

Central School of Speech and Drama

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Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out institutional audits of higher education institutions.

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council in England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills). It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework, established in 2002, following revisions to the United Kingdom's approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the revised institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

Institutional audit results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of awards
- the confidence that 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.

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision, the judgements and comments also apply unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland 2006* - Annexes B and C refer).

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the Central School of Speech and Drama (the School) from 9 to 12 June 2008 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the School offers on behalf of the University of London.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the School and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the School manages the academic aspects of its provision.

In institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities is audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom (UK). The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

Outcomes of the institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the School 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 that it offers on behalf of the University of London
- 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.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The enhancement remit at the School has been promoted and acted upon in the practical areas of performance; industrial collaboration; professional and community development and the recent postgraduate research strategies (see below and paragraph 81). However, the audit team noted that there still appeared to be a lack of clear and deliberate steps to enhance students' learning opportunities in a systematic manner, through the long-established undergraduate portfolio of courses and, to a lesser extent, within the taught postgraduate courses. It was the view of the team that different arrangements for course organisation might enhance the learning opportunities for students through the systematic analysis of the impact and outcomes of performance, research and professional and community activities.

Postgraduate research students

The institutional arrangements that it has established for postgraduate research students make a significant contribution to the claims that the School makes in its mission statement that it is 'dedicated to specialist teaching, scholarship and research for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing standards' and 'as a global intermediary for university drama departments and drama schools in the areas of teaching, practice and research within and for theatre'. The arrangements are systematic and contribute to the enhancement of the students' learning opportunities.

Published information

The audit found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the School publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the iterative engagement with industry, including student placements and outreach work, thus supporting the aims and philosophy of the institution's programmes
- the creative work of the School of Professional and Community Development in supporting both the School and the constituencies it serves
- the successful promotion of a research culture and environment with particular consideration to PhD supervision
- the Technical Support Department, which provides a vital resource for the School, students and stakeholders and contributes to the mission of the School.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the School to:

- affirm the institutional leadership of both quality assurance and enhancement activities and the roles of those supporting them, to ensure clarity and vision and to overcome the current institutional shortcomings in swiftly expediting change
- ensure clear minimum expectations in the communication of assessment activities and criteria, to minimise the current variability and inconsistencies within and across courses, levels and their supporting documentation
- initiate, at the earliest opportunity, development of a strategic approach to learning resources that links explicitly to other strategies, policies and statements of intent.

It would be desirable for the School to:

- consider means by which the institution can engage better with the broader higher education community, thus increasing its awareness and understanding of debates and practices within the sector.

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the School of the Academic Infrastructure, which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that the School took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Report

1 An institutional audit of the Central School of Speech and Drama (the School) was undertaken during the week commencing 9 June 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the School's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team was Mrs F Church, Mr C McIntyre, Professor T Moscovitch and Ms K Southworth, auditors, and Mr S Murphy, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms F Crozier, Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The Central School of Speech and Drama (the School) was founded in 1906 as the Central School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art. It was integrated into the publicly funded higher education institution sector in 1989 and receives funding as a discrete specialist institution. The School became the newest of 19 current full colleges of the Federal University of London in September 2005. It was awarded taught degree awarding powers of its own in August 2004, although at the time of the audit it awarded degrees of the University of London. In March 2005, the School was designated a Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre, one of 54 Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)-funded Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

4 The School offers three first degree courses and two related PGCE courses. There are 12 MA courses and a small cohort of postgraduate research students. At the date of the 2007 Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey, the School had 848 students registered on higher education courses; 570 of these were undergraduate students, 266 were taught postgraduate students and 12 were MPhil/PhD students. There is no sub-degree work. Nearly 97 per cent of the School's higher education students study full-time. Additionally, the School of Professional and Community Development offers a programme of short courses and summer schools, which in the academic year 2006-07 involved 982 participants. The School employs 58 contracted teaching and research staff (50 full-time equivalent), and in the academic year 2006-07 it employed 37.5 full-time equivalent visiting professionals.

5 The School's mission statement is as follows:

'Central is the English Funding Council's designated Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre, providing a conservatoire higher education in dramatic arts practice. It holds a premier position as a university college dedicated to specialist teaching, scholarship and research for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing standards within its subject field in general and the drama and performance industries in particular.

As an internationally distinguished institution for professional drama education and scholarship, the college will continue to develop -

as the UK's leading brand in drama HE

as the UK's only HE specialist drama college with a full range of opportunities for undergraduate and postgraduate study in theatre

as an international centre for the production, enhancement and the promulgation of knowledge about and for theatre and performance

as an educational hub which draws together higher education, industry and user communities in the field of drama

as a global intermediary for university drama departments and drama schools in the arenas of teaching, practice and research within and for theatre.'

