The Politics of Intercultural Collaboration in Higher Music Education: Challenges Seen from a Leadership Point of View

Sidsel Karlsen

Abstract Internationally, various mandates and policy directives require higher music education institutions to engage in intercultural collaboration. These include fulfilling national policy demands for internationalization in higher education, providing students with experience of working internationally to increase their employability, and conducting proper diversity management so as to facilitate diversity-conscious and responsible interaction with employees, students, and the broader educational community. In this chapter, the topic of intercultural collaboration in higher music education is approached from a different starting point, asking what, from a leadership point of view, creates obstacles to such collaboration and what makes it challenging or difficult either at the levels of individual participants, administrators, or the institution. Twelve leadership representatives from three different institutions of higher music education were interviewed about their experiences with intercultural collaboration and the benefits and challenges of engaging in such interactions. From the interviewees' experiences, their work of attempting to govern or manage situations of complex intercultural interaction while simultaneously negotiating between the different interests expressed within the frames of their respective institutions featured prominently in the empirical material. In this chapter, these negotiations and deliberations are theorized and discussed attending to perspectives borrowed from literature on intercultural competences, leadership in higher education, and new managerialism.

Keywords Challenges of leadership · Complex intercultural interaction · Higher music education · Intercultural collaboration · Leadership · Politics

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1 Introduction

Internationally, various mandates and policy directives now require higher music education institutions to engage in intercultural collaboration. These include fulfilling national policy demands for internationalization in higher education (Kertz-Welzel 2018), providing students with experience of working internationally to increase their employability (Westerlund and Karlsen 2017), and conducting proper diversity management, understood as developing and enacting “an organizational strategy which emphasizes the need to recognize ethnic, cultural, gender and other differences” (Wrench 2015, p. 254) so as to facilitate diversity-conscious and responsible interaction with employees, students, and the broader educational community. In music education, matters of intercultural collaboration have been explored from the experiential point of view of music teacher educators and their students as well as in-service music teachers, with the emphasis often focusing on the advantages of such endeavors. For example, music teacher students’ participation in intercultural immersion courses and projects has been found to increase their level of reflexivity related to what and how they teach (Burton et al. 2013), their ability to approach teaching situations from an improvisational point of view (Westerlund et al. 2015), and their understanding of their “role in the construction of Otherness” (Bartleet 2011, p. 20). Likewise, music teacher educators involved in cross-national collaboration have been seen to develop new and deepened perspectives on diversity and interculturality (Miettinen et al. 2018), and in-service music teachers have experienced positive musical and personal transformations (Robinson 2005). Even experiential and emotional hardships, following from music students being forced to step out of their individual and cultural comfort zones, have been framed as positive outcomes of intercultural collaboration, with researchers claiming that such experiences have evoked students’ ability “to engage in a deep reflection on the nature of teaching and the purpose of music education” (Westerlund et al. 2015, p. 55) and strengthened “their professional identities” (Sæther 2013, p. 48).

In this chapter, however, I have chosen to approach the topic of intercultural collaboration in higher music education from a different starting point, asking what, from a leadership point of view, creates obstacles to such collaboration and what makes it challenging or difficult either at the levels of individual participants, administrators, or the institution. Twelve leadership representatives from three different institutions of higher music education were interviewed about their experiences with intercultural collaboration and the benefits and challenges of engaging in such interactions. From the interviewees’ experiences, their work of attempting to govern or manage situations of complex intercultural interaction while simultaneously negotiating between the different interests expressed within the frames of their respective institutions featured prominently in the empirical material. The area of obstacles and challenges related to such negotiations and deliberations is the focus of this particular chapter.

