

# **Central School of Speech and Drama**

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DECEMBER 2005

## **Preface**

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE.

To do this QAA carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In England and Northern Ireland this process is known as institutional audit. QAA operates similar but separate processes in Scotland and Wales.

## **The purpose of institutional audit**

The aims of institutional audit are to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges are:

- providing HE, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and
- exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

## **Judgements**

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 quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards
- 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.

These judgements are expressed as either **broad confidence**, **limited confidence** or **no confidence** and are accompanied by examples of good practice and recommendations for improvement.

## **Nationally agreed standards**

Institutional audit uses a set of nationally agreed reference points, known as the 'Academic Infrastructure', to consider an institution's standards and quality. These are published by QAA and consist of:

- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*, which include descriptions of different HE qualifications
- *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects
- guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of the what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. They outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the FHEQ.

## **The audit process**

Institutional audits are carried out by teams of academics who review the way in which institutions oversee their academic quality and standards. Because they are evaluating their equals, the process is called 'peer review'.

The main elements of institutional audit are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution nine months before the audit visit
- a self-evaluation document submitted by the institution four months before the audit visit
- a written submission by the student representative body, if they have chosen to do so, four months before the audit visit
- a detailed briefing visit to the institution by the audit team five weeks before the audit visit
- the audit visit, which lasts five days
- the publication of a report on the audit team's judgements and findings 20 weeks after the audit visit.

## **The evidence for the audit**

In order to obtain the evidence for its judgement, the audit team carries out a number of activities, including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, such as regulations, policy statements, codes of practice, recruitment publications and minutes of relevant meetings, as well as the self-evaluation document itself
- reviewing the written submission from students
- asking questions of relevant staff
- talking to students about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the Academic Infrastructure.

The audit team also gathers evidence by focusing on examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work using 'audit trails'. These trails may focus on a particular programme or programmes offered at that institution, when they are known as a 'discipline audit trail'. In addition, the audit team may focus on a particular theme that runs throughout the institution's management of its standards and quality. This is known as a 'thematic enquiry'.

From 2004, institutions will be required to publish information about the quality and standards of their programmes and awards in a format recommended in document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*, published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews progress towards meeting this requirement.

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**A report, in lieu of institutional audit, based on enquiries undertaken in the period 2002-04, in connection with the School's successful application for taught degree awarding powers**

Following an application by the Central School of Speech and Drama (the School), to the Privy Council seeking the grant of its own taught degree awarding powers, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was asked to advise the Privy Council as to whether such powers should be granted, based on the Government's criteria. A team of QAA assessors visited over the period 2002-04 to review the School's application. Following scrutiny of the application and QAA's subsequent recommendation to the Privy Council, the School was granted taught degree awarding powers in August 2004.

To arrive at its conclusions the team of assessors reviewed the quality assurance procedures in operation, spoke to members of staff throughout the School, to current and former students, and to employers. It also read a wide range of documents relating to the way the School manages the academic aspects of its provision.

At the same time as the School was undergoing QAA scrutiny, it was also due to be engaged in a QAA institutional audit. The purpose of audit is to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards it offers. Audit leads to a judgement of confidence in the management of the quality and standards of the awards being offered by the institution. However, when an application for taught degree awarding powers has been successful, it can also be concluded, on the basis of the evidence reviewed, that a judgement of broad confidence can be made on the management of quality and standards. Therefore, no further institutional audit visit is required.

'Academic standards' is a way of describing 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.

Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

This report provides a summary of the findings of the assessors, focusing on those areas that are relevant to institutional audit. The report also highlights some matters that a future institutional audit team may wish to pursue.

## **Outcome**

As a result of its enquiries, the view of the team of assessors is that:

- broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the School's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards.

In due course, the institutional audit process will include a check on the reliability of the information set published by institutions in the format recommended in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*. At the time of the taught degree awarding powers scrutiny the School was alert to the implications of the document and was moving in an appropriate manner to fulfil its responsibilities in this respect.

