



Royal College of Art

Institutional Review
by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

May 2012

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About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the Royal College of Art. The review took place from 21 to 25 May 2012 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Neil Casey
- Ms Jenny Rice
- Mr Lee Gavin (student reviewer)
- Ms Denise Cooper (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by the Royal College of Art, and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
 - threshold academic standards¹
 - the quality of learning opportunities
 - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- identifies features of good practice
- makes recommendations
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take
- provides commentaries on public information and the theme topic.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 4.

In reviewing the Royal College of Art, the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [theme](#) for the academic year 2011-12 is the First Year Student Experience.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.² Background information about the Royal College of Art is given at the end of this report. A dedicated page of the website explains the method for [Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland³ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

¹ For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

² www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/IRENI/pages/default.aspx

Key findings

This section summarises the QAA review team's key findings about the Royal College of Art.

QAA's judgements about the Royal College of Art

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at the Royal College of Art (the College).

- Academic standards at the College **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at the Royal College of Art.

- The effectiveness of the various mechanisms for promoting, capturing and responding to the views of students. This results in an effective relationship between the College and the student body (paragraph 2.3.3).
- The continuing commitment to professional practice and employability evident in both the curriculum and the College's attention to promoting links with industry and art and design professions (paragraph 2.7.3).

Recommendations

The QAA review team **recommends** that the Royal College of Art:

- develop a procedure for timely partnership reapproval, separate from the revalidation process, that ensures that the terms and conditions of partnerships, as originally approved, continue to be met (paragraph 2.11.5)
- develop procedures for monitoring the appropriateness of staff who deliver and assess the College's validated awards at partner institutions (paragraph 2.11.5)
- strengthen its arrangements for maintaining oversight of the partner institution's implementation of the College's Academic Regulations (paragraph 2.11.5).

These three actions should be completed by 1 January 2013.

Furthermore, the QAA review team **recommends** that the Royal College of Art:

- complete and publish all programme specifications by 30 September 2012 (paragraph 1.1.2)
- make sure that all programme teams engage with external reference points such as the Academic Infrastructure, and that the information that it produces for students clearly demonstrates the alignment between programme learning outcomes, learning and teaching methods and assessment (paragraph 1.1.2); this should be completed by July 2013.

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms the following actions** that the Royal College of Art is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The College's plans to introduce an institution-wide induction for external examiners appointed to taught master's programmes (including those for collaborative partners) (paragraph 1.2.2).

Public information

The information that the Royal College of Art provides about its higher education is clear, accessible, accurate and up to date.

The first year student experience

The Royal College of Art has effective arrangements for managing the experience of first-year students.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the operational description and handbook available on the QAA web page explaining [Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland](#).⁴

About the Royal College of Art

The Royal College of Art was originally founded in 1837 as the Government School of Design, the first ever art and design school funded by central government. It became the Royal College of Art in 1896, and was awarded its Royal Charter as an independent institution of university status in 1967 with the object 'to advance learning, knowledge and professional competence particularly in the field of fine art, in the principles and practice of art and design in their relation to industrial and commercial processes and social developments and other subjects relating thereto, through teaching, research and collaboration with industry and commerce'. Since then, it has built upon and enhanced its position as the only entirely postgraduate university institution of art and design in the world. The College has three partner institutions: Imperial College London, the Victoria and Albert museum and the National School of Film and Television. The College is also seeking international partnerships with institutions in Japan and the United States of America.

The College provides learning and research opportunities for 1,070 full-time equivalent students, all at postgraduate level. The majority of students undertake taught, two-year master's programmes leading to the degree of MA, while 94 full-time equivalent students are studying for research degrees.

The College's previous review by QAA in 2007 resulted in a judgement of confidence in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The Institutional Audit led to a number of recommendations; these were set out in the mid-cycle follow-up report together with a summary of the action taken by the College to address them.

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/IRENI/pages/default.aspx

A new Strategic Plan for 2011-16 was launched in December 2010, following extensive analysis, external benchmarking, consultation with students, staff and other key stakeholders, and approval by the Council of the College. This document announces the College's mission, strategic vision and goals as follows.

Mission

The Royal College of Art aims to achieve international standards of excellence in the postgraduate and pre/mid-professional education of artists and designers and related practitioners. It aims to achieve these through the quality of its teaching, research and practice and through its relationship with the institutions, industries and technologies associated with the disciplines of art and design.