6 QAA's last audit visit to the School was in 1994. In December 2005, a report was derived from the confidential report to the QAA Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers based on the taught degree awarding powers scrutiny over the period 2002 to 2004. The team of assessors concluded that 'broad confidence could be placed in the soundness of the School's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards'. The current audit team found that the School had generally taken appropriate action in response to the 2005 report, although it considered that decisive executive decision-making processes continued to require attention.

7 In the interval between audits, there have been a number of changes to key personnel and a series of reviews of organisation and process has led to several significant changes. The retirement of the former Principal in 2007, one member of the Directorate and the School's Registrar prompted a review of the senior management structure. At the time of the present audit, the School was in a transitional phase while new management structures became established, along with a reorganisation of the committee structure. An administrative mapping exercise was, at the time of the audit team's visit, nearing completion and it was anticipated by the School that all structures would be in place ready for the commencement of the academic year 2008-09. The importance of ensuring that these changes are implemented effectively is reflected in the recommendations made by the team.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

8 The School publishes a Quality Assurance Framework, which provides an overview of the key committees and processes that contribute to the management of quality and standards, and enshrines the primary mechanisms by which the School defines and maintains the academic standards of its awards. The Framework emphasises the importance of external practice and guidance, and the School has sought to ensure that its processes accord with the Ordinances of the University of London, the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (the Code of practice)* and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and the relevant published subject benchmark statements. In addition to the framework statement, the School provides guidance to its approach to assessment in the assessment handbook.

9 The School expresses the intention that its quality assurance systems be fit for purpose in relation to the particular character and portfolio of a small specialist institution, and, at the time of the audit was reviewing the various processes and practices for the maintenance of standards on an ongoing basis, with the aim of ensuring that quality assurance principles be embedded in its daily life.

10 The roles and responsibilities of external examiners are clearly specified in both the Quality Assurance Framework and the assessment handbook, which also define the terms and process of appointment, and the School's expectations in respect of briefing and guidance offered. The audit team took the view that the process for the nomination and appointment of external examiners was clearly defined and properly carried out, and all institutional requirements in this area were implemented. Briefing and support is taken seriously by the School and effective guidance is offered in annually updated documents.

11 The reporting requirements for external examiners are clearly articulated and supervised, and responsibility for the processing and consideration of reports lies at both course and institutional level. The Chair of the Academic Board monitors reports, which are also seen by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Officer, who makes a summary report of issues with school-wide relevance. Reports also form part of the portfolio of evidence considered by audit and review panels during course review. Feedback to external examiners on their reports is provided by course leaders and through the provision of outcomes from course monitoring; and it was clear to the audit team from review of the relevant documentation that these processes were taken seriously and operated effectively.

12 The School has introduced some effective aspects of practice in the management of external examiners, for instance, it conducts a main postgraduate examination board, which gathers together the external examiners with responsibility for taught postgraduate provision, and an annual external examiner's briefing day, which ensures a clear understanding of the role, and provides an opportunity for the examiner to act as a 'critical friend' to the course team.

13 The School believes that it has made 'strong and scrupulous' use of external examiners in assuring standards and this is evidenced in course validation and review, and in their engagement in a wider than normal range of activities, which include reading scripts, viewing time-based media and attending performances and recitals, and critiques of these events.

14 There was good evidence of healthy debate around points raised by external examiners and the system was operating effectively and making a significant contribution to the assurance of standards in the programmes and awards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

15 The School believes that the use of the Academic Infrastructure (especially the FHEQ and Course (programme) Specifications) and relevant professional reference points are well embedded in its processes, and that thorough use of external expertise in programme approval and review, and sometimes in programme design, is established, well understood and effective.

16 Guidelines for course teams advise on the use of the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements, but since much of the School's provision is well established, references at point of revalidation tend to focus on verifying continuing adherence. The FHEQ descriptors were used in the development of new master's courses between 2002 and 2005. Postgraduate course teams are also referred to the FHEQ master's degree descriptor in guidelines for monitoring and there was evidence of the consideration of external reference points in revalidation processes. Amendments to the *Code of practice* are considered through the Academic Development Committee and senior consideration of *Code of practice*-related matters has taken place in a senior planning 'awayday'.

17 In several of the School's subject areas, course design reflects the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. The MA Drama and Movement Therapy (Sesame) is accredited by the Health Professions Council, and the BA (Hons) Acting and some strands of the BA (Hons) Theatre Practice are accredited by the National Council for Drama Training.

18 The School acknowledges that it has not explicitly drawn on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area in its management of academic standards, but the Academic Board has received periodic updates on the progress of the Bologna Process. The consideration of the future structure and organisation of taught MA courses has included reference to the European context.

