



# **Institutional audit**

**Conservatoire for Dance and Drama**

**JUNE 2010**

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ISBN 978 1 84979 220 2

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

## Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) 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 the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 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 then Department for Education 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 to 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 (UK's) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the 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 on 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 the 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, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

## Summary

### 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 to 11 June 2010 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of this audit was to provide public information on the institution's management of the academic standards of the higher education awards that are offered at its affiliate schools and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

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

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are 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 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

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.

### 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 quality enhancement of teaching.

## 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 as being **good practice**:

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

## Recommendations for action

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

The team **advises** 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 (that is, between the Conservatoire, its affiliate schools and their validating universities)
- secure an effective and consistent level of engagement with annual programme monitoring across its affiliates.

It would be **desirable** for the Conservatoire to:

- clarify the criteria for screening nominations of external examiners
- implement measures to improve the effectiveness of student representation and participation on Conservatoire committees
- 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
- strengthen mechanisms for identifying good practice that is transferable across disciplines and affiliate schools.

## Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the Conservatoire 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*

- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that the institution took due account 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 Conservatoire for Dance and Drama was undertaken during the week commencing 7 June 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the institution's management of the academic standards of the higher education awards that are offered at its affiliate schools and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Professor A Dean, Professor M Hunt, Professor A Jago, Ms H Marshall, Mr L McNaughton, auditors, and Mr D Batty, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 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).

4 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'.

5 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. Collaboration among affiliates allows their shared values and collective thinking to be directed to the benefit of students, as well as providing opportunities for joint artistic enterprise.

6 In 2009-10 there were 1,127 students registered with the Conservatoire and 301 teaching staff employed by the affiliates; in addition, 12 staff are employed by the Conservatoire to provide central administrative support. A senior executive management group, comprising the principals of each affiliate, deals with the planning and allocation of student numbers between the respective affiliates. Recent programme development has been focused on Foundation Degrees and professional postgraduate awards.

7 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.

8 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, which concluded that the Conservatoire had made good progress in addressing them.

9 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 terms of reference of committees and guidance for quality assurance processes are contained in the quality handbook, whose upkeep is the responsibility of the Academic Registrar.

10 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.

11 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. 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**

12 The Conservatoire has a clear role 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. Proposals first need to gain planning approval from the Conservatoire before being forwarded to the validating university for confirmation. This gives the go-ahead for development of the programme by the affiliate concerned and entry to the validation process. Two programmes have obtained planning approval from the Conservatoire since the introduction of the current process in 2008-09.

13 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 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, and to express these in terms more relevant to programmes offering artistic development and professional training. 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. 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.

14 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. The validation panel considers the proposal against a set of threshold criteria developed by the Conservatoire. The first two programmes to go through the conjoint process, in early 2010, were successfully validated. The arrangements for conjoint validation do not apply to the other two validating universities, and the audit team saw this as an important next step towards consolidating the Conservatoire's position in the programme approval process.

15 The annual monitoring process 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. Reports and action plans prepared by affiliates, having been considered internally, are then considered by the Conservatoire by means of an overview report presented to the Academic Board, highlighting themes, issues and best practice, and suggesting action points. Appended to the report are the action plans of individual affiliates, which are followed up by the Academic Board three months later.

16 From a review of sample reports and committee minutes, the audit team found that the use of data to inform and guide action planning was variable and often limited. 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 Conservatoire; 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 was being implemented across affiliates, since action points were often carried forward, or repeated in 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.

17 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.

18 The Conservatoire supports its affiliates to meet the requirements for external examining as laid down by their respective validating universities, and has developed relevant procedures, including the screening of external examiner nominations before these are submitted to the validating university for approval. The Conservatoire is 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). It 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 audit 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.

19 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 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 45).

20 An annual overview of external examiner reports is considered by the Conservatoire 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 concluded that, through good use of external examiner reports, the Conservatoire was making an effective contribution to maintaining academic standards.

21 The affiliates operate under the academic regulations of their validating universities, and detailed information about the methods of summative assessment and about grading criteria are published in programme handbooks. Award certificates and student transcripts are issued by the validating universities. The Conservatoire has supported the affiliates in drafting their individual learning, teaching and assessment strategies, including threshold standards for assessment practice. The audit team could see the potential of these 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.

