

## Assessment report – Bachelor Programme in Circus

**Programme:** Bachelor Programme in Circus, 180 credits

**Department:** Department 1; Circus Subject Area

**Assessment Group (name, title, organisational affiliation):**

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London, UK.

Johan Forslund - Assistant Professor of Acting, Stockholms konstnärliga högskola (SKH).

Tilde Björfors - Founder of Cirkus Cirkör.

Maria Arkouli - Student representative, Stockholms konstnärliga högskola (SKH)

**Chairperson of the group:** Adrian Porter

**Students/doctoral students have participated as follows:**

**Date of submission of assessment report:** 2024-04-23

## Purpose and instructions

Programme evaluations are part of the systematic quality work at Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH). The purpose of the programme evaluations is to generate regular and systematic knowledge needed to ensure and develop the quality of the SKH's educational programmes. A programme evaluation consists of four steps: start-up, self-evaluation, peer review and measures. All programmes at first-, second- and third-cycle leading to a degree shall be evaluated. Programmes are evaluated on a six-year cycle, which means that every programme is evaluated once every six years. All programmes shall be assessed against the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions' (SUHF) criteria based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). All programmes shall be assessed against all criteria.

The template for assessment report is part of the Guidelines for Programme Evaluations; its use is obligatory. The template reflects the template for self-evaluation report.

Assessment is based on the self-evaluation report and the compulsory appendices: general syllabus for third-cycle programmes or programme syllabus for first- and second-cycle programmes, and an overview of qualitative targets. If the Assessment Group has requested additional supporting documents assessment, this should be stated in the assessment report.

Based on the criteria (see Section 2.2 of the Guidelines for Programme Evaluations), the assessment report shall offer recommendations concerning strengths and areas of development, aimed at developing the programme. A recommendation should be problem-based and thus differ from more general tips and advice, which may be included in the assessment under each criterion but not in the overall assessment. The Assessment group shall clearly justify its assessment, preferably using examples. The assessment should **not** result in a grade for the entire programme.

The report should not exceed 15–25 pages including the text in the template.

Before the report is submitted to Stockholm University of the Arts, the responsible officer at the Research Office or the Educational Administration Department shall have the opportunity to correct any factual errors and misunderstandings.

The final report shall be submitted by the chairperson of the Assessment Group to Stockholm University of the Arts, i.e. the responsible officer at the Research Office or the Educational Administration Department.

## Summary of strengths and areas for improvement according to the self-evaluation

- A summary of the strengths and areas for development identified in the self-evaluation.

Assessment Group's comments.

The SKH Circus programme offers three years of study with a dual focus on the development of a high level of technical and artistic abilities as well as engendering engagement with both autonomous and collaborative research specific to artistic research, act development, creation and diffusion. It is clear that the student artistic voice is central to the programme, beginning with an appreciation of a breadth of performance techniques alongside kinaesthetic, spatial and proprioceptive awareness in the first year, moving onto the audience/artist relationship in an individual and collaborative context and in the final year a deepening of their own artistic voice. This approach is both robust and logical in the context of developing artists. However, the panel found that while focus in this area is essential and necessary, environments, tools and strategies that promote longevity and support professionalism should be looked at as areas for development. For example the need for appropriate access to physiotherapy informed by the circus arts practice has been highlighted as a significant need with the Head of the circus subject area and student feedback. The same would apply to self-care support encompassing the physical, mental and spiritual. The aims of the BA programme are structured in line with and benchmarked against other subject areas in the university which is appropriate in maintaining a consistent standard across the schools. We are confident that the programme meets the Standards and Guidelines for the Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. We can also agree that the learning outcomes align well with other schools in Europe delivering similar courses. The Circus Arts facility benefits greatly from state of the art resources in keeping with the standards found in many international companies. The quality of the programme is reflected in the destination data provided indicative of the programmes contribution not only to Sweden's but the international circus landscape. The Circus Subject Area employs 5 full time discipline teaching staff who deliver circus technique (male), 2 full time riggers who deliver, support and oversee technical aspects of module delivery, research and productions (Also male). Three more teaching staff are employed full time: one professor of circus with overall responsibility for the MA programme, one assistant professor of circus with overall responsibility for the BA programme and management of the entire circus subject area (both female), and one adjunct professor (shared with another subject area) with responsibility for independent courses in both circus and acting (also male). Teaching activities in the BA programme are possible for all three, but functionally limited due to the number of additional responsibilities. The rest of the teaching staff in the BA programme are made up of visiting practitioners closely connected to the performing arts industry as both consultants and practicing artists ensuring that the programme remains current and relevant to the profession. This mix of lecturers/teachers is enriching providing a good breadth and depth of learning environments and support. The panel did however highlight the demographic imbalance in the full time staff as a