2 Contexts and Sampling of Participants

The three institutions involved in this research were the Sibelius Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki in Finland; the Levinsky College of Education in Tel Aviv, Israel; and the Nepal Music Center in Kathmandu, Nepal. At the time of the interviews, these institutions were engaged in a large-scale transnational research project named *Global Visions Through Mobilizing Networks: Co-developing Intercultural Music Teacher Education in Finland, Israel and Nepal* (see Global Visions n.d.). Although belonging to the same network, the institutions were quite different with respect to the types of music education and programs offered, and they also represented vastly different cultural and social contexts as well as musical and pedagogical traditions. While the Sibelius Academy is a music conservatoire institution, educating musicians and music educators in Western classical music, folk music, and a variety of jazz and popular music styles, the Levinsky College of Education is a teacher training institution that includes a Faculty of Music Education which mainly educates music teachers to work within a variety of contexts. At this institution, Western classical music holds a dominant position, although other musics, such as Hebrew singing traditions, world music, and popular music are also taught to a certain extent (see Miettinen et al. 2018, p. 71). The Nepal Music Center is a music and culture nonprofit organization which offers courses in Western popular music, Nepali folk music of various kinds and traditions, and Eastern raga-based music. At the time of the research project, both the Sibelius Academy and the Levinsky College of Education were undeniably institutions for higher music education in the sense that they offered education at the university level (see Jørgensen 2009, p. 12), from bachelor's degree programs and above. The Nepal Music Center was in the process of becoming such an institution, waiting for approval of a bachelor's degree program to be launched in collaboration with the Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu.

As mentioned above, 12 leadership representatives were interviewed, among them 6 men and 6 women. The interviewees were selected because they all worked within music education institutions that were engaged in intercultural collaboration but experienced this phenomenon from different locations within the institutions and also from positions characterized by huge differences with respect to values, traditions, hierarchies, and sociocultural and economic conditions. Consequently, the sampling strategy used could be described as based both on a reputational case selection and a wish to achieve maximum variation (Miles and Huberman 1994), aiming to capture the specific experiences of a certain group of people, considered as key informants, as well as diverse variations within this particular sample, hoping to identify "important common patterns" (p. 28). With one exception, all the interviewees can be described as manager-academics (Deem et al. 2007) or manager-musicians to some degree, in the sense that they were "academics [or musicians] who [had] become managers and leaders" (p. 102) in the institutions where they worked, either full time or as part of their workload. For reasons that have to do with protecting the anonymity of the interviewees, I choose not to give any further

descriptions of their academic or administrative ranks or of how many interviews were conducted within each institution. For the same reason, when describing the results below, I also refrain from connecting contextual information to individual utterances.

3 Procedures, Analysis, and Theoretical Points of Departure

The leadership representatives were interviewed in a place of their own choice, mostly in their own offices or in meeting rooms located within their workplaces. This was both a practical solution and a way of respecting the fact that the participants were interviewed in the capacity of their professional role and standing. The interviews were semi-structured, following an interview guide, and the interviewees gave their consent in accordance with the ethical guidelines provided by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2012). All interviews were conducted in English, which was neither the mother tongue of the interviewer nor of any of the interviewees. This situation did of course complicate the conversations (see more on linguistic challenges below); on the other hand, none of us was privileged as the native English speaker. The interview transcriptions were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach, meaning that the texts were coded and categorized focusing on the factors that the interviewees saw as either beneficial or challenging in relation to intercultural collaboration. As mentioned above, in this chapter, I have chosen to concentrate on the part of the empirical material where obstacles, challenges, or difficulties were described. These aspects were divided into four main categories, namely, (1) common challenges connected to intercultural work; (2) the perils of university (or school) life; (3) the potential that intercultural collaboration could have for challenging the local culture and creating controversies; and (4) the phenomenon of institutionalized distrust. All four categories spanned utterances made by interviewees in all the three institutional contexts involved. The results are theorized attending to perspectives borrowed from literature on intercultural competences (MacPherson 2010), leadership in higher education (Whitchurch and Gordon 2017) and new managerialism (Deem et al. 2007).

4 Challenges of Intercultural Collaboration

Instead of approaching the interviewees with a fixed understanding of what intercultural collaboration might imply, some of the initial questions in the interview guide were directed toward mapping their understandings of how this phenomenon appeared both within and beyond the borders of each institution, following the conviction that exploring intercultural encounters is not necessarily “a matter of

defining assumed cultural boundaries” (Miettinen et al. 2018, p. 70) but rather of acknowledging “how we imagine and co-construct ourselves and the selves of others, across diverse contexts” (p. 70). Consequently, below the interviewees describe challenges that might occur in both internal and external intercultural collaborations, the former spanning, for example, handling ethnic, cultural, religious, or linguistic differences between diverse student and staff groups, but also tackling differences connected to various music traditions or to the divergences between researcher and musician cultures. The latter, external form, would typically involve encounters with other national bodies, such as higher education institutions or ministries or, as was most common, cross-national collaboration with international stakeholders.

