



Institutional audit

Royal Northern College of Music

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Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out Institutional audits of higher education institutions.

In England and Northern Ireland QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies, and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the then Department for Education and Skills. It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and to evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002 following revisions to the United Kingdom's (UK's) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the Institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews and on feedback from stakeholders.

Institutional audit results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of awards
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes

Institutional audit: report

- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision, the judgements and comments also apply unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised Institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the Royal Northern College of Music (the College) from 28 February to 4 March 2011 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the institution offers.

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

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK. The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards
- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

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

Postgraduate research students

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

Published information

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

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

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

Recommendations for action

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

It would be desirable for the institution:

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

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the College of the Academic Infrastructure, which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

Report

1 An Institutional audit of the Royal Northern College of Music (the College) was undertaken during the week commencing 28 February 2011. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the College's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Professor B Anderton, Dr J Barry, Ms A Christou, Mr A Hussain and Professor P Speare, auditors, and Ms L Green, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The Royal Northern College of Music (the College), located in Manchester, was established in 1973 through the merger of the Northern School of Music and the Royal Manchester College of Music. It has its own awarding powers for taught degrees (granted in 2007), while its research degrees are awarded by Manchester Metropolitan University.

4 The College is a conservatoire and its higher education provision prepares students for a professional career in music. It sees its purpose as to educate and train musicians to the highest level in an environment that is both stimulating and rich in opportunity, focusing on developing students' capacity to innovate, to inspire others and to be musical leaders of the future. Among the College's facilities is a substantial arts centre, with spaces for both concert and theatrical performances. The teaching staff comprises 30 permanent staff and 191 part-time staff, whose teaching is complementary to their professional work. As at December 2010, student numbers totalled 719 (522 undergraduate and 197 postgraduate).

5 The College is organised into five schools: Composition, Keyboard Studies, Strings, Vocal Studies, and Wind, Brass and Percussion. In broad terms, degree programmes comprise three components: practice, developed through a principal study; academic studies; and professional studies. The principal study is organised through the schools and focuses on the student's technical, musical and creative development in their chosen instrument (including voice), or in composition.

6 QAA's last audit of the College, in May 2003, resulted in an overall judgement of broad confidence in the College's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The audit recommendations were subject to a mid-cycle follow-up by QAA in June 2008, which concluded that good progress had been made in addressing the recommendations. The present audit confirmed that the College had taken appropriate action.

7 The appointment of a new Principal in 2008 prompted changes to the academic management structure designed to strengthen the role of middle management and refocus the work of the academic administration on the provision of management information to guide planning and decision-making processes. There is a Vice-Principal who has particular responsibility for the academic operation of the College. Three deans report to the Vice-Principal, respectively responsible for taught provision, research provision and performance studies. Responsibility for programme management rests with course leaders reporting to the relevant dean. Academic administration is headed by the Academic Registrar, with the remit for quality assurance resting with the Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

8 Academic Board has overall responsibility for the College's academic activities, which it discharges through the work of its committees. Responsibility for the academic

standards of taught programmes is focused on the Academic Quality Committee, while that for students' learning opportunities is focused on the Learning and Teaching Committee. Reflecting their responsibilities for both academic standards and the quality of provision, separate undergraduate and postgraduate programme boards formally report to the Learning and Teaching Committee, but also report to the Academic Quality Committee, as relevant. The Research Committee oversees the learning experience of the College's small number of postgraduate research students.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

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

10 There is a single process of validation and revalidation, which covers both the initial approval and the periodic review of programmes. The period of time before revalidation is agreed at validation and can vary from three to five years. The issues to be addressed, the composition of panels, and the procedures to be followed are fully described in the College's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook. Panels include two external members, as well as a student member. From its review of a number of validation and revalidation exercises, the audit team found evidence of careful pre-validation work, in which drafts of the documentation were debated and developed in a range of forums, with the involvement of both students and staff. Panels produce well-evidenced reports, which are considered at programme level and also by the College through the Academic Quality Committee and Academic Board.