## **The structure of the school**

1 The Central School of Speech and Drama, founded in 1906, was integrated into the publicly funded higher education institution sector in 1989 and receives funding as a discrete specialist institution. Its principal campus is at Swiss Cottage where it plans to consolidate its activities in 2005, although pending completion of the current building programme some courses are taught in south-east and east London. In 2003-04, the staffing establishment stood at 93 (88.5 full-time equivalent (FTE)), of whom 39.5 FTE were teaching staff; the School also employed

16.8 FTE visiting staff - most on visiting lecturer contracts, but also including a number of high-level practitioners working on professional services contracts. Staff in the latter category contribute to its programmes of study on a more limited basis.

2 The School's academic structure comprises a single 'Faculty' led by a Director of Programmes. This is divided into undergraduate and postgraduate schools, under the leadership of a Head of Undergraduate Studies and a Head of Postgraduate Studies respectively. This structure, replacing a previous departmental structure, was first introduced in October 2002, at the beginning of the scrutiny period.

3 At the beginning of academic year 2003-04, the second year of the scrutiny, some 715 FTE students were registered at the School, which (excluding intermediate qualifications) then offered programmes leading to the awards BA (Hons) Acting; BA (Hons) Drama, Applied Theatre and Education; BA (Hons) Theatre Practice; Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Drama; PGCE Media Education with English; Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education; MA Acting Musical Theatre; MA Advanced Theatre Practice; MA Applied Theatre (Drama in the Community and Drama Education); MA Classical Acting; MA Drama and Movement Therapy; MA Voice Studies. At the time of the scrutiny, the School's higher education programmes were validated by the Open University through the University's Validation Service (OUVS).

4 The School's stated mission is:

'Central School of Speech and Drama is an international centre of excellence based in London, serving its professions by providing quality higher education in, and training for, the dramatic arts and the performance and media industries.

Through its activities the School aims to help confirm the status of Drama as an important social and economic force in British culture.

Accordingly the School will continue to advance its subjects through an ongoing improvement in its correspondence with the

theatre professions, with its sister institutions and with its communities.

As a subject-defined organisation concentrating on the interrelated goals of quality teaching, learning, scholarship and research in its educational domains, the School will develop as an example of what can be best about a specialist college in a diverse UK university environment'.

5 The Governing Body, which meets triannually, has 18 members, including representatives of staff and students. The School's Executive Management Group (EMG), which was reformulated in April 2001 and meets at least monthly, comprises the Principal (as Chief Executive) supported by a Director of Resources & Corporate Planning (and Deputy Principal), a Director of Quality and Academic Services, and a Director of Programmes. The Group advises the Principal on matters relating to corporate management, and reports to him on strategic progress. This structure encourages clear and differentiated management functions and transparent lines of communication. In particular the separation of responsibility for senior academic leadership and quality assurance keeps to a minimum the likelihood of any conflict of interest emerging between the two roles.

6 Overall, the assessors concluded that EMG enjoys the confidence of the large majority of staff, appears generally effective and displays a coherent and confident approach to internal affairs. While its approach to external, sector-wide matters appeared to the assessors to be more variable, this in part reflects a management structure whereby much personal responsibility here is taken by the Principal.

### **The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes**

7 In the view of the assessors the School's Academic Board is a generally effective body which discharges its responsibilities with due diligence. While in 2002-03 there appeared to be an overlap in the business of some of its constituent committees (including the Learning and Teaching Committee, Research Committee



and Academic Planning Group), a re-examination of the effectiveness of the structure was initiated by EMG during the course of that academic year and discussed at an all-staff development day. This resulted in the formation in 2003-04 of a single Academic Development Committee as the sole subcommittee of Academic Board. This review appeared to the assessors to be an appropriate response to the continued existence of a deliberative structure which seemed over-elaborate in relation both to its duties and to the size and character of the School. The assessors had also noted a number of uncertainties as to the balance of responsibility between this earlier structure and executive management.

