



## **Royal Conservatoire of Scotland**

### **Follow-up Report to the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)**

**January 2020**

#### **Preface**

One year after publication of their ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports, institutions are asked to submit a Follow-up Report to QAA Scotland. These reports are also submitted to the Scottish Funding Council. Follow-up Reports are written in the institution's own words and require to be endorsed by the institution's Governing Body prior to publication on the QAA website. Guidance on the content and structure is provided by QAA Scotland.

Institutions are asked to focus on the action they have taken since the review and to include an indication of the effectiveness of that action. ELIR reports highlight positive practice as well as areas for development, and institutions are encouraged to comment on key areas of activity relating to good practice that they have prioritised since the ELIR.

Follow-up Reports are discussed with institutions as part of the ELIR annual discussion meetings.



# Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

## Enhancement-Led institutional review (ELIR) Follow-up Report – October 2019

### Introduction

A first draft of this report was compiled by the Assistant Principal, Academic Registrar, Directors of School, Director of Human Resources, Head of Information Services, Director of Research and Knowledge Exchange and the SU President. An ELIR action plan, distilled from our technical report has been refined and updated over the last year, and discussed in the deliberative cycle, particularly at Quality and Standards Committee, which includes student representation.

At the time of ELIR4 the Conservatoire was implementing a newly reviewed UG curriculum, the first such periodic multi-programme review since the major Curriculum Reform project (the roll out of which coincided with ELIR 3). The ELIR4 Team was especially helpful in supporting the curriculum direction we are pursuing, but also in offering constructive and well-considered feedback in respect of our conservatoire-wide approach to assessment and feedback, technology-enhanced learning and the strategic (and reflective) cycle into which all learning and enhancement activity fits. Following the ELIR4 visit, this report offers an opportunity to reflect some progress made in these areas subsequent to our receipt of the full ELIR4 technical report, in particular in programme annual monitoring, strategic planning and technology-enhanced learning plans.

A new Principal joined RCS in 2014, and there have been other significant changes in senior personnel, both in terms of individuals occupying senior roles, and those roles themselves. A new Assistant Principal post was created in 2018 to lead the academic portfolio (including Learning and Teaching, Quality Assurance, Research, Outcome Agreement and Fair Access). The former Deputy Principal retired in 2016. A previous role of Director of Academic Innovation was reassigned to a 0.4FTE Director of Fair Access, a Director of External Relations was created as a new post, and the current Director of Music was appointed in 2015.

### ELIR4: Outcome Context

The contextualisation themes chosen by the Conservatoire reflected our two guiding principles

- a) Performing Arts Excellence, interpreted broadly as **Praxis** (the interrelation of practice and theory in learning) contextualised in the Conservatoire's proto-professional environment; and
- b) The **Promotion of Fair Access** as a means to enriching student, and

therefore creative, diversity in the learning and teaching environment (including, for example, the diversity of learning, teaching, assessment and feedback methods).

Following a challenging and rewarding ELIR4, the Conservatoire received the Technical and Outcome Reports in October 2018. We were delighted to note six commendations within the Outcome Report and welcomed the panel's five recommendations. Recommendations and the detail contained within the Technical Report were grouped into strategic areas and combined to form an ELIR4 Action Plan. This plan has been monitored through appropriate committees or departmental managers as appropriate (including student representation, some of whom also participated in the student group during the ELIR4 visit itself).

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the panel for their collegiate engagement with the Conservatoire. We especially welcomed the commendations, including of the proposed alignment of strategies to enable greater benefit to be derived from ambitious Conservatoire work, our robust and considered use of External Examiner protocols in all our programmes and our responsible management of challenges around timetabling and space which lead to consistently high student progression and retention rates.

The remainder of this report focuses on the areas for development outlined with the Outcome and Technical Reports.

**Alignment of institutional strategies** - continue with plans to ensure institutional strategies are aligned more closely with the Strategic Plan and with each other.

The Assistant Principal is currently co-ordinating the preparation for the Conservatoire Strategic Plan 2020-2025. The Board of Governors has agreed to the principle that the strategy's alignment with the various 'devolved' strategic areas of our operation (eg. Learning and Teaching; Finance and Estates) is essential in order to deliver, through a robust and well-managed and monitored process, the objectives set in the plan. Each member of the SMT will have responsibility for the development of strategies in the area(s) for which they are strategic lead, and all strategies will be ready for implementation from the beginning of calendar year 2021, some three months following the dissemination of the main corporate plan (2020-2025). This slight 'time lag' is to enable the implementation of a new committee structure in September 2020, and the full establishment of committee terms of reference in the Autumn term (2020) so that responsibilities are clear to each strategic lead and their teams.

