the institution as a whole, evident to see.*³⁵

In some reports (Sonology, Composition Art of Sound), reflections were made on the gender balance in the department. The Critical Friend of the Composition Department addressed this as follows: “The Department is not unique in having a largely white male composition staff, and some measures of positive gender diversity have been brought in, for example the previous, current and next two visiting teachers are women. I would encourage the team to consider how non-white teachers might also be brought into the staff team, to reflect current society.” Since then, the head of the Composition Department has made great effort to address this issue. To make an explicit statement, he has given up one day a week of his position as head of department, and gave it to a female composition teacher.

³³ Report Critical Friend Sonology, 2017.

³⁴ Report Critical Friend Composition, 2018.

³⁵ Report Critical Friend Early Music, 2017.

A similar observation was made by the Critical Friend of the Institute of Sonology. The head of the Institute of Sonology has discussed this feedback with both teachers and students and summarised the key conclusions in his response to the report as follows:

The most important way in which a solution to the gender imbalance among Sonology students may be approached is in appointing more female staff members, and this is an issue we are actively addressing, not only in the choice of workshop leaders (for example Sara Pinheiro and Cathy van Eck, who teach one-week intensive workshops every year) but also in the recent appointment of Barbara Ellison and Ji Youn Kang to the staff. Starting in September 2018, Irene Ruipérez Canales will take care of the Educational Skills course in the Sonology bachelor's curriculum. In line with Essl's suggestion (support programmes for female students), Ji Youn Kang has recently implemented the possibility for female students to meet her individually or in groups to discuss gender-related issues. On the other hand, it was brought up precisely by our current female students and staff that when "nerdy" is understood as "characterized by an obsessive interest in something, especially technology" (online dictionary), it is not a very emancipated standpoint to see that as something causing a gender imbalance. During the academic year 2018–2019, spread over the four-year bachelor's, the two-year master's, and the one-year-course, we will have 39 male and 26 female students. This is especially the result of a continuous increase of female participants in the one-year course, and to a lesser extent in the bachelor's programme, while the number of female applicants for our master's programme was unusually low (this has been much higher in previous years). Nevertheless, gender balance and diversity are on our agenda for the years to come.³⁶

³⁶ Response to the Critical Friend Sonology, 2018.

Guideline 3: Quality Culture

The extent to which the organisational structure allows for efficient decision making and effective internal communication.

All Critical Friends agree that the organisational structure makes efficient decision making and effective internal communication possible. The department's Annual Plans are a good way to take the departments to a higher level in decision-making and stimulates self-analysis. Heads of department show initiative in generating effective and efficient decision-making mechanisms for reflective analysis and hearing students and staff. The views of administrative staff were reported to be recognised and appreciated in department meetings. Some Critical Friends (Composition, Early Music), noticed that there are issues for some support staff members who felt that their roles were different in relation to similar jobs in other departments. This was reason to discuss these roles with those involved, and redefine and revalue them together with Human Resources.

Another issue was raised regarding organisation and communication. Several Critical Friends (Composition, Classical, Jazz) reported hearing from students that some teachers were not showing up for sessions or cancelling them last minute. Although this has been actively picked up by the heads of the department involved, the suggestion is considered to create a clear handbook or system for students, staff and teachers on what to do when planning difficulties occur.

The quality assurance and enhancement procedures that are in place.

Critical Friends are positive about the Quality Culture approach of the Conservatoire.³⁷ They conclude that the Lemniscate of Continuous Improvement is a coherent approach that clearly connects not only internal and external quality cycles, but more importantly, connects artistic standards to educational quality. Their visit as a Critical Friend is a very clear example of this. They reported to be enthusiastically welcomed by the departments, in which they noticed an openness and willingness to consider critique and, if necessary, suggestions for improvement. Critical Friends confirm the importance of the international focus chosen in this approach as well as the involvement of external stakeholders. This makes the approach well-structured and allows continuous learning and improvements. Of course, there is always room for improvement in the process itself, and we take this feedback from Critical Friends very seriously.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Vocal Department, 2018: *This is a bold and courageous element in the quality culture of the Conservatoire. My presence there and the enthusiasm expressed for me to visit and report are further evidence of an openness and willingness to consider critique and if necessary change/development. The visits worked well overall and for the three days of my visits I was able to see a great deal of the working of the department. Perhaps for the future it would be even better if it were possible to organise time for conversations/interviews with some staff members and individual students. It might be worth considering offering whomever is there as 'Critical Friend' some questions or topics which the department would like to be considered. As the time available is limited, this could help focus attention on areas of concern which are already known, without excluding the value of a fresh, unbiased viewpoint. Of course it was possible to have some brief conversations with some staff and students during my recent visits but these were usually either just before or just after a more formal element (eg a singing lesson) and it would have been helpful to investigate views and opinions more deeply.*³⁸

³⁷ Quality Culture KC, 2020 and beyond.

