



Enhancement-led Institutional Review of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Technical Report

June 2018

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About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

The QAA website explains the method for [Enhancement-led Institutional Review \(ELIR\)](#) and has links to the ELIR handbook and other informative documents.¹ You can also find out more about the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#).²

Further details about ELIR can be found in an accompanying [brief guide](#),³ including an overview of the review method, information about review teams, and explanations of follow-up action.

About this review

This is the Technical Report of the ELIR conducted by QAA at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. The review took place as follows: Planning Visit on 26 April 2018 and Review Visit on 18-21 June 2018. The review was conducted by a team of five reviewers:

- Professor Tuomas Auvénin (International Reviewer)
- Professor Hilary Grainger (Academic Reviewer)
- Dr Steve Halfyard (Academic Reviewer)
- Gavin Lee (Coordinating Reviewer)
- Joy Vamvakari (Student Reviewer)

In advance of the review visits, the Conservatoire submitted a self-evaluative document (the Reflective Analysis) and an advance information set, comprising a range of materials about the institution's arrangements for managing quality and academic standards.

About this report

In this report, the ELIR team:

- delivers a threshold judgement on the current and likely future effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for managing academic standards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience.

The threshold judgement can be found on page 2, followed by the detailed findings of the review given in numbered paragraphs.

Technical Reports set out the ELIR team's view under each of the report headings. Shorter Outcome Reports are provided that set out the main findings of the ELIR for a wider audience. The [Outcome Report](#) for this review is on the QAA website.⁴

ELIR Technical Reports are intended primarily for the institution reviewed, and to provide an information base for the production of thematic reports that identify findings across several institutions.

¹ About ELIR:

www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review.

² About QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland.

³ Brief Guide to ELIR: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/reports/brief-guide-to-elir-method.pdf

⁴ Outcome Report: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Royal-Conservatoire-of-Scotland

Threshold judgement about the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has **effective** arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience.

This is a positive judgement, which means that the Conservatoire meets sector expectations in securing the academic standards of its awards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience it provides, currently and into the future. This judgement confirms there can be public confidence in the Conservatoire's awards and in the quality of the learning experience it provides for its students.

1 Contextual information about the institution, student population and the review

1.1 Summary information about the institution

1 The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS or the Conservatoire) is Scotland's national conservatoire with a strong international reputation including a global ranking in performing arts education. It is also one of the busiest performance centres in Scotland with over 500 public performances per year.

2 In 2017-18, the Conservatoire had 1,212 degree students from 63 countries. In the same year, it had 3,800 non-degree students studying in its Junior Conservatoire and a range of Transitions and outreach activities.

3 The Conservatoire has a total headcount of 855 staff of whom 118 are full-time and 267 are part-time academic staff. A further 256 are part-time academic staff involved in the delivery of pre-higher education provision.

4 The current Strategic Plan, 'Delivering a Defining Performance' runs from 2015-2020. It sets out the Conservatoire's vision to be 'Scotland's globally-recognised and inspirational leader in learning for the performing arts' and includes four strategic pillars:

- driving focused excellence
- promoting equality and diversity
- advancing lifelong learning
- embracing [the RCS] role as a national and international performing arts institution.

The Strategic Plan is supported by a series of operational plans and these are supplemented by the Conservatoire's Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council.

1.2 Composition and key trends in the student population

5 Since the previous ELIR in 2013, the Conservatoire's student population has grown by nearly 30 per cent overall (headcount). In 2017-18, it had 897 undergraduate students (representing over 19 per cent growth since 2012-13), 286 taught postgraduate students (over 72 per cent growth in the same period) and 29 postgraduate research students (over 81 per cent growth). All student numbers are headcount rather than FTE.

6 The majority of the Conservatoire's students are school leavers (78 per cent of UK-domiciled undergraduate entrants in 2017-18) which is typical of the performing arts, especially music and ballet. There has been a substantial growth of students from a

widening access background, notably SIMD 40 and 20, and this is a result of conscious work on the part of RCS (paragraph 21).

7 The growth in the student population provides a number of challenges for the Conservatoire, for example staff resource, space and timetabling. It was clear to the ELIR team that the Conservatoire is aware of the challenges and is managing them effectively. This is supported by the high retention and completion rates.

1.3 Commentary on the preparation for the ELIR including contextualisation

8 The RCS Academic Board established an ad hoc working group comprising academic and support staff plus representation from the Students' Union to prepare for the ELIR process. Preparation for ELIR took place in parallel with an intensive undergraduate curriculum review process, with curriculum review informing the content of the Reflective Analysis (RA). The RA was also developed following consultation meetings with academic and professional service staff as well as students. Drafts of the RA were considered in meetings of the Quality and Standards Committee and the Academic Board.

9 The Conservatoire identified two main contextual themes for the ELIR which the RA indicated reflect strategic priorities and everyday core values and practices: praxis and the promotion of fair access. Both of these were explored extensively in discussions with staff and students throughout the ELIR visits.

10 In addition to the two main contextual themes, the Conservatoire identified five further areas of focus for the ELIR:

- the role as a national conservatoire
- the extensive pre-HE provision
- the nature of the student population
- the proportionately large numbers of part-time staff
- the curriculum and quality processes.

11 Overall, the ELIR team considered that the Conservatoire had adopted an effective approach to preparing for ELIR. The topics and evidence chosen were good reflections of the strengths and challenges experienced by RCS. The evidence was set out in a clear and comprehensive RA with supporting documentation in the Advance Information Set. In particular, the discussions with staff and students were open and engaging.

1.4 Summary of follow-up to the previous ELIR

12 The 2013 ELIR identified eight areas for development and the RA asserted that the Conservatoire had made satisfactory progress in addressing each of these. The ELIR team confirmed this view, noting that improvements in the availability of data were particularly positive (paragraph 120).

1.5 Impact of engaging students in ELIR preparations

13 The Students' Union (SU) was actively involved in the preparations for the ELIR. A challenge in performing arts conservatoires often is that students prioritise their artistic work and practice over engagement with the institution around managing quality. However, the ELIR team noted that RCS had been successful in engaging the student population in the ELIR preparations.

2 Enhancing the student learning experience

2.1 Student representation and engagement

14 The RA indicated that student engagement is at the heart of the Conservatoire and this was further emphasised by students and staff in meetings with the ELIR team.

15 Student representation works at different levels, with elected or nominated student representatives sitting on a range of committees. There are different types of student representatives, such as committee representatives, departmental/instrument representatives, a postgraduate research and a mature student representative. The ELIR team considered that representation works well overall, with 8 per cent of the student community actively engaged in representation and with training available.

