

Conservatoire for Dance and Drama

Institutional audit

JUNE 2010

Annex to the report

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Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama (the Conservatoire) from 7-11 June 2010 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of this audit was to provide public information on the Conservatoire's discharge of its responsibilities in relation to the quality of the learning opportunities available to students of the Conservatoire, and to the academic standards of their awards.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

The Conservatoire for Dance and Drama is unusual as a higher education institution in that it is not a higher education provider and does not have degree-awarding powers. It is composed of eight affiliate schools, whose higher education provision leads to awards of their respective validating universities. The Conservatoire acts as an interface between its affiliate schools and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), applying for and receiving funding, and distributing it to the individual affiliate schools. As such, its remit is to ensure that the quality of education of funded students at the affiliate schools is of an appropriate standard for the award, as adjudged by the validating university and the Conservatoire itself, both of whose processes are subject to audit by QAA.

Within the scope of the remit of the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama, the audit team's view, as a result of its investigations, is that:

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards to be conferred by the validating universities
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in its affiliate schools.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

In the audit team's view, the Conservatoire, having developed its academic quality assurance framework, is well placed to focus on enhancement as it introduces its latest strategy for learning, teaching and assessment covering the next three years. This will provide the opportunity for the Conservatoire to clarify its thinking and strengthen some of its mechanisms in the area of teaching quality enhancement.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

Admissions to research programmes were suspended in 2008, but the audit team came to the view that the run-out arrangements for postgraduate research students were being handled sensitively and well.

Published information

In the audit team's view, the Conservatoire has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information published by itself or its affiliates about the quality of educational provision and the standards of awards. It satisfies the necessary requirements for public information on the Unistats website.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the formulation of level descriptors as a tool for curriculum development (paragraph 17)
- the encouragement given to staff and students to engage with professional practice (paragraph 50)
- the effectiveness of support arrangements for disabled students (paragraph 64).

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the Conservatoire consider further action in some areas.

The audit team recommends that it is advisable for the Conservatoire:

- to detail more clearly in its policies and procedures the responsibilities for quality and standards of each of the parties in the tripartite arrangement (paragraph 14)
- to secure an effective and consistent level of engagement with annual programme monitoring across its affiliates (paragraph 22).

The audit team recommends that it is desirable for the Conservatoire:

- to clarify the criteria for screening nominations of external examiners (paragraph 25)
- to improve the analysis and use of management information to ensure that all important issues can be identified and acted upon (paragraph 36)
- to implement measures to improve the effectiveness of student representation and participation on Conservatoire committees (paragraph 48)
- to complete and implement the research and knowledge transfer strategy with a view to strengthening the links between teaching and staff research, scholarship and professional practice (paragraph 51)
- to strengthen mechanisms for identifying good practice that is transferable across disciplines and affiliate schools (paragraph 73).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 The Conservatoire for Dance and Drama (the Conservatoire), established as a higher education institution in 2001, is composed of eight affiliate schools (affiliates):

- Bristol Old Vic Theatre School
- Central School of Ballet
- Circus Space
- London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA)
- London Contemporary Dance School
- Northern School of Contemporary Dance
- Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance
- Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA).

2 Through their relationship with the Conservatoire, the affiliates receive public funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for programmes of higher education and training in dance, drama and circus arts. While retaining their own distinct identities, the affiliates have shared values. Collaboration among affiliates allows their collective thinking to be directed to the benefit of students, as well as providing opportunities for joint artistic enterprise.

3 Each affiliate has entered into a validation arrangement with a university, as neither the Conservatoire nor the affiliates have powers to award degrees. Most affiliates offer awards of the University of Kent, the exceptions being the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, which offers awards of the University of the West of England, and RADA, which offers awards of King's College London. Recent programme development has been focused on Foundation Degrees and professional postgraduate awards.

4 In 2009-10 there were 1,127 students registered with the Conservatoire and 301 teaching staff employed by the affiliates; the student and staff numbers are analysed below. In addition, 12 staff are employed by the Conservatoire to provide central administrative support.

Affiliate	Students	FT staff	PT staff	Total staff
Bristol Old Vic Theatre School	170	21	-	21
Central School of Ballet	106	5	6	11
Circus Space	59	4	75	79
London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art	170	8	34	42
London Contemporary Dance School	185	12	28	40
Northern School of Contemporary Dance	166	11	6	17
Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance	91	8	-	8
Royal Academy of Dramatic Art	180	17	66	83
Total	1,127	86	215	301

(Note: the figures for part-time staff exclude freelance and occasional visiting staff)

5 The Conservatoire's mission statement is: 'to advance the art forms of dance, drama and circus arts by preparing students for sustainable careers as artists and to be leaders in their art forms; it aims to attract the most talented students, who are selected for training

irrespective of background, and to sustain its affiliate schools' excellence in leadership in training and research'.

The information base for the audit

6 The Conservatoire provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper, together with supporting documentation to illustrate its approach to managing the quality and standards of educational provision by affiliates. The team also had access to information relating to the two sampling trails that it selected, one in dance, the other in drama.

