



## Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of the Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts, December 2018

### Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that The Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts (the Academy) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the November 2017 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

### Changes since the last QAA review/monitoring visit

2 The Academy continues to offer BA (Honours) Acting; and, in 2018, enrolled students on to its new programmes - BA (Honours) Musical Theatre and Certificate of Higher Education: Introduction to Acting, which were validated in 2017 by its awarding body, The University of East London (the University).

3 The Academy's data return reports that there are 202 students registered on its programmes as follows: BA (Honours) Acting - 87; BA (Honours) Musical Theatre - 62; Certificate of Higher Education: Introduction to Acting - 53. The introduction of the two new programmes resulted in an overall increase in student numbers by more than 20 per cent/100 students, and a 30 per cent increase in type of provision (new programmes) by student head count, which led to an extended annual monitoring visit taking place.

4 The data return indicates that there are 15 full and six part-time members of staff, employed on a mixture of academic and management contracts; and, in addition, a significant number of staff are employed on a freelance basis, according to their expertise.

### Findings from the monitoring visit

5 The Academy is using the action plan developed following the November 2017 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)) to monitor its progress. This is updated and shows further development of all the identified areas of good practice, along with acceptable progress in relation to the two recommendations. It will require further time to fully identify the impact of the actions undertaken. The Academy has also produced a comprehensive Quality Improvement Plan, informed by a University review of the provision, along with input from staff and students, and consideration of external contexts. A further action plan has been drawn up following validation of the two new programmes. The Quality Assurance Manager is working towards combining these action plans into one document, as three plans are considered to be unwieldy. Admissions procedures for all programmes are thorough, ensuring that students possess the necessary skills and resilience to undertake the demanding levels of training (see paragraphs 12-14). Assessment processes are rigorous and ensure as much objectivity as possible within a creative environment (see paragraphs 15-19). The Academy has taken appropriate steps to ensure sufficiency of resources for the increase in the number of programmes and students.

6 The Academy has built on the good practice identified and further developed its programme of staff development as an integral part of its approach to improving teaching and learning. This is planned and recorded each academic year. In addition, staff recognised the need for mental health first aid training to improve support for students within the theatrical profession and a number of staff were trained earlier this year. Since the last QAA review, the Academy has introduced an onsite counsellor, who is regularly accessed by students to discuss issues. Training for staff teaching on the new BA Musical Theatre is in place and recent sessions have covered the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and approaches to assessment and feedback; with positive feedback received from staff. Regular teaching appraisals and peer observations are used to identify aspects of good practice and areas requiring improvement.

7 Good progress has been made in widening the opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration through the introduction of cross-cohort projects and interaction with alumni. One event was not as well-attended as had been hoped and a detailed evaluation has been carried out to enable staff to review this area of extra-curricular activity to provide improved opportunities for students to develop their learning. Professional Prep week, held for final-year students in the autumn term, has been widened to prepare students even more effectively for the professional environment.

8 Students confirm that there is a very helpful open-door policy that enables them to discuss their learning with any member of staff. Weekly meetings of student representatives discuss issues of concern, which are responded to quickly by the Academy. For example, when students raised concerns about a voice class being discontinued, staff reinstated it within a week. A staff and student working group has been set up to discuss the industry-relevant issue of ethics and consent, and is working towards agreeing a Fit to Train Policy.

9 Students are very enthusiastic in stating the benefits of panel tutorials, which enable them to take personal responsibility for their progress by appreciating how their different areas of study fit together, and they confirm that they are able to further discuss the feedback received with staff afterwards. Staff training was provided prior to introducing these on the BA Musical Theatre programme, with further training planned.

10 Acceptable progress has been made on the recommendation to ensure that committee agendas and minutes record explicit consideration of programme monitoring reports and programme improvement plans. The recently-appointed Quality Manager now provides standard templates for agendas of deliberative meetings, which include consideration of programme improvement plans. Following the introduction of a new standard record template, minutes of meetings for deliberative committees now demonstrate consideration of action plans containing programme improvements, with actions agreed and allocated. The review team welcome this development, as it had noted a previous example of insufficient rigour in maintaining formal records that accurately followed the agenda.

11 The Academy has made good progress in the recommendation relating to the implementation of procedures to ensure continued accuracy of information. A thorough review of all information systems across all three sites has taken place and a review cycle has recently been implemented, although it is currently too early to evaluate effectiveness. The latest update of the HER (AP) action plan identifies detailed progress and outstanding actions regarding the review cycle. New IT systems are currently being introduced to ensure compliance with data protection regulations and ease of access to management information. Following rebranding, a new website has recently been launched. Documented sign-off procedures for the website and course documentation are in operation.

