Royal Northern College of Music

MAY 2003

Institutional audit

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Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) 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 the Agency carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In England and Northern Ireland this process is known as institutional audit. The Agency 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 the Agency 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 the Agency 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 02/15 *Information on quality and standards in higher education* published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews progress towards meeting this requirement.

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Summary

Introduction

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) visited the Royal Northern College of Music (the College) from 19 to 22 May to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide information on the quality of the opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the College offers on behalf of the University of Manchester, which formally awards the degrees.

To arrive at its conclusions the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the College, to current students, and it read a wide range of documents relating to the way the College manages the academic aspects of its provision.

The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic 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 and effective teaching, support and learning opportunities are provided for them.

In institutional audit, both academic standards and academic quality are reviewed.

Outcome of the audit

As a result of its investigations the audit team's view of the College is that:

- broad confidence can be placed in the College's current management of the quality of its academic programmes. The findings also confirm that there can be broad confidence in the soundness of the College's future management so long as it addresses the recommendations below; and

- broad confidence can be placed in the College's present capacity to manage the academic standards of its awards effectively. The findings also confirm that there can be broad confidence in the College's likely future capacity to manage effectively the academic standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

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

- the student experience with regard to professional practice in the Supporting Professional Studies strand of the curriculum;

- the concern to support students with a disability;

- the support offered to former students through the Sound Advice scheme;

- the involvement in outreach community projects; and

- the approach to, and support for, part-time staff.

Recommendations for action

The audit team also recommends that the College should consider taking further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality and standards of the awards it offers are maintained. The team advises the College to:

- take a more strategic, systematic and self-critical approach to the management of quality and academic standards;

- make clear the ways by which academic and management issues are progressed through the management and committee structures and where authority lies, to ensure that matters are dealt with at the appropriate level and business is managed efficiently and effectively; and

- include staff and students more fully in quality assurance and enhancement processes.

Summary outcome of discipline audit trails

To arrive at these conclusions the audit team spoke to staff and students, and was given information about the College as a whole. The team also looked at one particular degree programme, the BMus (Hons), to find out how well the College's systems and procedures were working at that level. The team focused on two discipline areas within the Principal Study strand of the BMus (Hons): Composition and Contemporary Music; and Wind and Percussion. The College provided the team with documents, including student work and, here too, the team spoke to staff and students. As well as supporting the overall confidence statements given above, the team considered that the standard of student achievement in the BMus (Hons) was appropriate to the title of the award and its place in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (*FHEQ*). The team considered the quality of the learning opportunities available to students was suitable for a programme of study leading to the award of BMus (Hons).

National reference points

To provide further evidence to support the findings, the audit team also investigated the use made by the College of the academic infrastructure which

the Agency has developed on behalf of the whole of UK higher education. The academic infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help to define both good practice and academic standards. The findings of the audit suggest the College was making appropriate use of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by the Agency, subject benchmarks and programme specifications. The College has further work to do considering the intentions of the *FHEQ* in relation to the outcomes of programmes at the certificate, diploma and masters level.

From 2004, the Agency's audit teams will comment on the reliability of the information about academic quality and standards that institutions will be required to publish, which is listed in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) document 02/15, *Information on quality and standards in higher education* (HEFCE's document 02/15) The College is alert to the requirements set out in HEFCE's document 02/15, and was taking initial steps to fulfil its responsibilities.

Main report

Main report

1   This is a report of an audit of the academic standards and quality of programmes of the Royal Northern College of Music (the College or RNCM). The purpose of the audit is to provide public information on the institution's soundness as a provider of tertiary qualifications of national and international standing.

2   The audit was carried out using a process developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) in partnership with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and Universities UK (UUK), and has been endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills. For institutions in England, it replaces the previous processes of continuation audit, undertaken by the Agency at the request of UUK and SCOP, and universal subject review, undertaken by the Agency on behalf of HEFCE, as part of the latter's statutory responsibility for assessing the quality of education that it funds.

3   The audit checked the effectiveness of the College's procedures for establishing and maintaining the standards of its academic awards; for reviewing and enhancing the quality of the programmes of study leading to those awards; for publishing reliable information; and the discharge of its responsibility as a UK higher education institution (HEI) with responsibilities for delivering programmes leading to degrees from the University of Manchester (the University) as well as its own awards. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with HEFCE, SCOP and UUK, the audit included consideration of examples of institutional processes at work at the level of the programme, through a discipline audit trail (DAT).

Section 1: Introduction: the Royal Northern College of Music

The institution and its mission

4   Established in 1973, the College is a specialist music conservatoire which educates and trains performers and composers for a career in the music profession. The College is a one-campus institution with an on-campus hall of residence, in the centre of Manchester. Facilities for all activities, including practice and performance, are accommodated in the main building where all staff are based.

5   The College's full-time four-year BMus (Honours) undergraduate degree, validated by the University, is organised into three broad strands: Principal Study (PS), Supporting Professional Studies (SPS) and Supporting Academic Studies (SAS). There is also a 'Joint Course' programme for students with outstanding practical and academic ability. This involves concurrent but separate study and registration with the University and the College. Students on the 'Joint Course' study the University's three-year undergraduate honours degree programme which leads to a MusB (Hons) alongside the PS and SPS elements of the College's four-year undergraduate degree course to qualify for the College's Diploma (GRNCM) as well. The postgraduate diplomas (PgDip) and masters degrees (MMus) awards, and the MPhil research degrees offered by the College are also validated by the University. The College has its own Diplomas in Professional Performance (PCRNCM) and Composition. A postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) runs in conjunction with The Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and leads to that University's PGCE award in Music with Specialist Strings, with subsequent Qualified Teacher Status after successfully completing a probationary year.

6   At the time of the audit visit, the College had 612 students - 451 undergraduates and 161 postgraduates. The male:female ratio is 48:52 per cent. Students from countries outside of the EU comprise 11.8 per cent of the total student body.

7   The College's PS work is organised academically into discipline-based schools of study: Composition and Contemporary Music; Keyboard Studies; Strings; Vocal and Opera Studies; and Wind and Percussion, each of which has their own Head. The SAS strand is delivered by staff in the School of Academic Studies, which is jointly managed by the Head of Undergraduate Studies (HUS) and the Head of Postgraduate Studies and Research (HPSR). The SPS strand is managed by the Head of Professional Performance Studies. All academic heads report to the College's Vice-Principal.

8   The College's academic staff establishment comprises 28 full-time staff and some 171 part-time staff. Its employment policy strongly supports the recruitment of teachers who are, themselves, actively engaged in the music profession. The College has close links with the professional music sector locally and nationally, and provides student performers for local clubs and societies and other community activities. It has established the Junior Strings Project and the Junior RNCM. It has been awarded the Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher and Further Education three times, most recently in 2002.

Mission statement

9   The College's mission statement is:

- 'the RNCM will consolidate its position as a leading national and international conservatoire while at the same time strengthening its regional and European identity;

- the College will continue to recruit tutorial staff of the highest quality to educate and train students for the challenges of a professional career in performance and composition and will continue to develop programmes and courses that are responsive to the changing needs of the music profession in its broadest sense;

- the College will continue to develop its resources - human, physical and financial - to create an environment of the highest quality that is effective, efficient and professional in all its activities'.

Background information

10   The published information available for this audit included:

- the College's current prospectus;

- the report of a HEFCE Quality Assessment Report of Music (January 1995);

- the report of a quality audit of the College by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) (November 1997).