7 The students provided a written submission comprising separate reports from student representatives at each affiliate; these were collated and presented with a concise overview by student representatives from the Northern School of Contemporary Dance. The written submission sets out the students' views on the utility and accuracy of student information, the students' experience of assessment, their experience as learners, and the effectiveness of student feedback and representation systems. It draws on the results of the most recent National Student Survey.

8 In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the previous QAA Institutional audit report (June 2005)
- the QAA mid-cycle follow-up report on the Institutional audit (November 2007)
- accreditation reports produced by the National Council for Drama Training
- the Conservatoire's internal documents as requested by the audit team
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

Developments since the mid-cycle follow-up of the last audit

9 QAA's last Institutional audit of the Conservatoire, in June 2005, concluded that it was moving in an appropriate manner to fulfil its particular responsibilities for the management of the quality and standards of the award programmes of its affiliates. The audit recommendations were subject to a mid-cycle follow up by QAA in November 2007. Based on documentation provided by the Conservatoire, this concluded that the Conservatoire had made good progress in addressing the recommendations. It also identified the following as being of particular interest for the present audit:

- mechanisms for balancing the interests of the Conservatoire as a whole with those of its affiliates
- effectiveness of the central monitoring role
- extent of evidence-based evaluation by affiliates
- development of integrated learning and teaching strategies for the Conservatoire and its affiliates
- staff development strategy, including its linkage with other relevant strategies
- development of the common validation process.

10 The audit team paid attention to each of the above areas, and relevant comments are included in the report. However, in broad terms, the Conservatoire is continuing to develop and implement its quality assurance framework, comprising policies and processes that sit alongside those of the affiliates and validating universities. It has introduced procedural guidance for affiliates on generic topics and adopted standard templates to support its central monitoring role. The team recognises the benefits of these developments, but considered that the next step was to promote more consistent engagement with common approaches by affiliates to improve both the effectiveness of monitoring (see paragraphs 22 and 36, below) and the take up of best practice (see paragraph 73, below).

Institutional framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

11 The Conservatoire sees its responsibilities for academic standards and the quality of educational provision in terms of establishing benchmarks and monitoring/reviewing programme delivery by affiliates against those benchmarks. It seeks to discharge these responsibilities through a structure of committees composed of members drawn from the staff of the affiliates together with representatives of the student body. The most senior of these committees is the Academic Board, which oversees the Conservatoire's academic strategy. The principal strategy document (Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, 2006-9) incorporates action plans for each year covered by the strategy. There is a revised strategy for 2010-13 currently under preparation, of which the audit team was able to see a draft. The terms of reference of committees and guidance for quality assurance processes are contained in the quality handbook, which was approved in October 2009, and whose upkeep is the responsibility of the Academic Registrar. It is available to staff in affiliates as hardcopy, as well as electronically on the staff area of the Conservatoire website.

12 Implementing procedures for monitoring academic quality and standards is the responsibility of the Quality Assurance Committee, while the Joint Artistic Committee has specific responsibility for giving planning approval for new programme proposals coming from the affiliates. The Learning and Teaching Committee leads on the development of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, monitoring its implementation through consideration of annual reports prepared by the affiliates (see paragraphs 19 and 43, below); it is aided by two sub-committees dealing respectively with learning resources and student support. There is substantial cross-membership of all of these committees, facilitating managerial coherence. In addition, there is a senior executive management group (the Principals' Management Group), which deals with the planning and allocation of student numbers between the respective affiliates.

13 The resourcing, management and delivery of programmes is the responsibility of the affiliates. They are also responsible for having in place necessary quality assurance systems, working with their validating university. There is a standard operating agreement between each affiliate and the Conservatoire, which specifies these responsibilities and others, together with the responsibilities of the Conservatoire itself. The audit team considered these operating agreements to be a sound basis for arrangements between affiliates and the Conservatoire. The team found some errors of fact in the documents it saw, but noted that the Conservatoire was in the process of reviewing all the current agreements and that this was due to be completed by October 2010. At present, there are no plans to extend the number of affiliates, the last (Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance) having been admitted in 2005.

14 The audit team could see two distinct, though related, aspects of the responsibilities for academic standards and quality. First, each validating university, in its capacity as an awarding institution, has a clear and formal responsibility for the management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the experience of students on programmes leading to those awards. Second, the Conservatoire, as well as having financial accountability, has responsibilities for quality assurance in its capacity as a publicly funded higher education institution. However, the team was of the view that the Conservatoire, in presenting its own role and responsibilities, was giving insufficient prominence to the role and responsibilities of the validating university. At times, the result of this has been to suggest that the Conservatoire is actually taking on responsibilities for academic standards which are the remit of the validating university and which have not been delegated. The Conservatoire has also clearly stated its intention (in the quality handbook) that the same level of cooperation achieved with one of the validating universities will be achieved with the other two; however, the team found no evidence that the necessary discussions were being

progressed. Although there is acknowledgement in the quality handbook of the role of the validating university, the way a quality assurance procedure would actually work in the context of the tripartite arrangement is not always obvious, particularly when it comes down to who does what by when. The team considers it advisable for the Conservatoire to detail more clearly in its policies and procedures the responsibilities for quality and standards of each of the parties in the tripartite arrangement.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

15 The Conservatoire has a clear role (acknowledged by its affiliates) in developing academic strategy and overseeing the portfolio of the higher education programmes offered by the affiliates. The standards of awards are established through a programme approval process which also deals with the learning opportunities for students (see paragraph 42, below). The first stage is to obtain planning approval for a proposal from the Conservatoire through its Joint Artistic Committee, whose scrutiny extends beyond forecast student numbers to whether the programme's aims, outcomes and resources are appropriate to the award and whether offering such a programme accords with the Conservatoire's academic strategy. Successful proposals are forwarded to the validating university for confirmation of planning approval. This gives the go ahead for development of the programme by the affiliate concerned and entry to the validation process.