Strategic vision

To position the Royal College of Art as the world's leading university devoted exclusively to postgraduate art and design education, research and knowledge transfer.

Goals

- a Expand the programme of master's courses to advance new developments in design and art, ensuring twenty-first century relevance.
- b Consolidate research strengths and realise research excellence.
- c Strengthen the culture of design innovation and entrepreneurialism, with closer links to industry.

Explanation of the findings about the Royal College of Art

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.⁵

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#)⁶ is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.⁷

1 Academic standards

Outcome

The academic standards at the Royal College of Art **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 The review team found that programmes at the College are aligned to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ).

1.1.1 Systems are in place that make sure that levels conform to the expectations of the FHEQ. The College Academic Regulations explain that the standard of award is aligned with the relevant qualification descriptor in the National Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. This alignment is emphasised in the Quality Handbook in its guidance for the preparation for validation and revalidation of programmes, where panels are required to discuss the fit to the FHEQ.

1.1.2 The College has implemented procedures to make sure that programme specifications are in place for all courses, so students have access to relevant course material within a single document. This action was made in response to the last Institutional Audit report in 2007. It was piloted through the revalidation procedure and subsequently rolled out on a school-by-school basis. This process is on track to be completed by the end of the 2011-12 academic year but progress has been slow. Academic staff write learning outcomes but do not put together the programme specifications; these are assembled by administrative staff with reference to programme handbooks. Many staff showed little awareness of the process, or the importance of alignment with external reference points such as the Academic Infrastructure. The review team **recommends** that the College complete and publish all programme specifications by 30 September 2012. The review team also **recommends** the College make sure that all programme teams engage with external reference points such as the Academic Infrastructure, and that the information that it produces for students clearly demonstrates the alignment between programme learning outcomes, learning and teaching methods and assessment. This should be completed by July 2013.

⁵ The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However, it is available on request for inspection. Please contact QAA Reviews Group.

⁶ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx

⁷ See note 4.

Use of external examiners

1.2 The College makes scrupulous use of external examiners to ensure that the academic standards of its programmes are maintained at the appropriate levels. The role and duties of external examiners are clearly articulated, and there is an established procedure for the nomination and approval of external examiners.

1.2.1 External examiners for all of the College's programmes are appointed by Senate on the recommendation of the Academic Standards Committee, following nomination by the Head of Programme. The appointment of external examiners for research students involves additional support from the Director of Research. The Academic Standards Committee discusses nominations and approves appointments.

1.2.2 Heads of Programme are responsible for the face-to-face induction of new external examiners. While this is effective, there is no formal institutional induction for new external examiners. There are, however, plans to introduce an institutional induction in the future, which will encompass collaborative partners. The review team **affirms** the College's plans to introduce an institution-wide induction for external examiners appointed to taught master's programmes (including those for collaborative partners).

1.2.3 The external examiner sits on the programme-level examination boards but not the Academic Board for Concessions and Discipline, so there is no representation from external examiners across the whole of the College's master's provision. External examiners' reports are discussed at Programme Monitoring Committees and comments are fed into the departmental review process. Departmental review reports are received by the Academic Standards Committee and any actions are confirmed. The response is sent to the external examiner, and any issues or good practice are reported to Senate.

Assessment and standards

1.3 The College's procedures for the design, approval, and monitoring and review of assessment strategies are effective in ensuring that students have the opportunity to demonstrate the learning outcomes of their programmes.

1.3.1 The Academic Regulations contain detailed information of processes and examinations. The National Film and Television School has its own regulations which are mentioned in its partnership agreement with the College. Assessment practices are aligned to the requirements of different programmes and disciplines. Some programmes set specific assessment briefs linked to programme learning outcomes and which are clearly linked to the appropriate FHEQ level. Others are negotiated with students and proposals are checked against the College's overarching learning outcomes.

1.3.2 Formative and summative assessment is effective. Students receive regular formative assessment and feedback, although the review team heard of some instances of late feedback. Summative assessment is provided through an Interim Examination Board, which meets after the end of the first year of the programme, and a Final Examination Board, which meets at the end of the programme. The Final Examination Board is attended by the student's personal tutor, the external examiner and the internal moderator, who is appointed by Senate, and ensures that the process is objective and comparable across programmes. The review team was unclear whether the internal moderator for the National Film and Television School oversees all specialisms.

