**Royal Northern College of Music**

**Institutional audit**

**February 2011**

**Annex to the report**

## Contents

# Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the Royal Northern College of Music (the College), from 28 February to 4 March 2011 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 institution makes under its own degree awarding powers.

# Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the Royal Northern College of Music is 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
- **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, a clearly articulated and systematic approach to quality enhancement is serving the College well. The commitment to continuous improvement of the student learning experience is apparent throughout the institution.

## Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The College's research degrees programme is only recently established and the number of students is currently small. However, in the audit team's view, the College has developed a good working relationship with Manchester Metropolitan University as the awarding body for its research degrees and has put in place a suitable research environment, together with the necessary procedural infrastructure to deal both with current students and future growth plans.

## Published information

In the audit team's view, the College has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. It meets the current national expectations for public information on teaching quality.

## Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the annual review of programmes of study, which is a well conceived process, thorough and transparent in its execution, leading to action plans that are systematically monitored (paragraph 21)
- the open and responsive approach to student feedback, which ensures that students contribute to the enhancement of their learning experience (paragraph 41)
- the multifaceted and structured approach to students' professional development (paragraph 51).

# Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the institution considers further action in one area.

Recommendation for action that the team considers desirable:

- to reconcile the various minor inconsistencies, relating to award classification and student appeals, between the practical application of procedures and their documentation for students (paragraph 31).

# Section 1: Introduction and background

## The College and its mission

1        The Royal Northern College of Music (the College) was established in 1973 through the merger of the Northern School of Music (established 1920) and the Royal Manchester College of Music (established 1893). The College, which is located in Manchester, is a conservatoire, whose higher education provision prepares students for a professional career in music. It has its own awarding powers for taught degrees (granted in 2007), while its research degrees are awarded by Manchester Metropolitan University. Among the College's facilities is a substantial arts centre, with spaces for both concert and theatrical performances; this is used both by the College itself and by outside professionals.

2        The College is organised into five schools: Composition, Keyboard Studies, Strings, Vocal Studies, and Wind, Brass and Percussion, in which students study for degrees in performance or composition. The teaching staff comprises 30 permanent staff and 191 part-time staff, whose teaching is complementary to their professional work. Student numbers, as at December 2010, totalled 719 and are analysed in the table below.

| Course | Undergraduate | Postgraduate |
|---|---|---|
| Bachelor of Music (BMus) | 463 | |
| Graduate Diploma (GRNCM) | 18 | |
| Foundation Degree (FdA) | 41 | |
| Master of Music (MMus) | | 164 |
| Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip) | | 26 |
| Research Degrees | | 7 |
| Total students (719) | 522 | 197 |

3        Several awards are offered in partnership with other organisations. The GRNCM is a stand-alone graduate diploma delivered in parallel with a University of Manchester degree, while the FdA Popular Music Practice is an industry-led vocational programme, delivered in association with a commercial partner. In addition, there is a collaborative arrangement with a different commercial partner leading to PGDip Performing Arts Leadership and an arrangement with Manchester Metropolitan University leading to a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), giving Qualified Teacher Status.

4        The College sees its purpose as to educate and train musicians to the highest level in an environment that is both stimulating and rich in opportunity, focusing on developing students' capacity to innovate, to inspire others and to be musical leaders of the future. Objectives for the period 2010-15 are published in the College's Strategic Plan.

## The information base for the audit

5        The College provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper and supporting documentation. The Briefing Paper referenced sources of evidence to illustrate the College's approach to managing the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision.

6        The College's Students' Union provided a written submission, prepared by the President, with input from relevant student representatives. The submission covered both undergraduate and postgraduate students, drawing on the results of both internal and external surveys, supplemented by evidence from focus groups and committee minutes.

The submission set out the students' views on the utility and accuracy of student information, the experience of students as learners, their experience of assessment, and the effectiveness of student feedback and representation systems. While several suggestions for improving the student experience were included in the submission, these were set against a clear recognition that the College offered a wealth of opportunity to aspiring musicians.

7        In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the previous Institutional audit report from May 2003
- the mid-cycle follow-up report on the Institutional audit, June 2008
- internal documents as requested by the audit team
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

## Developments since the last audit

8        QAA's last audit of the College, in May 2003, resulted in an overall judgement of broad confidence in the College's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The audit recommendations were subject to a mid-cycle follow-up by QAA in June 2008. Based on documentation provided by the College, this concluded that good progress had been made in addressing the recommendations. It identified the following areas as being of particular interest for the present audit:

- the developing role of the Academic Quality Committee in taking an overview of quality assurance and enhancement matters
- the implementation of a recognised teaching qualification as part of staff development
- the arrangements for developing and approving new degree programmes, including those developed through partnerships, since the College was granted its own degree awarding powers
- the arrangements for postgraduate research students in the context of the relationship with Manchester Metropolitan University as the new awarding institution.

9        The audit team paid attention to each of the above areas and relevant comments are included below. In broad terms, the team found that the College had taken appropriate action. In particular, the remit of the Academic Quality Committee has been honed, so as to give emphasis to the development of policies and procedures, and to programme monitoring and review (see paragraphs 18 and 21); mechanisms have been put in place for staff to obtain a recognised teaching qualification, following withdrawal of the in-house postgraduate certificate course (see paragraph 68); mainstream quality assurance procedures have been extended to embrace collaborative provision (see paragraph 79); and a suitable research environment is being developed for postgraduate research students (see paragraphs 84 to 85).

10        The appointment of a new Principal in 2008 prompted changes to the academic management structure. As stated in the Briefing Paper, these were designed to strengthen the role of middle management and refocus the work of the academic administration on the provision of management information to guide planning and decision-making processes.

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

11      Academic Board, as the principal academic authority, has overall responsibility for the College's academic activities, which it discharges through the work of its committees. Responsibility for the academic standards of taught programmes is focused on the Academic Quality Committee, while responsibility for confirming attainment of those standards rests with the boards of examiners. There are separate subcommittees to deal with mitigating circumstances and academic malpractice, as well as a panel system to deal with student appeals. The main committees with responsibilities for standards, including Academic Board, have members from outside the College, giving an external dimension to their work.

12      In relation to students' learning opportunities, the relevant committee is the Learning and Teaching Committee, which is responsible for implementation of the College's Learning and Teaching Strategy. It has recently been given a more clearly defined role in curriculum development (see paragraph 18). The Research Committee oversees the learning experience of the College's small number of postgraduate research students, with operational responsibilities being delegated to its newly formed subcommittee, the Research Degrees Programme Committee (see paragraph 83). Also reporting to Academic Board is the International Committee, whose remit (among other things) includes monitoring international student recruitment (see paragraph 58).