16 Two programmes have obtained planning approval from the Conservatoire since the introduction of the current process in 2008-9, and the audit team noted that both had been approved by Chair's action. The team acknowledges that one programme had been considered at an earlier meeting of the Joint Artistic Committee and referred back to the affiliate for further work, and noted the Conservatoire's intention to schedule additional committee meetings, as necessary, so that approval decisions would be taken by the full committee, rather than resorting to Chair's action.

17 A recent development relating to programme design has been the implementation by the Conservatoire of generic level descriptors for use by affiliates in framing learning outcomes at the appropriate academic level. The approach taken was to consider how students in a conservatoire setting would demonstrate the attributes, knowledge and skills associated with qualifications at different levels on *The framework for higher education qualifications*, and to express these in terms more relevant to programmes offering artistic development and professional training (see paragraph 28, below). The Conservatoire level descriptors are now used as reference points by validation panels for programmes leading to University of Kent awards. The audit team identifies as a feature of good practice the formulation of level descriptors as a tool for curriculum development.

18 Another recent development has been the implementation of a 'conjoint' validation process with the University of Kent, under which the Conservatoire chairs the validation panel as well as having panel membership from outside the affiliate proposing the programme. External panel members are approved against both Conservatoire and University of Kent criteria from nominations made by the affiliate proposing the programme. A suite of templates has been designed by the Conservatoire to guide the affiliate in preparing its validation documentation (programme specification plus supporting information). The validation panel considers the proposal against a set of threshold criteria developed by the Conservatoire. The audit team noted that the first two programmes to go through the conjoint process, in early 2010, had been successfully validated. The team understood that no formal agreement had been entered into between the Conservatoire and the University of Kent about the terms or operational boundaries of the conjoint validation

process and took the view that such an agreement could be helpful in guiding the parties, particularly in the event of any difficulties in the relations between them. The team was also aware that the arrangements for conjoint validation did not apply to the other two validating universities, and saw this as an important next step towards consolidating the Conservatoire's position in the programme approval process.

19 Annual monitoring, overseen by the Learning and Teaching Committee, is one of the longer-established of the Conservatoire's quality assurance procedures. The current procedure (the result of gradual refinement since 2005) seeks to satisfy the requirements of the affiliates, the Conservatoire, and the validating universities through the preparation of a common report and action plan covering either a single programme or several cognate programmes. In order to encourage parity between affiliates in programme monitoring, the process now uses templates, checklists, guidelines and defined datasets, and requires common inputs, including external examiner reports. The reporting cycle is organised to fit with the scheduled meetings of the various committees involved.

20 Reports and action plans prepared by affiliates are first considered by their respective academic boards, and then by the Conservatoire's Learning and Teaching Committee on the basis of feedback from dedicated readers, who flag issues arising from the reports and comment on the process itself. An overview of the process is taken by the Academic Board, which considers a commentary (prepared by the Academic Registrar) highlighting themes, issues and best practice, suggesting action points and appending the action plans of individual affiliates. At a subsequent meeting (three months later) the Academic Board receives updates on these actions plans, which are also the subject of wider discussion at both the Quality Assurance Committee and the Learning and Teaching Committee.

21 A particular issue faced by the Conservatoire has been how to avoid duplication and overlap between annual programme monitoring reports and the annual reports produced by affiliates at institutional level. The latter cover their artistic work more broadly, but also touch on aspects relevant to programme delivery. The issue is being tackled from two angles: first by allowing the institutional report to be presented as a discrete section of the programme monitoring report (particularly suitable for smaller affiliates with fewer programmes), and second through ensuring that action plans distinguish the responsibility level for particular actions (programme, affiliate, Conservatoire or validating university).

22 The audit team considered the annual programme monitoring procedure to be clearly specified in the quality handbook. However, from a review of sample reports and committee minutes, the team found that the use of data to inform and guide action planning was variable and often limited (see paragraph 35 below). In general, the team considered that action planning would benefit from clearer allocation of responsibility for actions agreed, a realistic timeline for completion of actions and a more robust follow-up system. There was evidence of careful attention being paid to monitoring reports and comments on the process by the Learning and Teaching Committee, but the evidence of consistent careful attention by affiliates was much less clear, with some affiliate academic boards simply noting the submission of a report to the Conservatoire without any indication of debate. It was also difficult to gauge the extent to which action agreed by the Conservatoire Academic Board, ensuing from the Academic Registrar's commentary, was being implemented across affiliates, since action points were often carried forward or repeated in a similar vein the following year. The team considers it advisable for the Conservatoire to secure more effective and consistent engagement with annual programme monitoring across its affiliates.