1.3.3 The final examination looks at the work of the student against the assessment criteria for each programme. Accurate records are kept of all decisions in the final examination form. These forms are considered by the Academic Board for Concessions and

Discipline, which discusses individually any cases of referral or failure. The Academic Board sends an annual report to Senate regarding the conferment of awards.

1.3.4 Information to students about assessment is provided in the Academic Regulations, on the College intranet, and in programme handbooks. Despite some concerns about awareness documented in departmental reviews, students reported that they were aware of assessment procedures.

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.4 The College's procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes enable standards to be set and maintained.

1.4.1 The process for approval and validation is articulated in the Quality Handbook. The School Leadership Team in a school consider new proposals, which are then made on an 'Expression of Interest' pro forma to be considered and approved by the Senior Management Team, followed by a fuller outline application. The Academic Standards Committee then has to approve the content of the proposal before it proceeds to a full validation event. This event is articulated in the College Academic Regulations. The revalidation panel includes two external assessors as well as internal assessors from another school in the College. There is provision for a representative of the Students' Union to be part of the panel, although there is no formal training for this role. The outcomes of the panels are signed off by the Academic Standards Committee and Senate.

1.4.2 Programmes are revalidated every six years. Guidance on process is provided in the Quality Handbook and templates. The members of the revalidation panel are usually the same as for a validation, though there is no Students' Union representative. The terms of reference mirror a validation and also require evidence of annual review, external examiner and student involvement. Student work and facilities are viewed.

1.4.3 Programme monitoring is effective and takes place through the departmental review. The Quality Handbook sets out the responsibility of the school to monitor the standard of its academic provision, and the Head of Programme to present an annual report. The student handbook explains the important role of students in the process. Students feed back comments through Programme Monitoring Committees and can also feed back comments through Course and Programme Forums, which feed into the annual review. The Academic Standards Committee looks at all the departmental review reports. A summary of themes, including issues and good practice, is prepared by the Academic Development Office to be submitted to Senate.

Subject benchmarks

1.5 The College's programmes do not use subject benchmarks explicitly because all the programmes lead to postgraduate awards. However, Architecture refers to Royal Institute of British Architects validation criteria and Architects Registration Board accreditation requirements, and these have been applied to the MA Architecture. The review team heard that some staff developed an awareness of subject benchmarks through their external examining roles on undergraduate provision at other institutions. Additionally, an awareness of subject benchmarks is developed through working as a team with Imperial College London.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at the Royal College of Art **meets UK expectations**. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 The College ensures that staff involved in delivering and supporting programmes are appropriately qualified and supported, with the exception of the programme at the National Film and Television School.

2.1.1 While general quality assurance is provided by annual departmental reviews, the process of revalidation addresses the quality assurance of learning and teaching. Student feedback on this subject feeds into this process, and is generally positive, although there is a demand for more cross-disciplinary links. Some staff echoed this demand.

2.1.2 The College has a process for supporting professional standards for learning and teaching. This is set out in the Learning and Teaching Strategy, which refers to a 'community of practice' in which 'students and staff can learn from each other'. An important element of this strategy is a programme of continuing professional development for teaching staff. This strategy is operated through deans and heads of programmes, although staff were unsure where ultimate responsibility for the development of strategy lay.

2.1.3 Staff development needs are identified through the appraisal mechanism, which is viewed positively by both staff and managers.

2.1.4 The College has effective measures to promote and engage staff in scholarship of learning and teaching. While some staff are involved, the College has identified particular challenges in encouraging take-up from part-time and visiting staff. The College is taking measures to address this. This commitment to supporting standards for learning and teaching is reflected in the development of a Leadership Foundation course for deans to develop their management skills. As a result of this engagement, a number of proposals have been put forward which are designed to support the development of learning and teaching skills.

2.1.5 In addition to their teaching role, academic staff at the College undertake a tutorial role as part of their duties. The College acknowledges that there is a need for more development work with tutors to improve the recording of the outcome of tutorials, and tutors confirmed that there is variability in how their role is carried out. Personal tutors are matched to the interests of students, and this is appreciated by students, who regard the one-to-one tutorial process as an effective environment for critical reflection on individual student progress. Such tutorials are promoted as being available when requested; however, visiting lecturers are able to be a personal tutor provided that they are employed by the College for more than 15 days a year.