16 The Students' Union supports the student body effectively, especially after changes made by the SU President to raise the SU profile with the wider student body, for example through improved communication on the impact of SU work through featured blog posts. Students who met the ELIR team reported significant improvements in the SU voice and agency during the last two years, although they also highlighted its limited capacity and resources. In addition to the work inside the Conservatoire, the SU President engages externally with the NUS and Conservatoires UK, facilitating dialogue nationally and gaining insight about the sector.

17 The ELIR team learned that the SU and RCS are in the process of creating a student partnership agreement in order to further clarify and enhance the role of the Students' Union. The team noted that the role of the SU President is particularly wide-ranging for a conservatoire, which is positive but challenging for one individual to manage. There would be value in the Conservatoire reflecting on ways of providing additional support for the SU President's role to ensure students can continue to engage as the Conservatoire aspires.

18 Student feedback is collected through a number of mechanisms, formally through an array of surveys and through involvement in programme committees, annual dialogue and programme reviews. Student feedback is also communicated informally and directly to staff, enabled by the relationships established between students and course organisers, tutors and professional service staff. The primary means of RCS responding to student feedback is through programme committees. The ELIR team learned that the SU President also has a very active role in communicating and following up student feedback. Students reported effective feedback and response at course and programme level, with swift resolution of issues, such as the bunching of assessment on certain programmes. All students, not only representatives, are invited to contribute feedback at end of year Open Forum meetings, leading to dialogue and change.

19 Students who met the ELIR team were aware of how to raise complaints or challenges and the team noted that potentially sensitive cases, such as changing principal study tutor, were managed efficiently. Students described staff as very responsive to feedback with various examples of matters being swiftly followed up, notably within departments. Some students perceived action at institution-level to be slower, and there was a sense that views within smaller departments might be overlooked. However, the team heard specific examples of potentially sensitive issues being responded to rapidly at institutional level and, overall, formed a view of staff at all levels listening and acting on student feedback (paragraph 63).

2.2 Recognising and responding to equality and diversity in the student population

20 Promoting equality and diversity is one of the four strategic 'pillars' of the Conservatoire's Strategic Plan 2015-2020 and the RA confirms a sense of responsibility to promote equality, diversity and inclusion in and through all art forms and practices, and throughout the educational experience. This is reflected in the establishment of the Equality and Diversity Forum since 2009 and a number of posts with specific responsibilities including an Equality & Diversity Officer and Fair Access Manager. Equality and diversity is supported within the student body by student representatives in equality and diversity roles, namely the Liberation Officers, as well as relevant student societies and networks. The Conservatoire's responsibility and commitment to equality and diversity is also realised through performance. Student work which addresses equality and diversity is supported through the Equality and Diversity Creative Fund.

21 The RCS student body is socially diverse, having already exceeded the Commission on Widening Access target threshold intake of students from the lowest SIMD quintile for 2020. Diversity is supported by the Conservatoire's work in outreach and widening participation, especially through the Transitions and Junior Conservatoire programmes. RCS is also actively involved in enhancing equality and diversity within the sector, through developing new strategies with Conservatoires UK.

22 The role of Transition mentors is highly supportive in the context of the diverse student body. Transition mentors support students with potential in achieving required standards pre-admission. Pre-admission students are supported by the Transitions team, while after admission their progress is monitored, but they are not explicitly supported further, as they are fully integrated within the student body. Students who went through the Transitions programme reported having a very positive experience including support in preparing for auditions and maintaining informal contact with their Transition mentors after successfully gaining a place.

23 The RA stated that the Conservatoire is working hard to increase its proportion of black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) students, recognising that currently this is below the Scottish HE and the UK conservatoire sector averages. Specific actions identified include: working with the Equality Challenge Unit's Attracting Diversity project, setting up a joint project with the Scottish Youth Theatre to engage young BAME people, and contributing to the formulation of a Conservatoires UK strategy. The ELIR team would encourage RCS to continue pursuing its identified priorities in this area.

24 Equality and diversity is recognised and respected by the RCS staff, with both staff and students highlighting a positive culture towards diversity. Students who require further support are provided with mentors and can have bespoke learning and assessment schedules created to provide flexibility and facilitate them completing and succeeding in their studies. In meetings with students, the ELIR team learned that flexibility can be provided to support a family-friendly approach for MEd students. Adjustments are documented and supported individually through written learning agreements or plans.

25 In 2016-17, over 26 per cent of RCS students had disclosed a disability or medical condition. This is high compared to the Scottish HE and UK conservatoire sectors where it was over 11 per cent and just under 18 per cent respectively. The Conservatoire seeks to support all students in their individual learning. Disabled students are provided with bespoke support from the point of application through to graduation and are contacted by the Counsellor and Disability Adviser to ensure that their particular needs can be met. Learning Agreements are negotiated between the student, the relevant Head of Department or Programme, and the Counsellor and Disability Adviser. The Learning Agreements are

reviewed annually to ensure they continue to address the student's needs. Student feedback gathered by RCS suggests that the Learning Agreements are effective.

26 Some students who met the ELIR team indicated that it could be problematic for a single member of staff to hold a dual role as both the disabilities advisor and counsellor. The potential conflict of interest was acknowledged by staff who indicated that, where a conflict arises, a solution is negotiated, such as directing the student to an external counsellor.

27 The BA Performance in British Sign Language and English provides an opportunity for deaf or partially hearing performers and performance makers that doesn't exist elsewhere in the UK. Students on the programme who met the ELIR team confirmed they had received appropriate support and had a positive student experience. In discussion with the team, RCS staff emphasised the positive impact of the programme on the whole institution including enhancing learning and teaching practices. There has been wide uptake of BSL training among staff as well as BSL interpreters being available. It was evident to the team that this cohort of students are very well integrated with the student body.

28 Staff and recruitment panel members received training on unconscious bias, and BSL and deaf awareness training is part of student induction. Disability awareness training is part of the induction programme for new staff. Furthermore, equality, diversity and inclusion training is included in the PGCert and MEd programmes which staff can undertake (paragraph 86).

29 The Disability Adviser collects data on equality and diversity including the Learning Agreement process which informs an annual Counselling & Disability Service Report for the Academic Board. The Statistical Analyst collates and reviews additional diversity data which is considered in the committee structure. This data confirms the effectiveness of the support provided by RCS by comparing retention and progression across student characteristics such as SIMD status, disability and ethnicity.