13      Reflecting their responsibilities for both academic standards and the quality of provision, the separate Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programme Boards formally report to the Learning and Teaching Committee, but also report to the Academic Quality Committee as relevant. In a similar vein, a sub-group of the Academic Quality Committee that deals with the annual review of programmes, also reports to the Learning and Teaching Committee, as relevant. The Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, who chairs the Academic Quality Committee, also sits on the Learning and Teaching Committee, facilitating an appropriate division of business between these two committees.

14      At the most senior level, the Principal has executive responsibility for the quality and standards of the College's academic provision, but particular responsibility for the academic operation of the College is delegated to the Vice Principal. Two appointed deans, the Dean of Academic Studies and the Dean of Research and Enterprise, are line-managed by the Vice-Principal and hold the briefs for taught and research provision; they respectively chair the Learning and Teaching Committee and the Research Committee. Also reporting directly to the Vice-Principal is the post of Dean of Performance Studies, which is filled on the basis of selection from among heads of school every three years. The three deans, together with the Director of Performance and Programming, who is responsible for planning the College's performance activities, and the Academic Registrar, who heads the academic administration, comprise the Academic Planning Group chaired by the Vice-Principal.

15      Responsibility for programme management rests with course leaders, reporting to the Dean of Academic Studies, or, in the case of the research degrees programme, with the Dean of Research and Enterprise. The course leaders of the College's core undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (the BMus and MMus) respectively chair the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programme Boards. In broad terms, degree programmes comprise three components: practice, developed through a principal study; academic studies; and professional studies. The principal study focuses on the student's technical, musical and creative development in their chosen instrument (including voice), or in composition. It is organised within schools under the responsibility of the head of school.

16      The main strategy document relevant to the audit is the Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2010-15, the two basic aims of which are to meet the education and training needs of students preparing for careers in a changing music industry, and to develop the College's full-time and part-time teachers. The strategy identifies a series of projects referenced to these aims (see paragraphs 72 to 73). Other related strategies, such as those dealing with human resources, research, and widening participation are being developed or updated during 2010-11, so that they dovetail with the new Strategic Plan. As part of this renewal process for strategy and policy documentation, the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook, September 2010, has superseded the Quality Guidelines, 2004, and the various separate programme regulations will be consolidated into a single set of Academic Regulations (see paragraph 29). The main reference document for research degrees is the Code of Practice and Regulations, published by Manchester Metropolitan University (see paragraph 82).

# Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

## Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

17      Within the institutional framework described above, the College assures the standards of its awards through the application of its approval, monitoring and review processes for individual programmes. The same processes also deal with the learning opportunities that enable students to achieve their individual awards.

18      The College adopts a single process of validation and revalidation, which covers both the initial approval and the periodic review of its programmes. The period of time before revalidation is agreed at validation and can vary from three to five years. Since 2010, the Learning and Teaching Committee has taken on responsibility for approving outline proposals to proceed to detailed development and then to validation or revalidation. The issues to be addressed, the composition of panels, and the procedures to be followed are fully described in the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook. The process allows for the consideration of external reference points (see paragraph 26 and 27) and for external participation by two external panel members - one academic, the other professional - whose role is to comment on the suitability and currency of the programme; there is also a student member, who is independent of the programme under review. The panel report, together with a response from the programme team to any conditions or recommendations, is considered by the Academic Quality Committee, and revised documentation is then approved by both an external panel member and the chair of the panel before it goes to Academic Board for final approval. This is particularly significant, since the definitive documentation currently contains the academic regulations that govern the award.

19      The audit team saw documents relating to the conduct of a number of validation and revalidation exercises, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, and involving collaborative provision; each was undertaken on exactly the same basis. The team was also given papers relating to the preparation for the revalidation of the BMus degree, due to take place shortly after the audit. In every case, the evidence showed a very careful process of pre-validation work, in which drafts of the documentation were debated and developed in a range of forums, including the appropriate programme board, with the involvement of both students and staff, before going on to a formal pre-validation meeting. This ensured that the materials presented to the validation or revalidation panel were complete and addressed the full range of issues identified in the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook. The panels interviewed staff and students and produced well-evidenced reports containing clear

statements, both of good practice and of conditions and recommendations for consideration both at programme level and by the College.

20      The withdrawal of programmes is first considered by the Academic Planning Group on strategic grounds, and then by the Academic Quality Committee, prior to approval by Academic Board. These procedures were in evidence in the withdrawal of the Postgraduate Certificate in Performing Arts Education, the College's programme leading to a recognised teaching qualification for academic staff; all those currently enrolled are being supported to complete the programme.

21      The annual review of programmes of study is also a thorough process and is again strengthened by being the result of an ongoing cycle of preparation, debate, consideration and monitoring. Supporting evidence for each review report is gathered against a series of required headings, including, in the context of standards, evidence from external examiner reports (see paragraph 24). Drafts of the report are considered by the appropriate programme board, ensuring that the report, though authored by the course leader, is fully reflective of a range of student and staff views on the running of the programme. Each report contains details of actions taken in response to the previous year's action plan, together with an action plan for the coming year. Once the programme board is satisfied with the report, it is passed on to be considered by the Annual Review of Programmes of Study Scrutiny Group (chaired by the Dean of Academic Studies), which may request modifications to ensure that all key issues are fully addressed. The Academic Quality Committee receives a report on the scrutiny process from the Dean of Academic Studies and overviews of each report from course leaders, while Academic Board receives a summary report. This sequence of reporting ensures that all aspects are fully considered across the College. The outcomes of the review process are considered by the appropriate programme board at its next meeting, thereby providing the basis for the next round of review and for any upcoming revalidation of the programme. The audit team identifies as a feature of **good practice** the annual review of programmes of study, which is a well-conceived process, thorough and transparent in its execution, leading to action plans that are systematically monitored.

## External examiners

22      The College appoints one or more external examiners (known as overall external examiners) for each programme, including any delivered through collaborative arrangements. There are three boards of examiners, an undergraduate progression board, and undergraduate finals board and a postgraduate board, each of which includes external examiners as members. The roles and responsibilities of external examiners are clearly laid out in the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook. They are not involved in marking, but scrutinise marked work against set criteria; they meet students to hear their views on their programmes; they may also be asked to form part of any panel involving an appeal against a decision of the board of examiners on which they sit, to ensure that the panel's decision is appropriate.