2.1.6 All contracted staff at the College undertake an institutional induction, which is accompanied by an induction handbook. This is supported by less formal mechanisms for induction as staff learn on the job. Visiting staff attend a talk at programme level rather than undertaking any more formal procedure.

Learning resources

2.2 The College implements processes to ensure that learning resources are appropriate to allow students to achieve the learning outcomes of their programme. While these processes are generally effective, they can also be slow.

2.2.1 Responsibility for resource planning and allocation lies with the senior management of the College. However, some changes in resourcing are instigated from the bottom up. This has resulted in slow decision-making and a responsive approach to resource management rather than a strategic one.

2.2.2 Learning resource requirements are considered through validations, revalidations and in annual departmental reviews. These are informed by a range of reports, however the discussion of resources in some reports is limited. Student surveys and evaluations are critical of some technical facilities and the quality of accommodation, however the College has developed an additional site to house some programmes in line with its real estate 'masterplan', and to accommodate a planned expansion of student numbers. Concerns about the impact of the additional site on technical facilities and, particularly, the quality of accommodation were reflected in meetings with students.

2.2.3 Annual departmental reviews and revalidations also include discussion of library and technical support. They are managed by the Department of Information, Learning and Technical Services and are part of routine quality assurance processes. There was evidence of student satisfaction with the library provision.

2.2.4 Students expressed high regard for the systematic support offered by College administrative staff.

Student voice

2.3 The review team considered that the student voice was making an effective contribution to quality assurance processes at the College. This is evidenced through involvement in a range of committees and boards, comprehensive surveys and good relationships with the senior management of the College, including the Rector, who usually attends Student Council meetings. Students reported a good relationship between the Students' Union and senior managers at the College, and reported that senior managers are accessible and responsive. Similarly, the College's senior management confirmed the value of their relationship with the Students' Union.

2.3.1 MA students have a voice at programme level committees via Programme Monitoring Committees and Programme Fora. Programme handbooks outline the specific arrangements for student representation and feedback, and student representatives are selected or elected in a variety of ways across different programmes. Ways of feeding back to course colleagues similarly vary in method. While there is no institutional support to prepare course representatives for their role, the Students' Union has developed a role description for student representatives. Students were appreciative of both Programme Monitoring Committees and Programme Fora. Department reviews reveal effective student input, especially through the comprehensive annual student survey.

2.3.2 MA and postgraduate research student representatives are also on the Students' Union Students' Representative Council, where they can bring matters to the attention of the Students' Union President and Vice-President, who then raise issues at senior committees.

2.3.3 The review team noted the effectiveness of the various mechanisms for promoting, capturing and responding to the views of students, and how they result in an effective

relationship between the college and the student body. The review team considered this to be a feature of **good practice**.

Management information is used to improve quality and standards

2.4 Qualitative data is collected in a range of ways and is used in the management of quality and standards.

2.4.1 Quantitative data is included in recruitment reports, an annual report to Senate from the Academic Board for Concessions and Disciplines, and a Registry report from the Academic Standards Committee on college-wide statistics. While the data is comprehensive, the minutes show limited discussion. However, the data provided for annual departmental reviews is interrogated, albeit to varying degrees, in the reports. Qualitative data in departmental reviews includes external examiners' comments, and staff and student feedback. Institutional data is used to benchmark against course data. Deans of School reported that the statistical data helped them to manage quality and standards.

Admission to the College

2.5 Admissions requirements are clearly set out on the College website and in regulations. Staff talk prospective applicants through procedures at open days. As a specialist art and design institution, the College's recruitment and selection criteria are designed to ascertain candidates' creative as well as academic abilities. The College produces a letter to students explaining that admission is based on written application, portfolio and interview at an Admissions Board for the programme. Admissions processes have been shaped with reference to *Section 10: Admissions to higher education* of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*).

2.5.1 Admission decisions are made by Admissions Board, which are conducted in line with guidance from Registry. Membership of the boards may include students. The Academic Boards receive completed application forms with judgements against common criteria, which are applied consistently. International students who cannot attend the College are interviewed by a full panel using Skype, having sent their portfolio in advance. Most students found admissions information accurate and clear.