Consultations have begun with staff and Students' Union on overall vision and mission, as well as the direction of plans in strategic areas, each of which relates to one or more of three overall strategic areas of focus: what excellence means in our specialist context (focusing on our people – staff, students, visiting professionals and partner organisations); our place and responsibilities in Scotland; our future challenges and opportunities. Further consultations with both students and staff will be facilitated through the deliberative committee structure before 2020 and through informal meetings in the Principal's office of mixed groups of staff and students from all areas, to ensure as broad a set of perspectives as possible. Students and staff are put forward for these meetings either by line managers, or peers, and can self-nominate

to attend. The Principal's office coordinates the meetings, where the Assistant Principal and Principal are present to take notes and to invite ideas, critiques and stimulate discussion.

Staff and Professional Development will form a key part of the first of these three areas of focus, with the aim of embedding a continuous and collegial approach to staff development in the Conservatoire's day-to-day operation rather than relying on 'headline', but less frequent events such as the annual Learning and Teaching Conference to deliver the substance of development opportunities.

The alignment of an overarching strategic plan with its devolved strategies will enable a more integrated, efficient and strategic approach to enhancement. This will be mapped onto a committee structure built to deliver not only the aims of the plan but to manage people's time and resources efficiently, removing duplication of business from meeting agendas. Similarly, a "plethora of mechanisms" identified in ELIR4 for review and self-evaluation have been consolidated into a new annual programme monitoring documentation which each programme team will, with their student representatives in programme committees, use as the basis for enhancement discussions in the committees, and to monitor and deliver an action plan formulated each year per programme. A parallel monitoring process has been streamlined for our Professional Services staff and users, so that there are essentially two annual appraisals of the quality of experience: broadly speaking, 'academic' and 'non-academic'. These parallel processes (programme annual monitoring and professional services annual monitoring) are designed to complement each other and increase 'joined up' activity, as well as to provide equal platforms ('voice') for all Conservatoire stakeholders. Annual monitoring using this new reporting process is being implemented in 2019-20 AY. Each programme's reports will be considered in the relevant programme committee, and in December each year Quality and Standards Committee will receive a presentation on each, enabling critique and interrogation of the performance of programmes, performance indicators (eg. student progression rates) and innovations in learning and teaching. Academic Board will receive assurances at the end of each Academic Year that programme action plans have been successfully implemented over the course of the AY.

The Conservatoire has invested in Quality Enhancement in order to create a visible point of contact and management of QE in a newly re-designated role of Quality Enhancement Manager, reporting to the Assistant Principal. One intention of the creation of this post is to assist the alignment of strategies, committee business and review activity referred to above. By not situating the role in the Academic Registry, but reporting directly into the SMT, the brief takes on an 'institutional-scanning' remit, enabling the coherence of review and enhancement activity under the leadership of the Assistant Principal. The role holder manages curriculum review, programme annual monitoring, ELIR and Outcome Agreement matters, as well as Quality and Standards Committee business ensuring a clearer role for the enhancement agenda in both day-to-day Learning and Teaching issues and larger-scale projects and review cycles. The post, which began 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019, complements and works closely with a Quality Assurance Manager role which also supports effective governance in the Conservatoire, as well as external examiner arrangements, quality compliance and the efficient functioning of the committee structure and internal reporting.

We continue to cover regulatory arrangements for any collaborative provision between RCS and another organisation or awarding body in our annually-updated Quality Assurance Handbook. In a post-Brexit landscape, it is recognised that the potential agility necessary to ensure institutional sustainability and 'fleet of foot' capacity to seek new partnerships (or deepen existing ones) is essential, and an internal audit of all partnerships (academic and non-academic) has been undertaken in the year following ELIR4. A centralised register of partnerships is now held in the Principal's Office team, and the Conservatoire is poised to develop robust arrangements to secure the standards of any new collaborative provision (international). Our International Strategy, in development in parallel with the Strategic Plan, will need to be 'fleet of foot' given the uncertainties of the political landscape at the moment, and the potential changes that will ensue in student ecology, assuming that EU student numbers will be adversely impacted post-Brexit. Nonetheless, we continue to exceed targets in international recruitment and are pleased to be seeing particular success in North America. The Director of External Relations has ultimate responsibility for this International Strategy, but in close collaboration with the International Recruitment team in Registry. As with all strategic briefs that ultimately 'report to' the overall strategic plan, this strategy will take effect from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021 (the Strategic Plan being implemented from September 2020). We have MoUs with all our partner organisations (eg. National Companies) which set out the terms of our engagement.