matter of significant concern not only because of gender but also in terms of skill set being discipline technique teacher

The structure of the years training provides for a very good level of consistency in delivery of the various modules with circus technique occupying the mornings with Contextual studies throughout the afternoons. Contextual studies is delivered in blocks providing the student the possibility of a more immersive learning. The panel however recognises that for some not all modules, time between each block and possible real world implementation can be quite extended giving that student time to forget. The panel recommends that contextual studies blocks have some follow up through each year in order to create an iterative journey.

## Introduction

### About the programme

### The programme's structure and KPIs

Assessment Group's comments.

The SKH program structure covers 40 weeks of F/T study for each year and incorporates study weeks across the academic cycle. The progression from one year to the next provides a strong scaffolding culminating in their closing acts. It is noticeable that the amount of independent study in the form of personal research increases as the students moves through the 3 years fostering autonomy. The course covers many of the central elements of circus performance in line with the industry standard from rigging to management. The panel noted the elective module in year 2 as an excellent opportunity to push collaborative practice outside the sphere of circus.

Elective courses are a required part of every BA and MA programme at SKH. Several cohorts of students take the elective at the same time. Students choose from 7-15 different courses (depending on the term), and therefore attend the elective course with a mixture of students from other subject areas and, sometimes, education cycles. Students can apply for exemption from the elective if they have supplementary course credits from other education programmes, or can create an internship.

Students apply for elective courses and are placed into them based partially on their order of preference and partially with a lottery if there are more applicants than places.

The circus subject offers one elective course situated at the BA level and open to students from across SKH. It is expected that circus students will attend a course offered in another subject area, though circus students sometimes choose to stay within the circus course (or are placed there by default by not completing the application form for the other courses). Content of courses in the other subject areas is beyond the purview of the circus BA.

With regards to long term leave of absence, the school provides good systems and processes to support the student back into education. In the case of injury, illness, personal factors, the panel suggests investigating potential alternative assessment where possible and or appropriate in order to complete as much of the programme as possible within the given time frame. Alternative assessment also allows students a more inclusive access to the assessment itself.

With regards to applicants the balance in genders between applicants and those admitted remains consistent. The panel recommends more detail on the number of domestic, European and international students in order for better understanding of strategies that might support a domestic circus preparatory scheme.

While the main focus is on practice as research, it was noted in some feedback and from the program that the three years lacks some of the skills crucial to the performing arts industry but not specific to being on stage. The panel recommends that SKH investigate more points in the year to support students in further deepening their understanding of areas of professionalism such as rigging, writing copy, funding applications, managing finance, marketing and publicity. The panel recognizes that this is a significant recommendation however there is some mention of more opportunities in this area in feedback documents submitted.

## Assessment report

- 1. that the programme meets the requirements of the Swedish Higher Education Act (SFS 1992:1434) and the System of Qualifications, Annex 2 to the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100) in that the intended learning outcomes correspond to the qualitative targets and that examination is legally certain**

Report on the strengths and areas of development of the programme in relation to this criterion and recommend measures to develop the programme where appropriate.