³⁸ Report of the Critical Friend Vocal, 2018.

Critical Friends mention that the teachers and staff surveys, departments' Annual Plans, the Education Committee and the Exam Committee are all helpful in assuring quality. The alumni surveys, accreditation visits, external committee members at final presentations, and international benchmarking are also important in terms of the establishment of a quality culture at the Conservatoire.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Classical Department, 2016: *The double fold concept of quality is well formulated in the Quality Culture at the Royal Conservatoire 2016 document: not only the traditional artistic quality as seen in assessment of skills during lessons, examinations and public performances, but also as educational quality in well- functioning procedures, good planning, rehearsal facilities, inspiring learning environment etc.*³⁹

However, some Critical Friends (Art of Sound, Jazz, Composition) felt that it could be a challenge to get the teaching staff and students involved in the quality procedures of a department. They warned that the system should not become an administrative burden for the teaching or support staff.

Further advice was to promote more discussions about quality with teachers and students, and emphasise the importance of these procedures. To show that we have taken this advice seriously, we have organised more Student Panels, and, in some cases, Teacher Panels within the departments.

Students Panels are seen as a valuable mechanism by Critical Friends. This formal system of dialogue between students and staff in meetings and meeting minutes allows students to express feedback on their learning experience and make suggestions for improvements. By distributing the minutes of these meetings to fellow students as well as to the management of the Conservatoire and the Education Committee, Critical Friends felt assured that the feedback from students was actively and seriously used to make further improvements.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Vocal Department, 2018: *This is clearly a very valuable mechanism for articulating concerns from students and feeding back to the student body responses and information about departmental matters. In the meeting I saw, and the minutes of the meetings which I have read, it was clear that this provides a healthily open forum for discussion of issues. It is already showing specific outcomes, for example in how assessment criteria are disseminated and used. The students clearly take the forum seriously and the fact that there are clear responses and time-lines attached to issues raised is important. The panel was well organised and action points in the minutes make clear how any issue is being progressed – it would be good to always include an intended time-line for the action points whenever possible. One of the most valuable assets of this excellent forum is that it can help give students a better informed view of the reality of certain situations, including practicalities, which sometimes elude students in moments of 'blue-sky' thinking. In the exchange of views and information the existence of the panel should mean that serious problems and issues cannot be allowed to fester.*⁴⁰

However, according to some Critical Friends, more (follow-up) action and promotion could be made. The Critical Friend of the Art of Sound Department believed more attention could be given to feedback from the teaching faculty as well. Finetuning Student Panels was also suggested. In the Classical Department, for instance, some students expressed weaker interest in participating in Student Panels than in more specialised instrument-based

³⁹ Report of the Critical Friend Classical, 2016.

⁴⁰ Report of the Critical Friend Vocal, 2018.

panels. This was reason to adjust the organisation of the panels within this department, accordingly resulting in much appreciation from the students and a significant increase in attendance.

Guideline 4 : Public Interaction

The engagement of the programme with society (in cultural, artistic and educational contexts) and the contributions made at local, national and international level.

According to the Critical Friends, the Conservatoire develops many different forms of engagement with society. The Conservatoire has a programme of public events and a concert programme, which attract many different listeners. There are links between projects and professional environments with external partners. Final presentations are open to public and show the development of students. However, valuable suggestions for improvements have been made as well.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Composition Department, 2018: *Whilst high-profile artists and institutions visit the Department to discuss the classical music industry, perhaps there could also be a reflection of DIY approaches in these sessions. For example, whilst publishing houses still have power and help some kinds of composers, there are also issues of self-publishing that might be helpful to consider. The same goes for issues around DIY record labels, radio stations and websites which help to sustain contemporary thinking beyond the concert platform or established media. I would encourage the team to think about bringing in an even wider range of artists from the high-profile/established concert or film or EDM composer to the successful interdisciplinary DIY artist, to show the students a very wide and dynamic mixture of potential routes beyond their studies. It would be interesting for students to get a sense of a wide variety of potential career paths/artistic practices, rather than focussing just on the “pieces”/“products” of the visiting artists or organisations.*⁴¹