19 Course specifications are used in course design, review and approval, together with other core documents such as course handbooks. The School emphasises that aims, learning outcomes, unit structure, credit and approaches to teaching and assessment, in the course specification and in the handbook unit outlines, are the defining attributes of the course, and must not change without formal modification. The School believes that course specifications are well constructed, and all relevant information is provided, but a number of examples of different practice between courses in the provision of information was found.

20 The audit team found that the School had a very good record on externality in respect of both design and validation of programmes and in their implementation and delivery, and that it was committed to the use of external examiners, external academic peers and visiting professionals and in supporting vocational interconnectedness with its industries. Many examples of external engagement in relationship to performance and placement activities, work with visiting professionals and external bodies that have a bearing on the maintenance of

standards were evident in that they testify to the continuing professional relevance and acceptability of the programmes.

21 The audit team formed the view that generally the School took a serious and professional approach to external reference points in informing programme design and development, in testing programmes at validation and review, and in implementation and delivery of programmes.

Assessment policies and regulations

22 The School provides detailed guidance on assessment for students, staff and external partners including external examiners and visiting professionals. The Assessment Handbook is a 'live' document, informed by a range of external and internal sources and is the key source of reference on school-wide assessment policies and regulations.

23 The audit team found that, while the assessment handbook described the assessment principles, procedures and processes clearly, duplication of material on assessment in programme specifications and course handbooks led to a proliferation of material and potential confusion. The level of detail provided is creditable, but might lead to lack of clarity across documentation versions, and the School is encouraged to ensure clear minimum expectations in the communication of assessment activities and criteria to eradicate the current variability, and inconsistencies within and across programmes, levels and their supporting documentation. A rationalisation of assessment information and better use of electronic communication would minimise the risk of confusion.

24 Generally, the School does not apply common patterns of assessment across all courses at the same level. The audit team understood the principles at stake in this situation but commented on a level of diversity that accommodated the institution's three undergraduate programmes having different arrangements for the inclusion of level 2 work for the degree award, both in terms of percentages and in terms of the way in which the relevant assessment elements were selected. It advised the School to give the matter consideration.

25 The Assessment Handbook is also a key tool for the communication of the constitution, remit and procedures for the operation of examination boards and the terms of reference, membership, powers, roles and responsibilities of all staff concerned are clearly laid out and sample agendas, with other support material, are provided.

26 In respect of the load and timing of assessment, the School indicates that the overall assessment workload is considered at point of validation, and this may result in different programmes having slightly different models. The audit team found no evidence of reasons for concern about overall load and timing in most cases, although PGCE students indicated some limited concerns. In general, external examiners were supportive of the assessment balance, timing and method, and indicated a positive view on the assessment process.

27 Guidance on progression and qualification for award are clear in the School's regulations as laid out in the assessment handbook and elsewhere, and there are explicit statements on credit requirements for award and for requirements in respect of classifications and distinction, both in the generic regulations and in course handbooks as approved at validation.

28 Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies' requirements are reflected, where appropriate, in the accreditation of courses with appropriate bodies, and the appropriateness of the assessment arrangements for these programmes is confirmed in the accreditation process.

29 As a result of the changing environment and developmental position, the School is in at the time of the audit, a number of policies and strategic positions were emergent or untested. This is the case in respect of research degrees, which developed after the School became a college of the University of London, and for which no students had been examined at the time of the audit. Arrangements for the management of research degrees are based upon the section of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* and guidance from the

University, and are enshrined in the papers of the Research Degree Committee and the Postgraduate Student Handbook. The audit team confirmed that the assessment procedures and requirements, including guidance for upgrade from MPhil to PhD and the requirements of the thesis and final examination, were clearly articulated in the Handbook and that research students interviewed by the team were clear about these regulations.

30 The audit team came to the view that the arrangements for assessment were clearly established and understood, and made an appropriate contribution to the maintenance of academic standards, but that there was room for improvement in some of the mechanisms for communication and for clarification and simplification of the documents by which they are communicated. The School acknowledges that National Student Survey responses have indicated scope for improvement in the clarity of student information about assessment in some undergraduate programmes and the team saw evidence of effective address to matters in student understanding of assessment in the BA (Hons) Acting programme. The team also saw evidence in external examiner reports of issues being raised in respect of assessment issues, all of which were fed through to course committees and the Academic Board in the undergraduate and postgraduate summary reports with satisfactory response.

Management information - statistics

31 The School indicates confidence in its use of data to set, communicate, assess and monitor academic and professional standards. Annual course reports employ statistics on entry, progression and award statistics prepared by the Academic Registry, and course teams comment on these data. The audit team saw evidence of this consideration and analysis of data in course reports and of the use of commentary on data in the audit and review processes. The Academic Board also receives data on awards conferred over a rolling five-year period, with commentary incorporating comparison with most recent available Higher Education Statistics Agency data for the subject area. Data reports also relate information on equality and diversity, including disability, to progression and achievement in terms of standards of attainment achieved by students.