23 Hitherto, the Conservatoire has had no direct involvement in periodic review, although it has provided support to affiliates in preparing for review by their validating universities; it also routinely receives review reports. The Conservatoire is developing a

variant of the conjoint validation procedure, which would cover both periodic review and programme revalidation.

External examiners

24 Responsibility for the appointment of external examiners and for dealing with their reports rests with the validating universities that make the awards. However, the Conservatoire supports its affiliates to meet the requirements for external examining as laid down by their respective validating universities, and has developed procedures for nominating external examiners, conducting assessment boards and dealing with external examiner reports - all areas where the affiliates have a direct involvement.

25 The Conservatoire screens external examiner nominations through its Quality Assurance Committee before submitting them to the validating university for approval. The process is transparent, with the suitability of candidates being assessed against generic appointment criteria published in the quality handbook. Staff who met the audit team admitted that they were still deliberating on the acceptable limits for the independence of external examiners being used by affiliates, since in the past an external examiner, on completing a term at one affiliate and validating university, had been appointed at another affiliate with a different validating university. The team noted that the Conservatoire had the means to keep in check the 'recycling' of external examiners, as it monitored both nominations and appointments (via a standing item at the Academic Board). The Conservatoire is also concerned to maintain a balance between the academic and professional expertise of the pool of external examiners working across affiliates. However, there were cases where an industry professional had been appointed as the sole external examiner, leading the team to question whether this arrangement would necessarily satisfy the Conservatoire's criterion for providing 'an informed view on UK higher education standards'. The team considers it desirable for the Conservatoire to clarify the criteria for screening nominations of external examiners.

26 In addition to any induction provided by the validating universities, external examiners are briefed by the affiliates delivering the programmes. The Conservatoire specifies minimum requirements for the provision of information to external examiners, but in practice it takes a variety of forms. The audit team saw examples ranging from a helpful and informative bespoke handbook produced by an affiliate, to an assortment of extant materials. The team viewed this disparity as a missed opportunity for adopting existing good practice more widely across affiliates, lending support to a recommendation in this area (see paragraph 73, below).

27 Copies of external examiner reports are sent by the validating university to the principal of the relevant affiliate, who ensures that an appropriate response is made to the external examiner, with a copy sent to the validating university and to the Conservatoire. An annual overview of external examiner reports (prepared by the Assistant Registrar) is considered by the Academic Board to see that assessment is being carried out fairly and in accordance with the academic regulations of the validating university. This highlights concerns and good practice identified by external examiners and makes recommendations for the Conservatoire and specific affiliates to attend to in the year ahead; it also tracks action from year to year. The audit team appreciated the difficulties in dealing with external examiner reports produced to different formats and completed to varying levels of detail, but concluded that through good use of these reports the Conservatoire was making an effective contribution to maintaining academic standards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

28 As mentioned above (see paragraph 17), the Conservatoire used *The framework for higher education qualifications* as the starting point for its own level descriptors, which were developed by a working group (reporting to the Learning and Teaching Committee) comprising staff from across the affiliates. Part of the impetus for this task was the fact that the most relevant subject benchmark statement, *Dance, Drama and Performance* (QAA, 2007), is expressed in general terms that are not specific enough to the requirements of professional training. In the longer term, the Conservatoire hopes that its level descriptors will gain broad acceptance as the national standard for conservatoire training.

29 All programmes across the affiliates have programme specifications, using templates from their respective validating universities; however, the Conservatoire has recently produced a template of its own, which it intends to introduce as a standard, subject to obtaining necessary agreements. Acting and stage management programmes at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, LAMDA and RADA are accredited by the National Council for Drama Training, thus providing external recognition of professional standards.

30 In developing its quality assurance procedures the Conservatoire has been concerned to ensure their consistency with the QAA *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*), and this is explicitly stated in the quality handbook. Ensuring continued alignment between Conservatoire procedures and the *Code of practice* is the remit of the Quality Assurance Committee, although in practice responsibility has been spread more widely across different committees (see paragraph 40, below).

Assessment policies and regulations

31 Students are assessed constantly (either formatively or summatively) throughout their programme, and detailed information about the methods of summative assessment and about grading criteria are published in programme handbooks. The affiliates operate under the academic regulations of their validating universities, and the dominant relationship as far as assessment is concerned is between these two parties. This is underlined by the fact that the Conservatoire is not named on either the award certificates or the student transcripts issued by the validating universities.

32 It appeared to the audit team that the Conservatoire had not yet found its niche with regard to assessment policy and regulation; for example, it produces an annual digest of qualifications awarded as one mechanism for monitoring assessment outcomes (see paragraph 36, below), but this attracted only limited discussion, as evidenced by minutes of the Academic Board. Indeed, the team could not readily see how this digest would be useful in its present form, or how it related to the overviews on annual programme monitoring and external examining, which deal more broadly with assessment outcomes.