23      External examiners are selected against clear criteria, with all nominations scrutinised and approved by a nomination panel that makes recommendations to the Academic Quality Committee; final approval is given by Academic Board. External examiners receive appropriate documentation in advance, as well as College guidelines on the role, and are also briefed both by the College and by individual course leaders. They produce reports on a standard pro forma covering all the required topics, and are requested to comment specifically on the College's arrangements for preparation and support for the role. The reports seen by the audit team showed external examiners to be well satisfied on this point.

24      External examiner reports are considered widely across the College, including by the Vice-Principal, the Dean of Academic Studies, the Academic Quality Committee and by Academic Board, which receives an annual overview. They are considered by programme boards in the context of the annual review of programmes of study, and student representatives on these boards and other College committees, therefore, see the reports and are able to comment on them. External examiners receive a timely response indicating actions taken on the points they have raised; these are drafted by course leaders but approved by the Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement before being sent as a letter from the Dean of Academic Studies.

25      Like other conservatoires, the College also employs specialist external assessors in the principal study disciplines, in order to supply 'externality' in the marking of practical specialisms. These assessors submit a report on the standard of work they have seen, which is considered by the appropriate programme board and by the Learning and Teaching Committee. Although these assessors are not external examiners as such, they provide an extra element of external benchmarking and their comments are used to enhance provision in a systematic way.

## Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

26      As confirmed through validation, all awards are positioned at an appropriate level within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). Programme specifications, which are a requirement for all programmes, are approved as part of the validation documentation and made available to students in programme handbooks. The subject benchmark statement for music is referenced as appropriate. College procedures are mapped against the *Code of practice* (and rechecked as revisions are introduced) by the Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, who brings relevant issues to the attention of the Academic Quality Committee (see paragraph 34).

27      The College is an active member of both Conservatoires UK and the Association of European Conservatoires, and benchmarks its standards nationally and internationally through this involvement; it draws many of its external examiners from these bodies. Full use is made of external expert opinion in programme design, approval and review, and, in addition, Academic Board and the Academic Quality Committee have external members to advise on how issues are addressed at other institutions.

## Assessment policies and regulations

28      A high level of engagement with issues of assessment is demonstrated in all aspects of the College's activities, with appropriate and equitable assessment methods being a subject of continuous debate, especially in relation to the principal study - the most heavily weighted component in the assessment of students. Feedback from staff, students and specialist external assessors, as considered at programme boards and elsewhere, ensures that the conduct and content of assessment is under constant review, and this is reflected in the thoroughness of the treatment of assessment issues in validation and review processes.

29      There is currently no overall set of assessment regulations governing the College's awards. Instead, programme regulations are approved within validation or revalidation documentation and are published for students in a more user-friendly format in programme handbooks. Although a single set of Academic Regulations, which will include assessment regulations, is at an advanced stage of preparation, the audit team was given to understand

that programme handbooks would still be the primary channel through which students were made aware of assessment regulations, policies and criteria. The team found that the assessment criteria for each course unit and the forms of assessment used were laid out in great detail within programme handbooks, and was satisfied from its meetings with students that these were well understood (see paragraph 100). However, the team noted an important feature of the award classifications system, which was not in any of the handbooks and was not known to students: namely, that when an assessment is failed, but passed on a resit, it is the original fail mark that is used in arriving at the degree classification. Another aspect of award classification, the concept of a 'discretionary boundary' between different classifications was referred to in programme handbooks, but without emphasis on how sparingly this discretion was applied in practice. The team considered this omission to be potentially misleading for students whose marks placed them within the discretionary boundary.

30      Procedures dealing with mitigating circumstances and allowance for disability ensure that the particular demands created by the assessment of performance are addressed as fairly as possible. Most of the appeals received by the College relate to the performance aspect of assessment, and are addressed as speedily as possible so that if the grounds for appeal are considered valid a deferred assessment is not unduly delayed. The audit team noted that, as a consequence of this consideration, the College did not adhere to its stated procedures for academic appeal, which require a panel meeting (with student attendance and external examiner input) to consider all cases of appeal not rejected on prima facie grounds. While the team was satisfied that this variation from procedure was operated in the students' favour, and in relation to cases where a panel meeting would not have supplied extra information necessary to decide the case, it considered that the procedures should be amended to reflect the practice being followed. In another example, involving the collaborative programme PG Dip Performance Arts Leadership, the programme handbook did not make clear the College's formal appeals mechanism and that any consideration of a case within the partner organisation would be regarded as informal.

31      Overall, the audit team concluded that the College's assessment policies and regulations were effective in the maintenance of academic standards. Nevertheless, the team considers it **desirable** for the College to reconcile the various minor inconsistencies, relating to award classification and student appeals, between the practical application of procedures and their documentation for students.

## Management information - statistics

32      Data on student progress, completion and award classification are considered within the annual review of programmes of study. Student recruitment data is considered comprehensively by Academic Board, while related issues, such as widening participation, are addressed by the College's executive bodies rather than its deliberative committees. Statistical treatment of student feedback from internal surveys is thorough and considered in all appropriate settings, although the incorporation of National Student Survey data into the annual review process is less evident, particularly since it does not allow for the fine-grained distinctions between the different principal study disciplines around which the College's analysis tends to focus (see paragraph 41). The audit team concluded that the College was making effective use of statistical management information and noted the recent investment made in improvements to its student record system.

## Overall conclusion

33      The judgement reached by the audit team is 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 external reference points

34      Responsibility for overseeing an appropriate response by the College to the Academic Infrastructure, and any revisions to it, lies with the Academic Quality Committee. The Committee receives the regular updates to the *Code of practice* and first considers what changes have been made. The Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, in collaboration with appropriate members of staff, then produces a detailed mapping of the relevant College policies and procedures against the revised section of the *Code of practice*. Revisions to policies, as deemed appropriate to preserve congruence with the *Code of practice*, require approval by Academic Board. Key procedural documents, such as the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook, are reviewed annually, enabling any changes resulting from revisions to the *Code of practice, Section 3: Disabled students* to be dealt with as part of the routine update. The audit team tracked this process in relation to the section on disabled students, which was revised in February 2010. It was considered in May 2010 by the Academic Quality Committee, which instigated the mapping process outlined above, documentation for which was scrutinised by the team. Appropriate reference to the new version of the *Code of practice* is made in the current edition of the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook. Similarly, student handbooks that contain procedural information are reviewed and updated annually (see paragraphs 99 to 100).

35      Mechanisms like those outlined above ensure that the *Code of practice* becomes embedded in College procedures. An illustrative example is the guidance notes and panel briefing notes for programme validation and revalidation, which draw on the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*, and also, in the context of making reasonable adjustments to the delivery and assessment of programmes, on *Section 3: Disabled students*. The College has also evidently made use of the *Code of practice* in developing its guidelines on work-based and placement learning. Consistency in the application of procedures is facilitated by the fact that all programmes are managed by one of the two programme boards - undergraduate or postgraduate.

## Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

36      The procedures for validation/revalidation and the annual review of programmes of study are outlined above in relation to academic standards (see paragraphs 18 and 21), but they also deal with the learning opportunities for students. For instance, in validation and revalidation there was evidence of consideration being given to the resource implications of proposed developments in terms of centrally provided resources (specifically the library), any special requirements, and the adequacy of the staffing base, both academic and professional. Similarly, there was consideration of the views of employers and professional organisations as to whether programmes would develop the requisite skills for employability. In the case of revalidation, the views of external contributors and of current students inform the evaluation of the success of existing programmes.

37      The annual review process commences with programme boards looking in detail at individual course units, thereby encouraging input from the staff who deliver these units and from students who study them. It is a requirement that reviews include evaluation of student feedback and learning resources, as well as analysis of progression, retention and award data. As mentioned previously, the review process is a continuous annual cycle in which programme boards review progress on action plans at each meeting and consider curriculum developments for the following year. From minutes of programme boards, the audit team was able to confirm that discussions were detailed and monitoring of action plans was meticulous, supporting the feature of good practice previously identified (see paragraph 21). The team noted that when proposed modifications to programmes of study were being considered by programme boards, their discussions were set in the context of the overall programme; for instance, in considering an increase in contact hours for specific course units, the impact on staffing for the programme as a whole was taken into account.

## Management information - feedback from students

38      The College's small size, coupled with the significant level of one-to-one teaching that students receive, mean that issues can be easily voiced and effectively resolved without relying on formal feedback mechanisms. Nevertheless, the College conducts annual online surveys of its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. These elicit students' views on the three main components of programmes (the principal study, academic studies and professional studies), as well as on the academic and support services. The questionnaires are comprehensive and furnish detail at unit level. Survey results are incorporated by course leaders in their annual review reports and an overall analysis is considered by the respective programme boards. There is, in addition, an annual library survey (see paragraph 54), which also informs the annual review of programmes of study. The audit team found the treatment of survey results to be detailed and thorough, as shown in review reports and committee minutes.

39      Response rates to the general surveys from both fourth year undergraduate students and postgraduate students are known to be low. As a result, the timing of the postgraduate survey is being reviewed to encourage greater participation, while, as a short-term remedy for capturing more information on year four units, feedback is being sought from graduates who returned to the College on postgraduate programmes. The College also obtains feedback from final year students through the National Student Survey (NSS) in which its participation rate is high, due in no small measure to the support lent by the Students' Union in encouraging students to complete the survey.

40      NSS results are considered widely within the College, including by Academic Board, and there is a presentation made to the Board of Governors. The audit team noted that the College compared its performance with that of other specialist conservatoires, while also focusing attention on weaker areas, or where there had been deterioration from the previous year. The Academic Planning Group has developed an NSS action plan for 2010-11, which had been partially implemented at the time of the audit. In addition, one of the projects associated with the new Learning and Teaching Strategy (see paragraph 73) is concerned with feedback to students on assessment, which has been a lower-scoring area in the NSS.

41      The audit team was given to understand (in meetings with students and staff) that the College has paid rather more attention to internal surveys than to the NSS, but that this was changing. For instance, the 2010 results were considered at the Annual Staff Conference in September 2010 and, more recently, at a staff development event. The team further noted that the NSS results had also been discussed in some detail by the Undergraduate Programme Board, with the object of using the revalidation of the BMus to effect improvements in the organisation of the programme. The team identifies as a feature

of **good practice** the College's open and responsive approach to student feedback, which ensures that students contribute to the enhancement of their learning experience.

## Role of students in quality assurance

42      Students have a role in quality assurance through their membership of Academic Board and its committees, including the Academic Quality Committee, the Learning and Teaching Committee, the International Committee and the programme boards. The latter have student representatives from different year groups or specific programmes. Student representatives are nominated by the Students' Union President, who as the sole sabbatical officer also acts as the main conduit for communication between representatives and the constituencies they represent. There is a Student-Staff Liaison Group, whose remit covers the non-academic side of the student experience, such as operational issues associated with College services and facilities, including halls of residence. This group has recently been revamped to clarify its function and has been given a clear reporting line into the Senior Management Committee.

43      The College works cooperatively with the Students' Union in supporting the representational system. For example, a half-day training programme run by the Students' Union and supported by the Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement was delivered at the start of the current academic year, supplemented by a brief guide for student representatives. Also introduced at this session is the facility for student representatives to go through agendas before meetings and relevant issues after meetings with the Students' Union President and/or the Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement. The students who met the audit team commented positively on these recent developments. It appeared to the team that the leadership provided by the Students' Union was a significant factor in the success of the representation system, but that conversely reliance on this leadership could pose a challenge to the sustainability of the system.

44      Outside of students' involvement in quality assurance through representation on academic committees, the College is seeking to involve them in other ways that have the potential to enhance the quality of its educational provision. For instance, validation/revalidation panels have a student member independent of the programme being considered and also meet groups of students, while there are plans to have student focus groups comment on draft documentation as part of the preparations for revalidation of the BMus.

## Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

45      The College recognises the importance of linking research and advanced scholarship with learning opportunities for students. Central to its approach is to encourage staff and students to see their practice as a form of applied research, known as practice-as-research. This approach is carried through into the design of programme structures and curriculum content, with aspects of practice-as-research being included in the final year of the BMus. Research-led teaching is promoted through elective course units whose subject matter is congruent with staff research interests, and research work in areas such as music psychology and music education is generating new opportunities for students to perform in different settings. Undergraduate students are introduced to research methods through project work, while postgraduate students take specific preparatory units. A postgraduate programme in research methods for creative practitioners is under development, explicitly linked to the Learning and Teaching Strategy project on the integration of research and teaching (see paragraph 73).

46      The College expects both full-time and part-time staff to engage in research, and a senior lecturer appointment has recently been made in the area of educational development with a view to ensuring that provision is underpinned by the latest research and scholarship. Encouragement is given through staff development funding to support research visits to other conservatoires in Europe and through the College's teaching awards scheme (see paragraph 69). A weekly research forum has been organised so that staff, postgraduate students and visiting researchers can share work-in-progress through presentations and debate (see paragraph 85).