32 The School acknowledges some historical difficulty in working with data to produce management information statistics, but the audit team saw evidence of development in this area in improved use of the system to generate useful data. Additionally, the School indicated that quality assurance and enhancement officers have an extended role in analysing as well as generating student data, and presenting it in a form that will encourage fruitful discussion and help to identify priorities for enhancement; ongoing consideration of data use will be part of a review agreed by the Academic Board in December 2007.

33 Overall, the audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Academic Infrastructure and other reference points

34 The School is confident that it takes full account of the *Code of practice* in the articulation of its policies and operations. The procedures on admissions, disability, placements and student appeals and complaints are informed by the relevant sections of the *Code*, as is the assessment handbook, and management of the new research programme has benefited from the *Code of practice Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. There is evidence that the School uses the *Code, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review* effectively, to inform policies and enhance good practice in course design while ensuring transparency through the use of external reference points.

35 On the basis of its reading of committee minutes and relevant handbooks for staff and students, the audit team would concur with the School's own belief that it meticulously considers

each published section of the *Code of practice* and takes any necessary action to implement them. It would encourage the School to be proactive in continuing to review its practice and disseminate awareness of the *Code*.

36 The audit team was able to confirm that external examiners use the opportunities afforded to them to comment in their reports on a full range of quality considerations, such as curricular content, learning resources and staff scholarship and that their observations are considered at institutional level.

Course approval, monitoring and review of programmes

37 The School's approach to managing approval, monitoring and review, is expressed in the Quality Assurance Framework, which outlines the core procedures and is supplemented by guidance information for teams preparing for approval or review and validation of programmes. The procedures for validation are also applied quinquennially to established courses, with the addition of an audit and review stage, and the audit team was able to see the outcomes from programmes revalidated under more streamlined interim procedures, as well as the specification of future systems for periodic review, which will not routinely entail full revalidation.

38 The full validation process consists of a feasibility study and a two-stage validation. At each stage, the panels are small in membership but fulfil the requirements of independence and externality. There is documentary guidance to teams and panels on the paperwork required and themes to be explored, while at each stage the panel is supported by a quality officer.

39 A feasibility study is required before a new course can begin the validation process and may also be required for courses being revalidated. The audit team considered the template for this exercise to be a detailed and useful document, requiring a rationale and market analysis, and specifying particular requirements across the years of the programme against sectoral and institutional norms for space, technical and staffing ratios. Once feasibility has been established, the new proposal is included in the validation schedule and the team was able to read a number of reports from panels that demonstrated that they had conducted thorough and wider ranging discussions with teams, including exploring learning opportunities in relation to the curricula and resources.

40 Procedures for course modifications are detailed in the Quality Assurance Framework. Proposals for change may arise from recommendations by external examiners, suggestions from partner employers or students, or through reflections on practice, and must be flagged in annual monitoring reports. Reading of the Faculty Board minutes suggests that course teams are responsive to their constituencies in seeking to make changes.

41 In conversation with the audit team, staff emphasised the reflective and proactive nature of the School and welcomed mechanisms that were less paper-based and facilitated a flexible approach. The team considered that it was too early to judge whether changes in the current procedures would give an appropriate balance between rigour and the ability to respond effectively to change.

42 The Academic Board has overall responsibility for monitoring programmes, drawing on annual monitoring reports and the minutes of the Faculty Board, which has a remit to review the curricula and the impact of learning resources on courses. Individual course reports are produced annually and an overview document is written by the Dean of Studies for consideration by the Academic Board. The formal report, submitted annually to the University of London Senate, draws on the School's annual summary of themes from external examiner reports. Any concerns about the quality of the learning experience on courses can trigger a review, the requirement for an action plan or, in theory, course closure. The audit team formed the view that the monitoring system was both reflective and rigorous, providing adequate safeguards for the School to identify and take action on any potential threats to quality.

43 Overall, the audit team considered that the School had procedures which promoted careful consideration of the quality of learning opportunities. Although many of its new committees and procedures were as yet untested at the time of the audit, the evidence from previous structures and systems, and the School's willingness to review and reassess their effectiveness, indicate an institution that engages in critical reflection, both on academic and professional practice and on its own processes, and suggests that confidence can be placed in its developing systems for monitoring quality.