11 The annual review of programmes of study is also a thorough process and is again strengthened by being the result of an ongoing cycle of preparation, debate, consideration and monitoring. Supporting evidence relating to standards includes external examiner reports (see paragraph 13). The review report, incorporating an action plan, is considered in draft by the appropriate programme board, so that a full range of student and staff views is reflected. All reports are then considered by a scrutiny group to see that the key issues have been addressed. The Academic Quality Committee receives a report on the scrutiny process, while Academic Board receives a summary report. This sequence of reporting ensures that all aspects are fully considered across the College. The outcomes of the review process are discussed by the appropriate programme board at its next meeting, thereby providing the basis for the next review round. The audit team identifies as a feature of **good practice** the annual review of programmes of study, which is a well-conceived process, thorough and transparent in its execution, leading to action plans that are systematically monitored.

12 The responsibility for confirming students' attainment of academic standards rests with the College's two boards of examiners - undergraduate and postgraduate. There are external examiners appointed for each programme who are members of these boards and their roles and responsibilities are clearly laid out in the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook. External examiners are selected against clear criteria, with all nominations scrutinised by a panel, which makes recommendations to the Academic Quality Committee; final approval is given by Academic Board.

13 External examiner reports are considered widely across the College, including by the Academic Quality Committee and by Academic Board, which receives an annual overview. They are considered by programme boards in the context of the annual review

of programmes of study, and student representatives on these boards and other College committees, therefore, see the reports and are able to comment on them. External examiners receive a timely response, indicating actions taken on the points they have raised. Like other conservatoires, the College also employs specialist external assessors in order to supply 'externality' in the marking of the principal study. They provide an extra element of external benchmarking and their comments are used to enhance provision in a systematic way.

14 As confirmed through validation, all awards are positioned at an appropriate level within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). Programme specifications, which are a requirement for all programmes, are approved as part of the validation documentation and made available to students in programme handbooks. The subject benchmark statement for music is referenced as appropriate. College procedures are mapped against the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA (and rechecked as revisions are introduced) by the Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, who brings relevant issues to the attention of the Academic Quality Committee. The College is an active member of both Conservatoires UK and the Association of European Conservatoires and benchmarks its standards nationally and internationally through this involvement.

15 There is currently no overall set of assessment regulations governing the College's awards (although academic regulations that will include assessment regulations are at an advanced stage of preparation). Instead, programme regulations are approved within validation or revalidation documentation and are published for students in a more user-friendly format in programme handbooks. The audit team found that the assessment criteria for each course unit and the forms of assessment used were laid out in great detail within programme handbooks, and was satisfied from its meetings with students that these were well understood. However, the team noted that certain aspects of award classification relating to resit marks and the extent of discretion applied at classification boundaries were not adequately covered in programme handbooks. The team also noted that the College sometimes 'fast-tracked' its appeals procedure in the interests of addressing issues for students as speedily as possible. While the College's assessment policies and regulations are effective in the maintenance of academic standards, the team nevertheless considers it **desirable** for the College to reconcile the various minor inconsistencies, relating to award classification and student appeals, between the practical application of procedures and their documentation for students.

16 Data on student progress, completion and award classification are considered within the annual review of programmes of study, while statistical treatment of student feedback is thorough and considered in all appropriate settings. The audit team concluded that the College was making effective use of statistical management information and noted the recent investment made in improvements to its student record system.

17 The judgement reached by the audit team is that **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

18 The College's policies relating to students' learning opportunities have been developed in the light of the *Code of practice* (which is part of the Academic Infrastructure). As mentioned above, the Academic Quality Committee oversees the College's response

to developments in the Academic Infrastructure, while resulting policy revisions require approval by Academic Board. Key procedural documents, such as the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook, are reviewed annually, enabling any changes resulting from revisions to the *Code of practice* to be dealt with as part of the routine update. The audit team tracked this process in relation to the section on disabled students, which was revised in February 2010; appropriate reference to the new version is made in the current edition of the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook. The College has also evidently made use of the *Code of practice* in developing its guidelines on work-based and placement learning (see paragraph 23). Mechanisms like those outlined above ensure that the *Code of practice* becomes embedded in College procedures.