## Other modes of study

47      As part of its emphasis on the professional development of its students, the College works with a number of partners to provide placement and work-based learning opportunities. These fall into three main categories: professional attachments offering experience with a professional orchestra, work-based learning in arts administration, and other shadowing or placement opportunities from a list of approved providers. Placements are not normally credit-bearing, although they may be assessed, an exception being the optional professional placement within the MMus.

48      Professional orchestra placements are subject to strong competition. They are highly sought-after and valued by students, and even those who are not successful appreciate the experience of preparation and auditioning as a valuable insight into the professional context in which they aspire to work. Mentored work experience is organised in accordance with the College's work-based learning and placement guidelines, which are aimed at students, partner organisations and College staff involved in managing placements. There is a learning agreement for each placement, setting out the respective roles and responsibilities of student and provider. Feedback is provided by the mentor, while the student completes a reflective account (see paragraph 66). Partner organisations provide written evaluation of the student's performance. The audit team found all these arrangements to be consistent with the *Code of practice*.

49      In addition, the College routinely provides a range of performance opportunities for students both through its own facilities and through external professional engagements for students who have reached a stage where they can be placed on the external list. These opportunities, while not part of students' programmes of study, are beneficial to their professional development.

50      Provision through collaborative arrangements also includes work-based learning. The FdA Popular Music Practice (the College's single Foundation Degree) fully integrates work-based learning through opportunities for students to work alongside professional musicians, recording engineers and producers at rehearsal and recording studios in Manchester. The PGDip Performing Arts Leadership is firmly practice-based, involving a specialist training programme and work in schools. The detailed arrangements are covered by the respective collaborative agreements.

51      The audit team concluded that there was a pervasive emphasis in all programmes on the development of professional skills and identifies as a feature of **good practice** the multifaceted and structured approach to students' professional development. Furthermore, the Learning and Teaching Strategy envisages work-based learning and professional experience becoming increasingly embedded in core curriculum provision and the team was able to see from draft documents for the revalidation of the BMus degree how detailed proposals for the incorporation of professional skills were being developed.

52      The College does not operate any programmes of study through flexible or distributed learning either within its own in-house provision or that delivered under collaborative arrangements with partner organisations.

## Resources for learning

53      The main mechanisms for identifying learning resource requirements are validation/revalidation, the annual review of programmes of study and the annual library survey. Requests for additional resources emanating from either schools or service departments are then considered through the annual business planning process. Longer term developments are taken forward through the College's strategic plans. The College's learning resources have scored highly in the NSS and were reported on positively in the students' written submission.

54      According to the Briefing Paper, the library has a large stock of music, books and audio-visual material and has recently added a number of online resources. The Learning and Teaching Committee considers the development of learning resources in the light of the library survey and statistics on the usage of different media categories. The library is also responsive to needs identified through the annual review of programmes of study, as evident from the minutes of programme boards. The students who met the team were particularly appreciative of the helpfulness of library staff in locating copies of scores that needed to be sourced from other libraries.

55      The Learning and Teaching Strategy recognises the need to develop in students IT skills relevant to their professional development. These would include developing a web presence, using music publishing software and employing creative applications in music performance, composition and recording. The audit team heard from staff examples of such creative applications currently being introduced and from students of the effective use of recording facilities to support their instrumental studies. In general, students considered hardware and software provision to be of a high standard and well supported.

56      The College is in the process of implementing a virtual learning environment (VLE) for all programmes from 2011-12, led by the new appointment of an e-learning coordinator. Existing use of the intranet for online teaching resources has resulted in a system recognised as being poorly structured and frustrating to use, whereas the VLE developed by the College's partner to support the FdA Popular Music Practice is proving to be very effective, as confirmed by students on the programme. The audit team noted recent activity in relation to the planned VLE, including discussions by the Learning and Teaching Committee and consultations with staff and students led by the new e-learning coordinator.

57      As indicated in the Briefing Paper, the College regards its teaching space and performance venues as being of professional standard. This was confirmed by views expressed in the student written submission and by students in meetings with the audit team. Practice rooms are a key resource and, although there is pressure on their availability at times, students regard the provision as very good and well managed to achieve effective use. In addition, staff indicated that facilities were designed or could be adapted to meet the specific requirements of students with disabilities, with a 'disability audit' being conducted as part of any proposed refurbishment. The College's Estates Strategy is linked to the Learning and Teaching Strategy so that the physical environment can be developed in ways which best meet future learning and teaching requirements.

## Admissions policy

58      The admissions policy for each programme, which also covers the accreditation of prior learning (both certificated and experiential), is contained in the relevant programme handbook. Applications to undergraduate programmes are made through the Conservatoires UK Admissions Service (CUKAS), although some international students apply directly to the College. English language requirements for international students are clearly stated in the prospectus. The admissions process is managed centrally, with appropriate involvement from schools. The selection process involves auditions in the principal study discipline, plus a written paper and academic interview, where considered necessary. The College organises auditions in target overseas countries, with arrangements made for applicants unable to attend such auditions to submit a DVD instead. Heads of school (or their deputies) chair final selection panels and mentor less experienced staff involved in the assessment of auditions. There is regular reporting on applications and offers against admissions targets to both senior management and Academic Board.

59      According to the Briefing Paper, the College operates an inclusive admissions policy based on academic and musical ability and the potential to succeed in the prospective programme of study. In this context, the audit team noted that all applicants were invited to disclose any disability or impairment, so that appropriate arrangements could be made for auditions. Open days for successful applicants provide a further opportunity for those disclosing a disability or impairment to discuss with the College their particular support requirements and any financial allowances that might be available. The students who met the team all felt adequately informed about entry requirements and were positive about the support provided by the College during the admissions process.

60      The College recognises the barriers to be overcome by students from disadvantaged groups in meeting its entry requirements - the high costs involved in playing a musical instrument, the need to start at an early age, and the unequal provision of music education in schools. Among the College's widening participation initiatives are grants given to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds to cover audition fees, and bursaries for local state school students to join the Junior RNCM, which provides expert tuition and specialist training to musically-gifted young people. The Centre for Young Musicians was set up as a project to encourage local young people from all backgrounds to take up specialist music training and, from 2005-10, it received funding from the College's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). The introduction of a non-traditional programme, the FdA Popular Music Practice, has also served to broaden student access to a conservatoire education.

## Student support

61      The support requirements for students' principal study are rather different from those for their academic studies, and students necessarily have extensive one-to-one contact with their principal study tutor. However, given the small size of the College, they are also able to build close relationships with their respective course leaders and individual unit tutors. Collectively these roles and relationships form the basis of what would normally be termed the academic support system. As explained in the Briefing Paper, the College sees this multiplicity of contacts to be more suited to the student learning experience in a conservatoire than the more traditional personal tutor system, whereby students are allocated a named individual who acts as a first point of contact for support in general.