The panel is fully satisfied that SKH meet the requirements of the Swedish Higher Education Act and the System of Qualifications, Annex 2 to the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance. All of the bachelor programme content and modules align with learning outcomes and the field of circus demonstrated by the diverse student destination data provided. Content prepares the students in a holistic manner to be performers that are able to engage fully with the process of creation from idea to analysis. This represents that backbone of the programme. The panel would highlight that while the circus subject area head mentions the lack of ‘professional or financial incentive to complete a bachelor degree’ The panel feel that the environment created at SKH is well thought out and has a structure essential to

developing the future practitioners in a safe and controlled environment. With regards to assessment, the panel are satisfied that the examinations are aligned with the content and intended learning outcomes. The pass/fail is appropriate however the panel recognises the need for students to understand where the student sits on this continuum as a way to understand their strengths and weaknesses better. Information on the modules, content and assessment are clearly provided with the practice of including the examiner through the process. This is an excellent practice. Access to alternative assessment is considered as excellent practice also, ensuring the student has every opportunity to complete. The varied feedback inputs provide students with a rich discourse among visiting teachers/examiners and peers. There is a clear coherence between the different aspects of the programmes which is borne out through support of the individual student journey with regards to discipline and the creative explorations embedded in the programme. As such the students are well prepared to develop work based on specific interests

One area of concern however is that a significant amount of feedback comes from the F/T faculty (Male and technique teachers). From a demographic perspective the panel sees this as significantly restrictive and in some ways not supporting the variety found outside this group. While the circus technique feedback is very strong, this represents a historic model of teachers/coaches and does not address the need to evolve which should serve as an example to staff and students alike.

The panel recommends that this is addressed as a mid-term objective through work with the SKH Human Resources department. We also recognise the sensitivity and potential stress around a shift such as this but urge all involved embrace this with positivity and planning.

## **2. that teaching focuses the students'/doctoral students' learning**

Report on the strengths and areas of development of the programme in relation to this criterion and recommend measures to develop the programme where appropriate.

It is clear that students remain at the centre of the learning experience and the panel recognises the progression from teacher led/student influenced to student led/teacher supported as excellent practice and appreciate the student voice throughout the three years at the school

It is clear that developing discipline technique forms the backbone and this is indicative in the way the academic schedule is constructed. It is also where synthesis should happen. The student feedback however shows somewhat of a challenge for this synthesis to happen within these classes. The reasons for this are unclear however the panel feels that this must be unpacked.

All modules with theoretical content (professionalization/production) are recognised as crucial by the panel and appreciate that students have the choice in

which area an examination may take place. This allows students to focus on their specific interests which is great. This does however give a student the opportunity to not engage in some and not all of the content. The schedule is able to give overview on these areas and specificity where needed. The panel feels that the industry more and more requires an artist to have a broader body of knowledge and more importantly practice around these theoretical content subjects. The panel recognises the challenge with how theory class aligns with students' individual value system and vision of their own work and commends SKH for adaptations made based on student needs.

The panel recommends that synthesis of the different courses in technique class is given more support and guidance.

While the panel appreciates the adaptations made to theory content, the panel asks how sustainable this is in the mid/long term? Could more support in setting out expectations help? The students often focus on the immediate or just the self which is understandable, however the purpose of your programme is to look at the industry in as broad a context as possible without losing their connection to their chosen discipline.

The panel also recommends that theoretical content is dosed throughout all three years as a way to maintain this aspect in the minds of the students. Also the idea of extending the elective courses with other arts departments outside the school and into the industry. Bringing the industry into the school is invaluable. Placing the student in the industry in a controlled manner is as valuable.

**3. that the content and form of teaching activities rests on an artistic and/or scientific foundation and proven experience**

Report on the strengths and areas of development of the programme in relation to this criterion and recommend measures to develop the programme where appropriate.