19 The procedures for validation/revalidation and the annual review of programmes of study, outlined above in relation to academic standards, also deal with the learning opportunities for students. For instance, in validation and revalidation there was evidence of consideration of resource requirements, including staffing, and of the views of employers and professional organisations as to whether programmes would develop the requisite skills for employability. In the case of revalidation, the views of external contributors and of current students inform the evaluation of the success of existing programmes. The annual review process encourages input from staff who deliver course units and from students who study them, and it is a requirement that reviews include evaluation of student feedback and learning resources, as well as analysis of student performance data. The audit team was able to confirm that discussion of the reviews at programme boards was detailed and that the monitoring of action plans was meticulous, supporting the feature of good practice previously identified.

20 The College conducts annual online surveys of its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, which elicit students' views on the three main components of courses, as well as on the academic and support services. There is, in addition, an annual library survey. The audit team found the treatment of survey results to be detailed and thorough. The College also obtains feedback from final-year students through the National Student Survey (NSS), in which its participation rate is high. The team noted that the College used this survey to compare its performance with that of other specialist conservatoires, while also focusing attention on weaker areas, or where there had been deterioration from the previous year. There is a National Student Survey action plan for 2010-11, which had been partially implemented at the time of the audit. The team identifies as a feature of **good practice** the College's open and responsive approach to student feedback, which ensures that students contribute to the enhancement of their learning experience.

21 Students have a role in quality assurance through their membership of Academic Board and its committees. The programme boards have student representatives from different year groups or specific programmes. There is a Student-Staff Liaison Group, whose remit covers the non-academic side of the student experience; it has recently been revamped and given a clear reporting line into the College's executive structures. The College works cooperatively with the Students' Union in supporting the representational system through training, guidance and briefing of student representatives. There are also other areas in which students are involved in quality assurance: validation/revalidation panels have a student member and meet groups of students, while student focus groups are used in programme development.

22 The College promotes research-led teaching through elective course units whose subject matter is congruent with staff research interests. Undergraduate students are introduced to research methods through project work, while postgraduate students take specific preparatory units; a postgraduate programme in research methods for creative practitioners is under development. The College encourages staff and students to see their practice as a form of applied research (known as practice-as-research), an approach that

is carried through into the design of programme structures and curriculum content. Both full-time and part-time staff are expected to engage in research, and a weekly research forum has been organised so that staff, postgraduate students and visiting researchers can share work-in-progress through presentations and debate.

23 As part of its emphasis on the professional development of its students, the College works with a number of partners to provide placement and work-based learning opportunities. These fall into three main categories: professional attachments offering experience with a professional orchestra, work-based learning in arts administration, and other shadowing or placement opportunities. Placements are not normally credit-bearing, although they may be assessed. There is a learning agreement for each placement, setting out the respective roles and responsibilities of student and provider. The latter gives a written evaluation of the student's performance, while the student completes a reflective account. The audit team found all these arrangements to be consistent with the *Code of practice*.

24 In addition, the College routinely provides a range of performance opportunities for students, both through its own facilities and through external professional engagements. While not part of students' programmes of study, these opportunities are beneficial to their professional development. Under a collaborative arrangement, the College offers a Foundation Degree (FdA Popular Music Practice) that fully integrates work-based learning through opportunities for students to work alongside professional musicians, recording engineers and producers at rehearsal and recording studios in Manchester. The audit team concluded that there was a pervasive emphasis in all programmes on the development of professional skills and identifies as a feature of **good practice** the multifaceted and structured approach to students' professional development.

25 The College's learning resources have scored highly in the National Student Survey and were reported on positively in the students' written submission for the audit. The Learning and Teaching committee considers the development of learning resources in the light of the annual library survey and statistics on the usage of different media categories. The library is also responsive to needs identified through the annual review of programmes of study, as evident from the minutes of programme boards. The College recognises the need to develop in students IT skills relevant to their professional development. The audit team heard from staff examples of creative applications currently being introduced, and from students of the effective use of recording facilities to support their instrumental studies. In general, students considered hardware and software provision to be of a high standard and well supported. The College is in the process of implementing a virtual learning environment for all programmes from 2011-12, led by the new appointment of an e-learning coordinator.