Management information - feedback from students

44 Questionnaires are undertaken from time to time at course level, and by service areas. There are also occasional themed questionnaires, for instance on experience of placements. The School has responded vigorously to the outcomes of the National Student Survey, particularly with respect to those of course organisation. The results of the Survey were studied closely at the Academic Board, and benchmarked against the sector generally and other relevant specialist institutions. Satisfaction rates of less than 50 per cent prompted reviews and beneath a mean score of 3 required action for improvement within six weeks. The degree of attention given to the National Student Survey outcome is noteworthy and indicates that the School is taking a more robust central and coherent overview than has been the case until recently, when the individual course was the locus for evaluation and enhancement. The audit team welcomes this development.

Role of students in quality assurance

45 The latest edition of the Student Handbook summarises the formal avenues for student representation. The most immediate one for students is the course committee for each undergraduate programme and for groups of related postgraduate courses, while the Support Services Forum brings together one student from each course committee, with staff from the main service departments, to discuss practical and resource issues.

46 The audit team read the minutes of a number of course committees and verified that staff were generally responsive to student concerns and requests, taking action to refer issues to relevant bodies and authorities, or to make changes and facilitate needs. However, experiences differed between courses. In general, the team considered course committees and year group meetings to be effective fora for discussing operational matters, for quality enhancement at a local level and also in improving student understanding of course expectations.

47 Student representatives are trained by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Office or the Deputy Dean for quality assurance. Course committees provide the opportunity to discuss annual monitoring reports and external examiners' reports, and proposals for modifications to courses are also presented here. Students are also represented on the Board of Governors, Academic Board, Academic Development Committee/Academic Standards and Enhancement Committee and, from the academic year 2008-09, the Faculty Board. There are also student representatives on the Employers' Partnership Groups.

48 Students are normally involved in preparation for revalidation and have been involved in a number of working groups of the Academic Development Committee/Academic Standards and Enhancement Committee, including those considering alternative assessment, arrangements for mitigating circumstances and plans to improve communication with students in the light of low scoring areas of the National Student Survey. Review panels always meet students, including elected student representatives.

49 The student written submission suggested that the student voice was highly emphasised in the School and the audit team saw much evidence of the School's sensitivity to the needs of students and its willingness to use them as a resource for quality enhancement. At the time of the audit visit, however, students were less active in strategic decision-making and the team would encourage the School to continue to explore further ways of using the strength of the student voice to best effect.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

50 The relationship between research and scholarly activities and students' learning is rooted in the unique character of the School in providing conservatoire-style training in a higher education environment, with the capacity to interrogate received practice, by virtue of its high reputation within the theatre industry. The relationship with professional practice is an iterative one and students are expected both to learn from and contribute to the expertise of others. At master's level, in particular, the notion of 'practice as research' is highlighted. Students benefit from many opportunities to engage with a range of national and international theatres and organisations, from community, to regional, national and international companies. It appeared to the audit team that the School engaged in a constant and productive articulation of the research/practice and learning/teaching relationship.

51 The Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre was envisaged in 2004 as 'a national laboratory for pedagogic exploration within a vocational context' and in 2007 its interim evaluation report declared its intention to be 'a focus for theatre research and scholarship'. The School sees it as a way to add value to the full range of its activities, and it has a potentially important role within the School to foster research and teaching links, and relate these both to pedagogic practice within the curriculum and to that in the industry.

52 A number of projects conducted within the aegis of the Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre have given opportunities for students to be involved. Bursaries have been provided to support student participation, for instance enabling attendance at the Moscow Art Theatre School conference.

53 Members of staff may apply for study leave, funded through the HEFCE Teaching Quality Enhancement scheme and any kind of research and development activity is eligible, provided 'there is an eventual dividend to learning and teaching through new techniques, new curricula or evolved methods of teaching'. The audit team noted that the use of distinguished visiting professionals in teaching is an important contribution to the currency and vibrancy of the curricula and enhances students' enthusiasm, professional awareness and career opportunities.

54 Students are encouraged to recognise the academic implications of work at master's level and the working group considering the development of postgraduate work has emphasised the need for subject specialisms to be informed by current research or 'cutting edge' practice. A research methods and outputs unit is now common to all courses at this level. A current aim is to engage more of the School in outreach activity. The audit team would encourage this as a potentially powerful contributor to the learning and career opportunities of existing, as well as potential future, students.

55 External examiners have commented specifically on the effectiveness of the research and teaching relationship in contributing to 'an extremely empowering learning environment'. The audit team suggests that it would be desirable for the School to promote further the research and teaching relationship through involving its entire staff in scholarly networks, both within their subject and professional areas and also in pedagogic higher education networks.

Resources for learning

56 The relationship between course development and resources is embedded in the culture of the School. Before any new course can be developed, a detailed feasibility study is undertaken, covering the availability of placements, staffing, equipment, specialist and general teaching and learning-space needs. Despite this detailed planning, however, there are indications of pressure on resources, especially space.

