

Executive summary

Report

Programme quality enhancement review

Bachelor and Master in Visual Arts Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp (Antwerp, Belgium)

Site-visit: 8-10 March 2021

Introduction

The Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp (hereafter 'the Academy') is one of five art colleges in the Flanders region of Belgium and forms one of the Schools of Arts of the Artesis-Plantijn (AP) University College, which itself is one of thirteen Flemish University Colleges. The Academy was established in 1663 and is one of the oldest art schools in the world. The Bachelor and Master in the Visual Arts form the Academy's core educational offer and are complemented by an Educational Master's programme and a PhD programme, which is delivered in collaboration with the University of Antwerp and Antwerp Research Institute of the Arts (ARIA). While most of the Academy's learning and teaching activities are delivered at the historic Campus Mutsaard, a former medieval convent and church, converted into an art school in the early 19th century, there are additional city centre locations for Fashion, In Situ and Graphic Design.

The Visual Arts Programme comprises a 180 credit Bachelor degree (normally taken over three years) and a 60 credit Master degree (normally one year). The Academy approached the review with a single SER that presented the two awards as an holistic educational experience (although in future they wish to draw further distinction

between the two). In light of this, the Review Team's report addresses the programme as a whole, and this is reflected in the matching compliance levels in all standards. The detail of the report does however, draw distinctions between undergraduate and postgraduate provision where applicable,

The Visual Arts Programme is available within six specialisms; Photography, Graphic Design, Jewellery Design, Theatre Costume, Fashion and Fine Arts. The Fine Arts specialism is further divided into Sculpture, Painting, In Situ and Printmaking options. All specialisms are offered in both Dutch and English at both Bachelor and Master level, attracting a substantial number of international students (60% of total in 2019-20). There are around 568 students on the Visual Arts Programme each year, evenly split between the Dutch language and English language pathways. Fashion is the largest specialism, with around 200 students, the next largest being Graphic Design with around 100 students. [Source: *Q Report, Student & Study Profile – figures 2017-2020*]

The current structure of the higher education system in Flanders stems from the region's implementation of the Bologna agreement in 2003, including the adoption of first and second cycle programmes (Bachelor and Master) and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The 2003 Structural Decree established clusters of universities and university colleges within structural partnerships in the form of associations, and also introduced a public accreditation system to quality assure Flemish higher education provision with the establishment of the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO). In recent years the government has allowed higher education institutions greater autonomy in quality assuring their own provision and it is within this context that this review of the Visual Arts Programme has been undertaken.

The two Schools of Arts of AP University College (the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and the Royal Conservatoire) commissioned MusiQuE to conduct a quality enhancement review at programme level, aimed at assessing the educational and artistic activities as well as the quality assurance systems in place for the Dance Bachelor Programme and the Bachelor and Master of Visual Arts Programme. MusiQuE sub-contracted the review of the Visual Arts Programme to EQ-Arts while remaining responsible for the overall coordination of the procedure. In preparation for the site-visit, the MusiQuE Standards and Guidelines for Institutional Review were mapped against those of EQ-Arts and a merged set of standards and guiding questions was established, which has been used as the basis for this review.

Summary of the compliance with the standards

1. Programme's goal and context	
Standard 1. The programme goals are clearly stated and reflect the institutional mission.	
Bachelor of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
<p>Good Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The impact of the Academy's thorough and critically reflective preparations for the review process can be seen in its newly developed strategic roadmap, which sets out a clear vision for the future development of the Visual Arts Programme. The creation of 'studio portraits' has provided a mechanism for critical reflection at the studio level that has stimulated change and could be a valuable enhancement tool if repeated periodically. <p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is recommended that the strategic target for the programme related to internationalisation, as articulated in the roadmap, is expanded to include the incorporation of a greater range of non-European reference points within the curriculum. Data on applicant profiles should be systematically collected, in addition to data on student progress and employment outcomes, in order to enable analysis of access to and attainment within the programme throughout the student study cycle, for all students including those from underrepresented socio-cultural backgrounds. 	
2. Educational processes	
Standard 2.1. The goals of the programme are achieved through the content and structure of the curriculum and its methods of delivery	
Bachelor of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
<p>Good Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The studio method and individual contact with teachers are highly valued by students, demonstrating the importance of student-centred learning within the programme. Projects linked to the programme, such as the <i>Second Shelf Project</i> and the <i>Drawing Marathon</i>, are highly innovative and effectively embed artistic research opportunities for students within the programme. 	