26 The College regards its teaching space and performance venues as being of professional standard and this was confirmed by students in their written submission and in meetings with the audit team. Practice rooms are a key resource and students regard the provision as very good and well managed to achieve effective use. In addition, staff indicated that facilities were designed or could be adapted to meet the specific requirements of students with disabilities, with a 'disability audit' being conducted as part of any proposed refurbishment.

27 The College's admissions policy is based on academic and musical ability and the potential to succeed in the prospective programme of study. The admissions policy for each programme is contained in the relevant programme handbook and English language requirements for international students are clearly stated. The selection process involves auditions in the principal study, plus a written paper and academic interview, where considered necessary. The audit team noted that all applicants were invited to disclose

any disability or impairment, so that appropriate arrangements could be made for auditions. The students who met the team all felt adequately informed about entry requirements and were positive about the support provided by the College during the admissions process. There is regular reporting on applications and offers against admissions targets to both senior management and Academic Board. The College recognises the barriers to be overcome by students from disadvantaged groups in meeting its entry requirements and offers several schemes to encourage young people from all backgrounds to take up specialist music training. The introduction of the FdA Popular Music Practice, a non-traditional programme, has also served to broaden student access to a conservatoire education.

28 The support requirements for students' principal study are rather different from those for their academic studies, and students necessarily have extensive one-to-one contact with their principal study tutor. However, given the small size of the College, they are also able to build close relationships with their respective course leaders and individual unit tutors. Collectively these roles and relationships form the basis of what would normally be termed the academic support system. This is supplemented by a range of student services geared to pastoral support, including counselling, and dyslexia and disability support. Students who had disclosed a disability or impairment outlined to the audit team what appeared to be a proactive and responsive process for developing personal learning plans - the College's mechanism for making reasonable adjustments in line with individual requirements. The team gained a clear impression that appropriate support arrangements were being put into effect promptly, routinely updated and sensitively communicated to those who needed to know.

29 Personal development planning is fully integrated within the professional studies component of the College's undergraduate programmes, while a more structured approach within postgraduate taught programmes is being planned. Students have access to a wide range of specialist careers advice, both from within the College and from outside, through staff contacts and networks. There is also an arrangement with the University of Manchester, whereby students can access the resources of its careers service.

30 The profile for academic staffing at the College reflects a typical conservatoire model of a relatively small permanent staff base and a larger number of part-time professionals, who contribute predominantly to the principal study component of programmes. As a general rule, staffing policies and procedures encompass all categories of academic staff, although their contractual arrangements are necessarily different. Staff are encouraged to attain professional recognition as teachers from the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Following the withdrawal of the College's own Higher Education Academy-accredited programme (no longer seen as cost effective), staff who are new to teaching, or have limited experience, continue to be supported on an accredited programme at Manchester Metropolitan University. The College has a mentoring scheme to assist staff in applying to the Higher Education Academy for recognition through the 'experienced teacher' route.

31 Staff development needs compatible with institutional objectives are identified through an appraisal process. The Learning and Teaching Committee is responsible for agreeing staff development priorities in relation to teaching and learning and curriculum development. It also oversees the College's teaching awards scheme, through which staff may apply for funding for discrete projects. Good practice in teaching and learning is disseminated through events such as the annual staff conference, to be supplemented by termly learning and teaching forums and the development of an online forum for sharing ideas and initiatives.

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

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

33 The Learning and Teaching Committee is the focal point for quality enhancement through its remit to develop and implement the Learning and Teaching Strategy (2010-15). This identifies 13 separate enhancement projects, which cover such areas as the learning environment; support for student learning; curriculum development; assessment and feedback; integration of research and teaching; responsiveness to employers; and developing teaching staff. Responsibility for project leadership has been clearly assigned and there is a timetable for reporting on progress. There is already evidence that these projects are leading to tangible outcomes, such as the development of a postgraduate programme in research methods for creative practitioners. The audit team also noted examples of how students were contributing to the enhancement of their learning experience, for instance in the process of implementing the College's virtual learning environment.

