

## FEASIBILITY STUDY OF A EUROPEAN RANKING OF OPERA ACADEMIES AND BALLET SCHOOLS



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Theatres and academic theatres perceive themselves as being in competition for scarce resources and their drive towards excellence is increasingly led by the need to find models for generating and disseminating culture that are sustainable from an economic point of view. In other knowledge based industries – such as universities – similar trends have generated in recent years the proliferation of tools that are meant to measure performances and to drive the choices of funders and clients.

Rankings are one of these instruments: they are a natural consequence of the need for information raised by a competitive market characterized by the demand of clients/ users/ stakeholders (students and their families, policy makers and taxpayers, funders, employers) to use palpable and comparable instruments in order to make choices and to better allocate resources.

Within this context this project has got the ambition to fill a gap: at the moment, there is no European ranking of Ballet schools and Opera academies. Such an instrument would provide a tool which is essential to generate and sustain fairer competition as well as guide strategic choices of academic theatres. Indeed, the measurement of results, performances, and the exercise to compare them with appropriate benchmark is fundamental to boost a culture based on the ideas of improvement, innovation, and constant evaluation.

Whether on one hand this experiment is led by the enthusiasm that characterizes innovative projects, on the other hand, the fact that a ranking does not exist poses a number of challenges – such as the development of an appropriate methodology that respects and emphasise the peculiarities of this industry, the identification of the institutions to build a consistent sample, and the gathering of the necessary data to compile the classification - that this project will try to address

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## 1. OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

The project aims to verify the possibility and the feasibility to compile a European ranking of Ballet schools and Opera Academies. According to this expectation we identified three main objectives:

1. **Building a shared methodology.** The methodology constitutes a fundamental element of the league-table: it provides ranking with legitimacy, defines the basis for the comparison, and identifies the institutions that will be part of the exercise.
2. **Creating a network of supporting institutions.** This is an important aspect for the development of a European ranking of Ballet Schools and Opera academies. Consequently, one of the main objectives of this project consists of verifying the support that the idea of the ranking can obtain and getting early feedbacks on the methodology.
3. **Gathering preliminary data.** Although the methodology represents the central element of the ranking, the availability and accessibility of data related to the indicators identified is extremely important to confirm the feasibility of the measurements and, therefore, the achievability of the whole project. A preliminary assessment exercise will be run with the only purpose to verify the possibility to construct selected indicators.

We will now describe how do we intend to achieve these objectives.

## 2. THE METHODOLOGY: THE RATIONALE

Although a relatively recent phenomena, ranking are important tools to foster improvements and innovation. League-tables are capable to influence public opinions (especially international), students, faculty, funders, governments and employers' choices. Obviously, rankings are not free from imperfections, but whether tuned in the proper way, they can provide their users with interesting and useful information. Drawing on both our experience in the field of university ranking and on an in depth analysis of ballet schools and opera academies industry, we would like to develop a ranking based on three guiding principles:

**Focus on results.** Our ranking will be oriented to measure outcome and not organizational choices or processes (Inputs). This way the different institutions that will participate in the ranking project will be compared on their capabilities to get results, provide added value to their students, and on the effectiveness of the choices they made (not on the choices themselves).

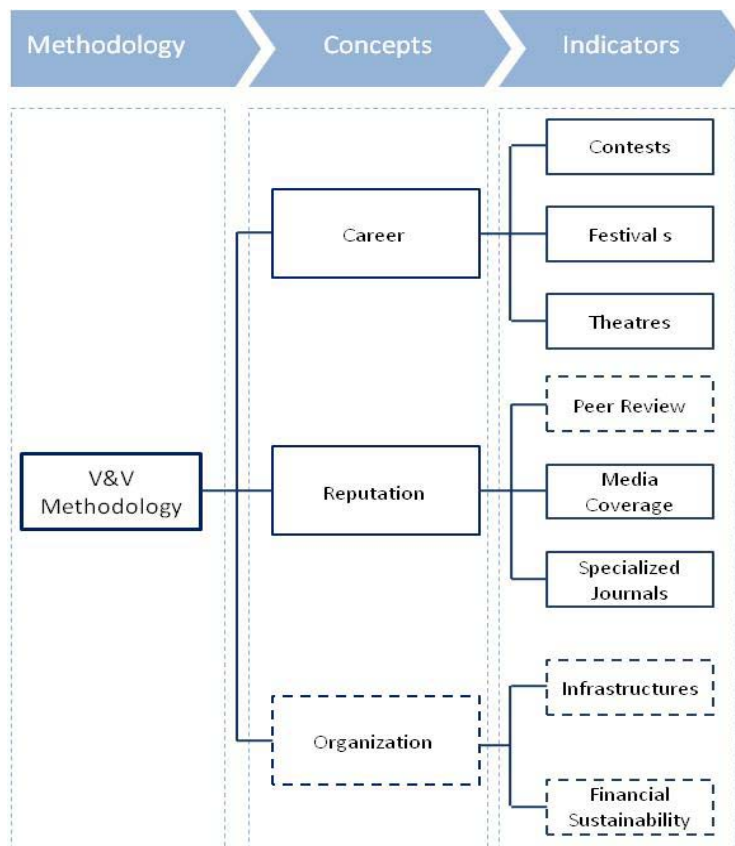
**Quantitative Indicators.** The measurement of results, performances, and the exercise to compare them with appropriate benchmark is of great value to boost a culture based on the ideas of improvement, innovation, and constant evaluation. However, the ideas of value added, results, improvements and innovation, become relevant only when they can be measured and quantified. For this reason all the indicators of our ranking will refer to quantitative parameters that can be precisely defined.