33 The audit team noted that the Conservatoire, through a working group of the Learning and Teaching Committee, had supported the affiliates in drafting their individual learning, teaching and assessment strategies, including threshold standards for assessment practice. While these are a relatively recent development, the team could see their potential for bringing greater transparency and consistency to the assessment process and that they were helpful to the Conservatoire in defining its contribution to policy making on assessment.

Management information - statistics

34 The Conservatoire supplies the affiliates with datasets for use in annual programme monitoring. These cover recruitment, retention, progression, award, and employment destination, with student numbers classified according to gender, disability, ethnicity and fees status (home or overseas). As stated in the Briefing Paper, these datasets enable comparisons to be made between programmes and between programme levels, including year-on-year comparisons and comparisons between affiliates.

35 The Conservatoire has identified, through its routine evaluation of the annual programme monitoring process, that affiliates vary in the quality of their evaluation of data, but recognised that in reaching the current position there had been a general improvement over the past few years. However, the audit team, on the basis of its own review of sample documentation relating to annual programme monitoring, found very little evidence that programme teams or affiliate academic boards were making the sorts of comparisons claimed in the Briefing Paper. Mostly they appeared to be commenting on or explaining individual statistics.

36 As mentioned above (see paragraph 32), the Conservatoire compiles an annual digest of award data, which also includes comparative data on degree classification for a small number of institutions deemed to be similar. The audit team noted that the Conservatoire intended to add more comparator institutions to create a 'basket' for benchmarking purposes, but, while this would be an improvement, it would not fully compensate for the limitations of the digest as a basis for comprehensive analysis and interpretation of progression, retention and award statistics. The team considers it desirable for the Conservatoire to improve the analysis and use of management information to ensure that all important issues can be identified and acted upon.

Summary

37 Within the scope of the remit of the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama, the audit team's view, as a result of its investigations, is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards to be conferred by the validating universities.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

38 As outlined above (see paragraphs 28-30), in developing its procedures, the Conservatoire seeks to verify their alignment with the Academic Infrastructure. The relevant qualification and subject benchmark statements, and now the Conservatoire level descriptors (see paragraph 17, above), are used in the design or review of programmes, in the context of learning opportunities, as well as the standards of awards. Given the nature of the programmes, interaction with industry professionals is a particularly prominent feature of the student experience (see paragraph 50, below). This is evident in programme specifications and annual programme monitoring reports, which, where appropriate, give consideration to the requirements of the professional body and the way these are being met.

39 The Conservatoire has referenced the QAA *Code of practice* in recent procedural guidance, such as that covering placement learning (see paragraph 53, below) and admissions policy (see paragraph 60, below). Affiliates' support arrangements for disabled

students, an area where the Conservatoire has been particularly proactive (see paragraph 64, below), are currently in the process of being checked against the 2010 revision of the *Code of practice*. In addition to these developments, the audit team recognised that the validating universities, through their collaborative arrangements with individual affiliates, were also instrumental in assuring consistency of practice with the *Code of practice*.

40 The Conservatoire sees itself as well positioned to oversee the alignment of policies and procedures with the *Code of practice* across affiliates. However, it has spread responsibility for this work across a wide range of different committees, rather than concentrating it in the Quality Assurance Committee within whose remit the work falls. The audit team was of the view that a more systematic approach to routine checking would be needed before the Conservatoire could fully satisfy itself that policies and procedures were being implemented and developed in step with the *Code of practice* at all eight affiliates.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

41 The processes of programme approval, monitoring and review are described above (see paragraphs 15-23). This section highlights points of particular relevance to the learning opportunities of students (teaching, learning resources and student support).

42 Consideration of student numbers, staffing and learning resources is an important part of the approval of new programmes. The planning approval process looks in detail at any additional resources needed. The criteria for validation used by the panel cover the appropriateness of resource provision, including staffing (numbers and expertise); specialist facilities (accommodation and equipment); and student support arrangements, with emphasis given to provision for disabled students. As indicated by the validation reports, the two conjoint validations conducted to date were suitably probing about the impact on the student experience of forecast student numbers in relation to resources provision, and in particular about any perceived overreliance on practitioners employed on a visiting teacher basis.

43 Examples of annual programme monitoring reports seen by the audit team contained effective reviews of resources and of learning opportunities more broadly. The associated action plans recommended improvements, drawing on feedback from students, staff and external examiners. The commentary on annual monitoring prepared at Conservatoire level also dealt extensively with learning opportunities, identifying good practice from particular affiliates and translating it into action that might be commonly adopted. However, as was the case with issues related to standards (see paragraph 22, above), the team could not readily see how 'suggested' actions were being turned into completed actions at affiliate level.

Management information - feedback from students

44 A variety of means is used to gather feedback at programme level, but the most common of these are module feedback questionnaires, programme/year surveys and student-staff meetings. Students are also members of affiliate academic boards, although at some affiliates their attendance at meetings is sporadic. In addition, given the high teaching contact hours, students have many informal opportunities for direct communication with staff at all levels.