34 The College seeks to employ quality assurance processes that are also developmental. As outlined above, the annual review of programmes of study is an open process, involving input from a broad range of staff and students. It provides a sound basis for a systematic approach to quality enhancement - an approach that has gained more coherent leadership as a result of the recent restructuring of management responsibilities across the College.

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

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

36 The College has adopted a cautious approach to developing collaborative arrangements, with opportunities being considered as they arise. Currently, there are students studying for awards of the College on two programmes delivered by separate commercial partners. Both arrangements are covered by contracts, but pre-date current procedures for selecting and approving partnerships, although these will be applied to any future proposals. Under these procedures, the College establishes that the proposal fits its mission and strategic plan; that the partner has good financial standing and operates a policy of non-discrimination and equality of opportunity; and that expertise and resources are sufficient to support programme delivery. A report is made to the Academic Quality Committee and Academic Board, following which the collaborative contract is drawn up.

37 Once a partnership is established, management responsibility for any programmes lies with a course leader appointed by the partner and with a link tutor at the College to oversee the arrangements. The processes for validation/revalidation and review of programmes delivered through partnerships are the same as for the College's in-house programmes, while programme boards deal with collaborative programmes alongside in-house provision and in the same manner. These arrangements currently apply to all existing collaborative programmes and the audit team considered them to be effective and proportionate to the scale of the provision. Award certificates mention both the College and the partner organisation, as recommended in the *Code of practice*.

38 In addition, there is a programme offered in conjunction with Manchester University, Graduate of the Royal Northern College of Music (GRNCM), which leads to an honours degree from the University and a graduate diploma from the College. The Graduate of the Royal Northern College of Music is part of the undergraduate provision of the College in all respects and senior staff of the College and the University maintain regular contact. There is also an arrangement with Manchester Metropolitan University leading to a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), giving Qualified Teacher Status. The audit team found these partnership arrangements to be working effectively.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

39 The College's postgraduate research degrees programme is validated by Manchester Metropolitan University under a memorandum of agreement dated December 2008. The programme is built around the core areas of staff research - musicology, music psychology, performance, and composition. Day-to-day management is discharged through the programme leader at the College, who is the link tutor with the University. The Research Degrees Programme Committee deals with individual student's progress, reporting to the Research Committee, which has responsibility for the students' overall learning experience.

40 There are seven students on the programme, with the first enrolling in 2010. The intention is to grow the numbers to around 20 students by 2015, when the first graduates are also anticipated. The College offers two research studentships and is seeking external funding to support further studentships. Research students have designated space in new accommodation to help give them a group identity within the College. They are entitled to full use of learning resources at both the College and the University; the students who met the audit team were positive about the resources available to support their research. External speakers, as well as College staff, contribute to the weekly research forum and an annual symposium is planned, giving research students the opportunity to present and discuss their work-in-progress.

41 Applicants to the research degrees programme submit a research proposal, which may lead to an interview and (where relevant) an audition by two members of College staff. The programme leader may provide feedback on unsuccessful proposals, prior to one re-submission. On entry to the College, students receive general induction, an MPhil/PhD Handbook and a new College Guide for Research Students. During induction, research students are also given their personal development portfolio, which they will use to maintain a record of annual reviews, skills audits, and professional and educational activities. Attending an induction day at the University is a pre-requisite for registration, which for full-time students must be completed within three months of admission to the College.

42 The College is responsible for establishing suitable supervision arrangements, which are then confirmed by the University. Standard supervisory teams include primary and secondary supervisors (one of whom may be external to the College), plus a director of studies appointed by the University from its staff. Teams must have had the combined experience of supervising at least three students to successful completion, and limits are placed on the number of students a primary supervisor may supervise. Supervisors without individual experience of supervising to completion undertake compulsory training provided by the University, while all supervisors attend University refresher courses every three years. The College intends to build its supervisory capacity in line with the planned growth in research student numbers through the appointment of appropriately qualified new staff, as well as through training and mentoring.