11   The College provided the Agency with:

- an institutional self-evaluation document (SED);

- a discipline self-evaluation document (DSED) consisting of existing programme review documentation;

- undergraduate programme documents; Follow-up Report (1998); Postgraduate Programme Revision and Re-Validation Report: University of Manchester (2000); Undergraduate Programme Quinquennial Review Report: RNCM Response; Report of Institutional Review of RNCM: University of Manchester (2001); Institutional Review of RNCM: College Response; undergraduate and postgraduate programme specifications.

12   During the briefing and audit visits, the audit team was given ready access to the College's internal documents, some of which were available through the intranet.

The audit process

13   Following a preliminary meeting at the College in October 2002, the Agency confirmed that one

DAT would be conducted during the audit visit. The audit team decided during the briefing visit that the DAT would focus on two discipline areas within the PS strand of the BMus (Hons): Composition and Contemporary Music (CCM); and Wind and Percussion (WP).

14   The Agency received the SED and supporting documents and DSED, which comprised of the Annual Review of Programme of Study (ARPoS) (Undergraduate), ARPoS (Postgraduate) and the Report of, and response to, the Overall External Examiner (OEE) for the PPRNCM Diploma in January 2003. The SED was written specifically for the purposes of audit; the DSED was made up of existing documentation.

15   The audit team visited the College for a briefing visit on 19 and 20 March, to explore with the Principal, senior members of staff and student representatives matters relating to the management of quality and standards raised by the SED and other documentation provided for the team. At the close of the briefing visit a programme of meetings for the audit visit was developed by the team and agreed with the College.

16   At the preliminary meeting for the audit, the students of the College were invited, through their Students' Union representative, to submit a separate document (the student written submission (SWS)) expressing views on the student experience at the College, and identifying any matters of concern or commendation about the quality of programmes and the standard of awards, and describing how information had been obtained from students. A SWS was submitted and did not contain any matters that would require the audit team to treat them with any level of confidentiality greater than that normally applying to the audit process.

17   The audit visit took place from 19 to 22 May 2003 and included further meetings with staff and students of the College. The audit team was Dr D Furneaux, Dr E Lillie, Professor P Manning, Mrs C Penna, auditors, and Mr M Gresson audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for the Agency by Dr J Ellis, Assistant Director, Reviews Group. The team is grateful to all those who made themselves available to help it with its enquiries.

Developments since the previous academic quality audit

18   The HEQC quality audit in 1997 commended many aspects of the College's operation, including the loyalty and commitment demonstrated by staff and students. Action was taken to satisfy the audit's

recommendation that the processes and criteria for appointing external examiners should be consistent with the expectations of the validating university. Areas in which the College was advised to take action and did so included: the quality assurance and enhancement processes; the policy for academic standards; aspects of the student regulations; the consistency of topics in student handbooks; and some aspects of its staffing policies.

19   Since the HEQC quality audit, the College has had a number of reviews as part of the arrangements with the University as validating body. The postgraduate programmes were revised 'to reflect professional realities and to respond to market demand', and successfully revalidated in March 2000 by a review panel which included an external adviser at the College's request. The outcome of the University's Quinquennial Review of the undergraduate programme in April 2001 was used as the opportunity to recast the programme as a credit rated award in line with University policies and degree structures. Following action in response to the panel's requirements, this major change was introduced in the College in September 2002 for both first and existing second-year students. At the Institutional Review in May 2001, the University unconditionally approved the renewal of the partnership link, and 'generally commended the RNCM for its systems and processes' and the 'robust nature of its quality assurance processes'.

20   The College commented in its SED that 'the level of transparency that a credit rated scheme brings to so many aspects of programme structure, delivery and assessment has been of substantial benefit'. The audit findings supported the claim of greater transparency and confirmed that actions had been taken in response to the Quinquennial Review to meet the intended purposes of the precepts of the *Code of practice for the assurance of quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*), published by the Agency. Over the period, the College has taken steps to strengthen the quality assurance system, including appointing additional overall external examiners and revising, in 1999, its academic quality committee structure. However, the audit concluded that some aspects signalled by the HEQC quality audit for development would benefit from further attention to ensure that staff and students were fully engaged with a reflective quality assurance and enhancement system.

Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes

The institution's view as expressed in the SED

21   The SED described how the working of the current committee framework for quality assurance and enhancement links to Academic Board to ensure that the quality of programmes is assured and standards are secured. The SED also described how the College has attempted to articulate its committee structure with that of the University, its validating body. It indicates that the 'annual programme reports are the primary means by which the College regularly monitors quality and standards. They include, *inter alia*, commentary on, and evaluation of: changes to programme(s); future development of the programme(s); recruitment, retention and progression data; external examiners' reports; students' feedback; learning resources and staff development'. The annual programme reports are submitted to the Academic Board for approval before submission to the University.

The institution's framework for managing quality and standards

22   The SED described the Academic Board as having overall responsibility for academic quality and for assuring the standards of awards. The College's current academic quality committee structure was introduced in 1999, when formal Examination Boards were created and a review of the remainder of the structure was undertaken. Under the new structure two programme boards were introduced, for undergraduate and for postgraduate provision with a separate Academic Quality Committee (AQC). The validating body is represented on AQC which is responsible, on behalf of Academic Board, for quality assurance and enhancement of all programmes of study and awards. The organisational diagram provided in the SED indicated that the programme boards report to Academic Board through the AQC. Terms of reference for the programme boards describe them as 'committees of the Academic Board to which they report' and indicate they are responsible for the monitoring the curriculum content and the operation of programmes.

23   The SED described the role of several consultative committees, many of which are involved in the quality framework. The Heads' Forum is described as a monthly forum which 'offers opportunity for debate of a wide range of academic and management issues'. The role of the Senior

Management Team (SMT) is to 'share management information and to facilitate the College-wide debate of issues that embrace both academic and non-academic areas'. On the management side, the Directorate is the senior decision making group.

24   The structure as described in the committees' terms of reference, with two programme boards reporting directly to the Academic Board and with a separate AQC responsible on behalf of the Academic Board for the quality assurance of programmes including validation and review, seemed to the audit team to be very appropriate for a comparatively small, specialised institution. In practice it appears that the programme boards are reporting to Academic Board through the AQC in a process described as 'refining/filtering'. The AQC is described in the SED as overseeing the work of the programme boards. From the evidence available the team was concerned that AQC seemed to be involving itself in a large number of operational issues rather than taking a more independent holistic quality assurance overview. The minutes of Academic Board appear to the team to lack evidence of detailed debate of substantial issues, for example: the annual review reports. It was unclear where this debate was taking place and it could be that the Academic Board is expecting the AQC to debate this and other issues on its behalf. In the team's view to fulfil its remit AQC should be involved more in the quality assurance aspects of such activities and not in debating operational and course content issues.

25   The audit team was informed during the audit that programme boards now include all heads of school as a means to involve heads directly in the operations of programmes. The team believe that the management of quality could be made more effective if the programme boards were given authority to make some operational decisions about programmes and made directly accountable to the Academic Board as described in their terms of reference. This would allow the AQC to take a more independent internal view of quality, reflecting more closely its terms of reference.