45 Student feedback is an input to annual programme monitoring and the Conservatoire's guidelines for preparing monitoring reports state that affiliates should specify the sources of the feedback they use. The audit team noted that one affiliate had begun to organise the agenda for its student-staff meetings under thematic headings consistent with those required for annual programme monitoring reports, rather than taking feedback from each year representative in turn. The team found that this approach encouraged more

focused feedback on quality assurance (as opposed to 'domestic') issues. In addition, the Conservatoire has suggested that National Student Survey results could usefully be discussed at student-staff meetings, while acknowledging that results might be skewed by the small number of respondents, particularly at programme level.

46 The comments from students, both in their written submission and in meetings with the audit team, were mostly positive about mechanisms for student feedback and representation at affiliate level. The team gained the impression that, in general, students felt able to express their views with confidence that the issues they raised would be dealt with.

Role of students in quality assurance

47 Students are included in the membership of all Conservatoire academic committees so that there can be representation from the three disciplines of dance, drama and circus arts. However, securing student attendance at meetings remains a challenge for the Conservatoire, particularly given the intensity of student timetables and the geographical spread of affiliates. The audit team noted that there had not been any student representation at the Joint Artistic Committee, the Learning and Teaching Committee or the Quality Assurance Committee over the past two years. The Conservatoire is well aware of the issue and has recently begun exploring possible remedies, including extending the term of office for student members on committees and better use of electronic communication. It also intends to develop training for student representatives based on best practice among affiliates that already deliver it.

48 A related issue identified by the audit team in its discussions with students is that they did not have a clear understanding of how the Conservatoire and the work of its committees might have a bearing on the student experience. The team recognised that this was something that the training for student representatives would address, and also that the newly formed student support committee held out the prospect of dealing with matters of greater student interest. Nevertheless, the team considers it desirable for the Conservatoire to implement measures to improve the effectiveness of student representation and participation on its committees.

49 The Conservatoire expects that students should be involved in quality assurance through the annual programme monitoring process, and it was collecting information from affiliates about the extent of their involvement. The audit team noted that, in some cases, monitoring reports had not formally been considered by students through their representatives at either student-staff committees or affiliate academic boards, lending support to the team's earlier recommendation concerning the need for more consistent engagement by affiliates with the annual programme monitoring process (see paragraph 22). Another repercussion of this is that student representatives do not consistently see external examiner reports, which are appended to the monitoring reports, and the team encourages the Conservatoire to address this point.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

50 At the level of the affiliates, there is clear recognition of the need to ensure that teaching is informed by professional practice and by interaction and engagement with the creative industries. This is strongly reflected in the learning, teaching and assessment strategies of each of the affiliates (which map onto the institutional strategy to varying degrees). Through its human resources strategy, the Conservatoire prioritises the development of schemes that enable staff, over the long term, to renew industry experience, create new work and keep abreast of innovations in their field (see paragraph 66, below).

In addition, the affiliates employ a wide range of visiting professionals to work with students in a variety of ways, and the students who met the audit team reported favourably on the way that this form of engagement with professional practice both directly informs and enhances their learning experience. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the encouragement given to staff and students to engage with professional practice.

51 In its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, the Conservatoire recognises that maintaining excellence in teaching depends also on enhancing its research culture, and the strategy's related action plan identifies the need to investigate the meaning of research in the context of a conservatoire environment. The intention is to develop a formal vocational/professional research policy, to be combined with knowledge transfer into a single strategy document. However, the Conservatoire has not yet agreed a clear set of definitions of what constitutes research, knowledge transfer or scholarship for the institution. This issue has been under discussion for some time, principally through the Learning and Teaching Committee, and it seemed to the audit team that only slow progress was being made. Therefore, it was not apparent to the team how the Conservatoire is able to judge the extent to which research and knowledge transfer activity informs students' learning opportunities or supports their learning outcomes (as defined by the level descriptors). Moreover, since the incorporation of research into teaching is planned to be a key feature for enhancement of the student learning experience over the life of the next learning, teaching and assessment strategy (see paragraph 71, below), the team considers it desirable for the Conservatoire to complete and implement the research and knowledge transfer strategy with a view to strengthening the links between teaching and staff research, scholarship and professional practice.

Other modes of study (including placement learning)

52 The only programmes that incorporate a work placement are the technical programmes at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and RADA, whose students complete a period of secondment with a professional company. The placement is not an assessed component of these programmes, although a written report on the student is required from the placement provider to ensure students' attendance and participation, as well as to provide them with feedback on their performance.

53 The Conservatoire has produced a template for use by affiliates in preparing placement handbooks. This covers the life cycle of a placement from setting up the arrangement with the placement provider to evaluating the student experience, and constitutes a checklist rather than detailed procedural guidance. The audit team regarded the template as a useful step towards expanding the current information for students to include more advice on how to deal with problems should they arise.

54 The provision of work placements is monitored through the annual programme monitoring process, which has identified the need for affiliates to strengthen their evaluation of placement learning, as distinct from concentrating on specific advantages or difficulties encountered. The students who met the audit team, commenting on their own experience of secondment, found it valuable for developing contacts in the industry as much as for giving them a taster of 'real' work. Other students gave examples of how they derived work experience (in the later stages of their programmes) by forming touring companies and staging performances in external venues.