43 Students indicated that on average they had weekly contact with their supervisory team, and records are kept of formal supervisory meetings. These form part of the annual progress review for students, which is undertaken by the University using a reviewer independent of the supervisory team. All students must have a satisfactory annual review to re-enrol at the start of the new academic year. Students are normally admitted on an MPhil registration for the first 12 months (full-time students) and may then transfer to PhD, subject to a satisfactory progress review. At the time of the audit, only two students had reached the point of completing their first annual review.

44 Research students have an individually tailored programme to develop their research and transferable and employment-related skills based on a skills audit agreed between the student and the primary supervisor. Research students must satisfactorily complete their programme of supporting studies and this is monitored through the annual progress review. It is a formal requirement that research students attend the College's weekly research forum, while modest funding is available from the College to support their attendance at external conferences and events. The College is planning to adopt the University's graduate teaching assistant framework, including its requirement to complete a 'new-to-teaching' course.

45 The annual progress review is the formal mechanism for research students to give feedback, but students also indicated that they felt able to raise concerns informally through their primary supervisor or the programme leader. There is also student membership of the Research Committee where more general issues are discussed.

46 Final assessment will not commence until 2015, but the necessary procedures are in place and clearly communicated through the MPhil/PhD Handbook. In relation to complaints and appeals, students are entitled to invoke the complaints procedure of either the College or the University, but not both. Staff were unable to explain to the audit team the circumstances in which the College would make decisions on academic appeals or malpractice, rather than the University as the awarding body. While recognising that the programme was at an early stage and these issues were unlikely yet to have arisen, the team saw the need for clarification of the written procedures, lending support to its earlier recommendation on this point.

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

Section 7: Published information

48 The College produces a wide range of information about both the College itself and its programmes. From its own check of student handbooks, the audit team found the information to be up-to-date, comprehensive and mostly consistent with procedural documents. The students who met the team were clearly well-informed about assignment deadlines, assessment criteria, and feedback relative to marking guidelines. They also confirmed that the information they had received prior to joining the College represented an accurate view of College life.

49 The College publishes information on teaching quality in accordance with current national guidelines. The prescribed statistics, National Student Survey results and links to QAA reports may be accessed from the Unistats website, which also contains the required

commentary on graduate employability. Items relating to the quality and standards of programmes are not typically published on the College website, but would be made available on request.

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

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the annual review of programmes of study, which is a well conceived process, thorough and transparent in its execution, leading to action plans that are systematically monitored (paragraph 11)
- the open and responsive approach to student feedback, which ensures that students contribute to the enhancement of their learning experience (paragraph 20)
- the multifaceted and structured approach to students' professional development (paragraph 24).

Recommendations for action

52 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- to reconcile the various minor inconsistencies, relating to award classification and student appeals, between the practical application of procedures and their documentation for students (paragraph 15).

Appendix

Royal Northern College of Music's response to the Institutional audit report

The College welcomes the QAA judgement that confidence can be placed in the present and future management of both the academic standards of its awards and the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. This acknowledges the maturity of the College's policies and procedures for the management of academic standards and the quality of the learning opportunities, and, in particular, the work that has taken place since the College was granted taught degree awarding powers in 2007.

The College particularly welcomes the identification of good practice that reflects its strong ongoing commitment to the support and professional development of its students; features which are central to a rounded and high quality conservatoire education, and the continuing enhancement of student learning opportunities. The College is also pleased that the audit found its support for students who have disclosed a disability to be appropriate, proactive and responsive.

In response to the one desirable recommendation the College has already taken steps to address the minor inconsistencies in relation to its documentation for student appeals, with a revised Appeals Procedure having been considered by the Academic Quality Committee and approved by Academic Board in June 2011. Minor inconsistencies that related to awards classification have been reviewed and clearly articulated in all documentation including student handbooks for 2011-12.

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