57 In the student written submission, and among the students seen by the audit team, there was frustration about the perceived shortage both of learning and social spaces, especially rehearsal space at weekends and outside term dates. The audit team had the opportunity to see

and hear of the efforts made by the School to manage its space effectively, in refurbishing, office-sharing and multi-use, and overcome its shortages by leasing, refurbishment or new-build, but access to rehearsal and social space are likely to continue to fall short of student expectations.

58 The Technical Support Department incorporates media, technical, wardrobe and workshop support and is a vital resource for the School and highly regarded by stakeholders, including students. The audit team recognises the important contribution made by this department to the mission of the School.

59 The library is purpose-built and considered by the School to be a 'sound' resource, bearing comparison with that of other drama schools. Undergraduate students find it adequate with a good supply of basic primary texts. The central London location and membership of the University of London provide major supplementary resources on which students can draw, especially since the development and expansion of postgraduate provision, including research degree programmes. Master's students generally find the holdings at the School insufficient for their needs and make use of Senate house provision. Students generally testified to the helpfulness of library staff and their responsiveness to suggestions.

60 Wireless access throughout the site allows students to use laptops, and students are generally satisfied with computer access but would welcome longer opening hours. Students who spoke with the audit team were more critical of the access to data off-site, particularly of the inability to access material on a shared drive needed for production work. They would have welcomed either an intranet or virtual learning environment, which would have provided reliable course information, currently updated annually, and sometimes confusingly, in paper copies. Both have been considered for some years. Staff who spoke to the team acknowledged that there had been delays implementing the intranet and that it had the potential to facilitate better communication. The Learning and Teaching Strategy contains a section 'Consider e-learning initiatives' which commits to implementing the intranet between 2007 and 2009 but makes no reference to a virtual learning environment. Given that students are unable to access relevant learning materials, course information or the library catalogue off-site, and given space constraints on-site, the audit team would encourage the School to expedite speedily the implementation of the intranet or other means of remote access to course information and learning materials. It would recommend that the School implement an effective and transparent way of reporting on, and planning, resource provision, to ensure that developments indicated in planning are on target, linked with institutional priorities and appropriate to support curricular needs. Further, it suggests the School might wish to make greater use of professional networks to benchmark themselves against other higher education providers.

Admissions policy

61 The principles underpinning admissions to the School are published on its website. The Admissions Handbook makes links with associated policies and procedures. At the time of the audit, the School's priorities for recruitment included increasing international student numbers and recruiting more PhD students.

62 As part of the selection process, many courses require an audition for which protocols are described in the admissions handbook. Students who met with the audit team were generally very appreciative of the admissions process. Most students considered that the information they had been given prior to their enrolling gave an accurate impression of their courses, although there was some feeling that master's courses were more theoretical than expected, a perception recognised by the institution.

63 The School's agreement with the Office for Fair Access gives a commitment to outreach towards under-represented schools and communities, including a programme of audition and interview workshops. In the view of the audit team, the School is effective in implementing and monitoring its admissions policy and, in particular, that its outreach work makes a good contribution to achieving a socially inclusive student body.

Student support

64 At institutional level, there is a range of support mechanisms for students. Students receive information on these through handbooks, publicity materials and website information as appropriate. The Student Counselling and Advisory Service delivers the majority of student support services, including counselling, disability support, an accommodation service and general guidance to students. The service is particularly proactive in its support of students with dyslexia, recognising that a high proportion of the students at the School have this condition.

65 The strong ethos of course identity within the School means that students generally use tutors as the first reference point for academic matters. Students valued this aspect of their support highly, and those who met the audit team expressed satisfaction that they were able to find academic support when needed. Career development and personal development planning are strongly embedded in the curricula, and specific modules and learning outcomes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level include reflection on the learning process. Students meet regularly with personal supervisors and professional mentors to track progress.

66 In the view of the audit team, the School has a comprehensive framework for academic and personal student support that operates effectively.

Staff support

67 The Human Resources function is overseen by the Deputy Principal, supported by the Human Resources department. The School's Human Resources Strategy dates from 2004 and was being updated at the time of the audit. A range of general policies is available to staff to guide and support their activity.

68 There is an established annual appraisal system and a peer observation of teaching scheme, and the audit team was able to see comprehensive evidence of their operation. Support for staff development is centrally funded and applications for support commonly refer to what has been agreed at appraisal. A notional per capita allowance for staff development is agreed each year, and the introduction of opportunities for secondment to the Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre and a leave of absence scheme for research informed teaching enhance the opportunities available. Centrally delivered workshops are offered on a variety of development themes and research training is also provided.