4.1 Common Challenges: Linguistic and Cultural Differences and Divergence of Expectations

Writing from the point of view of how decision-making is negotiated in intercultural teaching situations, MacPherson (2010) emphasizes mastering “[i]ntercultural communicative competences” (p. 273) as an important skill, including “cross-cultural listening” (p. 273), being aware of “power dynamics” (p. 273) and also being able to master more than one language and to code-switch whenever needed. A lack of such abilities was seen by the interviewees in the present study to be one of the more common sources of obstacles for intercultural collaboration, and it was evident both in internal and external encounters. Regarding linguistic differences, one interviewee explained:

English is not my [native] language, and it is not yours . . . it sounds different [depending on who speaks], not intended, but . . . how *I* understand [and] how *you* understand, there is this confusion. I am always, like, “OK, did you get what I tried to . . .?”

This quotation points both to the obstacles involved in speaking different versions of English but also, more implicitly, to the deeper layers of understanding that are connected to having different (cultural) frames of reference. Another interviewee emphasized the latter challenges, by saying:

First, [you have] to understand the culture well enough to allow you to cooperate. Because that is not easy. It is never easy, even if you work with [people from] somewhere very close . . . the culture is always different. And you cannot go there and say, “Do it like this!” You have to listen.

Not fully mastering these layers of communication could have quite severe consequences, such as international partners withdrawing from collaboration, which had happened to some of the interviewees in previous projects. Lack of, or obstructed, communication could also enlarge a divergence of expectations among collaborators, which would potentially hamper the collaboration outcomes or at least the experienced usefulness of such outcomes for one or more of the partners involved. Describing such a discrepancy of outcomes from the point of view of her institution,

and from her particular location within that institution, one of the interviewees expressed a certain disappointment with the way things had developed in one particular project:

In spite of [our] sincere efforts, desirable effects and outcomes have not been witnessed . . . mainly because of not having enough funding or sufficient resources, I do not know . . . the aspect of development [that was desired from our point of view], we have not seen.

While the interviewee in this quotation points to a lack of resources as one possible reason for the state of things, other parts of this particular conversation revealed a certain frustration with expressed expectations not being met by collaborators. Other points of frustration could occur when, for example, resources seemed to be shared unevenly among collaborators in cross-national projects: “Well, of course, very many of the benefits went to [the other institution].” While situations like these can be challenging enough among partners having similar cultural and linguistic frames of reference, the potential obstacles multiply when negotiations need to be filtered through linguistic and cultural differences.

4.2 The Perils of University (or School) Life: Lack of Time, Resources, and Opportunities

Writing on new managerialism in higher education in the UK, Deem et al. (2007) recognize the increasingly heavy workloads that academics are expected to carry. Likewise, Whitchurch and Gordon (2017), describing the situation from a more international point of view, note that even though workload models exist, also of the kind that aim to achieve “transparency and equity” (p. 81), they do not necessarily “account particularly well for interdisciplinary and external partnership working” (p. 81). This description of academic working life reality was highly evident in the interviews, on a general level, but the various aspects of it were also seen to be among the main forces that hindered intercultural collaboration, perhaps especially of the kind that required cross-national contact and travel. One interviewee simply put it like this: “We don’t have time!” Another emphasized the economic aspects when answering my question about the challenges of intercultural collaboration: “Challenges? It has always been finances . . . that is the main challenge.” A third interviewee elaborated further:

Interviewee:	It is a question of resources. It is not just money; it is also about people. . .
Researcher:	. . . time and people, yes.
Interviewee:	Time and people. We are all working very hard here.

Some of the leaders interviewed feared that by engaging in projects that required extensive intercultural collaboration their staff ran the risk of being completely overloaded with work and burnt out. Others pointed to local priorities and cultures as something that perhaps needed to undergo change in order to make such collaboration viable: “Perhaps this institution appreciates teaching too much?” Finally,

there was a concern that staff members did not even have time to talk among themselves about everyday matters nor to engage in domestic developments. Expressing admiration for those who took on intercultural and cross-national work but pointing out that such work also took the focus away from the institution, one interviewee stated: “We value what they do, but at the same time, we miss those who would concentrate on domestic issues.” Such a view stems perhaps from the experience (or opinion) that work done elsewhere does not necessarily benefit the employing institution. Also, when institutional resources are viewed as scarce, the question easily becomes to whom, primarily, do the employees owe their time and effort?