**Transparency.** There is not effective evaluation or comparison whether the data used to compile the ranking are neither reliable nor verifiable. Consequently, in order to be an effective tool to boost fair competition and innovation, our ranking will be built with data that are available and accessible by everyone who is interested in verifying their quality and reliability. According to this principle all our indicators are desk parameters, therefore, all the data that will be used to build the ranking are already existent and are available and accessible through the Internet.

### 3. THE SET OF INDICATORS

The indicators – as well as the institutions – represent an essential component of the ranking’s methodology. In fact, the definition of the parameters determines the ground on which the institutions considered by the league-table will be compared on. Potentially there are thousands possible indicators to assess Opera academies and ballet schools’ performances; however, not all these potential indicators provide the same information or refer to the same specific organizations’ activities. Vision&Value is firmly convinced that rankings are means to deliver a message. Therefore, in order to send a clear message, the comparison among organizations should be achieved on a small number of very precisely defined areas of activity. According to this, we would like to frame the assessment carried out by the ranking in the following way:

Chart 3.1: Framework of the assessment provided by the ranking



Source: Vision&Value

As shown in the chart, the methodology of the ranking is based on the assessment of three different areas: Careers outcome, Reputation, and organizational aspects. These areas constitutes the rationale for the indicators: the domain, the concept, to which the measurements carried out by the parameters refer to. The **career** category includes all the indicators tuned to measure activities that affect the career of Opera academies and ballets schools' students (presence of alumni in important representations, festival or contests). Under **reputation** fall all the indicators that assess the level of reputation of schools and academies (peer review, media coverage, and specialized journals). Last but not least, **organization**. This area of assessment concerns an evaluation of the infrastructures that characterizes the organization involved in the ranking experience (number of rooms, accommodations, availability of scholarships, etc).

Going into the details, the next paragraphs provide the definitions of the indicators considered for the feasibility study of a European ranking of opera academies and ballet schools:

### CAREER INDICATORS

1. Number of alumni winning high standing **international contests** in a specific amount of time (last 5 years). Furthermore, this parameter allows us to obtain specific information regarding a peculiar segment of academies' clients: we assume that the contests participants are usually young performers in the initial phase of their career. Therefore, we will be able to measure the result of the academies in influencing students' career in the moment they do not have working experience.
2. Number of alumni participating in high standing **international festivals** in a specific amount of time (last 3 or 5 years). The rationale for this indicator is to obtain a result-oriented measure of the quality of dancing and music academies' product and, therefore, the impact that education have on their careers. Differently from the previous one, this indicator allows us also to understand the level of sustainability of the academies' product: we assume that performers of all ages participate in festivals. Therefore, the presence of alumni – especially if some years after graduation - in this high standing international festival can be considered a measure of the sustainability of the academy's product.
3. Number of alumni acting during the current performing season in highly recognised representations performed in high standing **international theatre** (e.g. the Turandot performed at the Metropolitan Opera).

### REPUTATION INDICATORS

4. **Media coverage** (Public opinion making). This indicator aims to measure the impact of the academies on public opinions. The measurement consists in counting the number of times the name of an academy is quoted in the articles of a set of national newspapers.
5. **Specialized Journals** (Specialized opinion making). This indicator aims to measure the impact of the academies on experts' opinions. The measurement consists in counting the number of times the name of an academy is quoted in the articles of a set of specialized journals.

6. **Peer Review.** Reputations amongst other academies. Representatives of the academies that will be involved in the ranking project will be asked to classify other institutions from the best to the last. This indicator mirrors the peer-evaluation mechanism usually adopted to evaluate university teachers' research.

#### **ORGANIZATIONAL INDICATORS**

7. **Infrastructures** (Input and Processes). This indicator considers the number of classrooms, scholarships, and accommodations for students. It is an evaluation of the academies' infrastructures.
8. **Financial sustainability.** Amount of funds attracted by the academy from private investors. This indicator aims to assess the ability of academies in attracting funds.