26   The current membership of AQC is: Vice-Principal (Chair); HUS; HPSR; a University representative; Head of Professional Performance Studies; Academic Registrar and a representative of heads of school. Noting that HPSR and HUS are both directly responsible for the delivery of the College's programmes they are in a sense assuring their own quality. Another interesting feature of this committee is that it is the only one in the academic structure without student representation. This

appeared to be an odd omission and the College may wish to reconsider the membership of the committee so that it better reflects the requirements of its terms of reference.

27   It was apparent from the SED and discussions during the audit that many issues, both academic and managerial emanate from one or other of the consultative committees. Currently, informal discussions of both academic and management issues take place at either or both of SMT/Heads' Forum and are often then progressed through other committees. The way in which issues are dealt with was not clear to the audit team and instances were given where a particular issue may go to Heads Forum, SMT, AQC, and Directorate before a decision was taken. Given the large overlap of membership on these committees this represents a significant duplication of effort by senior staff. In the team's view these specialist consultative committees should be useful venues for focused, detailed discussion and provision of advice to management.

28   There did not seem to the audit team to be any formal separation of management and academic issues or of the routes issues should take within the committee structure. This leads to difficulty in identifying where detailed discussion should take place and duplication of effort as the same issues are often considered by many of the committees in the College. The College may find it advisable to review its managerial and academic decision-making processes so that the routes the issues should take are clearly identified and involve discussion by the appropriate members of staff.

29   In the course of the audit the audit team learnt that the Vice-Principal's responsibilities include: acting as one of the panel chairs at students' final recitals and also, ex officio, chairing the Examination Boards that decide the students' degree classifications (subject to ratification); membership of Academic Board; chairing the AQC; conducting the annual resourcing negotiations with the heads of school; chairing the Special Circumstances Committee; overseeing the agenda for staff conferences; approving College publicity material as well as membership of the Directorate and SMT. In the team's view this range and level of involvement may represent an over-reliance on a single individual to ensure that the academic and managerial business of the College proceeds efficiently and effectively. The College may wish to consider ways of revising some internal responsibilities to produce arrangements less dependent on a single post.

The institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards

30   The SED described quality enhancement as a 'dynamic ongoing process'. It identifies 'the careful monitoring of new courses and their regulatory frameworks' as one of the most important elements of the College's enhancement strategy over the next three years. It also acknowledged that in considering the purposes of the *Code of practice* several areas were identified where urgent work was necessary. In addition, the SED mentioned several other areas identified for specific attention in the next three years. These include: a review of the 'Joint Course' (with the University), a review of the status of the PPRNCM Diploma, a major review of the work of the School of Vocal and Opera Studies, development of possible shared programmes in electro-acoustic music (with the University), the establishment of a practice-based Doctoral programme, consideration of the establishment of a pre-degree programme, various administrative improvements in the Academic Registrar's area and a formalisation of procedures using the Human Resources Strategy (HRS).

31   Many of the above initiatives fall into the curriculum development category and result from issues picked up from review processes. In the view of the audit team there is scope for the College to be more pro-active in terms of a quality enhancement strategy and to be more self-critical of its internal processes. For example, there are no formal internal processes for regularly reviewing the effectiveness of its committee structures or the effectiveness of student support provision. In addition, the College Quality Handbook could be usefully enhanced by the addition of more procedural detail, for example: the detailed procedure for the initiation; collation; and reporting responsibilities for the annual review process.

Internal approval, monitoring and review processes

Programme approval

32   The University validates the College's degree courses and the SED stated 'the College has little say in the area of programme approval'. The College has largely adopted the procedures laid down by the University and has sound procedures for the initial preparation and consideration of proposals internally. These procedures are focused on the AQC, which is responsible, on behalf of the Academic Board, for dealing with all issues about the initial validation and revalidation.

33   There was evidence in the SED of detailed consideration of the *Code of practice* and, in considering the documentation for the DAT, that appropriate inputs to reflect the subject benchmarks and *The framework for the higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (*FHEQ*) had been made for the undergraduate programmes. The SED makes mention of the College seeking external participation in review and validation processes (for example: the postgraduate revalidation 2001) which the University did not require. The audit team concluded that the College's procedures for preparing proposals for submission to the University for approval were sound and transparent.

Annual monitoring

34   The SED gives little detail about the annual or Quinquennial Review processes, other than to identify the fact that the annual review of programmes' reports produced by the College were substantially fuller than those required by the University. The audit team was provided with the documentation for the annual reviews of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and for the Quinquennial Review of the BMus (Hons) and BA (Music).

35   The ARPoS are put together by the College and then submitted to the University. The reports consist of a range of working papers including meeting minutes, OEEs' and specialist external assessors' (SEAs') reports, student feedback data including the analysis of surveys and some statistical data on progression and completion. These, with a commentary and a proposed action plan are compiled by the appropriate Head of Studies, taking input as necessary from other staff, and are considered by the programme boards. The report is then passed through AQC to Academic Board before going to the University.

36   There is little doubt that the process is successful in satisfying the requirements of the validating body. What is less clear is the extent to which the wider community of academic staff that contribute to the programmes are involved with putting the report together, the drafting of the commentary, and the production and execution of the action plan. Teaching staff the audit team met were unable to articulate any purpose for the annual review process other than to satisfy the University requirement. It seemed to the team that by not involving staff more generally in the annual review process an opportunity is being missed both to add value to the process and its function as a quality enhancement mechanism. Greater involvement of staff would also facilitate a broader understanding of quality assurance processes by staff and their

embedding within the College's culture. The team would advise the College to engage staff more fully in quality assurance and enhancement processes.

37   The monitoring of action plans seemed to be the responsibility of the appropriate Head of Studies with outcomes reported back at the next annual review. The audit team believe the College may want to consider the benefits from more frequent active monitoring of progress to ensure that important issues are resolved in a timely manner.

38   The College has a partnership where the PGCE in Music with Specialist Strings is offered by MMU. Overall responsibility for the award resides with MMU, and the College has to meet the University's quality assurance requirements as a co-provider. At present there appears to be no feedback from these processes to the College's quality assurance of its own awards, thus denying the opportunity to develop a broader view of its overall performance and also disseminate good practice. The College may want to consider strengthening its lines of reporting and discussion in terms of quality assurance to take into account its contributions to the PGCE in Music with Specialist Strings, offered in collaboration with MMU.

Periodic review

39   The College has no internal periodic review processes because of the nature of its relationship with the University. The university conducted a Quinquennial Review of undergraduate programmes in 2001, and the audit team noted the College's full engagement with the process. The College's response to the review took the form of a letter to the University giving written responses to the issues raised. The team noted that the matter only received brief attention at the subsequent Academic Board and also that little discussion seemed to have taken place in the AQC that followed. No process for following up and checking on the completion of actions was apparent. In this respect, the role and input of the two key committees in the College's quality management infrastructure was unclear. The team believe the College would benefit from adopting a more strategic, systematic and self-critical approach to the management of quality and academic standards.

External participation in internal review processes

40   The SED described how the College requested that a panel member external to the College and the University be appointed to the panels for both the postgraduate revalidation in 2000 and the undergraduate Quinquennial Review in 2001. This was outside the University's requirements but the College felt that this extra external specialist would further strengthen the process. The audit team concluded that the College was well aware of the potential benefits to be gained from including external representatives in both programme approval and periodic review.

External examiners and their reports

41   The College fully recognises the importance of external examiners in securing the standards of its awards. The arrangements for external examiners operate at two levels. In terms of the PS strand, SEAs are appointed to ensure a consistent and appropriate level of expertise across the entire spectrum of provision for this major component. At the programme level standards are secured by the OEEs who assure the examination process as awhole. The reports of OEEs and SEAs are evaluated as part of the ARPoS, under the requirements of the validating agreement with the University.