- The sustained development of artistic research and the use of research students as studio teachers enriches the curricula and provides additional career trajectories for graduates of the Master programme.

Recommendations

- The theory-practice working group should prioritise the development of a hybrid approach to theory and practice, in order to sustain the curiosity and critical engagement of students (particularly those in the applied arts) in the theoretical and contextual aspects of the programme.
- Opportunities for crossover between specialisms should be structurally embedded within the programme in order to encourage the development of interdisciplinary skills that equip graduates for entry to the professional field.

Standard 2.2. The programme offers a range of opportunities for students to gain an international perspective.

Bachelor of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant

Good Practice

- The *Arts Inclusive* project is focused on making each individual within the Academy responsible for creating a welcoming atmosphere and embracing the diversity of its learning communities.

Recommendations

- The Academy should find effective mechanisms for drawing the global perspectives of its international student body into the design and content of the curriculum.

Standard 2.3. Assessment methods are clearly defined and demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes.

Bachelor of Visual Arts	Partially compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Partially compliant

Recommendations

- The Academy should review its Assessment Policy as a priority, in order to ensure that enhancements already made in some studios (such as the use of mark sheets with clear assessment criteria and assessment feedback forms), are implemented throughout the programme.
- Clear protocols should be established for the operation of jury evaluations, which outline the responsibilities of those in different roles and sets expectations for the consistent conduct of these assessments.

- Efforts to enhance the quality and consistency of written feedback on assessment, through the development of targeted training and guidance for teaching staff, should be prioritised.

3. Student profiles

Standard 3.1. There are clear criteria for student admission, based on an assessment of their artistic/academic suitability for the programme.

Bachelor of Visual Arts	Fully compliant
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Master of Visual Arts	Fully compliant
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Good Practice

- The use of motivation as the key criterion for entry to the programme enables the admission of students on the basis of their artistic and academic potential, creating opportunities for the Academy to widen access to individuals from different backgrounds.
- The transition to online admissions exams during the pandemic has made the process more accessible for international applicants and those with other barriers to travel.

Recommendations

None

Standard 3.2. The programme has mechanisms to formally monitor and review the progression, achievement and subsequent employability of its students.

Bachelor of Visual Arts	Partially compliant
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Master of Visual Arts	Partially compliant
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Good Practice

- Internship, where it is embedded within different specialisms, enables students to develop key employability skills and has a positive impact on both their preparedness for professional life and their ability to build professional networks.

Recommendations

- The Academy should consider how it can embed relevant employability and professional skills incrementally within the curriculum (from BA through to MA), to ensure that students are all equally well prepared to make the transition out of the programme and into the professional world.
- Opportunities for internships should be reviewed to establish how and whether they can be embedded within students' learning experience and across all specialisms.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data on alumni destinations should be collected and analysed on an annual basis in order to identify actions that might enhance the programme's employment outcomes. 	
4. Teaching staff	
Standard 4.1. Members of the teaching staff are qualified for their role and are active as artists/pedagogues/researchers.	
Bachelor of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
<p>Good Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunities for staff to apply for funded research projects enable individuals to develop their artistic practice and to strengthen links between studio teaching and research. <p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work currently being undertaken by the Educational Master team to devise a continuing professional development programme for the Academy's teaching staff should continue to be prioritised in order to ensure that all teachers are supported to enhance their skills in the areas of inclusive and effective teaching, assessment and feedback. 	
Standard 4.2. There are sufficient qualified teaching staff to effectively deliver the programmes.	
Bachelor of Visual Arts	Fully compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Fully compliant
<p>Recommendations</p> <p>None</p>	
5. Facilities, resources and support	
Standard 5.1. The institution has (partner institutions have) appropriate resources to support student learning and delivery of the programme.	
Bachelor of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
Good Practice	

- The Academy provides a range of well-equipped and appropriate workspaces, including large studio spaces (for example for painting and In Situ).
- The masterplan for *Making Mutsaard* indicates a variety of exciting opportunities to ensure the sustainability and adaptability of the campus spaces in future, including the potential for designated research spaces and digital hubs.