62      The academic support system is supplemented by a range of student services geared to pastoral support. These are an integral part of the Academic Registry, and cover accommodation, advice about funding, counselling, and dyslexia and disability support. The

College employs a learning support tutor, a student counsellor and a support and welfare administrator, while an English language support tutor works within the International Office. The students on the Foundation Degree, whose primary support is provided by the partner organisation, also have access to these student services.

63        The College recognises the importance of drawing to the attention of students the available support arrangements at key stages: before they start at the College; during induction; and regularly throughout their programme. Relevant information is contained in a college-wide Student Information Handbook and in the undergraduate and postgraduate programme handbooks which are given to students at induction. In addition, the College's Students' Union operates a 'parenting' scheme for new students. In meetings with the audit team, the students conveyed a resounding message that there was always someone available if they needed support. They explained that most staff operated an open-door policy and that principal study tutors, including those who were part-time at the College, kept in close communication, even when performance commitments took them outside the UK.

64        With regard to the support arrangements for students with disabilities, the audit team met a group of students who had in place personal learning plans - the College's mechanism for making reasonable adjustments in line with individual requirements. Those students who had disclosed their impairment at the application stage confirmed that it had been followed up when they joined their programme through the process of drawing up their personal learning plan, which in every case had been initiated by the College. All the students, some of whom had disclosed their impairment during their programme of study, outlined what appeared to the team to be a proactive and responsive process for developing personal learning plans - the relevant College staff handled any necessary referrals to assessment agencies, provided assistance with applications for financial allowances and implemented provisional arrangements pending the results of external assessments. The team gained a clear impression that appropriate support arrangements were being put into effect promptly.

65        It is College policy that personal learning plans for students with disabilities must be reviewed at least annually. The students indicated that they were sent reminders when this review was due and also gave examples of how their individual plans had evolved with their changing needs. The students were also satisfied that their impairments were being sensitively communicated within the College to those who needed to know the support arrangements that had been agreed, and, on the rare occasions when a staff member was unaware of a particular arrangement, they had felt able to broach the matter with the individual concerned. Only in one area did the students raise any particular issue and this related to a College hall of residence, leased to an outside organisation, with a service-level agreement between the College and the lease-holder to determine standards of performance. The College will no doubt wish to confirm that the services performed by the external organisation in relation to support for students with disabilities meet the expectations it would place on itself, were it providing the service directly. In the audit team's view, the recently reconstituted Student-Staff Liaison Group (see paragraph 42) could provide a useful forum for discussing these types of issues.

66        In the context of students' employability, personal development planning (PDP), undertaken through reflective portfolios, is fully integrated within the professional studies component of the College's undergraduate programmes, and there are proposals under discussion for introducing a more structured approach to PDP within postgraduate taught programmes. Students have access to a wide range of specialist careers advice, both from within the College and from outside, through staff contacts and networks. In addition, the College has an arrangement with the University of Manchester, whereby students can access the resources of the University's careers service. This falls short of an entitlement

to an interview with a careers adviser, which the audit team saw as having the potential to disadvantage any students considering a non-music career. Nonetheless, the team was of the view that, in practice, any such students would receive reasonable support, given the general focus on the individual student at the College.

## Staff support (including staff development)

67      The College's staffing policies, covering appointment, induction, probation, mentoring, appraisal, training and staff development, are managed by the Human Resources Department. The associated strategies and procedures are reviewed by relevant College committees. At the time of the audit, a revised Human Resources Strategy was at final draft stage, as part of the wider process of updating all major strategy documents in the light of the new Strategic Plan. The profile for academic staffing at the College reflects a typical conservatoire model of a relatively small permanent staff base (30) and a larger number of part-time professionals (191), who contribute predominantly to the principal study component of the College's programmes. As a general rule, staffing policies and procedures encompass all categories of academic staff, although their contractual arrangements are necessarily different. As mentioned above (see paragraph 10), one of the College's recent priorities has been to strengthen the role of academic middle management. This is leading to some changes in the approach to providing training and support for academic staff, in an effort to reflect the College's preponderance of part-time staff. In practical terms, links with part-time staff are maintained through heads of school, staff development days and attendance at meetings.

68      Staff are encouraged to attain professional recognition as teachers by becoming an associate or fellow of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Following the withdrawal of the College's own HEA-accredited postgraduate certificate (no longer seen as cost-effective), staff who are new to teaching, or have limited experience, continue to be supported on an accredited programme at Manchester Metropolitan University. The College's mentoring scheme, open to all staff, provides a vehicle for them to prepare applications for HEA recognition through the 'experienced teacher' route. Staff additionally support one another in their role as teachers through a developmental system of peer observation of teaching, which is monitored by both the Learning and Teaching Committee and the Academic Planning Group. The audit team noted that the level of participation was in the order of 50 pairings, (acknowledged in the Briefing Paper as 'somewhat disappointing'). Therefore the feasibility of continuing with the existing system is being reviewed given the practical difficulties in arranging pairings with so many part-time staff involved (see paragraph 74).

69      Full-time staff and all part-time staff teaching 100 hours or more per annum are subject to annual appraisal; other part-time staff may opt in if they wish. Staff development needs compatible with institutional objectives are identified through the appraisal process. The College has a dedicated staff development and training budget, with funding for specific activities requiring approval by the Academic Planning Group. The Learning and Teaching Committee is responsible for agreeing staff development priorities in relation to teaching and learning and curriculum development. It also oversees the College's teaching awards scheme, through which staff may apply for funding for discrete projects, with approval again required by the Academic Planning Group. Good practice in teaching and learning is disseminated through events such as the annual staff conference, to be supplemented by termly learning and teaching forums and the development of an online forum for sharing ideas and initiatives.

## Overall conclusion

70      The judgement reached by the audit team is that **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

# Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

## Management information - quality enhancement

71      The College has recently articulated its approach to quality enhancement in a framework document. In short, quality enhancement is to be delivered through improved policies and procedures, improved management and leadership, innovation in teaching and assessment, and by listening and responding to the student voice.

72      The College seeks to employ quality assurance processes that are also developmental. As outlined above, the annual review of programmes of study is an open process, involving input from a broad range of staff and students. It provides a sound basis for a systematic approach to quality enhancement - an approach that has gained more coherent leadership as a result of the recent restructuring of management responsibilities across the College. There has also been a clearer delineation of committee responsibilities, with the Learning and Teaching Committee becoming the focal point for quality enhancement through its remit to develop and implement the Learning and Teaching Strategy, which identifies 13 separate enhancement projects to be accomplished over the period 2010-15.