42   The DAT (see below, paragraph 89) confirmed an appropriate level of engagement by the College with these reports in terms of the evaluation of comments and also the implementation of key recommendations at the programme level. Some issues requiring action at the School level, however, appear to be dealt with on a more informal basis, and the lack of supporting documentation to confirm the outcomes of these actions is a potential weakness in the quality assurance procedures. It is also unclear how issues requiring the attention of staff delivering course units in SPS and SAS are progressed and monitored. The College is recommended to review its procedures for disseminating feedback from external examiners and assessors to ensure issues arising are suitably addressed, loops are closed, and the outcomes assured.

43   The reports from OEEs and SEAs endorse the view of the audit team that the conduct and standards of examinations are appropriate and suitably assured. The comments of SEAs, on the processes of induction, however, suggest that these are not entirely satisfactory, and the College itself draws attention to the problems of sometimes having to appoint these assessors at relatively short notice. Although the publication of detailed assessment criteria has greatly improved the quality of guidance provided in this regard, the team believes the College would benefit by ensuring that the procedures used for the induction of SEAs are closely monitored to ensure they are adequately briefed in all cases.

External reference points

44   The audit team found that the College has engaged with the purpose and intentions of the *Subject benchmark statement* and, in part, the *FHEQ*. The new programme specification for the BMus demonstrates a thorough and appropriate engagement with the *Subject benchmark statement* and the *FHEQ*, clearly articulating the ways in which the learning outcomes are met at each level. In the case of the *FHEQ*, the College has further work to do in defining the exit points at the Certificate and Diploma levels.

45   The SED described the College's progress towards implementing the *Code of practice*. The SED stated that that the section of the *Code of practice* on postgraduate research programmes appeared initially to be of little immediate relevance to the College, given the quality assurance of the former through the processes of validation and the absence of research-based degrees at the time of publication (1999). It noted, however, that this situation changed with the introduction of the MPhil degrees in performance and composition in September 2001.

46   The current position with postgraduate awards, however, is still not entirely clear with regards to the *Code of practice*, and it is possible that some of these may not fully reflect the masters level outcomes within the *FHEQ*. In addition, the MPhil research degrees do not appear to meet the research training requirements of the Arts and Humanities Research Board for student awards, or the expectations of HEFCE in the same regard, outlined in the discussion documents 2003/01 and 2003/23. These issues have major implications for the College's aspirations to establish a programme of study at PhD level. It is recommended that the College revisit the outcomes of its programmes at the masters level to ensure that they meet the requirements of the *FHEQ*. Careful consideration should also be given to the HEFCE consultation documents on improving standards in postgraduate research qualifications.

47   In the case of the GRNCM and MusB (Hons) 'Joint Course' the audit team noted that discussions are underway between the two institutions to investigate the possibility of conducting some jointly run assessments. Under these circumstances the arrangement will become collaborative. In reviewing the structure of the 'Joint Course', in consultation with the Department of Music of the University, the team believes the College would benefit from reflecting on the section of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision and the expectations of the *FHEQ*.

Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies

48   The College received a HEFCE Teaching Quality Assessment report in 1994, a HEQC quality audit in 1997, and was part of a review by HEFCE's Conservatoire Advisory Group in 1997. The College response to the HEQC quality audit report was dealt with by the production of an overview paper by the College's Director of Development. This report was then considered by the appropriate academic committee and then by the Academic Board where the proposals for action were endorsed. The documentation provided no indication as to how completion of the various actions was to be monitored and there appear to be three issues identified during this audit that were raised in the 1997 report. The audit team concluded that the College may wish to consider its processes for taking an overview of such action plans and ensuring the Academic Board receives a definitive and timely report on how issues have been resolved.

Student representation at operational and institutional level

49   At the programme level, the SED indicated that students have been able to make their views known through their representatives on the undergraduate programme board and postgraduate programme board since September 1999. At the institutional level students are represented on relevant committees: Board of Governors; Academic Board; and the Library Committee. Students also sit on a range of consultative committees: the Student-Staff Liaison Group; the Information Technology (IT) Users' Forum; and the Welfare Forum. In addition to the formal structures for student representation there are informal mechanisms including an arrangement where the President of the Students' Union meets with the Vice-Principal as and when necessary. This open-door policy also extends to the school level as a means of addressing issues quickly and effectively.

50   The SWS confirms that student representatives are able to make their views known through their representation on committees at the programme and institutional level. Where students raise concerns the audit team found evidence to suggest that the College responds in an appropriate manner and that student representation on committees plays an important role in the management of quality and standards.

51   While noting the positive aspects of student representation the College is advised to consider the benefits of wider and more proactive consultations

with students at earlier stages of the development of policies. The College may also wish to consider the rationale for student representation on particular committees. For instance, the audit team was not convinced that there was a satisfactory explanation for the lack of student representation on AQC (see above, paragraph 26). The team would advise the College to engage students more fully in quality assurance and enhancement processes.

52   The audit team concluded that even with the potential for improvements to effective student representation at the institutional level, the comparatively small scale of the College allows for good informal communication between the President of the Students' Union and senior staff and between students and academic and support staff.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

53   The SED described how feedback from students is collected as part of the ARPoS. Student feedback is formally collected through a questionnaire administered to students on the experience of their programme. Year tutors collate the data from the student questionnaires and a report on them is compiled for and considered during the ARPoS (see above, paragraphs 35, 37). The SWS and other documentary evidence confirmed that feedback from evaluation questionnaires is seriously considered at the programme boards and action taken where necessary.

54   The library also gathers feedback from students on its performance by means of a biennial questionnaire, the results of which are considered by the IT Users' Forum and Library Committee so that they can be considered where any relevant actions or recommendations are made. In addition to this formal mechanism, the audit team learnt that students are encouraged to make views known to the library if and when problems occur. The team formed the view that the College may wish to reconsider the frequency of the biennial library survey to ensure greater responsiveness to student needs.

55   The audit team recognised that, given the size of the College, issues are often resolved through informal contact with staff and that the College is not solely dependent on the ARPoS for student feedback. The team believes communication with students, as well as feedback to them, will be further facilitated by the development of the College intranet and more widespread use of email. In terms of its formal mechanisms for student feedback the College may wish to consider how institutional

oversight can be maintained to ensure that its formal processes are monitored to help in the effective and timely resolution of problems.

56   The College endeavours to remain in contact with its graduates and other stakeholders such as the College's Association of Friends through RNCM News. In addition, former students may return to give performances as in the Young Artists Series - part of the College's Higher Education Reach-out to Business and the Community fund - led continuing professional development support for alumni. Students also retain contact through the Professional Engagements Office and there is a network of alumni ,although the College does not formally collect the views of graduates. The College also receives informal feedback from employers providing placements for students.

Progression and completion statistics

57   Although the SED makes reference to HEFCE's document 02/15, *Information on quality and standards in higher education* (HEFCE's document 02/15), and appropriate statistical data was available for the audit team at the time of their visit, there is no explicit commentary on the use that is made of statistical information. It is clear from the ARPoS, however, that progression and completion statistics are taken into account in this process, and such data clearly informed the revisions made to the BMus (Hons) to ensure a more appropriate distribution of awards as an accurate measure of academic attainment.