Recommendations

- A clear process for requesting access to specialist studios and equipment (outside of a student's normal studio) should be established and communicated to staff and students.
- The Academy should ensure that: all workshops where health and safety is a priority are supervised by a member of staff when accessible to, or timetabled for students; urgent equipment repairs are prioritised; and students are trained to use the equipment therein safely.

Standard 5.2. The institution's financial resources (financial resources of the partner institutions) enable successful delivery of the study programmes.

Bachelor of Visual Arts	Fully compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Fully compliant

Recommendations
None

Standard 5.3. The programme has sufficient qualified support staff.

Bachelor of Visual Arts	Fully compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Fully compliant

Good Practice

- Currently available and accessible student support services are carefully tailored to the needs of visual arts students, including the large community of international students within the Academy, and are led by knowledgeable, supportive staff.

Recommendations
None

6. Communication, organisation and decision-making

Standard 6.1. Effective mechanisms are in place for internal communication within the programme.

Bachelor of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
<p>Good Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The appointment of a dedicated Communication Officer has had a significant impact on the Academy's communications strategy, leading to enhancements such as the <i>Hello There</i> newsletter and use of Instagram as a channel for students to share their work and communicate with their peers across the Academy and beyond. <p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The approval and swift implementation of the planned internal communications policy is recommended in order to ensure that digital communication is effective, particularly during this time of increased online and blended learning. 	
Standard 6.2. The programme is supported by an appropriate organisational structure and clear decision-making processes.	
Bachelor of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
<p>Good Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a collegial and open approach to communication between the Head of Institution, Heads of Programme, Coordinators of Studios and teaching staff, and numerous forums exist through which staff at all levels can have an input into decision making within the programme. <p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear mechanisms for the closure of feedback loops should be established to ensure that students and other stakeholders know how their feedback on the programme has been considered and actioned where appropriate. The Heads of Programme should encourage the Student Council to establish ways to track issues and actions across academic years and to make use of the student intranet to both gather feedback and disseminate information. 	
7. Internal quality culture	
Standard 7 The programme has in place effective quality assurance and enhancement procedures.	
Bachelor of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant

Master of Visual Arts	Substantially compliant
<p>Good Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The regular use of focus groups is, in combination with other data collection methods, an effective way of gathering student feedback on priority areas. <p>Recommendations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular meetings between the Heads of Programme and the work field, and between Heads of Programme and the Student Council should be formally embedded within the annual quality cycle and feed into programme monitoring and review processes. The newly developed quality assurance mechanisms employed by the Academy should be regularly reviewed to ensure that they are fit for purpose and continue to identify issues, areas for enhancement and examples of good practice. 	
8. Public interaction	
Standard 8.1. The programme engages within wider cultural, artistic and educational contexts.	
Bachelor of Visual Arts	Fully compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Fully compliant
<p>Good Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The many public events, exhibitions and showcases organised by the Academy demonstrate its commitment to public engagement and to solidifying its position within the Antwerp art scene. Initiative and projects such as the <i>Extra Academy</i>, the <i>Expanding Academy</i> and <i>Noorderlicht</i> provide opportunities for students on the Visual Arts programme to participate in public discourse and community engagement. <p>Recommendations</p> <p>None</p>	
Standard 8.2. The programme actively promotes links with various sectors of the relevant artistic professions.	
Bachelor of Visual Arts	Fully compliant
Master of Visual Arts	Fully compliant
Good Practice	

- The Academy has a symbiotic relationship with the Antwerp’s arts organisations and institutions, which enables the programme to respond to the needs of the profession and contribute to the local arts ecosystem in a sustainable way.