The focus on pedagogy include mental/emotional/physical aspects of discipline training is well embedded in the programme. Teaching is of the highest calibre and is reflected clearly in the student feedback. Due to the high demand and risk within this environment it is recognised that the provision of medical intervention is lacking. While SKH benefits from a national health service, this provision is not fit for purpose when we factor in the particularities of circus training.

Managing alternative courses of action for content due to injury is seen as challenging and the panel appreciate the efforts made in this area. Managing the student expectation becomes the main focus here. In this situation the students' mental health can deteriorate considerably as it is linked to physical health, the pressure of study and the need to keep up with peers.

The panel suggests that circus specific physical therapy provision is provided. The panel recognise the challenges attached to this recommendation however the educational opportunity here would be invaluable in giving the student the best possible outcome around longevity of career. The panel would see this provision as being dovetailed with teaching staff providing a three pronged approach between therapist, student and teacher/HE team.

With regards to students who are not satisfied with alternative courses of action the panel share SKH's positivity in engaging with this incredibly difficult undertaking with little appreciation. Perhaps it is at this point where mental health professionals could help the teachers to navigate this issue with students.

**4. that the programme is useful to students/doctoral students in their future careers**

Report on the strengths and areas of development of the programme in relation to this criterion and recommend measures to develop the programme where appropriate.

The programme at SKH provides an excellent foundation to enter the circus industry at many levels. In particular, the ability to enter into existing high profile shows/companies is clearly demonstrated. There is also a strong connection between the school and the development of graduate companies. It is clear that SKH serves both of these areas of the industry. The 'Short Show' project (In the second year) is a very good example of how the school challenges the student to work on all production and compositional elements of a 30min piece on limited resources. Connected to this is a residency application. This is a crucial aspect of moving into the industry and should be considered as essential.

The panel would like to make sure that the first and third year have experiences that feed directly through the challenge and thought around the 'Short Show' turning this into a development/reinforcement of these thoughts processes and ideas.

**5. that those working in the programme have relevant, up-to-date knowledge of the subject and competence in subject didactics and higher education pedagogy**

Report on the strengths and areas of development of the programme in relation to this criterion and recommend measures to develop the programme where appropriate.

The professional development framework for teachers at SKH is strong including online resource (access to FEDEC and several established research platforms) as



well opportunities for in person exchanges through conferences, festivals, seminars. The inclusion of guest teachers further deepens the possibility of exchange.

The suggestion from students on teaching exchange cannot be underestimated. More importantly the F/T teaching staff (male and circus technique focused) would benefit greatly from being disrupted. The panel feel that this disruption is fundamental not only to updating of knowledge but more importantly the expansion of knowledge outside the remit of technical skill development and the most basic artistic strategies.

The panel recommends that the credit time for teachers (in particular the F/T teachers) is dedicated to seeking knowledge outside the area of technique progression. This can be around the expanding the creative toolkit, mental/physical health support.

**6. that students/doctoral students can exert influence over the planning, implementation and follow-up of the programme**

Report on the strengths and areas of development of the programme in relation to this criterion and recommend measures to develop the programme where appropriate.

The three-year cycle from teacher led/student informed to Student led/teacher supported is indicative of a clear dedication to the journey towards autonomy. It is aligned with entry into the industry at a professional level and this system benefits greatly from student involvement in planning and implementation. As well as this, unique challenges caused by illness and or injury are similarly supported through mutual agreement despite the challenges described by the Head of the circus subject area.

Students have been able to influence how material is embodied by prompting the faculty to create the 'digest week' giving the student time to work through what is learned in previous blocks of learning.

Follow up in the form of course evaluations help SKH to reflect/review and create changes to the programme. The 360 nature of this process where teaching staff generate responses to the student course evaluations demonstrates very robust practice. That said the quality of the teacher analysis is not consistent from one course to another. The panel feels that this aspect should be given more thought and attention.