22 The Conservatoire supplies the affiliates with standard datasets (covering student recruitment, progression, award, and employment destination) for use in annual programme monitoring. These enable comparisons to be made between programmes and between programme levels, including year-on-year comparisons and comparisons between affiliates. However, the audit team found very little evidence that programme teams or affiliate academic boards were making these sorts of comparisons. Mostly, they appeared to be commenting on or explaining individual statistics.

23 The Conservatoire compiles an annual digest of award data as one mechanism for monitoring assessment outcomes. This also includes comparative data on degree classification for a small number of institutions deemed to be similar. There was limited discussion of the digest by the Conservatoire Academic Board, and the audit team could not readily see how, in its present form, the digest would be useful as a basis for comprehensive analysis and interpretation of progression and award statistics. Neither was it clear how the digest related to the overviews on annual programme monitoring and external examining, which deal more broadly with assessment outcomes. 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.

24 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**

25 In developing its policies and procedures, the Conservatoire seeks to verify their alignment with the *QAA Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code*) in respect of students' learning opportunities to

achieve the academic standards of their programmes. The validating universities are also instrumental in assuring individual affiliates' consistency of practice with the *Code*.

The Conservatoire has spread the responsibility for overseeing the alignment of policies and procedures with the *Code* across various committees. However, 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* at all eight affiliates.

26 The processes of programme approval, monitoring and review are described above (see paragraphs 12-17). This section highlights points of particular relevance to the learning opportunities of students (teaching, assessment, learning resources and student support). Consideration of student numbers, staffing and learning resources is an important part of the approval of new programmes. 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 over-reliance on practitioners employed on a visiting teacher basis.

27 Annual programme monitoring reports seen by the audit team contained effective reviews of resources, and of learning opportunities more broadly. The overview report on annual monitoring considered by the Conservatoire 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, the team could not readily see how 'suggested' actions were being turned into completed actions at affiliate level.

28 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 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. The Conservatoire has suggested that National Student Survey results could be a useful 'handle' for discussion at student-staff meetings while acknowledging that results might be skewed by the small number of respondents, particularly at programme level.

29 The comments from students (both in their written submission and in meetings with the audit team) were mostly positive about mechanisms for feedback and representation at affiliate level; the high teaching contact hours also gave students many informal opportunities for direct communication with staff at all levels. The team gained the impression that, in general, students felt able to express their views with the confidence that the issues they raised would be dealt with.

30 Students are included in the membership of all Conservatoire academic committees, although securing their attendance at meetings remains a challenge, particularly given the intensity of student timetables and the geographical spread of affiliates. Another factor is that they do not have a clear understanding of how the Conservatoire and the work of its committees might have a bearing on the student experience. The Conservatoire is exploring possible remedies, including better use of electronic communication and the development of training for student representatives, while a newly formed student support committee holds out the prospect of dealing with matters of greater student interest. Nevertheless, the audit team considers it desirable for the Conservatoire to implement measures to improve the effectiveness of student representation and participation on its committees.

31 The Conservatoire expects that students should be involved in quality assurance through the annual programme monitoring process. However, 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 its earlier recommendation concerning the need for more consistent engagement by affiliates with the annual programme monitoring process (see paragraph 16).

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.

32 The need to ensure that teaching is informed by professional practice and by interaction and engagement with the creative industries is strongly reflected in the learning, teaching and assessment strategies of each of the affiliates. 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. 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 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.

33 The Conservatoire recognises that maintaining excellence in teaching depends also on enhancing its research culture, and it is developing 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. 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. Moreover, since the incorporation of research into teaching is planned by the Conservatoire to be a key feature for enhancement of the student learning experience, 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.

34 The only programmes that incorporate a work placement are the technical programmes at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and RADA, although the placement is not an assessed component. The Conservatoire has produced a template for use by affiliates in preparing placement handbooks. The audit team regarded this as a useful step towards expanding the current information for students to include more advice on how to deal with problems should they arise. 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 difficulties encountered. The students who met the team, commenting on their own placement experience, found it valuable for developing contacts in the industry as much as for giving them a taster of 'real' work.

35 The criteria for membership of the Conservatoire (and for receipt of premium funding from HEFCE) serve as a specification of students' entitlements to teaching and professional supervision; they also cover class sizes, space norms and the provision of specialist facilities that match professional standards. The allocation of student numbers to each affiliate forms the basis of its funding allocation from the Conservatoire. However, 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).