58   The audit team consider, however, that statistical data is not used to full advantage in terms of identifying trends in progression and completion rates, and the use of such information to monitor and evaluate quantitatively the implementation of institutional policies as regards key aspects such as admissions. The high quality of applicants and the low dropout rates throughout the course are notable achievements. Without closer analyses of the underlying data, however, the College cannot be sure that important trends have been overlooked, for example, the impact or otherwise of changes in the proportion of overseas students within the student cohort, or the effects of policies to widen access. The College may wish to make more proactive use of statistical data in monitoring student progress from admissions to the completion of study.

Assurance of quality of teaching staff, appointment, appraisal and reward

59   The College has recently issued a HRS which describes procedures for staff recruitment and

appointment. Full-time academic and support staff posts are advertised internally and nationally; candidates are short listed by a small group before interview by a panel. While interviews are currently conducted according to informal ground rules, formalised interview procedures are in process of development. Part-time academic staff play a crucial role at the College providing the necessary high level technical skills required by students, and professional networks are used to help to recruit musicians. The College is mindful, and has taken initial steps, to ensure that its practice is in line with current equal opportunities and other relevant legislation. A new equal opportunities committee is in the process of being formed and the audit team was told that for all new appointments effective from September 2003 all posts will be advertised in accordance with the College's recruitment and section procedures. The team would, while noting the steps already taken, encourage the College to continue to formalise and standardise its procedures as planned.

60   Following the appointment of full-time academic staff there is a 12-month probation period which includes interim feedback from a nominated colleague and an end of probation review conducted with the line manager. More generally, the College has an annual policy of appraisal and the SED indicated that the Staff Development and Appraisal Scheme was applicable to all staff from 2002. The outcomes of appraisal will be recorded and points for further action included. These action points will be monitored by the Staff Development and Training Manager and the line manager to ensure appropriate action. The evidence provided by staff suggests that they found the appraisal system helpful to their personal development, however, the audit team would wish to encourage the College in its integration of the appraisal process across its staff as set out in its HRS.

61   The College recognises that with such a relatively high proportion of part-time staff, many of whom are at the College only for a short period of time, appraisal can be a problem. To address this the College has introduced payments for part-time staff to go to appraisal meetings facilitated by recent extra funding from HEFCE. The College has also trained some part-time staff to act as appraisers. The audit team heard from part-time tutors that they had been encouraged to progressively take on more hours and responsibility some of which included greater participation in the management of quality and standards.

62   The HRS indicates that a Promotion Panel, made up of Human Resources staff, heads of school and heads of study is to be formed to consider applications for promotion for staff across the College and submissions for accelerated incremental progression. Currently, promotions and increments are considered at an annual staffing review meeting. The audit team would encourage the College to fully formalise its procedures for promotion and incremental progression.

Assurance of quality of teaching through staff support and development

63   The development needs of staff are identified through the appraisal process (see above, paragraph 61) and academic and support staff may also make requests to the Staff Development and Training Manager and the Vice-Principal. Information about staff development is also included in ARPoS. The staff are supported in the development of their teaching, their research, in membership of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and in the acquisition of skills for specialist roles and management. There is also an annual Staff Conference for all staff in September and full-time academic staff now have a mid-year Staff Conference. These conferences deal with staff development issues and provide an opportunity for staff to debate matters concerning quality and standards. An annual Senior Management Conference has been held for the past two years to discuss strategic academic and support management issues.

64   Given the large number of part-time staff employed by the College, their participation and development in the management of quality and standards has been of particular concern. The College points to a strong sense of allegiance that many part-time staff have to their Principal Study School, but recognises potential problems where the hourly commitment and proportion of remuneration is relatively small. The College has moved to address this in a variety of ways, for instance, by introducing a system of payments to part-time staff to attend the College's annual September Staff Conferences. The SED also indicates that the College offers support to part-time staff for professional development and research initiatives and part-time staff confirmed this. The audit team was impressed by the range of measures in place to support, engage and develop part-time staff and the team concluded that this was a feature of good practice at the College.

65   The College provides an induction and mentoring programme for all new staff. The mentoring scheme has until recently been informal; however the College intends that this should be

formalised across the institution by July 2004. The audit team heard from recent appointees that both the induction programme and mentoring scheme worked effectively and provided a good introduction to the College. Peer observation of teaching was also being introduced on an incremental basis and fits well within the College's collegial atmosphere. The College intends to provide training for academic staff to allow them to perform the role effectively. The team noted that a handbook for staff was being developed and was able to view sections of it on the intranet. The College acknowledged in the SED that work on this is still ongoing and the team would encourage the further development and completion of this resource to support the management of its quality and standards.

66   In conclusion, the audit team noted that the College's HRS is currently being phased in and would stress the importance of its continued implementation. While the strategy envisages that 'the success of...[the] annual Corporate Training Plan will be reported in the College's Annual Operating Statement' the College may wish to consider how to ensure that a mechanism is established to review the effectiveness of the full range of measures outlined.

Learning support resources

67   The College recognises that it has been slow to develop the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) by staff and students. The College is continuing to develop its existing Information Systems Strategy (2003 to 2005). This document is still in draft form and going through the College processes. The strategy includes support to academic staff to make use of on-line resources for tutorial purposes; increased access by students to word-processing equipment and dedicated music software packages.

68   In meeting with students the audit team was informed of some dissatisfaction about the underdevelopment of ICT resources. The team found that staff and senior management were aware that there was work still to be done on the integration of ICT into the curriculum. They recognised areas for development and were already working towards the introduction of the measures outlined in the strategy before the beginning of the academic year 2003. The full implementation of the strategy will be crucial to the improvement of the College's use of ICT and the team would encourage the College to continue developing its work in this area.

69   The importance of maintaining a substantial instrument stock is highlighted in the SED. Students

confirmed that the range and access to instruments was good. Students have access to purpose-built practice rooms which are heavily used, although plans are currently being formulated by the College for an expansion in provision. The audit team was impressed with the College's policy on the provision of instrument stock for its students.

70   The audit team heard from students that they considered the library facilities to be excellent and staff helpful in obtaining material. Students may request stock from the library and there is cooperation with other libraries for any material which is unavailable. The library also hires contemporary scores, liaises with publishers, purchases new material and subscribes to on-line services. However, the opening times are one limiting factor for students given that the computing terminals are housed in the library. However, the team learnt that there are plans to have an IT suite accessible to students outside library hours.

71   The audit team took note of these processes for learning support resource and of the attention given to students' needs, and would encourage the College to continue to review and refine its system for the monitoring of learning resource provision.

Academic guidance, support and supervision

72   At induction students receive an information pack including a Student Handbook relevant to their programme and school of study. Although the generic sections of this document are generally satisfactory in both scope and content, the audit team identified some variation in the quality of information provided in the school-specific sections of the Handbook. Whereas some sections provided information on the aims and objectives of the course, others were restricted to purely operational aspects. Although staff indicated awareness of these inconsistencies the team would encourage the College to continue to review the content of the Handbook to ensure a greater degree of consistency in terms of the school-specific information provided to students.

73   Students confirmed that induction sessions had been useful, supportive and well organised and that the material was both comprehensive and useful. The induction arrangements for overseas and ERASMUS students were also found to be effective. There are special sessions for international students and when required students are given free access to language support classes. The audit team learnt that international students felt in general that they were supported and that effective steps to integrate them into life at the College were taken.