**7. that all students/doctoral students are offered an accessible, fit-for-purpose study environment**

Report on the strengths and areas of development of the programme in relation to this criterion and recommend measures to develop the programme where appropriate.

SKH provides a physical environment commensurate with the needs of the course, the industry and similar schools internationally. The equipment used for physical activities is of the highest quality and is managed by an expert team of technical staff ensuring regular inspections. Accessibility to texts (both artistic and scientific), and IT resources is excellent allowing the greatest amount of flexibility for students and teachers irrespective of geographical location. All students on campus have access to broader action groups via the student union. Access to the other arts subject areas to see other types of work is exceptional and a great asset.

A lack of robust self-care provision is a theme throughout and no less here. The student awareness and expectation are developing at pace as stated by the head of programme, and the school must make provision in order to manage and support this.

The panel recommends that the school investigates both mental and physical therapy practitioners focusing on the particularities of the needs of circus.

That the school look at the possibility of training in order to develop a small team of mental health first aiders who are able to sign post student to free at the point of use treatment whether this be part of national health provision or part of a charitable offer.

While the breadth of activities open to the student on campus is excellent, the panel wonders if more opportunities can be made externally (within the Stockholm performing arts landscape) that serve the same function. This is with the understanding that cost is possibly the primary barrier to access.

**8. that the programme is continuously monitored and developed, supported by course evaluations and, for doctoral students, individual study plans**

Report on the strengths and areas of development of the programme in relation to this criterion and recommend measures to develop the programme where appropriate.

As stated in provided documentation the course evaluations follow SKH guidelines and the panel see a very high level of respondents. This demonstrates a strong sense of agency for the student body in general. The courses are well received and

the feedback clear and concise in the course reports submitted by Head of circus subject area for course C1110G and D2093G from the 22-23 academic year. As with many programs in Europe, the more theoretical modules such as performance and interpretation at SKH suffer from clarity in setting student expectations. The panel recognise the challenge of attaching relevance and expectations to these modules and are pleased to see recognition in the planned measures. Circus discipline evaluation provides an interesting picture where technique development evaluations score highly while artistic vocabulary and ability to discuss aesthetic content are in contrast much lower. This is not reflected in the teacher analysis which was found to be odd as the scores indicate technique overshadowing the artistic rigor. The panel recommend that this is unpacked to see how artistic vision can be developed within the technique class alongside the biomechanical needs of the student with the apparatus. The panel sees this as a professional development opportunity for all technique teachers. The panel would also challenge the notion of employing a physical therapist across the different SKH subject areas (Dance, Circus, mime, theatre) as suggested. We do not believe that this would provide sufficient specificity for circus and treatment. In addition, it is our belief that this one person will be overwhelmed with demand if it is structured and offered in this way.

#### **9. Specific to third-cycle programmes:**

- **that doctoral students have access to an active research environment with adequate depth, breadth and scope in their subject**
- **that doctoral students have opportunities to collaborate on research nationally and internationally and with the surrounding community**

Report on the strengths and areas of development of the programme in relation to this criterion and recommend measures to develop the programme where appropriate.

Write text here... **NOT APPLICABLE**

#### **10. Other**

Describe, analyse and evaluate any other aspects, such as internationalisation, broadened recruitment, sustainable development and gender equality.