Resources for learning

55 The criteria for membership of the Conservatoire (and for receipt of premium funding from HEFCE) also serve as a specification of students' entitlements for timetabled teaching and professional supervision, including supervision and support for performance or technical

activities. In addition, they cover class sizes, space norms and the provision of specialist facilities that match professional standards.

56 The allocation of student numbers to each affiliate is reviewed annually by the Conservatoire through its executive structures and forms the basis for the allocation of funding. The Conservatoire has no direct role in deciding priorities for the provision of learning resources at affiliates, although it has an indirect influence through its role in programme approval and annual monitoring.

57 In order to optimise the use of learning resources across affiliates, the Conservatoire has recently established a Learning Resources Sub-Committee (reporting to the Learning and Teaching Committee). This brings together library and other learning resources staff from the affiliates to facilitate shared developments and seek ways of avoiding unnecessary duplication.

58 The student written submission drew attention to certain shortcomings in the facilities available to students, while students meeting the audit team clarified that these were often more associated with logistical issues and timetabling than the quality of the facilities themselves. The team, noting the limited references to student feedback on learning resources in some affiliates' annual programme monitoring reports, was uncertain as to how assiduously such feedback was being collected or utilised.

Admissions policy

59 Responsibility for student admissions lies with the affiliates; however, as a condition of membership of the Conservatoire, affiliates must operate admissions procedures that distinguish candidates with the greatest talent and potential to train, irrespective of background. In order to meet the requirements of the validating universities, admissions decisions must also be taken within the parameters of the programme specification and, if applicable, regulations governing English language proficiency. At all affiliates the selection process involves the audition and interview of all eligible candidates.

60 The affiliates publish details of their respective admissions processes, and the Conservatoire is currently drafting guidance on the basic requirements for admissions policy, in terms of consistency, professionalism and fairness, to be used by the affiliates in further developing their own policies. The audit team understood that the guidance would draw on the Conservatoire's self-assessment of its strategy for widening participation and supporting diversity, as submitted to HEFCE in June 2009.

61 The Conservatoire keeps a record of applications, which shows that across affiliates there has been a 60 per cent increase (from 7,305 to 11,723) over the last five years, with acting courses attracting the highest demand. It routinely publishes data on applications and admissions, while analysis of the entry profile by affiliate is one of the datasets available for use in annual programme monitoring.

Student support

62 Primary responsibility for student support lies with the affiliates. Support arrangements take into account the needs of different student groups, and there are special provisions made for students with disabilities or particular learning needs. Given the nature of conservatoire training, the support extends to provision of physiotherapists, nutritionists, psychologists, and others catering for the physical and mental demands of the programmes. The audit team looked at programme handbooks and found that student entitlements to support were clearly stated. It was evident to the team from the

student written submission and from discussions with students that they appreciated the support available and considered it to be of high quality.

63 The operating agreement between each of the affiliates and the Conservatoire states the responsibility of the affiliate to have appropriate arrangements for student support and the Conservatoire's responsibility to require the affiliate to have suitable procedures in place. The Conservatoire is able to oversee the provision of student support by affiliates through its annual programme monitoring process. The threshold criteria for validation recently developed by the Conservatoire specify minimum expectations for student support.

64 The student support provided by the affiliates is augmented by the Conservatoire through the work of the Equality and Diversity Manager and through the recent establishment of a Student Support Sub-Committee (reporting to the Learning and Teaching Committee), whose remit is to disseminate best practice and, wherever possible, to share student support services more effectively. A working group led by the Equality and Diversity Manager has been instrumental in developing the disability equality scheme and in preparing and implementing a detailed action plan to enhance available support. The audit team identifies as a feature of good practice the effectiveness of support arrangements for disabled students.

Staff support (including staff development)

65 The criteria for membership of the Conservatoire, together with the HEFCE criteria for premium funding, specify expectations for the professional/artistic and educational currency of teaching staff delivering higher education programmes at the affiliates. The operating agreements between the Conservatoire and the affiliates confirm that the policies and procedures for appointments, grading, promotion, remuneration, staff development, employee relations, appraisal and discipline are the individual responsibilities of each affiliate. Within these agreements, however, the Conservatoire retains a responsibility to make proposals to the affiliates in matters relating to staff development and training. The Conservatoire employs a Human Resources Manager, who advises affiliates on staffing matters, while the Equality and Diversity Manager offers staff training on a variety of equality and diversity issues (see paragraph 64, above).

66 The Conservatoire uses its human resources strategy as the basis for assisting its affiliates in achieving good practice in human resource management (as well as applying the strategy to itself as an employer of a small administrative team). The strategy seeks to encourage and support staff development that enables staff to perform at the highest level, maintain their professional contacts and memberships, and develop their careers. It sits alongside the individual strategies that exist in some affiliates, and the audit team was informed that, in cases where affiliate schools had no human resources strategy of their own, the institutional strategy, or relevant sections of it, could be adopted as required to suit the needs of the particular affiliate.