73      The enhancement projects cover such areas as the learning environment; support for student learning; curriculum development; assessment and feedback; integration of research and teaching; responsiveness to employers; and developing teaching staff. The project descriptions outline key measures for evaluating the success of the projects, whose detailed scope is defined by the individual project groups. Responsibility for project leadership has been clearly assigned and there is a timetable for reporting on progress to the Learning and Teaching Committee, which in turn reports to Academic Board by means of an annual digest.

74      The two enhancement projects concerned with developing teaching staff, which deal, respectively, with rewarding high quality teaching and sharing good practice, are being used to review existing mechanisms for staff development and staff reward. Specifically under consideration are the operation of the teaching awards scheme, whose application process is seen as too convoluted, and the peer observation of teaching system, which is seen as falling short in terms of the sharing of good practice. There is already evidence that the Learning and Teaching Strategy and its enhancement projects are leading to tangible outcomes. Examples include the development of a postgraduate programme in research methods for creative practitioners (aimed at improving the integration of research and teaching) and the proposals for professional studies within the BMus (aimed at improving responsiveness to employers).

75      From documentation and meetings, the audit team noted several examples of how students were contributing to the enhancement of their learning experience. Student focus groups are being used in fine-tuning the proposals for professional studies mentioned above, and also in the process of implementing the College's virtual learning environment. Moreover, collaboration between the Students' Union and the College has revitalised the student representation system, significantly increasing students' ability to influence developments through programme boards.

76      In the audit team's view, a clearly articulated and systematic approach to quality enhancement is serving the College well. The commitment to continuous improvement of the student learning experience is apparent throughout the College.

# Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

77      According to the Briefing Paper, the College has adopted a cautious approach to developing collaborative arrangements, with opportunities being considered as they arise. Currently, there are students studying for awards of the College on two programmes delivered by separate commercial partners - the FdA Popular Music Practice and the PGDip Performing Arts Leadership. Both arrangements are covered by contracts, but pre-date current procedures for selecting and approving partnerships, although these will be applied to any future proposals.

78      As set out in the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook, prior to approval of a partnership the College will establish that the proposal fits its mission and Strategic Plan; that the partner has good financial standing and operates a policy of non-discrimination and equality of opportunity; and that expertise and resources are sufficient to support programme delivery. A report is made to the Academic Quality Committee and Academic Board, following which the collaborative contract is drawn up for approval by the Directorate (the College's senior executive team), Academic Board, and the equivalent authorities at the partner organisation.

79      There is a College-appointed link tutor for each partnership whose responsibilities are detailed in the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook. Once established, management responsibility for any programmes lies with a course leader appointed by the partner, with the link tutor overseeing arrangements on behalf of the College. The processes for validation/revalidation and review of programmes delivered through partnerships are the same as for the College's in-house programmes. Collaborative programmes come within the remit of the relevant College programme board and thus all aspects are considered alongside in-house provision and in the same manner. Documents seen by the audit team confirmed that these arrangements currently apply to all existing collaborative programmes and the team considered them to be effective and proportionate to the scale of the provision. In the context of award certificates, the team noted that reference was made to both the College and the partner organisation, as recommended in the *Code of practice*.

80      The FdA Popular Music Practice is taught on the College's premises and students participate in committee processes as related to the programme. By contrast, students on the PGDip Performing Arts Leadership are employed by the partner organisation and work throughout the country. In this case, the audit team noted that although there are student members on the programme group at the partner organisation, they had not been present at recent meetings. The team considered that the College could look for ways of improving student representation for this programme, perhaps through attendance at meetings of the Postgraduate Programme Board when reports on the annual review of programmes of study are being considered.

81      The College's other partnership arrangements include the delivery by Manchester Metropolitan University of units giving Qualified Teacher Status as part of a specialist pathway on the BMus, and a programme offered in conjunction with Manchester University (the Graduate Diploma (GRNCM)), which leads to an honours degree from the University and a graduate diploma from the College. The GRNCM is part of the undergraduate provision of the College in all respects. Students are represented on the Undergraduate Programme Board, where operational matters can be discussed, and senior staff of the

College and the University maintain regular contact. The audit team found these arrangements to be appropriate and to work effectively.

# Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

## Institutional arrangements and the research environment

82        The College's postgraduate research degrees programme (encompassing both MPhil and PhD) is validated by Manchester Metropolitan University. Under the memorandum of agreement (December 2008), the University has overall responsibility for standards and quality, while the College and the University are jointly responsible for the delivery and administration of the programme. The College exercises its responsibilities in accordance with its own MPhil/PhD Handbook, which references the University's procedures, as set out in its Code of Practice and Regulations.

83        Day-to-day management of the programme is discharged through the programme leader at the College, who is the link tutor with the University. The programme leader chairs the Research Degrees Programme Committee, which deals with individual student's progress, although formal progress reviews are conducted annually by the University (see paragraph 92). It reports to the Research Committee, which has responsibility for the students' overall learning experience, within a broader remit for the College's Research and Enterprise Strategy. It was clarified to the audit team that the annual review of programmes of study will cover the research degrees programme, but the procedure, requiring a report from the programme leader to the Research Committee, had, at the time of the audit, not yet been implemented.

84        There are seven students on the programme, with the first enrolling in 2010. The intention is to grow the numbers to around 20 students by 2015, when the first graduates are also anticipated. The College offers two research studentships and is seeking external funding to support further studentships. Research students have designated space in new accommodation to help give them a group identity within the College. They are entitled to full use of learning resources at both the College and the University, including library, IT and practice facilities; the students who met the audit team were positive about the resources available to support their research.

85        The research degrees programme is built around the core areas of staff research - musicology, music psychology, performance, and composition. The College's research seminar programme (originating in the Centre for Music Performance Research funded through the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) has been re-launched in 2010-11 as a weekly research forum, to which external speakers, as well as College staff contribute. One meeting each year will be devoted to a research students' symposium, giving them the opportunity to present and discuss their work-in-progress; the first is planned for May 2011.

## Selection, admission, induction and supervision of research students

86        The College's website provides information and guidance about the research degrees programme and how to make an application. The proposed research field should coincide with established or developing research within the College. Applicants submit a research proposal, which may lead to an interview and (where relevant) an audition by two

members of College staff appointed by the programme leader. The programme leader may provide feedback on unsuccessful proposals, prior to one re-submission.