Complaints and appeals

2.6 Complaints and appeals procedures are set out in the College Academic Regulations. The complaints procedure was reviewed in 2009 in the light of *Section 5: Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters* of the *Code of practice*, to help students become more aware of the difference between the complaints process and the appeals process. While the complaints process is effective, it sometimes lacks formality.

2.6.1 Some students met by the review team were aware that appeals and complaints processes existed. However, others suggested that if they wanted to appeal or complain they would talk to their course leader or the Students' Union in an effort to address matters informally. Student appeals are heard at the Academic Board for Concessions and Discipline, and then reported to Senate. However, complaints are not formally reported to any College committee. The College may wish to consider a more formal procedure for reporting complaints to College committees.

Career advice and guidance

2.7 The College has instigated a range of procedures that build on individual course links with professionals and practitioners. These are valued by students.

2.7.1 The College mission statement highlights the importance it places on its relationship with art and design industries. This is reflected in the strategic plan, which talks about the need to 'strengthen the culture of innovation and entrepreneurialism with closer links to industry'. This strategy is delivered through a variety of initiatives, which help students move from their studies to professional life and employment. Additionally, questions about employability are asked at revalidation panels and departmental reviews, although with varying degrees of comprehensiveness.

2.7.2 These measures are well received by students, although better integration into individual courses would be welcomed. Visiting staff, many of whom are leaders in their field, are a feature of delivery in many courses, and are highly valued by students.

2.7.3 The College's continuing commitment to professional practice and employability and its attention to promoting links with industry and art and design professions is a feature of **good practice**.

Supporting disabled students

2.8 A quarter of students at the College declare as dyslexic or dyspraxic. The College has comprehensive support arrangements and resources in place to enable the entitlements of these, and other disabled students, to be met.

2.8.1 The Learning and Teaching Strategy incorporates objectives relating to the support of students with disabilities. The policy on disability is overseen by the Equality and Diversity Committee, which addresses and monitors the College equality objectives, issues relating to institutional objectives around disability, legislative and other external reference points, and aspects of the student experience relating to disability. Additionally, there is a Dyslexia Forum which reports into Learning and Teaching Committee and seeks to promote best practice. Students offered examples of the mentoring of dyslexic students. Details of support for students with disabilities are on the College website, and staff induction and staff development both address issues relating to disability.

Supporting international students

2.9 The College provides appropriate support to enable international students to complete their programmes. Practical support for international students to help with issues such as accommodation and visas could be enhanced.

2.9.1 Support for international students is centred in the Student Support Office. There is extensive information on the website, which is clear and accessible, and the College organises an introductory day for international students at the start of their programme.

2.9.2 The review team found that academic support for international students, such as dissertation editing workshops and pre-sessional events, was effective and well received, but that practical support for issues such as visas and accommodation could be improved. This is important in view of College plans for the expansion of international activities. The College recognises this and has appointed a part-time International Student Advisor, and is also reviewing the College's English for Academic Purposes provision.

Supporting postgraduate research students

2.10 Appropriate support and guidance is provided to enable postgraduate research students to complete their programmes of study and to enable staff involved in research to fulfil their responsibilities.

2.10.1 Expectations regarding admission to research degrees are set out in the prospectus, College Academic Regulations and the Research Student Handbook. Students are interviewed by their programme and are admitted subject to suitable expertise being available.

2.10.2 Guidance on supervision is in the Academic Regulations and Research Student Handbook, with expectations of research coordinator, supervisor, student and programme clearly set out. The College Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy 2011-16 identifies provision of research training for academic staff and enhancement of research supervisor training as two key objectives. Appointment is confirmed by the Academic Board for Concessions and Discipline. All supervisors undergo a compulsory training course, and are able to attend a Supervisors Forum. The review team heard from staff that these meetings were informally minuted.

2.10.3 The progression of research students is monitored and reviewed through a mixture of informal and formal arrangements. The Research Office coordinates and monitors research student activities and reports to the Academic Standards Committee. All students take the mandatory Research Methods course which is overseen by the Senior Research Tutor.