8 The deliberations of the Strategic Planning and Policy Review Group contribute directly to the School's *Strategic Plan* (incorporating the *Academic Plan*), which EMG translates into a range of annual operating statements with associated targets. Under procedures introduced in October 2003, the Strategic Planning and Policy Review Group is also the body which considers new programme proposals and feasibility studies. Approval of these leads to the incorporation of a planned programme into the *Academic Plan* and validation schedule (see paragraph 12). This procedure appears to the assessors to ensure the strategic as well as economic logic of proposed innovations and to be a useful and appropriate bulwark against the danger of mission drift.

9 The Undergraduate and Postgraduate Boards of Study support the faculty structure of the School set out in paragraph 2. Their early activities seemed to the assessors to focus more on routine than on fundamental issues. However, the School was aware of the need to address this point and, in June 2003, Academic Board approved a revised structure for the boards, introducing a suite of course committees and an Academic Services Board to deal with student related issues. While this revised structure was still relatively new in 2003-04, its introduction appeared to be

symptomatic of the School's willingness to take an open and self-critical approach to its own policies.

10 The School's activities are also supported by an Academic Management Group, established in October 2002, comprising the Director of Programmes, the two Heads of Studies and the Head of Professional Development & Lifelong Learning, with others attending as required. This forum is seen by the School as part of a 'crucial continuum' between executive business and the academic life of the faculty. While the assessors were not yet in a position to assess the long-term efficacy of this forum, it was judged at its best to be an effective channel of communication, and its increasing formalisation (which extends to the introduction of formal minutes and action points) was welcomed.

11 Overall, therefore - although assessors took the view in 2002-03 that while some committees and groups operated effectively, this was not always the case - the School's willingness to keep new structures under regular review was seen as indicative of a responsive institution committed to an enhancement agenda. As a small institution, the School is aware of the need to make accommodations between managerial efficiency and collegial deliberation, and continues to explore ways of streamlining its executive and deliberative structures in such a way as to ensure continued staff support.

12 Programme validation appears to assessors to be a generally effective two-stage process, both stages involving external membership. The first stage has a developmental as well as regulatory function; the second stage event included OUVS representation. Although the assessors formed the view that Registry support for the stage one events was sometimes limited (with additional responsibility falling to the chairs as a result) and that some variability exists in practice, the validation process itself appears to play a significant role in embedding the importance of standards in institutional culture and practice.

13 Annual monitoring arrangements, although transitional at the time of the scrutiny, appeared to the assessors likely to be robust, with annual monitoring reports being both self-critical and responsive to the comments of external examiners. Revisions to the membership and terms of reference of Boards of Studies (see paragraph 9) should further strengthen the annual overview process. With the introduction of revised arrangements for review of the academic year 2003-04, however, it will be important for this element of the development of quality and the assurance of standards to be monitored and evaluated rigorously.

14 The School claims that its approach to learning and teaching focuses on enabling students to become knowledgeable, confident, articulate, self-motivated and reflective professional practitioners. In its Learning and Teaching Strategy the School articulates generic values and principles associated with a wide range of discipline or profession-specific actions. These include learning to learn, equal opportunities and widening access, collaborative learning, sharing good practice, scholarship and research and the encouragement of autonomous lifelong learning. These values were debated and trialled with students as well as staff, and both values and operating targets are subject to regular review, with the monitoring of the Strategy itself being delegated to the Academic Development Committee. Staff and students speak positively of this value-based orientation, and it is clear that it is associated with targeted staff development activities and with a successful policy of encouraging increasing numbers of applications for the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILT) membership (now the Higher Education Academy).

15 At the time of the scrutiny, in addition to formally appointed visiting lecturers, over 250 individuals made teaching contributions at the School. The School claims that such personnel, particularly those with assessment responsibility, are appropriately briefed on their roles.

Nonetheless, students met by the assessors, otherwise very complimentary about teaching quality, pointed to a degree of variability among such staff, a concern given added credibility by the fact that at least some of the visiting staff expressed confusion about learning outcomes in relation to assessment. It would, therefore, seem wise for consideration to be given as to how the training, support and monitoring of visiting staff, whether formally appointed as visiting lecturers or not, can be further developed.