69 The School has offered a Higher Education Academy accredited PGCert Learning and Teaching in Higher Education but this did not run in the academic years 2006-07 or 2007-08, mainly due to low numbers. Alternative provision for new teaching staff during this period has been provided and the School is now planning a shorter programme of structured sessions, combined with a more formal mentoring system. Research students with no prior teaching experience will also have access to these sessions, to enable them to undertake teaching activities effectively.

70 All staff are encouraged to pursue staff development within and across the four principal areas of research: New Technologies in Contemporary Theatre Practice; Sonic Dramaturgies; Spaces and Ethics of Performance; and Bodies and Culture. A human resources strategy is in place and staff development priorities are linked to a designated budget for training and development opportunities. This document defines the budget that is available to enhance training and development opportunities for staff, and how the money is distributed to the respective budget-holders.

71 The audit team concluded that the School's arrangements for staff support and development in relation to academic staff engaged in teaching and the supervision of research students were satisfactory but that, while annual appraisal review forms demonstrate some evidence of networking and comparing practice across the wider higher education sector, a clear focus on higher education sector benchmarking and networking would be beneficial for staff development and for the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

72 Overall, the audit team came to the conclusion that 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.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

73 The School is acknowledged by the Higher Education Funding Council for England as a designated Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre and in its mission it aims to 'pursue enhancement strategies for both maintaining and enhancing standards within its subject field in general and the drama and performance industries in particular', in addition to its aspiration as 'an international centre for the production, enhancement and the promulgation of knowledge about and for theatre and performance'.

74 Throughout the year, students present a large number of performances, many of which are in the public arena with some of these in overseas locations. The Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre has been proactive in promoting and funding some of these events. At the end of each year, there are also a number of showcase events where graduating students can present cameo performances to a specially invited audience of agents, casting directors and producers. In addition to the formal Embassy Theatre lectures given by practitioners of repute from the industry, there are also master classes from internationally recognised artists. While the audit team acknowledged the impact that all of these predominantly performance-based activities gave to the students, especially in terms of improving and developing subsequent future performance, it could not find any evidence of deliberate steps to take a systematic approach to this invaluable enhancement opportunity, which could specifically influence course curricula and development.

75 In marked contrast there was clear evidence of good practice in two other areas, where deliberate steps had been taken, systematically, to enhance the students' learning opportunities. The postgraduate research culture and environment, although recently established, defined the School's strategy of transforming the college from a conservatoire into a research-active higher education institution. This strategy clearly indicated the impact upon postgraduate provision generally and PhD supervision specifically, as well as the value and importance to staff development and pedagogy. One outstanding example within this context was the postgraduate research conferences, where PhD students had to present papers to their peers.

76 In addition to the excellent research seminar series for postgraduate research students, the School of Professional and Community Development was also a good example of where a systemic approach to the enhancement of learning was taking place. A deliberate strategy has been established with definitive outcomes that enhance personal wellbeing and productivity at work through links with schools, voluntary and community organisations, the public sector and the business community.

77 The Centre for Excellence in Training for Theatre provides opportunities for staff development such as a Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund for research-informed teaching submissions. The fund provides for periods of leave, in order to undertake research-related activities that will have a direct impact on teaching practices and student learning. Staff can apply for either a half-term or full-term sabbatical to study one of two strands: research-informed teaching/knowledge transfer or pedagogic research.

78 The School has been engaged in considerable deliberation over its structure of committees and working groups. In relation to learning and teaching, these questions have focused on how the strategy can be owned, driven forward, tracked and evaluated. The audit team, having seen little evidence of progress in some areas of the strategy, such as e-learning initiatives, would encourage the new Academic Standards and Enhancement Committee to be diligent in its responsibility for promoting a whole-institution approach to the enhancement of learning and teaching.

79 The audit team felt that the staff development systems and priorities agenda fully supported the opportunities for all staff to develop their own expertise, in order to enhance the learning opportunities for students and also the reputation of both the School and themselves as professional participants within the performing arts. However, while the enhancement remit had been promoted and acted upon in the practical areas of performance, industrial collaboration, professional and community development, and the recent postgraduate research strategies, the team noted that there still appeared to be a lack of clear and deliberate steps to enhance students' learning opportunities in a systematic manner through the long-established undergraduate portfolio of courses, and to a lesser extent within the taught postgraduate courses. It was the view of the team that if these courses were organised in a simpler and standardised coherent manner, there would be greater opportunity to enhance the learning opportunities for students, through the systematic analysis of the impact and outcomes of performance, research and professional and community activities.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

80 At the time of the audit, the School did not have any collaborative arrangements for delivery of higher education provision.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

81 In its overarching approach to dramatic arts practice, the School states in its mission statement that it is 'dedicated to specialist teaching, scholarship and research for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing standards' and it also sees itself 'as a global intermediary for university drama departments and drama schools in the areas of teaching, practice and research within and for theatre'. The institutional arrangements that it has established for postgraduate research students make a significant contribution to these claims in a well-organised and systematic manner that contribute to the enhancement of the students' learning opportunities, and which clearly adhere to the principles of the *Code of practice, Section 1*.