30 The RA confirmed that international students are vital for the Conservatoire, contributing to the diversity of the student body and bringing fresh insights. RCS is currently developing an international strategy, aiming to increase international student recruitment in the next year. International students are represented in the SU by the International Student Officer. International students who met the ELIR team reported feeling well-supported through English language support services, the Effective Learning Service, and a bespoke induction programme. International postgraduate research students can also access English academic writing support through the University of St Andrews (paragraph 122). Furthermore, international students indicated that they received good support with visa processes.

31 In discussion with the ELIR team, students highlighted their desire for further diversity among the staff team and in their curriculum content to reflect the breadth and diversity within the professional sectors. Currently, diversity in this context is mainly achieved through external visiting academic staff and practising professionals.

2.3 Supporting students in their learning at each stage of the learner journey

Student support

32 RCS offers a strongly student-centred, personalised experience. Students described the welcoming and friendly approach of the institution, the degree of support provided by tutors, and the opportunities for students to direct their own learning through optional module choices, negotiated projects, and curricular and extracurricular collaborative

work. Students are able to draw on the full range of disciplines with systematic processes in place for supporting their curriculum choices.

33 RCS uses an online Student Contract to allow both staff and students to track the student's progress. The contract is a single online platform where students can view the modules on which they are enrolled, and see both marks and feedback from completed assignments. The contract is administered by the Transitions tutor, who can also write notes from tutorials onto the contract itself, allowing any issues to be recorded and tracked. There is evidence of students engaging with and valuing the contract and the way it allows all formal information to be kept in one place as a stable point of reference, all of which is very positive. The technology used to create this is somewhat basic and evidently relies heavily on human effort, with the physical scanning and uploading of printed documents. Bulk uploading has helped to streamline the process this year but there would be value in RCS continuing to seek improved technological or other automated ways of managing the exercise.

34 Academic Administration and Support (AAS) within RCS offer a centralised service with a number of branches including the Effective Learning Service and Student Welfare support. Additionally, each student is allocated a Transitions tutor, whose role relates to academic advice, curriculum guidance, responsibility for agreeing the Student Contract and signing off the student's module selections for the year, a mechanism designed to encourage engagement from students with the tutor, the contract and their studies. The Transitions tutor is not, however, considered to be a personal tutor as such. Pastoral care is the responsibility of the central AAS services, with the intention that students can seek pastoral support as and when they need it (paragraph 35).

35 From the student perspective, there are effective mechanisms for student support in place. A defining feature of a conservatoire environment, where there is a substantial emphasis on cooperative and one-to-one practical activity, is that students are known personally to their teachers, and their principal study tutors and heads of department. Students regard their tutors - normally principal study or Transitions tutor - as the first port of call in relation to pastoral support, and tutors are evidently happy to take on this role and see it is an inevitable result of the nature of conservatoire study. Students who met the ELIR team did not seem aware that pastoral care officially lies within the remit of the centralised services, although teaching staff are aware that this is not technically part of their role. The ELIR team learned that pastoral support is included within the undergraduate and postgraduate handbooks and communicated during student induction. Nonetheless, the institutional understanding of where responsibility lies is different between the experience of staff and students with the role being played by teaching staff essentially unrecognised. This evidently works in practice from the student perspective, and staff appear well informed about where students should be directed in relation to counselling, disability issues and other support services. There would be value in the Conservatoire reflecting on the most effective way of communicating the pastoral support arrangements to ensure this reflects actual practice, with appropriate guidance being provided for new staff about this aspect of their role (paragraph 121).

36 RCS recognises that the education of performing artists presents particular challenges in the demands it makes on the whole person - aesthetic, academic, emotional and physical – but is also aware of the challenges this presents in supporting students, and in particular, the rise in students presenting with mental health issues. RCS has implemented a number of strategies to address support in this area. AAS provides a counselling service and has invested in an online mental health and wellbeing service, The Big White Wall, to provide additional support for students. A 'Fitness to Study' policy was introduced in 2015 and a 'Fitness to Practise' policy in 2017 to provide a clear process for addressing problems and providing support. Other initiatives include a Mental Health

Awareness week and Mental Health First Aid training for staff. Students who met the ELIR team were aware of the potential for the intensity of conservatoire study - and their own commitment to that study - to impact on their health and wellbeing. It is positive that the students were also aware of encouragement from their tutors to take time for work-life balance. In addition, the team noted that specific regulations are incorporated into the curriculum to support work-life balance, for example there is a minimum interval of 11 hours permitted between shoots for film students. The team concluded that RCS was taking positive measures to help students balance the demands of conservatoire study.

Assessment and feedback

37 RCS does not currently have a Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, although the new Assistant Principal has confirmed the intention to introduce one. Currently, assessment is governed by a number of documents: postgraduate and undergraduate assessment frameworks (which are primarily concerned with academic regulations) programme handbooks and assessment handbooks.

38 There are no agreed norms for assessment loads as, in keeping with the 'tight-loose' philosophy established during the Curriculum Reform process, staff considered that as the work being done was so diverse, assessment loads should be driven by the needs of the work itself. As a result, there is notable inconsistency in assessment loads between modules both across and within courses. For example, essay word lengths per 10 credits vary between 600 words and 6,250 words. Some module descriptors do not indicate how long essays or presentations should be. Potentially, this leaves students with quite different workloads for the same number of credits, depending on their area of specialism, module choice or understanding of the task (paragraph 64).

39 Students get feedback on their work from multiple sources at multiple times in the year, not only in relation to summative assessment. Verbal feedback on formative work within RCS is continuous and instantaneous, occurring in one-to-one lessons, group work (such as rehearsals and performance-based classes) and planned tutorials. All written feedback is uploaded into the online Student Contract, where it can be seen by both the staff and individual students. Students evidently find this system convenient and easy to use, and value knowing that they can refer back to all their feedback in one place, which is positive.

40 RCS has also developed a process of 'mutually constructed feedback' in which the tutor and student discuss and agree feedback and, in some instances, marks. This may be in relation to ongoing work on a module rather than a specific assessment, as is the case for some BMus students on principal studies modules. It is also used as part of the assessed tutor report on BMus principal study modules for some students as part of a current pilot, and it may be used by a tutor in determining a mark in relation to the student's critical reflection on Contemporary Performance Practice modules. This form of feedback is clearly appreciated and valued by staff and students and represents an innovative approach to developing students' critical and reflective thinking in understanding their own progress. It has only recently been developed and there is currently a range of practice. RCS should consider establishing parameters for its use to ensure it is used in a consistent, fair and effective manner across different courses and levels of study.

