

Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of ALRA, January 2016

Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that ALRA (also known as the Academy of Live and Recorded Arts - the Academy) has made acceptable progress with implementing the action plan from the January 2014 [Review for Specific Course Designation](#).

Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review

2 The Academy currently offers a Foundation Degree in Stage Management and Technical Theatre (Level 5: 17 students), a BA (Hons) Acting (Level 6: 188 students) and an MA Professional Acting (Level 7: 56 students). The awarding body for all these programmes is now St Mary's University, Twickenham. All students on programmes for which the awarding body was previously the University of Greenwich have now completed their studies.

3 Places are still heavily oversubscribed and numbers have increased slightly but are limited by capacity at both campuses. There are currently 243 UK students, 11 European Union students and seven international students across all programmes.

4 Annual monitoring has been enhanced by the creation of a new Curriculum and Quality Officer post to support the work of the curriculum leaders and administration team. Additionally, the role of Programmes Manager has been moved to Assistant Principal to provide a senior overview of the Academy across both sites, while an Assistant Programmes Manager remains in place at the North Campus to oversee administrative function.

5 A Quality Improvement Plan has been implemented as a rolling document to monitor achievement against actions and is reviewed at all curriculum and academic meetings.

6 The core teaching team has been expanded with the appointment of two new senior acting tutors, one at each campus.

7 In 2015 the Academy underwent a successful Ofsted inspection of its provision, including the effectiveness of its leadership and management and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, which were both found to be good.

8 The Academy's accreditation with Drama UK is valid until June 2017. All its programmes are validated on a five-year cycle with St Mary's University with effect from September 2013. The Foundation Degree in Stage Management and Technical Theatre was re-accredited in 2014, and re-accreditation for the BA and MA programmes is due in September 2016 and 2018 respectively.

Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

9 Overall, the Academy has addressed and made acceptable progress on the recommendations in the action plan from the QAA review in 2014. Good practice has been maintained and enhanced.

10 The Academy has continued to embed and to build on the good practice identified at the 2014 review. The robust and comprehensive admissions, audition and induction processes continue, and a welcome letter has been added for new applicants, which expands on what the Academy can offer. The outreach programme has been expanded to include more schools and organisations and there are deliberate actions to include students from a diverse range of backgrounds, for example via outreach auditions with London Bubble, and Generation Arts. Schools can also now request an outreach audition day. Career development and employability enhancement now includes professional showcases involving students and invited industry specialists, agents, casting directors, and alumni, as well as taking student shows to festivals such as the Edinburgh festival. Students receive continuing support and the Academy recruits an above average number of students with learning needs and disabilities. The links with alumni continue to expand with graduates returning to give talks on their work and use rehearsal facilities. The Academy is developing internal record systems to provide easier and more complete access for students from September 2016.

11 Progress has been made with ensuring transparency, standardisation and verification of the marking of assessments. Student and staff handbooks contain details of assessments, intended learning outcomes, marking criteria and the appeals process. The second-marking process has been clarified for staff and is taking place. The electronic student tracker system records the double marking and the final mark. Students are directed to information on marking and appeals processes at their induction and are aware that details can be located in their handbooks. However, they also reported feeling unsure about the second-marking process.

12 External examiner reports are initially checked by the Principal who returns comments on factual accuracy to the awarding body. Points made by the external examiner are discussed informally with staff at various meetings but are not always formally recorded. Formal discussions and any resultant action planning are only considered at the Academic Board in March of the following year, around six months after the report has been received. Students can request access to external examiner reports, but this has only occurred once and there is no agreed policy with students on what support and guidance would enable them to benefit from reading the reports. Practices therefore do not yet fully meet the indicators of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), *Chapter B7: External Examining*.

13 There has been significant progress with the feedback on assessed work. Students reported tutors giving more specific advice, and written feedback now relates to the assessment criteria and intended learning outcomes. Students also reported finding the electronic student tracker system useful for reviewing their recorded feedback.

14 The process for maintaining the accuracy and currency of information has progressed. The Academy initially created a Public Information Committee to oversee published information but the process is now overseen by the new Head of Marketing and certain work is outsourced. The content of all public information is written by the Head of Marketing in consultation with teaching staff. The Principal has responsibility for final approval of all published information, and this occurs verbally and via email, but formal recording of sign-off is not yet in place.

15 The arrangements for the recording and reporting of meetings has improved, though scheduling is sometimes problematic. There are standard templates in place which ensure that all meetings are appropriately minuted. Regular, minuted meetings take place throughout the year. However, only Academic Board meetings are timetabled in advance from the start of the year and this has led to members, especially students, sometimes missing meetings.

16 The information relating to the process for making complaints, through to the awarding body if necessary, is now available in most student and staff handbooks, though not all. Students report that they feel able to raise any issues or complaints with members of staff informally and confirmed that they are introduced to the formal complaints and appeals procedures as part of the induction process.

17 Admissions continue to be on the basis of a robust process of application form, live auditions, interviews, and observation and taster days, with the Registrar overseeing a centralised online database of the admission process. Qualifications and age are verified by means of exam certificates and passport. English language ability is evidenced by level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language certification, equivalent to International English Language Testing System level 5 to 6, and also determined through the linguistically demanding auditions and interviews. These are also used to assess genuine intention to study. Most international students are from the USA or South Africa but the majority of non-UK students have indefinite leave to remain and have been through the UK school system.

18 Retention and progression rates are very high across all programmes with retention rates mostly between 90 and 100 per cent and completion rates of 100 per cent for all final year cohorts. Data available at the time of the visit showed employability rates of between 60 per cent (2015 graduate respondents) and 88 per cent (2014 respondents), although details, such as amount of time spent employed in professional work, are uncertain.

19 Quality assurance is now more effectively maintained by means of the Quality Improvement Plan, which is a single tracking document and reference point for regular review of all quality assurance processes and actions. The new Curriculum and Quality Officer post also encompasses internal monitoring of quality processes and student evaluations.

Section 4: Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

20 The Academy has made some progress in working with the Quality Code. There has been a mapping exercise relating the Academy's existing policy documents and procedures with Quality Code Indicators. Staff from both campuses participated in a training day in 2014 introducing them to the Quality Code. However, there has been no further staff training in relation to the Quality Code since that time and the team found no evidence of the mapping being used to further engage staff or students or to enhance academic standards or learning opportunities.

21 Students had no awareness of the Quality Code and there is no mention of it in student or staff handbooks.

22 Before the start of each academic year all permanent staff meet for two days to consider outcomes from the previous year and agree actions and changes for the new academic year. These meetings are informed by external examiner reports and any other relevant data from external awarding or accreditation bodies. In 2015 a predominant theme

has been the external examiner's recommendation to reduce over-assessment and this has led to a proposal for a new assessment framework.

Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit

23 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

24 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Brian Whitehead (Reviewer) and Ms Jacqueline Young (Coordinator) on 26 and 27 January 2016.

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