67 According to the current strategy document (2009), the introduction of comprehensive staff induction programmes and appraisal systems has been largely completed, though the staff who met the audit team reported that their individual experiences of induction were predominantly informal and mainly reliant on mentoring arrangements. The team was also told that at least one affiliate had yet to establish a staff appraisal system. However, the staff were able to confirm that, within the human resource policies and/or staff development processes that exist at affiliate level, different categories of staff (for example, part-time, hourly paid, etc) are taken into account.

68 Staff development directly related to the teaching responsibilities of staff (for example, renewing professional experience) is supported at affiliate level. Some affiliate staff development policies make reference to expectations about the research and knowledge

transfer activities of staff, but the audit team noted that these expectations were not reflected in any information about the balance of duties of teaching staff, their terms and conditions of employment, or in guidance in the staff handbooks seen by the team.

69 The Conservatoire provides additional opportunities for staff development by funding the development of artistic and pedagogic innovation through knowledge transfer activities. (This is known as Joint Artistic Project Funding and is allocated by the Joint Artistic Committee.) The Conservatoire also organises an annual staff conference and supports an ongoing staff seminar programme. It has used targeted funding allocations from HEFCE (Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund and subsequently Teaching Enhancement and Student Success Fund) to provide opportunities for staff to gain teaching qualifications, apply for membership of the Higher Education Academy and compete for National Teaching Fellowships. The Conservatoire is currently engaged in developing its own postgraduate certificate in learning and teaching to suit the demands of teachers in the performing arts; it is intended that this will be conjointly validated with the University of Kent as the awarding institution.

Summary

70 Within the scope of the remit of the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama, the audit team's view, as a result of its investigations, is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the Conservatoire's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in its affiliate schools.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

71 On the Conservatoire's own admission, the main thrust of the Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2006-9) has been on constructing the frameworks for managing the quality of learning and teaching across the affiliates rather than on quality enhancement. However, the next iteration of the strategy (currently in draft) will have a greater focus on enhancement, through, for example, incorporating research into teaching. As mentioned above (see paragraph 51), in order to realise this latter objective, the Conservatoire must first secure a set of shared definitions of research, knowledge transfer and scholarship.

72 The Conservatoire has a responsibility to encourage good practice among its affiliates. It identifies features of good practice through two key formal processes. First, oversight by the Academic Board of external examiner reports drawn from across affiliate provision (external examiners comment explicitly on positive aspects of the student experience as well as making recommendations for improvements). Second, oversight by the Learning and Teaching Committee of the affiliates' annual programme monitoring reports (these include information on good practice identified by the affiliates as being worthy of wider dissemination).

73 The audit team saw summary reports bringing together external examiner comments and examples of good practice from annual programme monitoring. However, the team considered that there was little analysis or evaluation of these by the Conservatoire's academic committees. In relation to the annual monitoring reports there seemed to be a lack of clarity in distinguishing good practice that could be more widely shared across the affiliates from examples of programme success - a problem that has been recognised by the Learning and Teaching Committee. The team considers it desirable for the Conservatoire to strengthen mechanisms for identifying good practice that is transferable across disciplines and affiliate schools (see also paragraph 26, above).

74 In the audit team's view, the Conservatoire, having developed its academic quality assurance framework, is well placed to focus on enhancement as it introduces its latest strategy for learning, teaching and assessment covering the next three years. This will provide the opportunity for the Conservatoire to clarify its thinking and strengthen some of its mechanisms in the area of teaching quality enhancement.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

75 With the exception of the arrangements between the affiliates and their validating universities, neither the Conservatoire, nor the affiliates, have entered into an arrangement with any other partner organisation for the delivery of higher education provision.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

76 Only one of the affiliates, the London Contemporary Dance School, has in the past run research programmes, leading to University of Kent awards. Admissions were suspended in 2008, a decision ratified by the Conservatoire's Academic Board. Arrangements have been made to ensure the remaining students receive adequate supervision and support to enable them to complete the programmes on which they are registered. These arrangements include research seminars, attendance at relevant taught master's modules and continued supervisory support. The audit team came to the view that the run-out arrangements for postgraduate research students were being handled sensitively and well.

Section 7: Published information

77 The Conservatoire requires all affiliates to use the programme specification as the definitive source for information on programmes leading to higher education awards, and ultimate responsibility for accuracy of this information lies with the principal of each affiliate. Copies of all programme specifications, student handbooks and prospectuses are held centrally by the Conservatoire and are subject to checks by the Assistant Registrar. The Conservatoire has published guidelines aimed at ensuring that equality issues are carefully considered every time recruitment and marketing materials are reviewed and changed.

78 All publicity materials that the audit team saw made clear the relationship between the affiliate and the validating university, and in most cases the relationship between the Conservatoire and the affiliate was also made clear. The students whom the team met considered the information they received through student handbooks to be comprehensive and useful, but were less complimentary about the websites of some affiliates, which they thought could be improved in terms of currency and appearance.

79 The Conservatoire is responsible for the data returns to the Higher Education Statistics Agency that are used in compiling the statistical tables published on the Unistats website. The responsibilities of affiliates for furnishing the Conservatoire with their respective data are specified in the operating agreements.

80 In the audit team's view, the Conservatoire has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information published by itself or its affiliates about the quality of educational provision and the standards of awards.

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