41 RCS takes two main approaches to assessment grading: pass/fail and graded assessment. For the latter, the Conservatoire has implemented a Common Assessment Scale (CAS) which maps conventional degree classifications to a 17-point, A-F grading scale. Staff consider that this allows a focus on absolute rather than comparative performance but it is not used universally on all programmes. The three-year Ordinary degree programmes opted out of CAS in favour of pass/fail grades, given that these programmes do not give classifications to their students on completion. Reports written by

part-time staff in the School of Music on their one-to-one students are also assessed on a pass/fail basis using qualitative feedback (including mutually agreed feedback) rather than formal assessment. Pass/fail elements are routinely also awarded grades using the CAS, even though these do not feed into module marks, as students actively want to know their marks as well as having feedback. While this is understandable in relation to the three-year Ordinary programmes, it could be regarded as contradicting the aim of assessing on a pass/fail basis (paragraph 64).

42 Students who met the ELIR team indicated that they were not always clear how grades had been determined. Module descriptors provide marking criteria in the form of a description of the characteristics of work at the D3 (borderline pass) level. In addition, there are assessment matrices that map the overall programme-level descriptors against the CAS. In discussion with the team, tutors described using a range of intuitive approaches to arrive at grades based on their knowledge of benchmarks rather than highlighting their use of the assessment matrices. The Conservatoire is asked to consider how it can ensure that staff and students are clear about the intended assessment approach and that policy is implemented consistently in practice (paragraph 64). More specifically, there would be value in the Conservatoire clearly communicating marking criteria which describe not only the D3 level but the characteristics expected of individual assignments at different grade levels.

43 The ELIR team noted that Master's qualifications at RCS are now awarded only as pass or fail rather than with merit or distinction. This is unusual in the UK Conservatoire music sector and the team questioned whether this might disadvantage students applying for funding grants or MPhils and PhDs. In discussion, staff indicated that students were provided with transcripts and there had been no issues to date. Nonetheless, there would be value in keeping this under review.

Employability and enterprise

44 RCS has very strong employability figures, well above the average for the Scottish HE sector, with over 97 per cent of respondents in 2015-16 in work or further study six months after graduation (Scottish HE sector average of 91 per cent), and 91.5 per cent in graduate level or professional destinations (against the Scottish HE sector average of 72 per cent). The RA indicated that 90 per cent of undergraduate respondents and 88 per cent of postgraduate respondents reported that their employment was in the performing arts.

45 RCS describes itself as a proto-professional environment, finding a balance between its remit as an academic institution and the professional training it offers as it prepares students for entry into that profession. It has strong links with the professional world and aims to inculcate an understanding of professional expectations in its students within the context of formal academic study. In discussions with the ELIR team, students enthusiastically endorsed this view, describing the environment as supportive. In finding the balance between education and professional life, an emphasis is placed on praxis, and students demonstrate an understanding of how this concept applies to their own discipline (paragraph 71).

46 RCS offers a range of activities and opportunities aimed at developing graduate attributes, employability and enterprise. These include curricular work, such as the cross-programme modules 'Introduction to Collaborative Practice' (undergraduate) and 'Approaches to Critical Artistry' (postgraduate) which present students with opportunities for cross-disciplinary work, and the extra-curricular Make it Happen Month (which was first offered in 2017) and Bridge Week (which has been running since 2012). Students who met the ELIR team made an explicit connection between the cross-disciplinary modules and their later involvement in Bridge Week. Bridge Week is a significant investment on the Conservatoire's part. Students are invited to propose projects and successful ones are then

funded, with around 10 per cent of students participating in projects and almost all proposals being accepted. Students consider Bridge Week to be of significant value in promoting collaboration across disciplines and, for many students, the ethos of collaboration itself is part of the motivation for coming to RCS rather than another conservatoire.

47 In common with most other conservatoires in the UK, RCS runs an agency which secures professional engagements for its students. RCS is also supportive of students taking up professional work during term time, for example short-term contracts and one-off performance opportunities. Students indicated that absences to take up these opportunities can be negotiated as necessary with some flexible arrangements in place to manage timetables and even assessment.

48 RCS students have the opportunity to work extensively with professional practitioners and companies. Most of the very large number of part-time staff employed in the School of Music are professional musicians, and students evidently value the opportunity to learn from practitioners with established careers in their own discipline. RCS has partnerships with companies across the spectrum of its programme portfolio and several RCS programmes are delivered in partnership with external companies, such as the MMus/MA Pianist for Dance programme which is delivered in collaboration with Scottish Ballet. The Conservatoire has working partnerships with many performing arts companies in Scotland which allow students to work alongside professionals, such as the side-by-side scheme run for orchestral musicians with Scottish Opera and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra.

Student mobility

49 Allowing for some fluctuations, staff and student mobility has remained at a very steady level since 2012, with slightly more incoming staff and students than outgoing, but there is a fairly low uptake from students for study abroad at another institution. There has been an overall increase in the number of students applying for Erasmus but no increase in uptake. Staff indicated that students do not always take up exchange places when these are offered: music students become apprehensive about spending time away from their existing teacher and the impact this might have on their development; students on acting or dance programmes, where relatively small cohorts work together intensively, are reluctant to spend time away from their cohort, especially on the three-year programmes. Staff also reported that where one member of a cohort went on exchange and had a good experience, this influenced others on the same programme to pursue an exchange and that arranging consultation music lessons with the proposed teacher in the exchange institution was another mechanism recently introduced to encourage uptake of places. The ELIR team concluded that RCS was taking reasonable measures to encourage mobility among staff and students.

2.4 Postgraduate taught and research student experience

50 The Conservatoire has six Master's and three postgraduate certificate programmes. The postgraduate programmes in learning and teaching (PgCert and MEd) include distance-learning and part-time elements. The RA confirmed that RCS will be undertaking a review of all postgraduate taught programmes in 2018-19.

51 There has been a rise in postgraduate student numbers, both taught (mainly distance-learning) and research (paragraph 5). Taught postgraduate students reported that there is a strong sense of community supported by collaboration and they are able to get involved in all aspects of student life at RCS, including Bridge Week activities.

52 Postgraduate research degrees (MPhil, DPerf and PhDs) are validated by the University of St Andrews. The postgraduate research (PGR) student community is close-knit.

Students are represented through a dedicated PGR Students' Union representative and two student representatives sit on the RCS Research Degrees Committee. Students reported being strongly represented and confirmed that their feedback leads to change.