16 Assessors were especially struck by the School's commitment to extensive external involvement. For example, the School's periodic review of courses (known as Course Audit and Review) involves a review of a self-evaluation document by a panel which includes external membership, and material seen by the assessors indicated that the academic audit process is operating effectively. In addition, since 1995 the School has engaged some 200 external specialists as active participants in its quality processes, of whom about 115 have been involved in monitoring, review or validation activity. While, with increased institutional maturity, the School now involves fewer external participants than before, its commitment to externality as well as to external benchmarking remains extensive. In the latter regard, the annual statistical analysis presented by the Academic Registrar to the Academic Board, which includes analysis of the levels of awards across all programmes, appears to the assessors to be a well-presented and useful document that includes national and comparative analysis designed to be of practical use at a range of institutional levels.

### **The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the standards of awards**

17 As noted previously, the School's higher education programmes were validated by the Open University through OUVS at the time of the scrutiny. However, the School operated with considerable autonomy in respect of the validation and review of programmes and in

the nomination of external examiners, with OUVS presence only in the final stage of validation. OUVS also confirmed the appointment of external examiners and receives an annual report from the School.

18 Ultimate responsibility for the standard of the degrees awarded to students of the School lay at the time of the scrutiny with the Open University, but the School has always sought actively to assure the standard of the awards which represent the culmination of its learning and teaching activities. It regards the principal anchor points for the assurance of standards as threefold: the development of curricula appropriate in terms of level, volume and content to the awards to which they lead; programme delivery and assessment strategies which support and reliably measure student achievement; and a regulatory framework which specifies what is required for each award. The School claims that these goals are achieved primarily by course design, validation and review, and assured by regular staff reflection and interaction with students and by an emphasis on externality, not only in the form of external examiners but at all stages of the teaching and learning process. The School also makes extensive use of programme specifications in standard setting, with all units expected to ensure the compatibility of learning and programme outcomes and that all outcomes are appropriately assessed - an objective supported by a strategic deployment of staff development.

19 All assessments contributing to final classifications are second-marked internally prior to external sampling. The School's procedures for appointing external examiners were subject to standard OUVS conditions. This is a generally rigorous process which appeared to the assessors to work well. In respect of the School's own processes, the evidence that approvals and endorsements are generally properly executed is strong. While isolated cases of contravention of School guidelines were found (for example, not all essay titles were found to have been approved in advance by external examiners on one course) such instances are unusual and are acknowledged

by the School. Reinforcement of regulations is addressed through staff workshops and annual updating of the School's Assessment Handbook.

20 External examiners receive the Assessment Handbook and all appropriate course documents, and are invited to a well-received annual seminar to exchange views and disseminate good practice. External examiners' reports are copied to a wide group of staff, and a formal response is required from the programme team within two months of receipt. The timeliness of responses from programme teams is monitored by the Registry and forms a matter of report in annual monitoring. The Academic Registrar also produces an annual report to Academic Board on issues of more general significance deriving from external examiners' reports.

21 Overall, on the basis of their enquiries the assessors have confidence that the School's strategies provide a suitable mechanism for setting and maintaining appropriate standards for its awards and in communicating them to students.

### **The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning**

22 The Learning and Information Services Department is responsible for the provision of computing, library and media services, as well as advice to students; the Production Services Department provides equipment, costumes, workspaces and advice for performances.

23 Academic support, particularly in the form of tutorial structures, receives a high priority. These structures, founded on common principles but designed to meet the particular needs of each student group and programme, normally offer students access to two named members of staff, of whom one is responsible for supporting their academic progress, the other offering pastoral support. Formal details of this entitlement are set out in a programme handbook, and written records are kept of all academic progress tutorials. More generally, the small size of the School, the dedication of staff and the collaborative and experiential nature of much of the work undertaken by students are

all conducive to close staff-student relationships and a supportive environment. Successive annual monitoring events and QAA subject review teams confirm the strength of this aspect of the School's provision.