It is clear that these aspects such as internationalisation broadened recruitment and gender identity form a suite of issues and challenges that occupy the mind of the student. Development of the Erasmus exchange program is a great beginning in helping to develop internationalisation. That said the number of students not from Sweden far outweigh domestic students. The panel understands that the circus BA programme currently has the following Swedish students enrolled:

2 Swedish students are enrolled in the 2023-2026 cohort

5 Swedish students are enrolled in the 2021-2024 cohort (6 were selected, one took a leave of absence after the first year)

0 Swedish students completed the 2019-2022 programme (one was re-enrolled after a leave of absence, and then left studies before graduating)

While this demonstrates the reach of SKH circus subject area, it also has risk attached due to economic or political events outside the school's ability to control. The panel suggests SKH support discussions around the seeding of circus development programs in primary/secondary/undergraduate educational in Sweden. The panel recognises the huge challenge attached to this and recommend that this becomes a long term plan

The panel recognises a somewhat larger issue around the gender imbalance within the circus subject area staff and how this is being or could be perceived by students. As cultural sensitivities continue in the current direction of travel, this will become an increased burden to the circus subject area and must be addressed with care. The panel is aware of the complexities around employment law, however the importance of addressing this cannot be underestimated. The panel recommends that both gender and skill-set is investigated to address the hegemony of male circus technique teachers in order to move towards diversity in gender as well as including other equally important aspects of circus practice such as dramaturgy or circus theory within the core team.

### **11. Any other comment from the Assessment Group**

For future programme evaluations the panel recommends:

1. An in person visit allowing the panel to have face to face discussions with selected students in each year.
2. Similarly to point 1, ability to meet with full time staff and a selection of invited practitioners.

### **12. Summative assessment**

The Assessment Group shall clearly and concisely summarise its previous considerations and positions, as well as its previous recommendations. The summary assessment should also provide feedback on good practice and areas for development.

The BA circus programme provides students with 3 years of education that meets both the Swedish Education Quality standards as well as the level expected at entrance to the industry as a performer. It is clear that practice as research is the anchor on which the programme is built. The school provides state of the art premises, equipment and resources that give the students the necessary support in order to succeed in the programme. The quality of teaching is excellent and for the most part benefits from a considerable diversity of teachers for both discipline, performance and theoretical classes. This is somewhat tempered however by the lack of diversity within the core staff.

The course is built with a clear level of coherence with strong progressions from one year to the next ensuring that the student takes an increasing responsibility for their creative voice and autonomy around pedagogical development. The structure of delivery allows for deep learning in particular with the practice as research elements.

Mechanisms for evaluation/reflection and change are many and robust giving the student ample ability to question//challenge and provide feedback on the course and its provision.

Student support both mental and physical is a clear challenge and concern at the school and while much is done to support the students through many parts of the course, a call for registered professionals is clear.

Along with the positive work and impact SKH is having on the students in the circus subject area, there are two main areas in need of attention and development.

- A review of the full time faculty and the development of a plan to introduce diversity into this area of the school either in terms of gender make up and or skill set through targeted professional development. The panel fully understands the significant challenges with this recommendation so believe that this is a longer term plan.
- The panel believes that SKH students would benefit greatly from the provision of physical therapy and mental health services that focus on the specific needs of students in circus. A shared resource with the other performing arts subject areas is one idea however the panel do not believe that this will be sufficient given the nature of circus. This applies especially to physical therapy.

Secondary recommendations specific to the student learning experiences are:

- Creation of further enrichment opportunities in which Students can experience working in the industry.
- Investigate and identify more moments in the curriculum in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year leading up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year where the focus is on business, production, management, marketing and publicity. This the panel feels is critical in

leaving the programme with autonomy in creativity as well as from the business aspect.

## Appendices

The Assessment Group has received the following compulsory appendices to the self-evaluation report:

- *Programme syllabus (first- and second-cycle)*
- *Overview of qualitative targets.*

List any other documents on which the assessment is based.

- *SKH Circus BA Programme Destination Data*
- *Class of 2020 BA Programme Evaluation*
- *Course report for circus discipline 2b 15hp*
- *Course report for circus performance and interpretation 2b*
- *Course syllabus (independent project)*
- *Course syllabus (Circus performance 1A)*
- *Course syllabus (Circus discipline 1A)*
- *Course syllabus Circus discipline 2b)*
- *Course syllabus (Circus discipline 3b*
- *BA schedule overview (Excel document)*