***Communication of key institutional policies*** - improve the communication of key institutional policies and regulations to staff and students by considering their content, format and mode of dissemination.

A sizeable project is under discussion (initiated by Head of Information Services, in collaboration with the Information Compliance Administrator) to evaluate the work required to centralise all our policies, and make a suitably navigable online resource from them.

The priority will be to ensure key policies are the first to be brought together, and communicated effectively. At the moment, key institutional policies that require most engagement from either the staff or student population tend to be 'held' in one of three main areas of our operation: the Academic Administration and Support (all student-related and QA policies); Human Resources (all staff policies, including H&S, Governance and so on) and Information Services (Legal compliance such as GDPR, Acceptable use of IT etc.). These can variously be accessed in hard copy, online through the portal, or accessed through another interface (eg. Moodle). We recognise that we need to make these policies more readily accessible. Some of these issues were foregrounded in our most recent Learning and Teaching Conference, which focused on technology enhanced learning (September 2019). Simple to follow flow charts have been created and uploaded to the RCS Portal which presents key QA+E policies and procedures in an easily accessible, well-communicated format. The intention is to develop these resources, to include suitable induction materials for new academic staff (who may have limited experience of programme review and monitoring, for example). Overall, we are working to increase intuitive interaction with the Portal by aligning information on all courses in one 'location' and module co-

ordinators take responsibility for pointing students to the information that they need, effectively.

Some recent additions to our institutional policies (eg. Dignity at Work and Study) have prompted renewed consideration of how better to 'join up' those policies traditionally staff-facing, and those traditionally student-facing, since the aspiration to enhance our understanding of the learning environment as a partnership space requires acknowledgement that it is everyone's responsibility to behave with dignity, for example. More integration between policies will be sought through the strategic planning period, alongside the substantial project to draw together Conservatoire documentation into a 'one stop shop'. Where possible, we are seeking to simplify and reduce the number of policies, and to ensure effective signposting within them to correct procedure. All policies are reviewed annually, and so it makes sense to do a thoroughgoing review of extant policies in summer 2020 so that all are refreshed prior to the Strategic Plan rollout in 2020 (September). The bigger project of cohering all policy documentation effectively is a sizeable task, and will require strategizing across the life cycle of the 2025 Strategic Plan. We will require capacity in workloads and systems to effect such a bringing together of policies. The Head of Information Services has begun a scoping exercise to map the resource and approach required. The HIS reports to the Assistant Principal, although the Director of HR also takes a leadership role, working opposite the Assistant Principal, in policy leadership and communication.

***Assessment*** - establish an institutional strategy for assessment and bring greater clarity and consistency to the design and delivery of assessments including assessment weighting and marking practices.

Our ELIR4 panel drew our attention to the value of a consistent and clearly defined assessment strategy that would apply across the Conservatoire's programmes and disciplines. We have reflected on this and propose to subsume this area as a strategic project within an overarching Learning, Teaching and Technology Strategy. The rationale for this is to retain the impact, visibility and the clarity of our assessment regulations and practices, and to make explicit the link between assessment and learning enhancement, by presenting assessment activity as a learning opportunity, and ensuring that the consistent pursuit of learning enhancements across the Conservatoire, irrespective of programme discipline or level is mapped into a similarly consistent management and regulation of assessment policy, practice, comprehensibility and value. The work will address key questions relevant to all learners and pedagogues including 'what is assessment?' What is assessment 'for' and 'how can assessment enhance what we do?' as well as the practicalities of ensuring parity of approach (eg. timeliness of feedback across all programmes; clearly articulated assessment criteria across all levels of study, etc.)

Our next periodic review of undergraduate programmes will include an audit of all assessments, weightings and so on, in order to ensure that for example 10 credits in two different disciplinary contexts is not unequal in terms of assessment load and expectations. However, we will conduct this evaluation in the broader context of

understanding that disciplines *are* different, and a 'one size fits all' approach to assessment is detrimental to the specific learning outcomes pertinent to highly specialised disciplines and employment skill needs.