24 Student profile data at the time of the scrutiny indicate that 65 per cent of students are female and 10 per cent from an ethnic minority. The School's widening participation policy concentrates principally on links with local schools and on providing open access short courses, now incorporated into mainstream academic provision, and a summer school. The School provides appropriate support for students with disabilities, aided by a half-time HEFCE-funded disability counsellor. In terms of disability dyslexia is of especial significance, some 10 per cent of the student population having been diagnosed dyslexic. The School also provides writing skills support, although scrutiny of external examiners' reports suggests that the School has some way to go before it can be wholly satisfied with the success of this provision.

25 All students receive comprehensive student and programme handbooks, and there is general satisfaction with the quality of information provided. Other than in respect of a number of concerns about the quality of learning resources at the soon to be vacated Kennington Campus, students are as overwhelmingly positive about academic and pastoral support as they are about teaching, learning and assessment in general. Graduate first destination and continuing employment records are very encouraging, and the School maintains strong links with its graduates, a number of whom are represented not only as visiting lecturers but also as employers offering placement opportunities.

26 The School has recently established a new computerised staff database, revived its staff appraisal scheme and enhanced its recruitment and selection process by requiring job descriptions, selection criteria and training for interviewers. The induction process for recently appointed staff, hitherto predominantly ad hoc in character, is now underpinned by a centrally driven

programme. In addition, all newly-appointed staff are subject to a probationary period.

27 The School provides a range of staff development activities, the main forum being a twice-yearly Staff Information and Training day. The School offers a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, and the Academic Development Committee has actively (and increasingly successfully) sought to encourage staff to become members of the ILT as well as, following lengthy debate, approving a trial scheme for peer observation of teaching. This latter innovation has been implemented only gradually, and the School will no doubt wish to ensure the continued monitoring of the effectiveness of the scheme on an institution-wide basis.

28 Overall, in the view of the assessors the learning environment provided by the School, particularly on the main campus, is fit for purpose and regarded as such by the majority of staff and students with whom they explored the matter.

## **Conclusions**

29 The assessors accept the School's claim to have a shared sense of values, purpose and community. At the time of the enquiry, to the large majority of its students it was characterised by an atmosphere of intimacy, attentive, accessible and supportive staff and good support from central services. For their part, staff demonstrated commitment and a professional engagement with the School, their students and their disciplines.

30 As noted in paragraph 9, however, it has proved more difficult to comment conclusively on the effectiveness of the revised deliberative committee structures, only recently introduced at the time of the enquiry. In spite of clear evidence of progress, there remained residual concerns about the number of, and potential for overlap among, the executive and deliberative committees, and future auditors may wish to explore whether this remains the case or whether the School's present positive trajectory has continued.

31 The assessors were aware that, while the workings of some committees had yet to be fully embedded, the School was keen to address perceived deficiencies and was aided in doing so by the culture of commitment and self-criticism to which reference has been made. On the other hand, assessors also noted that on occasion this culture of commitment co-existed slightly awkwardly with the need for speedy and decisive executive decision-making. Future auditors may therefore wish to seek to confirm that rationalization has been introduced without detriment either to the integrity of the deliberative process or to the effectiveness of the outcome.

32 While, overall, the School's two-stage programme validation procedure appeared to the assessors both robust and professional, future auditors may wish to explore whether the School has enhanced both the central support and monitoring it provides for these events and the training of their chairs.

33 Similarly, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of revised procedures for the annual programme monitoring would appear especially appropriate for future auditors. Comment has also been made in this report about the need for further development of the School's widening participation policy and peer teaching observation scheme, and auditors may wish to explore the School's progress in these two areas.

34 In addition, while the School rightly takes pride in its deployment of, and liaison with, significant external professional peers, assessors noted some variability in training and support arrangements for such staff. Given the crucial nature of professional involvement for the School, both in academic and professional terms, consideration could appropriately be given to regularising the deployment of these personnel and to ensuring more systematically their familiarity with current policies on quality and standards. Accordingly, future auditors may wish also to give consideration to this point.