53 One-to-one supervisory relationships play a key role in the support for PGR students. Some students who met the ELIR team expressed a desire for more peer support and greater pastoral care from supervisors but, overall, the support arrangements work effectively. The Research Degrees Coordinator has an explicit role in the pastoral care of PGR students, and students identified the Coordinator as an effective first point of call. PGR students access training and support from both RCS and the University of St Andrews as well as that offered by the national Scottish Graduate School for the Arts and Humanities. Students highlighted the benefit of having staff from the University in their progress review meetings, indicating that they valued the external feedback and could draw on what they described as the academic rigour of the University and the creativity of the Conservatoire.

54 PGR students can undertake teaching support roles but have requested that further teaching opportunities should be made available and this has been discussed by the Research Degrees Committee. Students involved in teaching or related activities can access relevant training through the University of St Andrews, but this is not compulsory. RCS should ensure that all those engaged in teaching and especially assessment are appropriately trained and supported to do so.

2.5 Learning environment

55 The RCS states that its approach to learning and teaching has not changed as a result of growing student numbers but it has identified implications in terms of equality and diversity, mode of study, resources, staffing and quality enhancement. RCS has invested in increased staffing and technology to address the increase in student numbers. There has been alteration in the provision and use of space, and additional logistical and administrative support. In 2017 the opening of a new 'Creative Campus' represented a 50 per cent increase in the number of individual practice and teaching rooms. It was clear to the ELIR team that students appreciate the increase in this resource.

56 The staffing establishment has increased, particularly in the School of Music, where more part-time staff have been employed to maintain the level of one-to-one tuition. Other staff changes include the merging of the former posts of Head of BMus and Head of Creative and Contextual Studies (CCS) and the creation of a new post, Associate Head of BMus and CCS, to deliver a more coordinated management of the student experience. The RA indicated that the growth in student numbers has also resulted in a growth in student performance opportunities.

57 The adoption of a bespoke timetabling system for conservatoires has had a positive impact on the efficient use of the available space for both staff and students, who are able to book their personal practice spaces on the same system. In meetings with the ELIR team students raised the issue of a lack of social learning space. The social spaces within the Renfrew Street building are all open to the public as part of its dual function as educational environment and performing arts venue, and students indicated that they would appreciate more dedicated, non-public social spaces. There would be value in the Conservatoire considering how to achieve this.

Use of technology

58 RCS has recently created an IT Governance Committee and is about to review its current Digital Technical Strategy (2016-18). This was identified as an area for development in the 2013 ELIR and there are clear signs that progress has been made, for example with the online timetabling system and the electronic Student Contract. The RCS portal, with

separate areas for staff and students, is clearly laid out and contains a lot of documentation but is not always entirely logical or intuitive, and students reported difficulties in locating information at times. For example, the 'Courses' block only contains limited and selective information for some (not all) courses, and most course information is located in the smaller and less visually obvious 'key documentation' link.

59 RCS has used the current virtual learning environment (VLE) for more than a decade but its use is currently underdeveloped and inconsistent with some modules containing a great deal of information, some being empty, and others redirecting students back to the (400+ page) programme handbooks in the student portal. The ELIR team learned that module tutors communicate with their students through email rather than on module forums in the VLE. Student distribution lists exist at the course level and can be created manually at the module level but the VLE could provide an automatic route for communicating with a module group and would preserve the record of communication in one place. Given the VLE's potential for providing spaces where students can easily access module-level information, there would be considerable benefit in RCS stipulating the basic level of module-specific information which should be included in any module area, in addition to the other online resources tutors might then choose to develop (paragraph 65).

60 Digital technologies are used in relation to distance learning, including a bespoke system for remote music teaching particularly for pre-HE students studying in remote rural areas. A range of resources are used for the MEd programme. The Conservatoire's distance learning provision currently is focused almost exclusively within Scotland and this could potentially be extended in future depending on the institution's future international strategy.

61 Staff and students place less emphasis on standard educational technologies and significantly more on the use of industry-standard software, especially in music, theatre design and production, and film. Students were very positive about this aspect of their learning experience, highlighting the way the 'industry-standard' expectation in the Conservatoire's approach to technology reflected the proto-professional environment.

2.6 Effectiveness of the approach to enhancing the student learning experience

62 RCS has some very effective approaches in its enhancement of the student experience. In particular, there is substantial strategic commitment and systematic practical support in place to promote fair access to the Conservatoire. There is a strong culture of promoting equality and diversity among staff and students seen, for example, in the success of the Transitions programme and the substantial pre-HE provision, and in the development of the BA Performance in British Sign Language and English programme, which is a unique offer in the UK and which has brought benefits relating to improved communication and support for students and staff across the institution.

63 The RCS approach to student representation and engagement is built around a strongly student-centred, personalised experience. The Conservatoire is responsive to feedback, and students are evidently engaged in the RCS community. The opportunities for interdisciplinary activity inside and outside the curriculum, along with opportunities to work with professional practitioners and companies, further enhance the student experience. The concept of the proto-professional environment within RCS is one that staff and students understand and engage with and this creates a strong sense of institutional identity.

64 The active participation by students in understanding their development through mutually-agreed feedback is an innovative mechanism for encouraging greater student engagement with their progress and with the processes of assessment. In some areas the arrangements for enhancing the student learning experience are less effective than they

could be because there is no agreed strategy for assessment. The Conservatoire is strongly encouraged to establish an institutional strategy for assessment to bring greater clarity and consistency to the design and delivery of assessments.

65 RCS is aware that the use of technology in learning and teaching is an area for ongoing development. There have been some clear enhancements since the previous ELIR around timetabling and the Student Contract, as well as good practice in the use of industry-standard technologies. The Conservatoire should now ensure there is more consistent use of learning technologies across the curriculum to enhance the learning experience of both campus-based students and distance learners. There would also be benefit in considering how technology, such as the VLE, could be used to facilitate sharing key information between staff and students (paragraph 121).

3 Strategy and practice for enhancing learning and teaching

3.1 Strategic approach to enhancement

66 The RA argues that the two factors of scale and focus in the Conservatoire mean that there is not a significant separation between the strategic and the operational. This view was substantiated during the ELIR visits by teaching staff from across the institution, by heads of department and professional services staff.

67 The four pillars of the RCS Strategic Plan, which are designed to enhance the student learning experience (paragraph 4), are supplemented by a series of additional objectives and operationalised through five priorities underpinning the recent undergraduate curriculum review process namely: the embedding of pedagogical skills to facilitate student learning and enhance employability; a focus on quality and diversity; the streamlining of assessment and feedback; ensuring that programmes operate as efficiently as possible; and that there is effective choice and collaboration in the curriculum. RCS asked programme teams to demonstrate the ways in which they address these five principles within their own interdisciplinary contexts. This process is described as being a 'tight-loose' approach. The 'tight' aspect requires that the principles underpin programmes of study and the 'loose' aspect allows schools and programmes the freedom to decide how best to apply the principles within their own programmes of study, subject to approval through validation or review. The ELIR team found this process is widely recognised across the Conservatoire.