Since ELIR4 specific areas of assessment have received considerable scrutiny and modifications including a review of the degree regulations and removal of the five day late submission period have been considered and approved. The removal of the five-day late submission rule came into effect from September 2019, and was communicated by Directors to their programme leaders, and to the students via cohort meetings. Students remain able to apply for personal mitigating circumstances to extend deadlines where they have legitimate reasons to do so (eg. illness, bereavement, etc.). Additionally, although we retain the provision for discretionary decision-making in exam boards for cases where a student's marks profile straddles the borderline between two classifications (eg. 2.1 and class 1), the Academic Board approved in June 2019 a recommendation of QSC to limit the criteria for the application of discretion to enhance the consistency of decision-making between Boards in different subjects. These changes will come into effect at the commencement of AY 2021-22 so that no current student studying in a yeargroup for which their marks count towards the differentiation of their award will be affected.

Approaches to assessment have formed a key aspect of the PG review, the validation of which will occur in March 2020 for implementation of the new programmes from September 2020. Programme Teams have reviewed the design and delivery of assessments, and marking practices. An overarching interrogation of our assessment and feedback practices will be undertaken as part of our drive to enhance our student experience in our Learning and Teaching Strategy. The Assistant Principal will lead on the development and implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, including the important assessment-related project(s) it contains. This, like all strategies will align with the overall corporate/strategic plan due for implementation from September 2020. Consultation on the content and direction of the L&T strategy has begun through committees, and the Assistant Principal has articulated some broad areas for focus to the School management teams.

The rationale and use of pass / fail as a module, and degree outcome will be embedded into the learning and teaching strategy. Considerable debate has been had on this topic through the ongoing PG review process, including the presentation of research into the pedagogical advantages, challenges and competitor approaches.

#### Summary on assessment:

In academic year 2021-22 we begin the process of undergraduate programme review (periodic review), and will be considering assessment as a major area of focus in this process, including undertaking a comparative exercise to determine whether different programmes and disciplines set different expectations in terms of assessment load, duration, word counts and number of components of assessment, as indicated earlier. We will consider the strategic alignment of our assessment practices, sharing best practice amongst colleagues, engaging with alumni and students, and using our knowledge as External Examiners for competitor institutions to refine our approach in student and staff interests. The PGT Academic Framework, supporting the periodic

review of PGT programmes currently underway explicitly challenges programme leaders to ensure that the programme's approach to assessment is not duplicative, nor burdensome on staff or students, with a view to upholding wellbeing as well as fairness and reasonable balance between learning and assessment.

We are already confident that learning outcomes are aligned with assessments and therefore the additional activity outlined above is focused on ensuring we are able to identify, share and reflect on good practice within and outside the Conservatoire. Learning outcomes are aligned to assessment in every module descriptor via a matrix that explicitly maps assessment components to module learning outcomes. Module learning outcomes are then mapped to programme learning outcomes in another section of the handbook. We are also confident that assessors are assessing against the stated learning outcomes and there is no suggestion to the contrary in External Examiner reports.

***Approach to evaluation and review*** - reflect on the approach to self-evaluation and review to ensure the Conservatoire is able to optimise the learning from its review activity while streamlining the burden of conducting multiple reviews.

Further to the brief mention of the new annual monitoring process mentioned in a paragraph above, this process will be critiqued annually by a special convening of QSC, beginning AY 2019-20. The reflection on the process will normally take place with an external quality assurance professional in attendance, to offer programmes support and constructive challenge with a view to enhancing student experience, consistency of engagement between programme teams and the student body, and to monitor effectiveness of action planning. Up until now, QSC has scrutinised performance indicators for programmes in committee, and taken on the burden of reflecting on those PIs, in addition to a comprehensive annual dialogue process in which all programme leaders were engaged. In order to make QSC business more efficient, the programme monitoring of PIs, and reflective analysis will now pass to the Programme Committees, ensuring that student representatives get more significant input into the process of reflection on the previous year's activity, and the devising of an action plan for the year ahead. QSC will review, usually in January of each year, the progress made on these reflective monitoring documents, but will not hold primary responsibility for the review of PIs. The process becomes more 'joined up' insofar as the programme leaders' reflections will be presented to QSC, rather than QSC duplicating reflection on PIs that should properly rest with the programme leaders and their teams and students.

As an institution, we welcome the ELIR recommendation that we adopt a more evaluative approach to engagement with the Quality Code. We see opportunities in our periodic programme reviews, and the currently underway committee structure review (due to be implemented September 2020) to evaluate our core practices for quality, against the UKQC, seeking enhancements and improvements through those processes.

