



## Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of ALRA, October 2018

### Outcome of the monitoring visit

From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that ALRA is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the October 2017 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

### Changes since the last QAA review visit

1 ALRA continues to deliver performing arts programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels across two campuses in London (South) and Wigan (North). There are three programmes validated by St Mary's University (SMU): BA (Hons) Acting, MA Professional Acting and MA Directing. There are two programmes awarded by Trinity College, London (TCL): Diplomas in Professional Acting at Level 5 and Level 6 which students can study simultaneously with SMU programmes with no additional teaching or assessment requirements. Since the last review visit, the MA Professional Acting has been revalidated and a new programme, the MA Directing, was validated in February 2018. The latter programme has just commenced. In March 2018, ALRA completed validation with the Council for Dance, Drama and Musical Theatre (CDMT) demonstrating that ALRA meets the requirements of the professional body which oversees the performing arts sector.

2 At the time of the monitoring visit there were 120 students on the BA (Hons) Acting (43 of whom are also taking the Level 6 diploma); 32 students on the MA Professional Acting (one of whom is also studying the Level 5 diploma); five students on the MA Directing and one student studying solely on the Level 5 diploma. These student numbers represent a small decrease when compared with numbers at the time of the last review visit. ALRA employs 17 staff of whom 15 are full-time and 10 undertake solely academic roles.

### Findings from the monitoring visit

3 ALRA has made acceptable progress following the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) visit in continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision. ALRA fully addressed the recommendation in the October 2017 report to complete an audit of all public information by January 2018 and has developed processes and a policy to maintain this (paragraph 4). Student support has been further developed and strengthened, in particular with regard to support for students with mental health issues (paragraph 5). Continued development of outreach and widening participation activities has enhanced the diversity of the student body (paragraph 7). ALRA demonstrates its responsiveness to student feedback by the revision of assessment information, amending the size of summative feedback and adjusting assessment tasks to meet specific student needs (paragraph 8).

4 The information audit was undertaken in December 2017 by the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) and reported in the first meeting of QAC in January 2018. Similar audits are to be carried out annually and have been added to the academic calendar. ALRA has produced a Public Information Policy which is informed by the UK Quality Code for Higher

Education (Quality Code), Part C, and Consumer and Markets Authority guidelines for higher education providers. A Marketing and Outreach Group has been created which focuses on marketing and information and reports to the QAC. The chairperson of this Committee holds ultimate responsibility for the accuracy and reliability of information. Students met by the team commented favourably on the information received prior to application and on the programme. Second-year students confirmed that the quality of information received from ALRA has improved in terms of accuracy, currency and relevance from the previous year.

5 An existing tutor has trained as a therapist as part of their continuing professional development and has taken responsibility for mindfulness and wellbeing initiatives to support students who may have problems with the demands of the programmes and performing arts disciplines. Students commented favourably on this and confirmed that they felt supported and able to approach staff with any problem.

6 ALRA's Admissions Policy and processes are aligned to the Schwartz principles of fair admissions. Details of entry requirements, admissions and audition processes and appeals are available on the website. Details of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and the non-academic admission route are outlined in the admissions policy. International students have the option to submit audition tapes digitally as part of the application process. Additional information and guidance is provided at 'Taster Days' and 'Shadow Days'.

7 The admissions process is underpinned by the Widening Participation Strategy in order to reach a broader range of applicants and reduce barriers to prospective students. Admission of students who are from backgrounds with Protected Characteristics and Looked After Young People who may struggle with the full-time nature of the course, are offered a free, one-year foundation course in preparation for the BA or MA acting programmes. The non-academic admissions route is designed around *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and Subject Benchmark Statements and provides an opportunity for those who would not normally access degree-level study but are considered suitable for the programme. Applicants without the usual academic entry qualifications complete a written or digital task and non-academic registration workshop prior to starting the programme. Applicants who are not accepted can defer in order to complete further study. The number of mature students studying on the BA (Hons) and MA programmes has increased steadily since 2016. The audition process is a progressive day-long programme of practical performance, workshops and interview. The process uses an anonymous digital scoring system and is monitored by the Registrar. Staff training is provided in audition and assessment skills. All admissions are overseen by the Registrar and reported to SMU Registry department which approves decisions made around RPL and non-academic entry. The admissions process is informed by the Federation of Drama Schools and enables currency in conservatoire acting admission practice to be maintained. Students met by the team spoke positively about the fair and supportive nature of the audition, interview and the whole application process. Many students have progressed through ALRA's foundation and outreach programmes.