74 The College has a system of Principal Study Tutors (PST). The role of a PST is to provide students with support and guidance in their PS area. Care is taken when matching students with their PST and it is possible for students to request transfer to another PST should the student wish to experience a different teaching style or if the student/tutor relationship is not working. It was clear to the audit team that students found the relationship positive and supportive and helpful in discussing and resolving difficulties. Students also indicated that that if they had a problem they were able to approach the Head of Study, Head of School, year tutor or other relevant staff. The accessibility of staff was stressed and there is clearly a good informal network of support to students. However, it was also evident that while information on the whole picture of a student is held on a database or manual file, students were unclear about who to consult on their overall profile and achievement at particular stages of their programme.

75 While there seemed to be some variation in assessment feedback practice across different study strands, students confirmed that they had received helpful feedback on aspects of their studies. Attendance in PS classes is also carefully monitored. Students showed particular appreciation of the role played by their PST and indicated that a key factor in selecting the College was the amount of one-to-one tuition. The audit team was of the view that, despite some variation across areas, students benefit from excellent feedback and learning support, particularly with regard to their PS.

76 The use of personal development plans (PDPs) is currently being developed in the College and a pilot is to be implemented in the School of Keyboard Studies from September 2003. The format will be half intranet and half paper based. The College recognises the importance of student ownership and has included the President of the Students' Union as a member of the PDP Development Committee.

77 The audit team concluded that students benefit from a supportive environment in which staff are urged to promote progress in their studies. The College may wish to pursue its plans to standardise the information in the Student Handbooks. It should also consider putting in place a mechanism which would permit students to discuss their overall profile and progress with a member of staff, whether this be through a personal tutor system or some similar means.

Personal support and guidance

78 Student support and welfare are supported by the Academic Registrar's department. Areas covered include: health, including the provision of Alexander technique; and welfare support. The College has two part-time counsellors, an emergency appointments system, health awareness lectures for all first year students and a referral system to medical specialists in the case of student injuries. Students were appreciative of the welfare provision made for them and indicated that the College had been responsive to student representation in relation to a recent reduction in counselling provision. There is a clear and effective system for supporting students and the allocation of bursaries. The student finance manager gives advice on budgeting and emergency bursaries can be made available.

79 The Academic Registrar's department also manages the College policy on disabilities. A Disability Working Group was established in November 2001 and the College was successful when bidding for funds through the HEFCE Improving provision for disabled students scheme. The extra money led to the appointment of a new Learning Support Tutor for disabled students and a SKILL: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities (SKILL) audit. The College also plans to improve accessibility to the web site for disabled students. The audit team acknowledged the College's proactive engagement with the issues of student disability through its approach towards the implementation of the section of the *Code of practice* on students with disabilities, their response to the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and, in particular, commissioning a comprehensive SKILL audit to be a feature of good practice.

80 The College considers that its role as an Arts Centre in addition to its conservatoire provision is central to its mission to prepare students for a professional career in music. The events brochure gives evidence of the many opportunities that this provides for students for public performance and the overall enhancement of their experience at the College. In addition, the College has introduced a variety of educational outreach activities, many of which now are an integral part of the curriculum within the SPS strand. Valuable experience is also provided by the Junior Strings Project which serves to teach fundamental musical and instrumental music to junior and secondary school pupils using PGCE students from the College and MMU. The audit team concluded that the coherence of the student experience as regards professional practice and the College's involvement in outreach community projects were features of good practice.

81   The College has close links with the professional music sector and interacts with it through: networking; provision of a 'pool' of performers; and providing student performers for local events though its Professional Engagements Department. Other outreach activities include participation in a range of musical events. The appointment of noted members of the music profession in a visiting capacity within the College reinforces contact with the professional world. The Sound Advice initiative allows graduates to draw on the College's resources, and gives them access to the College's networks and resources to support them in building a successful career in music. The audit team was of the view that such networks and activities provide excellent contacts and current knowledge of the profession, play a significant role in the enhancement of the student experience and support graduates in their careers after they have left the College, and were a feature of good practice.

82   Arrangements for careers education, information and guidance are suitably robust and effective for students intending to pursue a career in the music profession. External links are further enhanced by the use of the part-time tutors who combine careers as performers and composers with teaching responsibilities within the College. Provision is less secure for those students who seek a career outside this field, and it is unfortunate that students in such situations cannot take full advantage of the careers service provided by the University. The College may wish to consider how it might strengthen its careers education and information guidance for students seeking careers outside the music profession.

83   The audit team concluded that the personal support and guidance offered to students was generally of a high quality. However, the College may wish to consider how it can effectively manage student support so that usage can be monitored.

Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline audit trails

Discipline audit trails

84   In the selected DAT, members of the audit team met staff and students to discuss the programmes, studied a sample of assessed student work, saw examples of learning resource materials, and studied annual module and programme reports and periodic school reviews relating to the programmes.

BMus (Hons)

85   For the purposes of the DAT two discipline areas within the PS strand of the BMus (Hons) were selected for scrutiny: CCM and WP. The audit team was provided with programme documentation, which included the programme specifications and unit descriptors. It was clear and comprehensive, and set out the aims and learning outcomes for the programme elements.

86   Students who met the audit team from these schools spoke highly of the institution's procedures for admissions and induction, and the care taken to ensure that a good match is achieved in allocating students to tutors. The extensive use of one-to-one tuition is a distinctive feature of study at the College, facilitating a highly interactive teaching and learning environment with opportunities for informal feedback.

87   Although the schools enjoy a significant degree of autonomy in terms of the management and delivery of the PS, the new credit rated degree framework has usefully strengthened the mechanisms necessary for securing an equivalence of academic standards across the component subdisciplines. The development of SPS as part of the revised degree is identified as a distinctive element of curriculum design.

88   While practice varies slightly from school to school, all specialist tutors are required to produce both mid and end-of-year reports on their students, and it is the responsibility of the Head of School to scrutinise these reports and follow up any issues arising. At the institutional level a system of year tutors is also in place. However, students seem unclear as to their precise role and relevance to their individual studies. Crucially, they appear unaware of the scope and extent of the responsibilities of year tutors for monitoring and supporting their overall progress, taking into account SAS and SPS as well as the PS. The College may wish to consider reviewing the provision of academic support and guidance to ensure that an appropriate member of staff has responsibility for providing an overview in terms of monitoring and advising students on their progress.

89   The external examiners' reports confirm the high standards attained in the outcomes of the BMus degree. The use of SEAs for the final PS examinations strongly underpins the work of the OEE at the programme level, and their reports form an integral part of the ARPoS. From its study of student assessed work and from its discussion with staff and students, the audit team formed the view that overall the standard of student achievement was appropriate to the title of the award and its location within the *FHEQ*.

90   In terms of student feedback, the informal mechanisms that have been created within the schools are underpinned by the annual student questionnaire, which seeks views on the processes of learning and teaching associated with each unit studied as part of the degree. Although the Undergraduate Programme Board considers analyses of this information as part of the ARPoS, the mechanisms for disseminating the outcomes of these considerations to students are not clear. The Student-Staff Liaison Group devotes most of its time to practical issues when it may, rather than engaging closely with learning and teaching issues, and is thus currently unable to provide a suitable forum for closing this loop. The College may wish to consider reviewing its mechanisms for the dissemination of its responses to student questionnaires and, more generally, reconsider the role of the Student-Staff Liaison Group as a forum for discussing both practical and academic matters.