68 The Curriculum Reform Project began in 2008 and was completed in 2012, with undergraduate courses launched in September 2012. Learning and teaching was addressed at a strategic level and 'systematised in the Academic Framework', underpinned by a series of philosophical and design documents now integrated into the Academic Framework. Staff who met the ELIR team indicated that the Project was a beneficial exercise, fostering collaboration across schools and between staff. In 2015, two new programmes which embody the principles of Curriculum Reform were approved: BA Performance in British Sign Language and English and MEd Learning & Teaching in the Performing Arts.

69 Building on the principles of Curriculum Reform, the Academic Board endorsed a new Academic Framework for postgraduate programmes, all of which were reviewed simultaneously in 2013-14. This led to enhancements including the introduction of the 'Approaches to Critical Artistry' module, the move to pass/fail assessment, and the dispensing with 'Merit' and 'Distinction' in Master's awards.

70 Staff who met the ELIR team showed awareness of the Strategic Plan, although part-time staff were less familiar with the strategic objectives. The Conservatoire acknowledges the need to engage part-time staff further in enhancement activities, although there was evidence that programme leaders were seeking to develop part-time staff

understanding of quality processes. It was clear to the team that the five principles of the 2017-18 curriculum review process have been adopted broadly across the undergraduate programmes although there remains some inconsistency in the implementation of assessment policies and practice (paragraph 64).

71 RCS identifies one of its guiding principles as Performing Arts Excellence, interpreted broadly as praxis, the interrelation of practice and theory in learning, contextualised in what the Conservatoire describes as its 'proto-professional learning environment'. Praxis underpins the first pillar of the Strategic Plan and informs curriculum review and the development of learning, teaching and research. It is identified as a level descriptor and in learning outcomes at levels 3 and 4 in the Undergraduate Framework. The ELIR team established that the concept of praxis has proved to be particularly effective as a vehicle for encouraging collaboration and learning from others and makes a valuable contribution to the established culture of preparing students for employment. Praxis is articulated through programme documents and handbooks and is understood by full-time and part-time staff. The value of the proto-professional environment was endorsed enthusiastically by students. Although the concept of praxis was characterised in various ways there was, nevertheless, evidence to suggest that it is reflected in the learning environment and is well embedded.

72 The ELIR team learned that a range of new institutional strategies are planned to complement the Strategic Plan. These include IT, Internationalisation, and Research and Knowledge Exchange. The team also heard that a new Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy was being considered. The existing Digital Technology Strategy (2016-2018) would soon be reviewed by the new IT Governance Committee and it was intended to review the Conservatoire-wide and programme-specific progression regulations. Other areas undergoing or due for review included: the Postgraduate Academic Framework in advance of the review of postgraduate taught programmes in 2018-19; staff development; the effectiveness of the Learning Agreement process; the development and implementation of the Fair Access and Gender Action Plans; and the development and implementation of a recruitment strategy to increase the BAME student intake.

73 The Conservatoire has been effective in enhancing the student experience although senior staff acknowledged that its strategic approach could have been more synchronised. The ELIR team learned that RCS was about to enter a new phase of planning in preparation for the Strategic Plan 2021-2026. The need for a period of reflection and consolidation has been identified by the recently-appointed Assistant Principal along with other members of the senior team who confirmed the intention to coordinate institutional strategies in order to ensure they align more closely with each other and with the objectives of the Strategic Plan. This is likely to be a very positive development which will enable the Conservatoire to derive even greater benefit from its work (paragraph 87).

3.2 Impact of the national Enhancement Themes and related activity

74 In the past, the Conservatoire has reported some challenges in engaging with the national Enhancement Themes on the basis of scale. However, there is substantial evidence of positive engagement with Themes since the 2011-14 Theme, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum (DSC).

75 DSC informed the re-design of the postgraduate curriculum in 2013-14 and, earlier, influenced activity relating to the undergraduate Curriculum Reform exercise. DSC encouraged academic staff, programme leaders and senior managers to ask fundamental and challenging questions, provided opportunities for collaborative team working, encouraged the use of benchmarks and other curriculum developments, and provided opportunities for evaluation and feedback to inform future developments, as demonstrated

by the postgraduate curriculum development. DSC also influenced the introduction of the shared modules, 'Introduction to Collaborative Practice' and 'Approaches to Critical Artistry'; pass/fail assessment outcomes for some modules; a common assessment scale across the RSC; and Bridge Week.

76 The 2014-17 Theme, Student Transitions, proved to be highly relevant, given the emphasis placed on enhancing transitions in the Curriculum Reform Project. Students attested to the success of the Transitions Programme. As a result, RCS worked closely with the Students' Union to develop multimedia materials and staff participated in conferences and other networking opportunities. The impact on policy and practice included a transitions support model for students from SIMD20/40 and care-experienced backgrounds, a research-led project on mental health, the launch of Teaching Excellence Award funded projects, and a Fair Access Plan and the establishment of a Fair Access Committee.

77 Although in its first year at the time of the current ELIR, engagement with the 2017-2020 Theme, Evidence for Enhancement, has resulted in the identification of two priorities: meaningful data for creative institutions and programme engagement with data. The Theme has also prompted RCS to work in partnership with Glasgow School of Art and Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design (University of Dundee) to explore the transformations that occur as a result of learning in a performing arts institution, gathering and using a range of data to inform new programme designs, and exploring ways of engaging staff and students in finding meaningful ways of interpreting data.

78 The RA acknowledged that, while staff would recognise engagement with the Enhancement Themes, those who are most familiar with the Themes are likely to be colleagues most directly involved in specific work relating to the Themes and those staff undertaking the PgCert or MEd in Learning & Teaching, since the Themes form an integral part of their curricula. The ELIR team also noted that some Institution-Led Review of Quality annual reports included accounts of the ways in which RCS engages with the Themes.

3.3 Approaches to identifying and sharing good practice

79 The RA indicates that the Conservatoire's compact scale and focused provision facilitate the identification and sharing of good practice. Overall, the ELIR team agreed with this view and considered the Conservatoire has an effective approach to sharing good practice, thanks to a highly collaborative culture and the range of opportunities for practice to be shared.