87      Students accepted by the College must register with the University within three months of admission (full-time students) and six months (part-time students). At this stage, the College ensures that any ethical approval required for their research proposal has been obtained. Students are normally admitted on an MPhil registration for the first 12 months (full-time students) and may then transfer to PhD, subject to a satisfactory progress review (see paragraph 92).

88      On entry to the College, students receive general induction and their entitlements and responsibilities are communicated through the MPhil/PhD Handbook and a new College Guide for Research Students. During induction, research students are also given their personal development portfolio, which they will use to maintain a record of annual reviews, skills audits, and professional and educational activities (see paragraph 93). Attending an induction day at the University is a pre-requisite for registration.

89      The College is responsible for establishing suitable supervision arrangements, which are then confirmed by the University. Standard supervisory teams include primary and secondary supervisors (one of whom may be external to the College), plus a director of studies appointed by the University from its staff. There are limits placed on the number of students a supervisor may supervise; six being the norm for a primary supervisor.

90      Supervisory teams must have had the combined experience of supervising at least three students to successful completion. Supervisors without individual experience of supervising to completion undertake compulsory training provided by the University, while all supervisors attend University refresher courses every three years. It was explained to the audit team that the College intended to build its supervisory capacity in line with the planned growth in research student numbers through the appointment of appropriately qualified new staff, as well as through training and mentoring.

91      The MPhil/PhD Handbook specifies research students' entitlement to a certain number of hours of supervision and, in meetings with the audit team, students indicated that on average they had weekly contact with their supervisory team. Records of formal supervisory meetings must be kept using the University's pro forma, which students confirmed was the case in practice, and these form part of the annual progress review for students.

## Progress and review arrangements

92      The University undertakes the annual progress review and this is carried out by a reviewer independent of the supervisory team. The objectives are to establish whether the student is making satisfactory progress with their research and maintaining regular contact with supervisors and, using the student's personal development portfolio, to identify skills acquired and future developmental requirements. All students must have a satisfactory annual review to re-enrol at the start of the new academic year. The review is also used as the basis for deciding on transfer of registration from MPhil to PhD. At the time of the audit, only two students had reached the point of completing their first annual review.

## Development of research and other skills

93      Research students have an individually tailored programme to develop their research, transferable and employment-related skills. This is based on a skills audit agreed between the student and the primary supervisor and draws on workshop units from the

University's research student development programme, combined with other relevant units offered by the College. Research students must satisfactorily complete their programme of supporting studies and this is monitored through the annual progress review, when adjustments to the programme may be made in the light of the student's personal development portfolio. It is a formal requirement that research students attend the College's weekly research forum, while modest funding is available from the College to support their attendance at external conferences and events. With regard to the possibility of teaching being undertaken by research students in the future, the College is planning to adopt the University's graduate teaching assistant framework, including its requirement to complete a 'new-to-teaching' course.

## Feedback arrangements

94      The annual progress review is the formal mechanism for research students to give feedback and any issues raised are considered by the College's Research Degrees Programme Committee. While there is no student membership of this Committee, since its business deals with individual students, the College has recently added a student member to the Research Committee, where more general issues are discussed. There is provision for two research students from the College to sit on the University's research degrees student forum, but the students who met the team seemed to be unaware of the arrangement. The students also indicated that they felt able to raise concerns informally through their primary supervisor or the programme leader.

## Assessment of research students

95      Final assessment will not commence until 2015, but necessary procedures are in place. Overall responsibility rests with the University, but the operation of assessment and examination processes will be overseen by the College's Research Committee, which is able to nominate the team of examiners, subject to approval by the University. Normally, there will be two examiners, one external and one internal but independent of the supervisory team, and an independent chair, appointed by the University, who is not involved in the examination of the thesis. Recommendations from the examiners will be considered by the Research Committee and it will approve an appropriate recommendation to the University of the award to be conferred. All these arrangements are clearly communicated through the MPhil/PhD Handbook.

## Representation: complaints and appeals arrangements for research students

96      Students are entitled to invoke the complaints procedure of either the College or the University, but not both. The formal procedure is contained in the Student Information Handbook. The students who met the audit team were clear about the circumstances when they should raise a complaint with the College and when with the University. Similarly, students are entitled to invoke the academic appeals procedure of either the University or the College (but not both) in respect of assessment decisions or alleged malpractice. Staff were unable to explain to the team the circumstances in which the College would make decisions on academic appeals or malpractice, rather than the University as the awarding body. While the team recognised that the programme was at an early stage and these issues were unlikely yet to have arisen, it saw the need for clarification of the written procedures, lending support to its earlier recommendation on this point (see paragraph 31).

## Overall conclusion

97      The research degrees programme is only recently established and the number of students is currently small. However, in the audit team's view the College has developed a good working relationship with Manchester Metropolitan University as the awarding body for its research degrees and has put in place a suitable research environment, together with the necessary procedural infrastructure to deal both with current students and future growth plans.

# Section 7: Published information

98      Through its marketing and communications team, the College produces a wide range of information for prospective students about both the College itself and its programmes. The content of this 'prospectus' material is checked for accuracy with a wide range of staff across the College, including heads of school, before it is published in print and on the College website. The Academic Registrar has responsibility for checking that programme information on the Conservatoires UK Admissions Service (CUKAS) website is consistent with the prospectus.

99      With regard to information for existing students, there is the Student Information Handbook and every programme has its own handbook containing the programme specification, details of component units and assessment, and other key information. These handbooks are updated annually and can be accessed on the intranet. The web-based student portal linked to the student records system (MyRNCM) is being increasingly integrated with intranet content, and the planned implementation of the virtual learning environment is expected to deliver further improvements in the presentation of information for students.

100      From its own check of student handbooks, the audit team found the information to be up-to-date, comprehensive and generally consistent with procedural documents, notwithstanding the minor technical points noted above regarding the computation of award classifications and the conduct of the appeals process (see paragraphs 29-30). The students who met the team were clearly well-informed about assignment deadlines, assessment criteria, and feedback relative to marking guidelines. They also confirmed that the information they had received prior to joining the College represented an accurate view of College life.

101      The College meets current national expectations for public information on teaching quality (as set out in the *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes, HEFCE circular 06/45*). The prescribed statistics, National Student Survey (NSS) results and links to QAA reports may be accessed by the public from the Unistats website, which also contains the recently required statement on graduate employability. Within the College, the Academic Registrar is responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) returns and also checks on the accuracy of the information derived from them, as subsequently published on Unistats. With regard to the items of information on the quality and standards of programmes, suggested in the circular to be of likely interest to the public, while typically these are not published on the College website they are available on request.

102      In the audit team's view, the College has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. It meets the current national expectations for public information on teaching quality.