91   The audit team is satisfied that the quality of learning opportunities is suitable for the programme of study leading to the BMus (Hons) degree, with evidence of good practice, notably in the development of SPS.

Section 4: The audit investigations: published information

The students' experience of published information and other information available to them

92   The audit team met students who confirmed that the prospectus was an accurate, comprehensive, reliable and useful source of information and that it reflected the College's reputation for high quality and access to specialists. Student Handbooks are given to students at induction. Students spoke highly of the Handbooks confirming to the team they were comprehensive and used as a current and future reference source of information about the College, student regulations, the programme of study, the schools, and further contacts.

93   The SWS pointed out that the current Handbook in its new format, 'solves a number of problems which occurred in recent years with regard to reliability of information and reliability of sources'. The students confirmed that the detail of the assignments, deadlines, assessment criteria and marking guidelines was very clear and helpful. Information from and interaction with tutors further amplified the learning outcomes, expectations and standards.

94   The audit team was able to verify the content, consistency, clarity and usefulness of the Student Handbooks and to confirm that they included details of the College's complaints and appeals procedures. The improvement to the Handbook is commendable as is the expressed intention to further improve the accessibility and comprehensiveness of information for staff and students by including the full programme specification in the Handbook from next academic year. While there is student representation on the programme boards which consider the Handbooks, the team suggests it might be helpful to include a specific reference to them in the student evaluation processes.

95   The audit team noted with interest the College's description of its 'Joint Course' (see above, paragraph 47) both internally and in its published literature, and the view expressed in the SED that this did not constitute a collaborative venture as described in the *Code of practice*. While generally agreeing with this view, the team felt that the title 'Joint Course' might be misleading given that there are two courses running in parallel leading to two separate awards rather than one award given jointly as the current terminology might suggest.

96   Overall, the audit team found the published literature to be accurate, consistent and reliable. Notwithstanding the need for consistency of content, the team did have some concern that the current arrangements for editing and signing off approved copy for publication might be over-burdensome for the Vice-Principal. The College might wish to review this when considering how to expedite academic and management business.

Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information

97   From 2004, the institutional audit process will include a check on the reliability of the information set published by institutions in the format recommended in HEFCE's document 02/15. The College reported in the SED that it had taken due note of the report and debated the requirements at its Academic Board. The SED indicated that much of the information required is readily available, but also indicated that there were certain areas 'where the reporting requirements will present some challenges' due to being outside the UCAS system and the lack of routine collection of some aspects of applicant data. Discussions with UCAS and the Federation of British Conservatoires to establish a special 'small system' to facilitate data collection and generation were ongoing.

98   The audit team was able to confirm that the College was alert to the requirements set out in HEFCE's document 02/15 and was taking initial steps to move in an appropriate manner to fulfil its responsibilities in this respect. The team wished to encourage the College to develop further its formative plans to meet its responsibilities for the requirements of HEFCE's document 02/15 so that by 2004, it has clear procedures and processes in place for collecting (through relevant mechanisms), analysing and externally publishing the information in the required data sets and specified formats.

Findings

Findings

99 An institutional audit of the College was undertaken during the week commencing 19 May 2003. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the College's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility as a UK HEI with responsibilities for delivering programmes leading to degrees from the University as well as its own awards. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with HEFCE, SCOP and UUK, one DAT was selected for scrutiny. This section of the report of the audit summarises the findings of the audit. It concludes by identifying features of good practice that emerged from the audit, and recommendations to the College for enhancing current practice.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes

100 The University validates the College's degrees and the College has largely adopted its approval, monitoring and review procedures. The College's SED indicated that the outputs of the annual programme review process, the ARPoS, are the primary means by which the College monitors quality and standards. These reports include a résumé of external examiners' comments and an action list produced by the College's heads of studies and passed through to AQC and Academic Board before going to the University.

101 The audit team found that the College's process for monitoring and review was successful in satisfying the requirements of the validating body. However, the audit revealed that the ARPoS process was not widely owned by staff as a key quality assurance and enhancement mechanism. The lack of engagement in the process by all staff led the team to conclude that the full benefits of the process as a means of securing and enhancing quality and standards was not being realised. The College has no internal periodic review processes but is subject to Quinquennial Review by the University both at the programme level and institutional level. The College's response to these reviews seemed to have received only brief attention at the Academic Board. The team concluded that the College might wish to consider how its monitoring processes should operate to ensure the effectiveness of its quality assurance and enhancement mechanism.

102 The SED only briefly mentioned the College's use of student feedback in the review process. There was evidence in the SWS which described formal feedback processes for student feedback in the College's management of quality and standards including: questionnaires; Student-Staff Liaison Group; and student representation on some committees. The SWS also indicated that direct informal feedback processes are widely used by the College. The audit team concluded that the College may wish to consider making more use of its formal student feedback mechanisms in the management of its quality and standards.

103 The audit team considered the framework set up by the College comprising two programme boards reporting through AQC to Academic Board to be an appropriate mechanism for monitoring and assuring quality and standards. In practice, however, the team found that the AQC was involved in a large number of operational issues rather than taking a more independent holistic quality assurance overview. The team was also unclear about the role of Academic Board and consultative committees in quality matters. The ways in which issues are dealt with through the committee structure did not always appear logical and in some cases seemed to be a duplication of effort. For these reasons, the team concluded that the routes by which academic and management issues are progressed though the management and quality committee structures should be further considered.

104 The findings of the audit confirm that broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's current quality of its awards. In order for this confidence to continue in the future, the College may wish to consider the recommendations below.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards

105 The SED described a number of changes and improvements that have been made to the College's assessment procedures to secure the standards of its awards since the quality audit conducted by the HEQC in 1997. These include improvements to the procedures used for the appointment and induction of external examiners, the introduction of OEEs in addition to SEAs, and the approval of new assessment criteria for postgraduate students. Changes have also been made to marking procedures for the PS and the conduct of the main Examination Boards. Consideration is also being given to the use of anonymous marking for examination components other than those involving instrumental performance.

106 Through the study of external examiners' reports and records of Boards of Examiners' meetings, the audit team found evidence to support the view that

academic standards are being secured. The introduction of the credit rated BMus (Hons) has involved a close engagement with the subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ in terms of learning outcomes and their quantitative assessment at the honours level. Comprehensive marking guidelines have been introduced for this degree, including level descriptors for each course unit. The reports of external examiners and SEAs are evaluated and reviewed by the College under the requirements of the validating agreement with the University.

107 On the basis of the evidence available to it, the audit team concluded that the College's arrangements for securing awards were effective.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

108 The College supports its students well in a range of areas with a particular focus on the needs of musicians. Student welfare and support are centralised under the control of academic registry. There are also two part-time counsellors and an emergency appointments system. In addition, two students act as senior residents with specific pastoral responsibilities within the College's hall of residence and there is also in place a student mentoring scheme for all new students entering the College. All first-year students are required to attend health awareness lectures and the College has a system of referrals to medical specialists in cases where students suffer performance-related injuries. Disability also comes under the remit of the Academic Registrar's department and the College has in place a Disability Working Group, a Learning Support Tutor for disabled students and has recently commissioned a SKILL audit. The audit team believe the College's approach to students with disabilities to be a feature of good practice.

109 The College library is well stocked and provides a range of services which students commented on positively. The College has been slower to develop its IT resources. The library houses a number of computer workstations, although access to them is restricted to library opening hours and students expressed a desire for more extensive access.