80 The RA identified a number of formal routes for good practice to be shared including: through heads of department and programmes, programme approval and review processes and the annual monitoring process. In addition, the RA emphasised the benefit of informal opportunities for good practice to be shared during discussion in committees, school management teams, during planning days or thematic workshops, and in the annual Learning & Teaching Conference where students are also involved along with staff. The ELIR team recognises the value of these approaches and of having a variety of ways to exchange practice. The culture of informal sharing and collaborating is one of the strengths of RCS, but a drawback of informal approaches is that they don't have a record of what is being shared, which can limit the extent to which good practice can be identified and shared across the institution or reflected on over time.

81 The Conservatoire has recognised that involving part-time academic staff in formal and informal sharing of good practice is a challenge and this links to one of the contextualised themes for the ELIR. RCS is addressing the challenge in a variety of ways including by funding part-time staff to attend the Learning & Teaching Conference and programme leaders are working to ensure part-time staff are familiar with quality processes,

which is positive and should continue. Making key information available to staff in a concise manner, for example through the VLE, is also likely to be helpful to all staff, including those on part-time contracts (paragraph 65).

82 The RA highlighted that the Conservatoire had developed the 'Principles of Best Practice in Conservatoire Teaching' which had been adopted by Conservatoires UK. The ELIR team considered this to be an excellent example of sharing good practice inside and beyond the institution.

3.4 Engaging, developing and supporting staff

83 The RA states that the Conservatoire is committed to the provision of appropriate and timely staff development for every member of staff. Staff development is delivered through the Career Review process and the Learning & Teaching Conference. In addition, each director has a fund that enables teams or individuals to access development opportunities as they arise. Overall, the ELIR team concluded that there is an effective approach to engaging and developing staff. RCS acknowledges challenges relating to engaging part-time hourly-paid staff and the team noted that attendance at staff development events, other than the annual Conference, is low. The Conservatoire offers two postgraduate programmes which are having a profoundly positive impact and for which RCS is commended.

84 RCS identifies a clear relationship between its quality processes and staff development activities, an example being the workshop on mutually constructed feedback held as part of the Learning & Teaching Conference in 2016. The team learned that staff development applications for personal development were dealt with on a 'first come, first served' basis and, as part of the review of staff development, there would be value in ensuring that a clear link is established between institutional strategy and staff engagement in development. The Conservatoire could also consider whether it places too much reliance on the Learning & Teaching Conference as a vehicle for staff development and disseminating good practice.

85 RCS has acknowledged that engaging the high number of part-time academic staff in development opportunities is inherently challenging as many of those staff have professional commitments outside the Conservatoire. Among the steps taken to address this, the Conservatoire has appointed a part-time Staff Liaison Officer and a member of part-time staff to the School of Music Management Team. These are positive measures which exemplify the Conservatoire's proactive and imaginative approach to engaging part-time staff.

86 The Conservatoire has offered its Postgraduate Certificate in Learning & Teaching (Higher Arts Education) since 2007-08 and, in 2015, added the MEd in Learning & Teaching (Performing Arts). The RA indicated that these awards fulfil a key function in building staff capacity and acting as a vehicle for enhancement. Specific examples were given of work ballet staff had carried out linked to the PgCert including activity impacting on curriculum content and design. It was clear to the ELIR team that the cohort of staff who have completed, or are completing, these programmes are having a tangible and profoundly positive effect on provision and the student experience, bringing new ideas and working methods. The MEd students, many of whom work as teachers in schools, are having a positive impact on performing arts education, enabling the influence of the programme to reach the wider creative arts environment (paragraph 88).

3.5 Effectiveness of the approach to implementing institutional strategies and enhancing learning and teaching

87 Overall, there is an effective approach with the Conservatoire being compact enough for all key staff, and students, to be involved in planning and implementing strategies. The Conservatoire is encouraged to progress its plans to ensure its suite of institutional strategies are aligned more closely with each other and with the Strategic Plan.

88 The Conservatoire is commended for the two postgraduate programmes it has in place, the PgCert in Learning & Teaching (Higher Arts Education) and the MEd in Learning & Teaching (Performing Arts), which are enabling those who study on them to have a significantly positive impact on the curriculum and the student experience inside RCS and in the wider creative arts environment.

4 Academic standards and quality processes

4.1 Key features of the institution's approach to managing quality and academic standards

89 The management of quality processes is overseen by the Quality and Standards Committee, reporting to the Academic Board. The RA emphasised that students are of fundamental importance as partners at all levels in the operation of the quality processes. The Academic Board, chaired by the Principal, has responsibility for the maintenance of quality and standards but the Principal delegates overall managerial responsibility for quality to the Assistant Principal who chairs the Quality and Standards Committee. School management teams are chaired by their respective directors, and programme committees by their respective heads of programme. Students are members of all committees, with the exception of school management teams.

90 The Quality Assurance Handbook sets out the key arrangements for managing quality and academic standards. There are clear processes in place for programme approval and validation, programme review, programme and module modification and new module approval, programme closure, and programme review for multiple programmes.

91 It was evident to the ELIR team that staff were familiar with these processes. In particular, staff confirmed the effectiveness of the review process describing it as transparent and logical, and indicating that its route through the committee structure was clear. Feedback from students has an impact on the process and staff welcomed the involvement of professional services staff who, in turn, confirmed they found their participation valuable. Some part-time staff reported being involved in validations and programme design and confirmed that they had been trained and well supported in preparation for these roles.

92 A review of the Academic Handbook began in 2016 and continued in 2017 following which a number of minor adjustments were made to ensure adherence with the UK Quality Code. These related to the sections on programme validation and review, and on external examining. The Admissions Policy was revised following a review of the effectiveness of the Contextualised Admissions Policy with the revised version now including a clear statement about the priority given to carers, the care-experienced and to applicants living in SIMD 20 postcodes. The section on Annual Dialogue was revised following feedback from staff and incremental enhancements to the process (paragraph 96-99) and the section on Student Engagement was revised in partnership with the Students' Union. The ELIR team learned that a review of the remaining sections was nearing completion.

93 Staff are informed about annual changes to quality assurance processes through the annual Learning & Teaching Conference and, more routinely, through heads of

department, team meetings and communications from the Quality and Standards Committee. There is a staff induction programme led by Human Resources and supported by academic departments, however, staff indicated that this was quite informal and a more systematic approach would be welcomed.

94 While staff acknowledged the Quality Assurance Handbook is comprehensive, they maintained it is not always sufficiently clear. The ELIR team was provided with examples of instances where a digest of relevant sections of published documentation were circulated to staff, including part-time staff, in order to ensure clarity and adherence. Students reported that they often relied on staff to provide information on assessment and other aspects of curriculum delivery, rather than referring to published information. It was evident to the team when meeting part-time tutors that they were conversant with quality policies on a 'need-to-know' basis and were sent extracts of the Handbook, but the team also noted there is no specific Handbook for part-time staff or formal induction.