8 Assessment processes are informed by the Quality Code *Chapter B6* and conform to SMU regulations. ALRA is responsible for designing assessment tasks and marking. Students are informed of assessment points at the start of the academic year. Details of assessment are contained in module guides and the Student Handbook which have been revised for the 2018-19 academic year at students' request to provide simpler and more accessible information. Formative feedback is given verbally immediately after performances followed by written feedback within three weeks on the Student Portal System. Performances are simultaneously second-marked with samples internally moderated in line with ALRA's Academic Regulations. Academic staff have received training in digital assessment. The Principal and Vice-Principal track the marks of one student per group offering a third mark and identifying any trends. Any concerns are reported at Exam Board.

External examiners review a selection of work by attending live performances and observing recorded assessments. They are able to access marks and reports via the Student Portal System. External examiner reports are presented to ALRA's Exam Board and also considered by the Teaching and Learning Committee, which has student representation as a central part of the annual monitoring process. Students met by the team from the South campus were unaware of how to access and comment on external examiner reports. Those from the North campus were aware of how to access reports but had not done so. Reports can be accessed on the virtual learning environment. The external examiner was involved in a recent consultation around the marking and assessing of the Level 6 Personal Research Project. Exam boards are held at SMU and attended by ALRA staff. External examiners commented positively on the standard and appropriateness of assessment. Students commented very favourably on the range and appropriateness of assessment which is performance-based, and the usefulness of feedback. The size restriction on summative feedback has been relaxed at the students' request. Some assessment tasks are amended to meet individual students' specific needs such as blogs and Vlogs.

9 ALRA makes good use of student data to evaluate and enhance its provision. All information goes to the Senior Leadership Committee and decisions are made directly from this data. ALRA has shown consistently high retention and pass rates. In 2016, the MA achieved a 100 per cent retention with a 98 per cent pass rate; in 2017, a 91 per cent retention and 94 per cent pass rate; and, in 2018, a retention rate of 92 per cent. Final pass rates for 2018 are not yet available. In 2016, the BA (Hons) achieved an 85 per cent retention and 98 per cent pass rate; and in 2017 and 2018, 86 per cent and 93 per cent retention rates, respectively. Final pass rates for these cohorts are not yet available. Retention and pass rates on the Level 5 diploma in 2016 and 2017 are excellent with 100 per cent recorded in each category. In 2018, there is also a 100 per cent retention rate with pass rates not yet available. The Level 6 diploma shows similarly high retention and pass rates at 87 per cent and 90 per cent for 2016; and retention rates of 86 per cent and 91 per cent for 2017 and 2018, respectively. Final pass rates for these cohorts are not yet available.

10 ALRA examines graduate success and their destinations. DLHE data does not accurately capture the destination data of self-employed actors therefore its usefulness is limited. Internal questionnaires and data are used to gather information and ALRA keeps in regular contact with alumni, some of whom return to give talks to students. Relevant data is included in external examiner reports.

## **Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education**

11 ALRA designs its own programmes which are validated by SMU and TCL. As such they ensure alignment with the Quality Code, FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. Staff are aware of the revised Quality Code soon to be published. ALRA is working towards all academic staff becoming Fellows or Senior Fellows of the Higher Education Academy. All academic staff are also current industry practitioners and bring their continuing professional experience to their teaching. As a member of the Federation of Drama Schools and an accredited school of the CDMT, ALRA adhere to their requirements.

## **Background to the monitoring visit**

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

13 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Millard Parkinson, Reviewer, and Ms Christine Bevan, QAA Officer, on 24 October 2018.

**QAA2288 - R10304 - Dec 18**

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