110 Students hoping to enter careers as professional musicians enjoy good support and opportunities through professional placement schemes and the varying outreach activities of the College as well as the SPS strand of the programmes. Graduates also receive help through 'a range of services co-ordinated through the Professional Engagements Office within the College's Promotions Department'. The audit team consider the College's support for students and

graduates through professional practice, outreach community projects and the Sound Advice scheme to be a feature of good practice.

111 The SED outlines the improved measures for staff support and development that are being rolled out within its recent HRS, including appraisal and the formalisation of a staff mentoring scheme, already informally operated. The College recognises the challenges posed by the proportion of part-time staff and has put in place measures which have been effective in increasing participation of part-time tutors in a wider range of College activities. The team believe the efforts made by the College to support part-time staff to be a feature of good practice.

112 Overall, the audit team concluded that student access to academic guidance and personal support were good, that central support services and resource allocation systems were effective, and that the College had adopted an effective approach to managing its part-time staff.

Outcome of the discipline audit trail

Two study strands of the BMus (Hons)

113 The audit team focused on two discipline areas within the PS strand of the BMus (Hons): CCM and WP. From its study of students' assessed work, and from discussions with students and staff, the team formed the view that the standard of student achievement in the programme was appropriate to the title of the award and its location within the *FHEQ*. The programme specifications set out appropriate educational aims and learning outcomes, and link these clearly to the teaching and learning styles, support and assessment that a student undertaking the programme would be expected to experience. Programme outcomes show clear links to the *Subject benchmark statement*, the purposes of which have been considered within the context of a conservatoire-based music degree. Student evaluation of the programme was very positive, with particular attention being drawn to the value of individual tuition for the PS component, and the wide choice of electives available to third and fourth-year students. The team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities available to students was suitable for programmes of study leading to the award of the BMus (Hons).

The use made by the institution of the academic infrastructure

114 The SED provided a concise summary of the College's responses to the *Code of practice*. Although there is further work to be done in considering the purposes of the *Code of practice*, good progress has been made in many areas, and the audit team has broad confidence that the task can be satisfactorily completed. Two areas requiring further attention in the light of anticipated academic developments are the sections of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision and postgraduate research.

115 At programme level effective use is made of the subject benchmark statements to set standards of awards at the appropriate level, and to give points of reference in programme specifications. The College needs to use the *FHEQ* to make explicit outcomes for exit points at the certificate, diploma and masters levels. In the case of the BMus (Hons) the audit team found that the programme specifications set out appropriate educational aims and learning outcomes. These were linked clearly to the teaching and learning styles, support and assessment that a student undertaking the programme would be expected to experience.

The utility of the SED as an illustration of the institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations, and to act on these to enhance quality and standards

116 The SED prepared for this audit by the College describes its internal quality framework and the external procedures for assuring the quality of its programmes and for securing the academic standards of its awards. In doing so the SED identified areas of perceived strength, particularly the committee framework and the annual review process, and also areas for improvement. The SED did highlight aspects of the external environment, and the need for constant monitoring of the effectiveness of its internal framework. However, the SED did not engage with an evaluation of the effectiveness of the processes in place to manage quality and standards, nor did it show that the College undertook such an evaluation on a regular and systematic basis.

Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards

117 The SED described quality enhancement as a dynamic ongoing process and identifies 'the careful monitoring of new courses and their regulatory

frameworks' as one of the most important elements of the College's enhancement strategy over the next three years. It acknowledged that there are several areas in need of further development, including the provision of information, and concludes that the new committee structure has produced a largely effective framework for institutional development and quality assurance and enhancement. The audit team was in general agreement with this conclusion provided the College pursues, through a regular and systematic process, its acknowledged need for effective monitoring of the new Committee structure's operation and working practices.

118 The audit team concluded that there was scope for the College to be more proactive in developing a quality enhancement strategy, for example, by being more self-critical of its internal processes and their effectiveness.

Reliability of information

119 The audit team found that in terms of the information HEFCE's document 02/15 requires institutions to publish, some of the quantitative data is available externally through the Higher Education and Research Opportunities web site and draws on Higher Education Statistics Agency data and external reports. Quantitative and qualitative data on quality and standards of learning and teaching was available internally and to the validating body, through the internal annual review process and for the validating body's periodic reviews. The team had no reason to believe that any of the information was inaccurate or unreliable and they were able to verify that actions were taken to follow up issues identified by external examiners, students and the validating body. The audit was also able to confirm that the College was alert to the requirements set out in HEFCE's document 02/15 and was taking initial steps to fulfil its responsibilities in this respect.

Features of good practice

120 The following features of good practice were noted:

i. the College's approach to, and support for, part-time staff (paragraph 64);

ii. the concern to support students with a disability (paragraph 79);

iii. the coherence of the student experience with regard to professional practice through the SPS strand of the curriculum (paragraph 80);

iv. the College's involvement in outreach community projects (paragraph 80); and

v.   the support offered to former students through the Sound Advice scheme (paragraph 81).

Recommendations for action

121 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

i.   consider the benefits of making explicit the routes by which academic and management issues are progressed through the management and committee structures and where authority lies, to ensure that matters are dealt with at the appropriate level and business is expedited efficiently and effectively (paragraphs 24 to 28);

ii. engage staff and students more fully in quality assurance and enhancement processes (paragraphs 36, 51); and

iii. adopt a more strategic, systematic and self-critical approach to the management of quality and academic standards (paragraphs 39, 42, 48).

Appendix

Statement by the RNCM on developments since the audit visit

The RNCM welcomes the report of the QAA's institutional audit as a contributory element within its broader quality assurance and enhancement processes. In particular, the College welcomes the overall judgement that broad confidence can be placed in the current and likely future management both of the quality of its academic programmes and of the academic standards of its awards. The College welcomes the fact that the report recognises features of good practice as follows:

- the student experience with regard to professional practice in the Supporting Professional Studies strand of the curriculum;

- the concern to support students with a disability;

- the support offered to students through the Sound Advice scheme;

- the involvement in outreach community projects;

- the approach to, and support for, part-time staff.

The College is pleased to note that the recommendations for action identified in the report broadly reflect matters that have been the subject of recent ongoing debate within the institution and/or were identified by the College in its SED. In more specific terms:

- the observations relating to management of quality and academic standards as they relate to 'closing the loop' on actions taken in response to external reviews conducted in 1997 and 2001 are duly noted. The College is confident that it has recently developed a more systematic approach in this area. The issue relating to the dissemination of feedback from external examiners to staff involved in delivering relevant course units is being addressed as a matter of priority;

- the relationship between the main quality assurance committees - the Programme Boards, the Academic Quality Committee and the Academic Board - has been, and continues to be, the subject of close internal scrutiny, particularly in the light of the recent major changes in curriculum design and management. The relation between these and the College's other 'consultative' committees has already begun to be reviewed in the interests of greater efficiency and the avoidance of duplication of business;

- the College has already begun a process of involving more staff in the quality assurance and enhancement process by providing, as part of its HR Strategy, payments to part-time staff for membership of main College committees. The possible extension of student involvement in the quality assurance and enhancement processes to include membership of the Academic Quality Committee is currently under discussion.

In each of these areas, as well as in a number of other general recommendations and suggestions embedded within the audit report, the report itself has provided a useful external view of current practice which the College will use constructively as part of its ongoing concern for quality assurance and enhancement.