12 Recruitment and selection processes are aligned to the relevant sections of the Quality Code and described in the Academy's comprehensive Quality Manual, on the website and in the Application Process flowchart. The Academy seeks to recruit a diverse cohort of students through a recruitment process which consists of an application via UCAS, followed by an audition and interview using a standard format. Auditions are conducted by trained members of staff, according to an established code of practice made available to all candidates on the website and through the audition pack. Once an offer has been made and accepted, prospective students are sent information to prepare them for their programme. Developmental feedback on their audition is provided to unsuccessful applicants on request. At the start of their programme new students receive a comprehensive induction and are assigned to a cross-cohort student 'family' to provide support. The Academy recognises that the diversity of prospective candidates could be broadened, and is seeking to do so through active outreach to youth theatres and regional areas.

13 The Academy requires the level of English for students with a different first language to be IELTS 6.0, or equivalent, as described in the Audition Code of Conduct on the website. Students requiring additional help with their English are identified at audition and induction and receive weekly support sessions.

14 The minimum admission requirements for the programmes are outlined on the website and in the audition pack. The suitability of applicants, and their commitment to study, is assessed through the application form and programme-specific audition process, which ensures that students possess the appropriate level of practical skills, attitude, character and dedication to meet the demands of the programme. The Academy makes effective use of the auditions to guide applicants towards the most appropriate programme for their level of skills. The Academy does not accept students for direct entry to Levels 5 and 6 of the BA programmes.

15 An outline of the Academy's thorough assessment processes is given in the student handbook, with a detailed description in the Quality Manual. Assessment practices for the BA Acting have been duplicated across the two new programmes. Termly departmental assessment meetings inform formative feedback and indicative marks. The University's Pre-Progression and Progression Boards, where the external examiner is normally in attendance, confirm the summative marks and awards of credit and qualification.

16 Module specifications provide clear and measurable learning outcomes, reading lists, assessment components, assessment criteria and marking guidelines. Student achievement is measured according to these at component and module level, and students receive summative marks directly from the University. A range of assessment methods are used to reflect the practical and vocational nature of the programmes, including cumulative practice, performance, presentation, essay, written reflection and analysis, portfolio and performance text. Practical performances are marked by staff on a group basis, with a moderator attending at least one performance of all productions being marked, and underpinned by written staff guidance.

17 Panel tutorials provide each student with formative assessment and detailed feedback from a group of staff on a range of different practical skills, encouraging them to take responsibility for their own progress (see also paragraph 9).

18 Staff development sessions are run periodically for all staff to reflect on and share their assessment practice and experience, and to ensure parity and good practice in standards of assessment and moderation. For example, the Programme Quality Board noted that teaching staff on the BA Musical Theatre programme have been provided with training in assessment to ensure cross-programme standardisation.

19 The nature of the programmes largely precludes opportunities for academic malpractice, as it inherently requires that each student's practical work is their own, and written reflections on practical experiences are individual and personal. However, some opportunities still exist for misconduct and the student handbook contains appropriate, detailed regulations to deal with this. Where there is a suspicion of misconduct, staff use plagiarism-detection software as part of the investigation and cases are considered by the Heads of Department meeting and Assessment Board.

20 Recruitment, retention and progression have remained consistent across the existing provision and staff are pleased with recruitment to the two new programmes. The University maintains detailed data on the student demographic, retention, progression, achievement and leavers' destinations. Student retention and achievement rates for the last academic year are 93.1% and 100% respectively, with a significant improvement in degree outcomes, compared to the two previous years.

21 The two new programmes, successfully validated and launched since the last HER (AP), have resulted in an increase in student numbers. The Certificate of Higher Education: Introduction to Acting replaces an existing Foundation in Acting course and provides a sound basis for access to specialised training for those who are not yet ready to take a full honours degree. The BA Musical Theatre is a new programme which uses the same admissions and assessment processes as the existing BA Acting programme but requires students to demonstrate a wider skill set at audition. The Academy has provided appropriate staff and recruited sufficient additional freelance teaching staff to deliver the new programmes. The new BA course is currently based at the Barbican and Guildford premises, with the Acting courses at the Clapham site. Following a comprehensive strategic review, the Academy is planning to sell the Barbican building and consolidate all higher education provision on one site, ensuring appropriate ongoing facilities for programme delivery.

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

22 The Academy uses a range of external reference points effectively to maintain the quality of provision, including external reviews by its awarding body, The Council for Dance, Drama and Musical Theatre Training, and QAA. A timely action plan is devised following each review and discussed by deliberative committees to ensure ongoing progress. The recent Review and Enhancement Report from the University has identified a number of matters which are currently being addressed by the Academy through a detailed action plan, with a view to further improving the student experience. The Academy has successfully completed a thorough mapping exercise of its policies and processes to the relevant chapters of the Quality Code (2013-18), as described in the highly detailed Quality Manual. Programme contents, including those for the BA Musical Theatre, have been mapped to appropriate points on *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ) and to QAA Subject Benchmark Statements.

## **Background to the monitoring visit**

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

24 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mike Coulson, Reviewer, and Nadine Baker, QAA Officer, on 10 and 11 December 2018.

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