### **3. THE RESEARCH STRATEGY**

In order to maximize the results of this feasibility study and achieve the goals that we set earlier in this paper, we developed a research strategy characterized by three elements:

**Focus on 5 indicators.** As stated in the first chapter of this work one of the primary goal of this experiment is to verify the availability and accessibility of data that will allow the implementation of the methodology we are shaping. With the intention to make our research of data as effective as possible we decided to focus – in this preliminary phase – on five indicators out of eight: number of alumni winning international contests, number of alumni participating to high standing festivals, number of students performing in high standing international theatres, media coverage, and capability to influence specialized public opinions. Therefore are excluded from this first experiment those indicators aimed to measure organizational aspects and the peer review indicator.

**Institutions.** As we will explain in greater details in the next chapter, the selection of the institution was made on the basis of organizational aspects. In fact, the ten institutions we consider for the feasibility study do have similar organizational structures: both of them are provided with a ballet school and an opera academy.

**Institutions as both Input and Output providers.** The institutions selected for the feasibility study supply us with information as both input and output providers. These are due to the fact that the organizations we considered do have both the theatre and the academic theatre. Therefore, they function as input and output providers. On the one hand these institutions, as schools, are evaluated on the basis of their students' performances (an information of output from our point of view) and, therefore, they are providers of an information of output. On the other hand, as theatres – as well as organizers of festivals and contests - they provide performers with the concrete ground on which they can build their career and, consequently, they are providers of information on input. This way, we consider institutions as both students' provider – that are a source of evaluation for schools - and as career opportunities providers (representations, festivals, and contests). According to this, we included in the sample of theatres, festivals, and contests those organized by the institutions that we are evaluating.

#### 4. THE INSTITUTIONS FOR THE FEASIBILITY STUDY

The definition of the sample of institutions considered by a ranking is an important aspect of the league-table's methodology. In fact, the logic of comparisons and benchmarking that underpins the ranking exercise is valid only in the case the sample of institutions considered is consistent and uniform. Drawing on this, for the feasibility study of a European ranking of music and ballet schools, we selected seven institutions that fulfil the following criteria:

1. **Educational Offer.** The institutions considered must have a Ballet School and a School of Music. This organizational feature is a necessary condition in order to become part of the sample.
2. **International standing and reputation.** The institutions must have an internationally recognised reputation based on objective results and tradition.

On the basis of these two elements we identified the following set of institutions:

Table 4.1: Institution considered for the feasibility study

| Istituzioni                                  | Scuole  |
|--|---|
| 1. Accademia Teatro Alla Scala (Italia)      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Scuola di Ballo Accademia Teatro alla Scala</li> <li>– Scuola di Musica Accademia Teatro alla Scala</li> </ul> |
| 2. Opéra de Paris (Francia)                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Ecole de L'Academie Royale de Danse</li> <li>– Atelier Lyrique</li> </ul>                                      |
| 3. Covent Garden (Inghilterra)               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Royal Ballet School</li> <li>– Royal Academy Opera</li> </ul>  |
| 4. Staatsoper Im Schiller Theater (Germania) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Staatsballet Schule</li> <li>– Opernstudio</li> </ul>  |
| 5. Bolshoi Teatr (Confederazione Russa)      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The Moscow State Academy of choreography</li> <li>– Opera Studio</li> </ul>                                    |
| 6. The Royal Danish Theatre (Danimarca)      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The Royal Danish Ballet School</li> <li>– The Royal Danish Opera Academy</li> </ul>                            |
| 7. Opernhaus Zurich (Svizzera)               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Junior Ballet</li> <li>– Internationales Opernstudio IOS</li> </ul>  |

