Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of the Open College of the Arts, February 2016

Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit

1   From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the Open College of the Arts (the College) has made commendable progress with implementing the action plan from the February 2014 Review for Specific Course Designation.

Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review

2   There have been no significant changes to the academic structure or validation relationships since the review undertaken in February 2014, other than six new degrees which were validated by the University for the Creative Arts (the University) in October 2015. These are awards in BA (Hons) Drawing; BA (Hons) Fine Art; BA (Hons) Illustration; BA (Hons) Graphic Design; BA (Hons) Music; BA (Hons) Moving Image, with only one student currently registered on each of the Illustration and Music awards.

3   At the time of the 2014 review the College had 959 students (headcount) registered for designated awards validated by the University for the Creative Arts, compared with 1,031 students at the monitoring visit; this represents an increase of 7.5 per cent.

Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

4   The College has acted very effectively on all aspects of the action plan from the 2014 review. The four areas of good practice have been embedded and in all cases enhanced. The College has maintained and enhanced the quality of online teaching and learning materials (paragraph 6), which supports the comprehensive feedback on, and support for, assessment (paragraph 7). The team had access to exemplary online video support materials and the enhanced range of media and formats for the presentation of public information, which have been maintained and which are widely available to staff and students (paragraph 8).

5   All recommendations have been fully addressed and further improvements identified and implemented in line with the College's overarching ethos, which stresses 'passion, professionalism and inclusivity'. This clearly underpins and guides the College in all its activities, including the management of academic standards. The College has reviewed the terms of reference of the Curriculum and Quality Committee, which clearly indicates its responsibilities for academic standards (paragraph 9), and reviewed the constitution of its committees to provide for a greater representation, and engagement, of staff and students (paragraphs 9 and 10). There are clear procedures and systems in place to capture the formal approval of information (paragraph 11).

6   The quality of the online teaching and learning materials has been maintained and continues to be reviewed and enhanced. The College has rewritten the Tutor Handbook and reviewed the structure of, and time given to, tutor development days to heighten awareness of the resources available to support students. Tutors confirm that this has had a significant effect on the quality of learning materials and commented on how valuable they found tutor development days in the sharing of good practice and learning experiences. The University

has commended the College at recent periodic reviews and validation events on the quality of its learning materials. Students met during the visit were very positive about the quality and accessibility of materials, videos and other resources. The monitoring team found online and hard copy resources to be of exceptionally high quality in content and production.

7   The College has built on the comprehensive feedback on, and support for, assessment by implementing enhanced tutor development days to ensure that all tutors are made more aware of the assessment process and requirements. The College included specific sessions on 'criticality' and communication with students at risk. Staff met during the visit confirmed the increasing value of tutor development days and commented that, for new staff, these are also part of a progressive induction framework of support. Tutors also have the opportunity to work shadow Head Office staff and observe key committee meetings.

8   The range and use of exemplary online video support materials available to staff and students has been enhanced to include improved indexing on the student website. As a result, video resources are more accessible to students, with a 23 per cent increase in video viewing between 2013-14 and 2014-15. In 2014, the College appointed two Course Support Advisors to review and develop online video support materials for staff and students, and this has made a substantial contribution to quality and accessibility of online resources. The College has maintained and enhanced the quality and variety of its media and formats for the presentation of public information. The range of resources are promoted in tutor newsletters which benefits students and tutors. There has been a 36 per cent increase in the number of posts written by tutors on the College's public website and significant improvement in page views and visit duration statistics.

9   The three desirable recommendations have been addressed and improvements embedded. The terms of reference of the Curriculum and Quality Committee (CQC) have been updated and clearly indicate its responsibilities for academic standards. The constitution of other College committees has been reviewed and there are improved opportunities for representation and engagement of staff and students. The College now has a Programme Leader for each degree with responsibility for development and oversight of their subject area and teaching team. The nominated Programme Leader representative brings academic experience and influence to the Development Committee and Board of Trustee meetings. Staff met during the visit were very positive about their opportunities for representation and engagement in College decision making. The responsibilities of Programme Leaders have been extended and strengthened and the introduction of Unit Leaders has helped to ensure consistency in the quality and standard of assessment across programmes.

10   The College created a Student Consultative Committee (SCC) in November 2014 with wider terms of reference than its predecessor. In practice, persuading distance-learning students to take on committee member responsibilities has proved difficult. The College hopes that the Project 2016 initiative, which has a primary remit to identify issues and recommend actions to address barriers to learning, will inform further development of student engagement and representation. Project 2016 involves staff and students, including the recently appointed Student Accessibility Representative.

11   The College has clear procedural arrangements to capture the formal approval of information. Under the College Protocol for Publication of Information all public information must have an originator and separate authoriser with joint responsibility for the quality of information published. While the Protocol specifies an audit trail, the College considers that there are sufficient checks and balances within the small team responsible to obviate the need for this. The College maintains a log of amendments and the Principal has oversight of, and responsibility for, all public information.

12   College admissions arrangements meet the requirements of *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). English language requirements are in line with University regulations and the University Learner Support Officer provides further guidance on request. The College operates an open access policy to Level 4 with the exception of music composition, which requires evidence of prior knowledge of music theory. To prevent students over-committing, the College enrols on a unitary basis rather than by level and advises and urges students to enrol on one unit as a norm and two by exception. The College also plans to widen participation by extending its current range of courses at foundation level to support progression onto the degree awards.

13   The College has rigorous and effective arrangements for programme monitoring and review which meet the requirements of *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* of the Quality Code. The University provides external oversight with responsibility for validation, periodic review and annual monitoring and the appointment of external examiners. The College maintains internal oversight through programme Annual Academic Monitoring (AAM) reports. The AAM reports are prepared by Programme Leaders, and action is taken at unit and programme level to maintain standards and enhance the quality of learning opportunities. The College collects student feedback through the student survey and tracks and analyses student performance. The Development Committee and Board of Trustees monitor performance against key indicators, including completion rates, re-enrolments and accreditations. Annual monitoring informs business and academic planning, including the instigation of strategic projects.

14   The College uses external performance indicators to compare its students' performance to that of similar institutions. However, the College believes that, for data on employment and employability, as the majority of graduates are mature students in employment or retired, a better measure of success is whether students have established an artistic practice and are sustaining it six months after graduation. The College has plans to collect this increased level of contextual data for reporting in the 2016-17 AAM reports.

15   The College monitors completion rates of individual units at Level 4 in addition to rates for each level, and analyses at which point during a unit students withdraw. This means they are better able to identify issues within units and take appropriate action. Furthermore, the strengthened position of Programme Leaders, the introduction of Unit Leaders and the College's commitment to acting on student feedback have enhanced its responsiveness to identified need for change. Student retention rates rose from 75 per cent in 2012-13 to 97 per cent in 2014-15.

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

16   The College makes effective use of the Quality Code through its close working relationship with the University and through the alignment of College policies and procedures to it. The partnership validation and revalidation procedures require the College to use external reference points, for example, *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The College has recently undergone successful periodic review and validation of all programmes offered on behalf of the University. This has ensured appropriate alignment to the Quality Code, with specific reference to the FHEQ. The College has met all the conditions for validation and implemented the panels' recommendations.

Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit

17   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.

18   The monitoring visit was carried out by Bob Saynor, Coordinator, and Ms Jenny Steer, Reviewer, on the 10 February 2016.