2.10.4 Postgraduate research students feed back through a range of mechanisms. The Research Student Handbook talks about a Research Student Representative Consultation Committee which meets twice a term to discuss research-related issues. Student representatives are invited to attend Research Committee meetings, however, the team heard that at students' instigation this practice had been dispensed with. Student representatives instead attend the Student Representative Council, which provides a formal feedback channel. They may also provide feedback through Research Methods course review meetings, and through school forums, where feedback is often more informal. Students met by the review team reported that, despite attendance at the Student Representative Council, the methods of feedback were often informal.

2.10.5 There is an internal questionnaire and Postgraduate Research Experience Survey every other year. Outcomes are reviewed by the Senior Research Tutor within the Research Office annual review. The survey notes dissatisfaction with a number of issues, including aspects of supervision. While these are identified for action in the comprehensive Research Office annual review, the progress of any action is not clear.

Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements

2.11 The quality of learning opportunities delivered as part of collaborative agreements is managed to enable students to achieve their awards. The College has collaborative arrangements with institutions inside the UK and is planning arrangements with overseas institutions. Senate and the Academic Standards Committee are ultimately responsible for quality and standards of partnerships, however, the review team heard that there is no single role with managerial oversight of collaborative provision.

2.11.1 The College has no specific strategy to accommodate a planned development of international partners and informal collaborations and partnerships, and consequently the review team heard that the College is developing an Internationalisation Strategy.

2.11.2 The College has three UK partners. Each works under different collaborative arrangements: a joint award is delivered with the Victoria and Albert Museum, a dual award is delivered with Imperial College London, and the College has a validation arrangement with the National Film and Television School. The Quality Handbook explains that partnership arrangements and dual awards will, in addition to the College's usual quality assurance requirements, be subject to the establishment of a Joint Academic Advisory Board comprising members of the partner institutions, which will advise on the planning, delivery and future direction of the programme.

2.11.3 Each contractual agreement is different, and not all are up to date. The College acknowledged that it had been very slow in issuing a new contract with the Victoria and Albert Museum, which dates from 1997. However, it was able to make a new draft contract available to the review team. The team noted that there is no formal process for the reapproval of partnerships, with the revalidation process also being used to renew the partnership.

2.11.4 The Quality Handbook claims that the College's approach is shaped by *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* of the *Code of practice*, but this was not consistently evident in the contracts seen by the review team. The Quality Handbook also sets out arrangements for approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision. However, the team was told that quality assurance processes are determined by the nature of the specific link with the institution and the original contract. These processes were varied in their coverage of the precepts within *Section 2* of the *Code of practice*, and the degree of oversight of the partner institution's implementation of the College's Academic Regulations. The team noted that external examiners at the National Film and Television School do not receive induction from the College, nor does the College exercise oversight of the academic and assessment regulations or monitor the appropriateness of staff. The College also has no Joint Academic Advisory Board with the National Film and Television School, and the team also found that the membership and terms of reference for the board at the Victoria and Albert Museum lacked clarity.

2.11.5 The review team **recommends** that the College develop a procedure for timely partnership reapproval, separate from the revalidation process, that ensures that the terms and conditions of partnerships, as originally approved, continue to be met. The review team also **recommends** that the College develop procedures for monitoring the appropriateness of staff who deliver and assess the College's validated awards at partner institutions. Additionally, the review team **recommends** that the College strengthen its arrangements for maintaining oversight of the partner institution's implementation of the College's Academic Regulations.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.12 The review team found that e-learning at the College was not highly developed. While the Strategic Plan contains the aim of 'exploring and developing opportunities for remote learning and teaching in the curriculum', the Learning and Teaching Strategy says very little about e-learning, although the College is developing an information and communications technology strategy. Computing Services - supported by an informal e-Learning Development Group - manages e-learning, which is 'designed to build learning communities'. This is supported by a part-time member of staff. However, academic staff did not reveal an awareness of e-learning as an institutional aim.

Work-based and placement learning

2.13 There are no formal placements validated within programmes, however, many programmes encourage students to take up informal placements and internships. These are

developed and monitored at programme level. Students are not disadvantaged if they do not undertake a placement.

Student charter

2.14 The College has a student charter in place which sets out the commitments of the College and its expectations of students. It includes reference to the provision of a high quality student experience, the availability of student support, and information on complaints procedures. The Learning and Teaching Strategy includes the objective of reviewing the College student charter in 2012-13. Students met by the review team were unaware of the student charter but were aware of other documentation which provided key information about their academic experience.