36 The Conservatoire has recently established a learning resources sub-committee, which brings together relevant staff from the affiliates to facilitate shared developments and seek ways of avoiding unnecessary duplication. The audit team was uncertain as to how assiduously student feedback on learning resources was being collected or utilised, given the limited references to it in some affiliates' annual programme monitoring reports.

37 A further condition of membership of the Conservatoire is that 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.

38 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 Conservatoire 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.

39 Primary responsibility for student support lies with the affiliates. 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, and entitlements to support were clearly stated in the programme handbooks seen by the audit team.

40 The student support provided by the affiliates is augmented by the Conservatoire through the work of the Equality and Diversity Manager, who 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. The team also noted that the new student support sub-committee had a remit to disseminate best practice and, wherever possible, to share student support services more effectively.

41 Most staffing matters are the sole responsibility of the affiliates. However, the operating agreements provide for the Conservatoire 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.

42 The Conservatoire's human resources 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. According to the current strategy document, 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 also noted that at least one affiliate had yet to establish a staff appraisal system.

43 Staff development directly related to the teaching responsibilities of staff (for example, renewing professional experience) is supported at affiliate level. The Conservatoire provides additional opportunities for staff development by funding the development of artistic and pedagogic innovation through knowledge transfer activities. It also organises an annual staff conference and supports an ongoing staff seminar programme. It has used targeted funding allocations from HEFCE 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.

44 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**

45 The Conservatoire has a responsibility to encourage good practice among its affiliates and 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 and, second, oversight by the Learning and Teaching Committee of the affiliates' annual programme monitoring reports. However, the audit team considered that there was little analysis or evaluation of these reports by the Conservatoire's academic committees; 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. The team considers it desirable for the Conservatoire to strengthen mechanisms for identifying good practice that is transferable across disciplines and affiliate schools.

46 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 quality enhancement of teaching.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

47 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**

48 Admissions to research programmes (which had been offered only at the London Contemporary Dance School) were suspended in 2008. 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**

49 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. It is also subject to checks by the Conservatoire.

50 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.

51 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

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website. The responsibility of affiliates for furnishing the Conservatoire with their respective data is specified in the operating agreements.

52 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.

## **Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations**

### **Features of good practice**

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

- the formulation of level descriptors as a tool for curriculum development (paragraph 13)
- the encouragement given to staff and students to engage with professional practice (paragraph 32)
- the effectiveness of support arrangements for disabled students (paragraph 40).

### **Recommendations for action**

54 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 11)
- to secure an effective and consistent level of engagement with annual programme monitoring across its affiliates (paragraph 16).

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

- to clarify the criteria for screening nominations of external examiners (paragraph 18)
- to improve the analysis and use of management information to ensure that all important issues can be identified and acted upon (paragraph 23)
- to implement measures to improve the effectiveness of student representation and participation on Conservatoire committees (paragraph 30)
- 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 33)
- to strengthen mechanisms for identifying good practice that is transferable across disciplines and affiliate schools (paragraph 45).

## **Appendix**

### **The Conservatoire for Dance and Drama's response to the Institutional audit report**

The Conservatoire welcomes the report of the QAA's institutional audit, and its overall conclusion that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the Conservatoire's present and future management of the academic standards of the awards conferred by its awarding universities. It also welcomes the confidence placed in the Conservatoire's present and future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

The Conservatoire is pleased that the audit recognised strengths of practice in the formulation of level descriptors as a tool for curriculum development, the encouragement given to staff and students to engage with professional practice, and (as in the 2005 Audit outcome) the effectiveness of support arrangements for disabled students. The Conservatoire continues to devote energy and creativity to developing its leadership in the vocational higher education and practice-based training of professionals in dance, drama and circus arts.

The recommendations from the audit team echo work already underway in key areas of the Conservatoire's strategy and development. The Conservatoire regards engagement with the audit process as one important part of the ongoing enhancement and development of its work. The responses to these recommendations will be overseen by the Academic Board of the Conservatoire and will be an important part of the institution's future enhancement work. The audit confirms progress since 2005 and encourages the Conservatoire in its intention to seek greater autonomy and ownership of quality and standards.



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