4.3 Challenging the Local Culture and Creating Controversies: Troubling Habits and Traditions

Aligning with previous research in music education (e.g., Westerlund et al. 2015; Sæther 2013 as referenced earlier in this chapter), some of the interviewed leaders argued that intercultural collaboration often required the participants to step out of their comfort zones. This was seen to evoke forms of learning that would affect the institution on a collective level and have the potential to destabilize the local culture and create unforeseen consequences and, sometimes, controversies:

Interviewee:	[An intercultural collaboration project] is probably expected to create some nice added value in the program, but we can think of any intercultural learning as being about . . . breaking the taken-for-granted issues or values in our programs. Independent of whether it is a student or a teacher, if it starts breaking and shaking the establishment and the status quo, then it might not be what the institution originally thought. It is not a nice added thing, but it actually starts a reorganization process. It depends on whether the leader sees that as a positive thing, or a dangerous. . .
Researcher:	. . .threat?
Interviewee:	A threat, yes.

Other interviewees attributed such tension not to the leadership level but to the level of staff members who, in their opinion, were not particularly willing or ready to change:

Another challenge is, you have this old-school thought of doing habitual things, like, you know they [the staff members] have been doing it for years and years, and then we have [other staff members] who are learning differently than what they have learnt . . . when we start to try to change, there will be lots of . . . tension.

Individual staff members’ resistance was seen, not only as related to habits but also to the employees’ close relationship with, or loyalty toward, their respective disciplines. Explaining how he assumed some of his staff members would react to intercultural collaboration and the changes potentially brought about by it, one leader said:

They will cling to their own discipline. I think it is part of the problem here . . . we have people who come from the more theoretical side . . . saying “Of course, music history is first and foremost about the Western civilization. I do not have time to start teaching Indian music, and I do not know Indian music, so just let me be”.

In the data generated for this particular study, such resistance and discipline-related commitment to tradition were first and foremost seen by the interviewees as something characteristic of musical traditions and cultures and of the academics and musicians who represented those. Broader research on higher education management shows, however, that the phenomenon pinpointed above as a conserving or obstructing force in intercultural collaboration is, in fact, a quite common trait among academics. According to Deem et al. (2007), many academics typically “base their identity on their discipline or subject,” and “[t]heir allegiance is more often to that discipline . . . than [to] their university” (p. 70). Manager-academics, on the other hand, are “far more likely to express loyalty to their institution” (p. 70).

4.4 Institutionalized Distrust: Envy, Selfishness, Censorship, and Surveillance

The doubt about staff members’ willingness to participate in intercultural collaboration on constructive terms that emerges in the two last quotations above was evident also elsewhere in the empirical material. This did not concern only subordinate staff, however; the leadership representatives clearly felt that neither could their own staff entirely be trusted to engage willingly and fruitfully in such activities nor could the superior authorities be expected to endorse them wholeheartedly. With respect to the first group, the leaders found that their staff formed a conservative culture, they emphasized the conserving forces of the discipline- and tradition-centered approaches mentioned above, and they acknowledged that they worked in institutions where change took time and often could not be achieved before someone went into retirement. Change, then, required hiring new staff:

It is a huge problem . . . there are not too many faculties that actually give tenureship . . . It is a huge problem because you cannot make changes. So, the only way to make changes is to bring new people. Newcomers.

Lack of staff competence was also pointed to as one factor that would hinder new developments, as were inter-faculty differences and arrogance, especially when it came to fostering intercultural collaboration between musical traditions:

Sometimes they collaborate with each other, sometimes not, because of an arrogant nature on the side of [one musical tradition]. These people [from the other tradition] are feeling that they have been humiliated or they have been oppressed by [people from the first tradition].

Cross-national intercultural collaboration was imbued with other challenges as well; the interviewed leaders described, for example, how staff members would express envy that they were not chosen to participate in certain projects or that colleagues

had chances to travel internationally. As one interviewee said, who had travelled himself: "When you are abroad, that creates envy . . . amongst other teachers, and they think you are on holiday." A certain selfishness was also attributed to employees, and some of the interviewees feared that competences achieved through intercultural collaboration would be used for the benefit of the individual academic or musician, and not of the institution: "If you run away with your own agenda and you ignore the institution . . . what is the point of us supporting all these people?" Thus, obstructions to fruitful collaborations were found on both collective and individual levels, according to the leadership representatives.