Our newest PGT Academic Framework (2018, written in support of the periodic curriculum review of PGT programmes) takes more risks in terms of the curriculum



principles, and graduate attributes it envisages, requiring programme teams to reflect on the development of skills in resilience, and empathy for example, in student cohorts. Emphasis throughout has been placed on the programme teams' expertise in their respective discipline areas, and the facilitation of a 'safe space' for student creative experimentation and discovery. As mentioned above, our new annual monitoring process (2019-2020) will draw on external expertise. A new student forum (begun in 2018-19) jointly convened by SUP and the Assistant Principal consults students in small groups on the effective development and enhancement of the student experience, and we are seeking means of supporting student representatives to get the most out of their experience (planning to supplement the main sparqs training with guidance from the Assistant Principal around effective representation of the student voice, and from the SUP on effective advocacy).

Because we are a small institution, our review activity can feel burdensome and ceaseless, but it is envisaged that our new programme annual monitoring, and professional services monitoring processes will streamline and enhance our reflective and evaluative structures, enabling us to conduct periodic reviews (ELIR, curriculum review, strategic planning) more efficiently. We continue, where possible, to conduct periodic curriculum reviews collectively (ie. several programmes at once) in order to maximise the potential for collegial support and best practice sharing, and to make the most efficient use of time. We secure input at an early stage from all stakeholders (staff and students) into our Academic Framework that will support any periodic review process.

***Use of the virtual learning environment*** - ensure there is more consistent use of learning technologies across the curriculum and consider how these could be used to promote engagement and to facilitate sharing key information between staff and students.

The Technology Enhanced Learning Forum (TELF) is addressing this broad aim with targeted and specific actions. The inclusion of technology as a key strategic driver in the next Strategic Plan will highlight and drive this ambition forward. We expect ambition for developing learning enhanced by technology to be a significant element of the Learning and Teaching Strategy currently being drafted alongside the Strategic Plan 2025. We want graduates to gain experience suitable for employment in the biggest growth areas in the creative industries, for example in motion capture for actors (for video gaming), composing for video gaming and so on. These are the fastest growing areas of the sector, and increasingly the more versatile our graduates are to work with different media, the more likely they are to gain sustained employment with regular income which enables them to pursue other 'one-off' projects without the same level of financial risk that isolated freelance projects pose. We will look to invest in digital technologies, but appropriately so, including rental and partnerships with companies, recognising that the pace of development in the industry often makes purchasing expensive hardware superfluous.

The national Jisc Digital Insights Survey has been delivered to staff and is specifically concerned with collating data on the RCS digital experience. This will provide a steer

on how staff use technology, how it affects their professional practice and how the institution could do more to target resources appropriately. The student Jisc DI Survey will be delivered in November 2019.

We recognise that there is an inconsistent level of engagement on Moodle and this is being addressed by identifying a lead from each school/or programme, overseen by School Directors and TELF, to take responsibility for their pages, so there is current content for every category. The Learning Technologist is also working with the Portal supplier (Parachute) to improve functionality (i.e. the search feature). We do not intend to create a 'minimum' expectation for Moodle use since it is not appropriate in some modules; what we will expect is that attention is given to the navigability of online resources so that the student experience is as joined-up as possible, minimising the different interfaces with which we expect cohorts to engage. This will be monitored by the Learning Technologist, as a member of TELF.

To this end, the TELF has created an action plan, and at every TELF meeting a member presents a best practice "show & tell" sessions to share knowledge.

This principle was extended to become the theme of our most recent Learning and Teaching Conference, 2019. A number of keynote and breakout sessions focused on learning technologies, enhancements and challenges were well attended by staff, and it is clear how essential it is – in order to keep up with creative industry developments – that we embrace a number of these enhancements in curriculum. This is already evident in the growing awareness of motion capture, for example, in acting programmes, recognising that a number of actors will be employed in the video gaming industry, one of Scotland and the UK's fastest-growing sectors. Demonstrations of low latency interactivity were also used to illustrate the importance (and ease) of making the virtual connection with institutions abroad to grow learning opportunities for students located here in Scotland. TELF has produced an action plan which is tracked through each meeting (there are currently four, annually), in order to ensure strategic collation of priorities in technology, and their integration and monitoring through the strategic plan currently being written.

**Approval date of this report by the Conservatoire's Board of Governors: 18<sup>th</sup> October 2019.**

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18 Bothwell Street, Glasgow G2 6NU  
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 0141 572 3420

Website: [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)