The engagement of the Master of Music and the Master of Sonology programmes with society (cultural, artistic and educational contexts) and the contributions made at local, national and international level are well known and considered as prominent and valuable. The Conservatoire will move to a new building in 2021 that will be shared with the The Hague Philharmonic Orchestra. This will open up new opportunities for collaboration with the professional field.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Early Music Department, 2018: *I attended a concert in which students worked side-by-side with members of the Orchestra of the 18th Century (one of three concerts in the series). This has obvious beneficial implications for students on an educational level. The concert was a free concert, open to the public, and well-attended, offering a high quality cultural and artistic experience for members of the public, who were clearly interested to experience the work of the conservatoire in this arena. I attended a meeting during my visit at which the integration of the NAIP project into the Early Music curriculum was discussed. Work to connect musical expression and purpose with sectors of society that don't regularly engage in this art form (as auditors or as participants) are to be supported and explored to ensure the continued relevance of the work inside the institution to the society outside. Such exploration is vital for the health and wealth of the community of musicians as well as for society as a whole.*⁴²

⁴¹ Report Critical Friend Composition, 2018.

⁴² Report Critical Friend Early Music, 2018.

The interaction with the profession (music and other artistic professions), including the assessment and monitoring of its ongoing needs.

Critical Friends notice that many teachers combine their teaching with their (international) performance work. With their knowledge, (artistic) skills and their network they offer their students the opportunity to enter the international music field. International artists and institutions visit many departments to discuss the music industry and to perform together. Conferences are organised bringing members of diverse international educational institutions together as well as exchanging projects, students and staff members.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Institute of Sonology, 2017: *Sonology is not only an important educational institution, but also serves a hub for the academic Electronic Music scene. In 2014, it has organized the conference „50 Years of Electroacoustic Music and Computer Music Education” (which I attended), bringing together members of 17 international educational institutes. One of the outcomes was the foundation of a platform for exchanging projects, students and staff members. Outside the Conservatory, Sonology is well-known for its concert programmes that attracted many listeners. Besides regular students recitals, it also curates excellent electronic music festivals. Most recently, “Historically Informed Performance Practice of Electroacoustic Music” (in cooperation with the ICST Zurich) presented some well-known „classical” electronic works in the spirit of “historical performance practice”, raising a bunch of questions that are currently discussed in academia. And finally, Sonology fulfils a prominent role in preserving the cultural heritage of early electronic music which is partly implemented in the aforementioned Analogue Studio, but also in the collection of original tapes and materials from the 1950ies on. The institute’s website houses a plethora of information including research topics, software development and master thesis which can be downloaded for free.⁴³*

The clarity and consistency of information given to the public (potential students, concerts audiences, parents, other interested stakeholders, etc.).

Critical Friends acknowledge that the website provides a lot of information about audition requirements and interview expectations. The website uses a combination of texts, photos, audio and video as well as information for the public (concert audiences, parents, other interested stakeholders) in a clear and consistent form. Departments organise many local, national and international educational, cultural and artistic activities through platforms such as annual meetings, artistic residencies, masterclasses, workshops and concerts. These events are helpful to put the educational programmes of the Conservatoire on the international map, and have an impact in terms of the number and level of applicant students. Although the current quality of the information given to the public is good, some Critical Friends (Jazz, Art of Sound, Composition) suggested that more emphasis could be placed on the diversity and the community the departments create, and that there could be more alumni news. These are all subjects that have since been further explored and developed.

Quote from the Critical Friend of the Jazz Department, 2018: *The Jazz Bachelor and Master Programmes at The Royal Conservatoire in The Hague have a very good international exposure, partially because to the already mentioned umbilical relationship with the IASJ. The Department developed a large amount of local, national and international educational, cultural and artistic efforts through the IASJ platform such as annual meetings, artistic residencies, masterclasses, workshops, concerts, and other activities. These events were crucial for putting the Conservatoire Jazz Programmes on the international map, and had a considerable impact in terms of the number*

⁴³ Report Critical Friend Sonology, 2017.

and level of applicant students. The final exams, for example, constitute a very good occasion for showing locally the work developed by teachers and students. Students also play regularly in jam sessions, which also enriches the local community. The Department also develops other forms of engagement of the Programmes with society, even though the number of performance opportunities outside school is decreasing, as previously stated. This is a considerable challenge that should keep concerning the Jazz Department. The information given to the public (potential students, concerts audiences, parents, other interested stakeholders) appears to be clear and consistent. ⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Report Critical Friend Jazz, 2018.

Appendix: Overview Critical Friends

Planning and realisation Critical Friends

	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025	2025/2026
Classical	x			x				x			x
Early Music		x				x			x		
Jazz			x				x			x	
Vocal			x			x			x		
Composition				x			x			x	
Music in Education						x			x		
Sonology			x			x		x			x
Art of Sound		x			x			x			x
Music Theory							x			x	
ArtScience					x			x			x