While the interviewed leaders expressed a certain distrust toward their staff, they themselves did not feel completely trusted by the authorities above them either. This was shown in two different ways with direct relevance to intercultural work and collaboration. First, there was a feeling among some interviewees that opening up the can of worms of tensions and challenges that discussing interculturality might imply could lead to political sanctions and censorship. During one interview in particular, I was given several examples of teachers being silenced for voicing their opinions, and the interviewee said:

It is also a question of being able to talk about these things. [In this country] there are many things where it is not clear within the Ministry of Education if you can or cannot talk about [it] . . . It is very unclear.

As the politics of the country in question had developed, this interviewee found it increasingly hard to engage in discussions regarding intercultural issues and added: "It is a question of being able to air your opinions and not be shunned by society because of that." Second, several of the leaders were concerned that the outcomes of intercultural collaboration within the various institutions could not be controlled or audited in a way that the national higher education accreditation units would recognize or acknowledge. This was the case with both student and teacher outcomes, exemplified in the following quotation:

My hands are tied, because being [in this position] I have to go through strict curricula that I did not produce . . . it is the Ministry of Education that actually decides . . . the curriculum is very tight . . . where do I put the multicultural thing in? So, it is difficult!

Other interviewees talked about challenges connected to giving students accreditation for courses that involved intercultural collaboration, and others again expressed worries that intercultural collaboration projects were not reported in ways that would be found satisfactory by the educational authorities.

The pattern of two-sided doubt about the good will and intentions of staff and authorities found above is not something particular to higher music education but strongly resembles what the new managerialism literature names institutionalized distrust. According to Deem et al. (2007), this phenomenon occurs when universities go from a system of "regulated autonomy" (p. 101) toward one in which "free market forces and private sector market discipline" (p. 101) rule the institutions. Such development requires "explicit performance and quality indicators" (p. 39) and also creates a bigger divide between the management or leadership and those who are managed. In other words, the university and its leadership are now subjected to "more intrusive state-centred intervention" (p. 25) than before, including increased

and “detailed surveillance of professional training and accreditation” (p. 25). In this chapter, such surveillance becomes visible, for example, through the strict ministry-determined curricula mentioned above but also, implicitly, through the expressed fear of not reporting to the authorities in a satisfactory or correct way. At the same time, “the power, status, and role of academics in university governance have declined” (p. 27) and with this the trust in academics as professionals. In my interpretation, such devaluation shines through in some of the not-so-flattering descriptions of staff members above. While the patterns of institutionalized distrust described here may not exactly be the same as the ones found by Deem et al. (2007) in UK universities, they are certainly similar. In the context of this chapter, it is also evident how these patterns create obstacles to various kinds of intercultural collaborations and interactions, both intra- and inter-institutionally, since the suspicion they involve seems to restrict the capacities for action of both leadership and staff.

5 Concluding Remarks

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the leadership representatives were interviewed about the challenges *and* the benefits of intercultural collaboration. Thus, what is highlighted in this text does not cover the whole range of their experiences with or viewpoints about such endeavors. It is important for me to emphasize that the interviews also contained information about many positive aspects of intercultural collaboration for higher music education. This, however, will have to be the topic for another article. Here, the *challenges* have been explored, and the above examination shows that leaders in higher music education institutions perform complex navigations between local and global discourses. They engage in politics-related maneuvers that require them to negotiate various kinds of difference and diversity and also to tackle phenomena following from developments in higher education management, such as institutionalized distrust. This happens across institutions, countries, and continents. What should not be forgotten, however, is that institutions, when embarking on collaborative projects, bring different prerequisites for participation – culturally, status-wise, and not least economically – and these conditions will highly affect the power dynamics of such projects. If one reads between the lines of some of the quotations above, it is possible to trace some of the negotiations relating to such dynamics, perhaps especially in relation to who is in a position to have their institutional expectations met and to steer the development and outcomes of particular projects and also who has the advantage of bringing the money and thereby making decisions regarding the distribution of economic resources. Ultimately, then, intercultural collaboration in higher music education might produce inequalities just as much as it aims for equality and is thus a phenomenon pregnant with numerous ethical challenges (see Karlsen et al. 2016). The overarching challenge is, perhaps, to engage in intercultural collaboration bearing in mind that we need “[a]n ethics of difference” (Kenny and Fotaki 2015, p. 494), one that will allow us to work respectfully together in a world with inequalities for which there is no quick fix.

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