3 Public information

3.1 The Royal College of Art makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate, and up to date. Students find the information useful both in helping them make an informed choice when applying to the College, and in preparing for what they might expect when they join. The review team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

3.2 The College makes the majority of information for prospective students available through online resources. This is clear and accurate, providing admissions guidance, information about student support and facilities, and information specifically for international students. Most students found admissions information accurate and clear. Current students have access to printed and online handbooks; these are disseminated to the student body at the start of a programme, and are accurate. Students also reported that the material that they received during their course was generally useful and clear, although some information about programme content was inconsistent.

3.3 The College provides information on quality and standards on the College intranet. While there is evidence of navigational issues, the College has indicated awareness of these problems, and is acting to address them.

4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

4.1 The enhancement of learning opportunities at The Royal College of Art **meets UK expectations**. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.2 The Learning and Teaching Strategy is the fundamental vehicle for the enhancement of the student learning experience. It is a new strategy aimed at promoting a more planned approach to enhancement initiatives. The College has instigated a range of initiatives designed to enhance learning opportunities, through a focus on developing professional practice, employability and entrepreneurship skills, and cross-discipline collaboration. Students reported that they would welcome more opportunity to work across disciplines.

4.3 The strategy consolidates a long-held ethos across the College to enhance student learning opportunities. While being well received, these enhancement opportunities have been developed informally at program level. The College now recognises the need to formalise a more integrated and systematic approach.

4.4 Specific enhancement activities are highlighted within the processes of validation, revalidation and departmental review, and the outcome of the Learning and Teaching Strategy is monitored by the Learning and Teaching Committee.

5 Theme: First Year Student Experience

Each academic year, a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for especial attention by QAA's Institutional Review teams. In 2011-12 the theme is the **First Year Student Experience**.

The review team explored the First Year Student Experience at the Royal College of Art.

Supporting students' transition

5.1 The College has effective arrangements in place for managing the quality of experience provided for first-year students. The College proactively supports students' transition to postgraduate education and is responsive to individual needs.

5.2 There are thorough induction processes. Responsibility for institutional induction lies with the Academic Registrar, while responsibility for programme induction lies with the Head of Programme. The review team heard about a range of induction activities, including some activities where a UK student works alongside an international student. This builds on the international student induction which is intended to acclimatise students to living and studying in the UK.

Information for first-year students

5.3 UK students in particular confirmed that the material that they received before application was accurate, as were the open days, which were helpful in setting expectations.

Assessment and feedback

5.4 The College uses a range of methods to communicate the requirements of assessment to students, and the level at which they will be assessed. Students indicated to the review team that the interview process frames expectations in terms of the amount and level of work required. Once on their programme, students indicated that they were aware of the level of work required through viewing outcomes from second-year students, and working alongside them in the studio.

5.5 The College operates a well-received personal tutor system that is the focus for feedback to students on performance in both formative and summative assessment. These tutorials are documented in regular personal tutor reports. The review team was advised by students that they valued this above the college-wide feedback form, which they felt was too generic. However, the team saw evidence of consistently clear and thoughtful feedback to students using the college-wide feedback form.

Monitoring retention and progression

5.6 The College makes effective use of a range of statistical information to monitor the progression, retention and completion rates of first-year students. Institutional data is used to benchmark against course data. Departments are required to analyse these quality indicators as part of the departmental review process.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions. For example, pages 18-19 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of threshold academic standards, learning opportunities, enhancement and public information.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx.

If you require formal definitions of other terms, please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx.

Academic Infrastructure Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their courses meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the **frameworks for higher education qualifications**, the **subject benchmark statements**, the **programme specifications** and the **Code of practice**. Work is underway (2011-12) to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Code of practice *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

credit(s) A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education programmes of study, expressed as 'numbers of credits' at a specific level.

enhancement Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

framework A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

framework for higher education qualifications A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*.

learning opportunities The provision made for students' learning, including planned **programmes of study**, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

learning outcome What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

operational definition A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

programme (of study) An approved course of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

programme specifications Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of **programmes of study**, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

public information Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

Quality Code Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is being developed from 2011 to replace the **Academic Infrastructure** and will incorporate all its key elements, along with additional topics and overarching themes.

subject benchmark statement A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

threshold academic standard The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standard**.

widening participation Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

RG 1007 08/12

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ISBN 978 1 84979 664 4

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786