Recommendations

None

Standard 8.3. Information provided to the public about the programme is clear, consistent and accurate.

Bachelor of Visual Arts

Fully compliant

Master of Visual Arts

Fully compliant

Good Practice

- Recent work undertaken to increase in the Academy’s digital presence, through social media, a new website and online events, has resulted in growing public engagement.

Recommendations

None

Conclusion

The Royal Academy of Fine Arts is embarking on a period of transition as it navigates the space between its long rich history and its vision for the future. The senior management team is relatively new in post and has developed clear strategic aims for the Visual Arts Programme, supported by consultation with staff and students and operating within the context of AP University College's concept of product leadership. The studio is at the heart of the Visual Arts Programme and in preparation for this review, each studio was encouraged to reflect on its values and methods and to produce studio portraits that were collated into the collective self-portrait presented in the self-evaluation report. The Review Team found this report to be a well-written, insightful and accurate representation of the current state of the programme and the actions required to enhance its delivery, currency and appeal in years to come. A significant effort was made in the months preceding the review to develop systems and processes for the quality assurance of the programme that have already led to a number of enhancements, in spite of the challenging circumstances surrounding the delivery of arts education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is evident to the Review Team, that as it approaches its 360th anniversary, the Royal Academy of Arts maintains a central role in the artistic life of Antwerp. The Visual Arts Programme contributes to the cultural profile of the city through its interaction with a range of arts organisations with regional and international significance, through its research-led events and platforms, and by enriching the local arts scene with the activities of its students and alumni. The *Making Mutsaard* masterplan heralds exciting new developments that will further enhance the Academy's facilities and create new opportunities for interdisciplinary work, while making this important cultural and historical site more accessible to the public. Currently few opportunities for social engagement are embedded within the programme and, as outlined above, more of these could help to establish new connections between Antwerp's diverse population and the Academy. However, its close collaborations with other Flemish and Dutch art schools extend its reach, while enhancing student learning opportunities.

The Review Team found that the priority areas of diversity, sustainability and Do It Yourself/Do It Together demonstrate the Academy's commitment to the future of its students, and hopes that the institution maintains its current momentum for change as it continues to make progress towards its highly ambitious goals for the programme. The recently established management team acknowledges that a small number of actions identified at the time of the previous review in 2011 have yet to be completed and have incorporated these into the new strategic roadmap.

Since the previous review, the Academy's research culture has evidently been developed considerably and this has had a significant impact on the programme, supported by the nexus education-research which aims to create new intersections between the two types of activity. Opportunities for teaching staff to become involved in research projects and for researchers to teach in the studios exposes students to new developments in their specialist fields.

The programme, with its Dutch and English language delivery at both Bachelor and Master level, attracts an internationally diverse student body that contributes to a stimulating working environment for both home and

overseas students alike. The cultural diversity of its students brings challenges in relation to the inclusivity of the programme and the diversity of its curriculum, which the Academy is committed to addressing through its strategic roadmap, and currently through the *Arts Inclusive* project to ensure that the programme is accessible to students from all backgrounds and cultures.

In noting areas of good practice and in making its recommendations against each standard, the Review Team is broadly in agreement with the Academy's own analysis of the programme's strengths, areas for enhancement and opportunities for development as set out in the self-evaluation report. The SER and the Roadmap for the Visual Arts Programme establish a clear vision for its future development, including aims and objectives for the next few years. The Academy is encouraged to maintain its critically reflective, sustainable and innovative approach to the enhancement of the programme as it considers the recommendations set out in this report.

Finally the Review Team would like to acknowledge that, while the review had to be carried out as a virtual site visit due to the Covid-19 pandemic, nonetheless the thorough preparation and availability of documents for the review by the Academy, the high level of engagement of all the Academy's representatives with full attendance at meetings, and the 'guided tour', enabled a thorough, fair and rigorous review process to take place.