82 Documentation reviewed by the audit team demonstrates the fertile research environment which has been established, and there are future plans to develop through a significant number of research publications, conference papers and practice-based research projects, together with extensive external research-related grants. The strategy adopted by the School demonstrates a clear commitment to build a sustainable research environment that will strengthen the research staff development context and also influence the learning experience for postgraduate research students.

83 The School has a research degrees committee that oversees all aspects of research work, and the study arrangements for postgraduate research students can be found in the Postgraduate Research Degrees Handbook 2006-08. The selection and admission procedure is very rigorous and ensures that early dialogue takes place to identify key issues related to the calibre of both the applicant and the intended PhD proposal, before a formal interview and subsequent acceptance or selection occurs. A two-day induction session takes place, which highlights the key features of being a practitioner/researcher; academic protocols and ethics and responsibilities.

84 The procedures for review, which include scrutiny of feedback and assessment processes, are robust with an agreed scheme of work review dates incorporating presentations at the postgraduate research conference, in addition to a technical support agreement that is vital to the success of practice-based research activities.

85 The process for student complaints or appeals relating to their progress are described in the student handbook, and students who are dissatisfied with the outcome of their final viva voce exams can appeal using the University of London procedure for consideration of appeals by candidates for research degrees.

Section 7: Published information

86 Students confirmed during both the briefing visit and the audit visit that the published information that they had seen such as the prospectus, website and course specification was accurate, as indicated, when they experienced the course themselves. However, the audit team found a number of inconsistencies in internal documentation about assessment information for students, where information varied between the student handbook, the course handbook and the assessment handbook (see paragraphs 23 and 30).

87 The School has a well-established system of checking the accuracy of its published information with regard to marketing and promotion, which involves all course leaders. The two deputy principals are ultimately responsible for approving all published information, whether it was for marketing and promotion or the Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey.

88 The audit team found that, overall, reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the School publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

89 The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the iterative engagement with industry, including student placements and outreach work, thus supporting the aims and philosophy of the institution's programmes (paragraphs 50, 54, 63, 76)
- the Technical Support Department, which provides a vital resource for the School, students and stakeholders and contributes to the mission of the School (paragraph 58)
- the creative work of the School of Professional and Community Development in supporting both the School and the constituencies it serves (paragraph 76)
- the successful promotion of a research culture and environment, with particular consideration to PhD supervision and (paragraphs 75, 81, 82).

Recommendations for action

90 Recommendations for actions that are advisable:

- to affirm the institutional leadership of both quality assurance and enhancement activities and the roles of those supporting them to ensure clarity and vision and to overcome the current institutional shortcomings in swiftly expediting change (paragraphs 6, 7, 78)
- to ensure clear minimum expectations in the communication of assessment activities and criteria, to minimise the current variability and inconsistencies within and across courses, levels and their supporting documentation (paragraphs 23, 24, 30, 79)
- to initiate, at the earliest opportunity, development of a strategic approach to learning resources that links explicitly to other strategies, policies and statements of intent (paragraphs 56, 57, 60).

91 Recommendation for action that is desirable:

- to consider means by which the School can engage better with the broader higher education community, thus increasing its awareness and understanding of debates and practices within the sector (paragraphs 55, 60, 71).

Appendix

Central School of Speech and Drama's response to the audit report

The School found the process of audit useful, coming, as it did, following a series of major institutional developments including the acquisition of taught degree awarding powers, entry to the University of London, significant internal restructuring and the start of a new planning period. Audit preparations and discussions, as well as the resulting report, have complemented concurrent internal reflection on priorities for enhancement.

The School welcomes the judgement of confidence, and the endorsement of the effectiveness of its principal procedures for the assurance of standards and the management of the quality of learning opportunities. It is particularly pleasing that the report commends good practice in both of the complementary strands which together define the School's vision of a 'University Conservatoire', the engagement with industry and the successful promotion of a research culture and environment.

The report's 'advisable' and 'desirable' recommendations, and the comments in relation the potential further development of the School's approach to enhancement, are helpful. We are pleased that they are in tune with the School's existing and evolving plans for more school-wide and cross-course approaches to enhancement, and for a particular initial focus on assessment and on communication.

The report, arriving during the summer vacation, will be considered by the Academic Board in autumn 2008, although some follow-up plans are already in place. We see the report as a useful resource to inform enhancement activity.