Source: Vision & Value

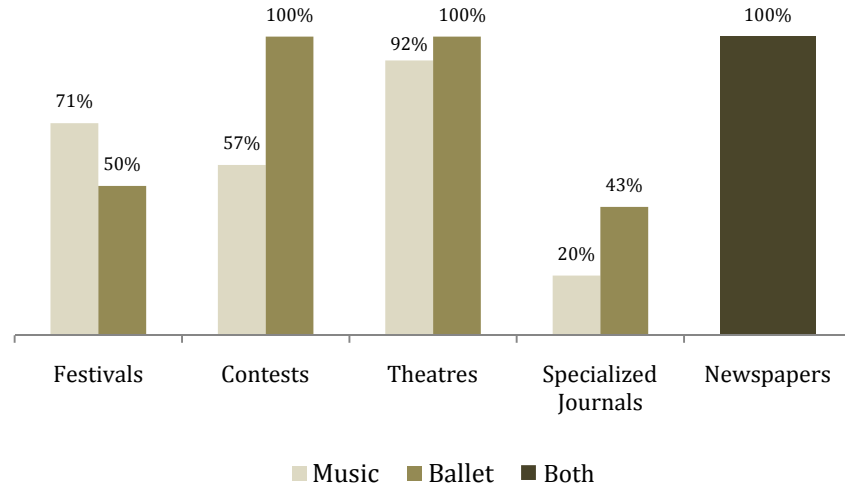
#### 5. GATHERING OF PRELIMINARY DATA

As already mentioned the gathering of preliminary data is conducted to verify the availability and accessibility of the data necessary to compile the ranking. Therefore, this process allowed us to understand whether the proposed set of indicators is implementable.

From an overall perspective the set of indicator passed the feasibility test, for all the measures identified we were able to gather some reliable data through the defined methodology. However, this preliminary gathering was not equally satisfying for all

indicators. The following graph shows the availability of data for each indicator considered.

Graph 5.1: Availability of data for each indicator of the ranking’s methodology.



Source: Vision & Value

In fact, we did not have any problem in finding data to fulfil the international dance and singing festivals indicator (we identified the necessary data for 5 festival out of 7, reaching an availability of data equal to 71%), the international contests indicator (as much as regard singing international contests we gathered data for 4 contests out of 7, whereas for dancing international contests we found data for each one of the selected events), and the alumni performing in international theatres indicators (as far as opera singing theatres, data are available and accessible for 92% of the cases. Even better is the situation regarding ballet theatres, data are available and accessible in each case).

Differently, some difficulties emerged in testing the indicators related to the numbers of citations in national newspapers and specialized journals. Since our methodology to count citations is based on online research the technology level of the journal’s online platform constitutes an issue. As much as regard the specialized journal, the absence of online archive made impossible the research for citations. Therefore the test helped us in recognising the limit of the methodology to gather data for this indicator. Although we did not have any problem of availability and accessibility of data concerning the newspapers indicator, we faced some difficulties to understand how different online archives allow to research within their databases. However, all the problems met during this test enabled us to fine-tune the methodology to compile the ranking.



## 6. THE RESULTS

The results of the feasibility study for the first European ranking of ballet schools and music academy can be summarized as follow:

**Building a shared methodology.** The methodology is the soul of a ranking, what makes it credible and reliable. Therefore, the building of a methodology shared by the institutions that will be evaluated is a fundamental aspect. The feasibility study – especially the interviews – showed that the method proposed by Vision & Value reached consensus. In fact, all the interviewees agreed on the fact that three characteristics represent the value of the methodology: the **transparency** through which the ranking is developed, the focus on **measuring results** (outcome), and the adoption of a set of **quantitative indicators**. Furthermore, the involvement of the managers - thanks to the interviews - enabled us to get feedbacks and suggestions on how to improve the methodology.

**Creating a network of supporting institutions.** The idea of a European ranking of ballet schools and music academies has been enthusiastically accepted by the majority of the institutions considered by the feasibility study. This is particularly important, because the institutions agreed on the idea of the ranking despite their differences and rivalry. In fact we should take into considerations that this schools are competitors – in gaining new clients, resources and sponsors – as well as partners for the creation of joint ventures; therefore their relationships are extremely delicate if we consider the specific market they are competing in. All the representatives of the organization we interviewed confirmed their availability and commitment in lobbying to reach consensus on the development of the ranking.

**Gathering preliminary data.** The test of the methodology through the gathering of preliminary data allowed us to verify the achievability of the ranking. Thanks to it we identified methodology's strengths and weaknesses, and problems related to availability and accessibility of data. The deep differences among the institution considered by our study shaded some lights on the limits of the proposed methodology and helped us to improve it: for example, regarding the counting of the citations on national newspapers and specialized journals, the lack of updated online platforms made us change the mechanism originally defined.

Concluding, on the basis of what we have just outlined, we think that the feasibility study has been a successful exercise and it will be extremely useful to the development of the first European ranking of ballet schools and music academies.

## 7. NEXT STEPS

Building on what we have seen in the previous paragraphs, the next steps of our projects are:

- **Development of the actual ranking.** The success of the feasibility study demonstrated that a ranking of ballet school and music academies can be compiled through the methodology we proposed. Therefore, tanking into consideration the necessary modifications emerged during the study, we will implement the methodology on a broader set of institutions.

- **Consulting.** The development of the ranking will provide us with a tool to compare organizations. However, we would like to consider it as the basis to carry out more in depth analysis of academies' product positioning, marketing, and internal organization. Thanks to these elaborations, we will be able to provide update, accurate and reliable recommendation to institutions in order to help them to find their specific value proposition and market niche.