95 While it was evident that the Conservatoire does take steps to document and disseminate information about its quality assurance policies and procedures, there would be considerable value in reflecting on how these are set out to ensure they are clearly understandable and readily available in a format (or range of formats) most likely to be accessed and used by all staff and students (paragraph 121).

Annual dialogue and annual monitoring

96 The Conservatoire introduced the Annual Dialogue process in 2011-12 as a strategic vehicle for enhancement. Convened by the Assistant Principal, panels include members from different schools, the Students' Union President and another member of the Students' Union, and three external 'critical friends' drawn from other conservatoires and professional service colleagues from the wider HE sector.

97 The Annual Dialogue process involves scrutiny of a range of material including: external examiner reports, performance indicators, and any programme or module modifications. Programme teams are required to produce a report that includes an evaluation of key information including: how the programme responds to the Strategic Plan; the effectiveness of any programme modifications introduced in the previous year; responses to the recommendations of the previous year's report; comments on programme-specific performance indicators, particularly changes and trends in benchmarking against other national and international institutions and organisations; comments on future developments mapped to the National Student Survey (NSS); placement and employability; as well as evidence drawn from a variety of reports, surveys, committee minutes and feedback from staff, students, employer and placement providers, and any lessons learned from student complaints, appeals or discipline issues.

98 The Annual Dialogue process was suspended for programmes that formed part of the curriculum review exercise, which meant that the undergraduate programmes did not participate in Annual Dialogue for two consecutive years, 2016 and 2017. The ELIR team was assured by senior staff that annual monitoring had been undertaken throughout that time. In future, it is intended that all programmes will participate in Annual Dialogue every year, irrespective of quinquennial review. Having considered feedback on the process, the Conservatoire believes Annual Dialogue is not providing an opportunity for the enhancement of support units. Staff who met the ELIR team spoke positively about the process in theory, but reported that, in practice, the meetings were not always long enough to allow full discussion and meaningful consideration of issues, which could lead to a level of frustration. The Conservatoire has made incremental enhancements to the process and indicated that they would continue to consult with stakeholders to ensure it is as effective as intended.

99 The ELIR team found some confusion surrounding the distinction between Annual Dialogue and annual monitoring. Staff who met the team referred to Annual Dialogue as being 'the enhancement aspect', which was 'above and beyond' the annual monitoring process. While the enhancement element had been paused for two years during the curriculum review exercise, annual monitoring as the quality assurance process had been conducted annually throughout the period. However, both the RA and the Quality Assurance Handbook describe Annual Dialogue as the annual quality process and the Quality Assurance Handbook doesn't refer to any other form of annual monitoring. Furthermore, the Quality Annual Report 2016-17 refers to Academic Dialogue as one and the same process, that is 'annual monitoring'. There would be considerable benefit in making the distinction between the two processes clear in documentation (paragraph 121).

4.2 Use of external reference points in quality processes

100 Overall, the Conservatoire has an effective approach to using external reference points. It considers externality to be of vital importance and, to that end, engages with professionals and colleagues from higher education institutions across the globe. There is clear evidence of the involvement of external individuals in the review process and staff pointed to the strong partnerships with industry professionals who make ongoing contributions to the proto-professional environment.

101 The Conservatoire had prepared a revised mapping of its policies and procedures against the Quality Code, indicating that it is 'fully compliant' with the Code. The team recognises the desire to assert adherence with all aspects of the Code, and recognises the precepts are very likely to be addressed, but there would be benefit in RCS adopting a more evaluative approach, given that adherence can be achieved in a variety of ways. The team would encourage RCS to show greater confidence in evaluating its activities, identifying potential risks and demonstrating the ways in which such risks can be mitigated.

102 Academic standards are reviewed by the Academic Board through programme approval, validation and institution-led review to ensure alignment with the Quality Code and the Conservatoire's Academic Framework. The Academic Framework was validated in 2011 and includes level descriptors, derived from six Curriculum Principles mapped against the requirements of the SCQF for the RCS learning environment. Learning outcomes are mapped by level to the SCQF Characteristics (2012) and the Dublin Descriptors (2005). Programmes are aligned with the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements and, where appropriate, specific reference points such as the AEC/Polifonia Outcomes for Music, and for dance, design, film and theatre education from EQ Arts.

103 External industry professionals, employers and graduates contribute to programme validation and review and engage through the consultation process. The ELIR team saw an example of stakeholder involvement resulting in changes to the BA Scottish Music programme.

104 The Conservatoire engages with two professional, statutory and regulatory bodies: the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) whose reviews are included in Annual Reports. The University of St Andrews validates the research degrees offered by the Conservatoire providing a further dimension of externality.

105 The maintenance of academic standards is supported by staff who are professionally active beyond the Conservatoire as external examiners, as well as through engagement with industry and the extensive use of external individuals including external examiners and specialist external assessors. The ELIR team saw evidence of external examiner reports being taken carefully into account in the review process.

106 External academics were involved in the Curriculum Reform Project and the Programme Review Panels were chaired by two external academics. This practice has been formally adopted in the current curriculum review process. In addition, there is an external academic member of the Academic Board.

External examiners

107 External examiners are central to the assurance of academic standards and their roles, responsibilities and terms of appointment are articulated in the Quality Assurance Handbook. Their primary role is to confirm academic standards through attending performances, observing and sampling student work, and through participation in boards of examiners. Their methods of working vary according to the requirements of the programme but, at a minimum, they oversee the assessment of all final-year students, necessitating attendance at productions, showcases and performances.

108 An informal mentoring scheme was introduced for new external examiners in 2016-17. In that year there were 21 external examiners: six from overseas including one from Ireland, six from UK conservatoires, nine from UK universities, and one from Scotland. The ELIR team explored the issue of ensuring confirmation of UK quality standards and were informed that external examiners who are not from the UK system are provided with an induction from HR, the Academic Registrar and the relevant head of department. The same process is in place for the Specialist External Assessors (SEAs) appointed by the School of Music. In 2016-17, 43 SEAs were employed, drawn mostly from UK-based orchestras, ensembles and conservatoires. They compile individual reports on each of the students they examine.

109 External examiner reports are considered together with responses from the programme teams by programme committees, school management teams, and the Quality and Standards Committee. Together they form part of the Annual Dialogue report. External examiner reports confirming academic standards, together with annual programme reports and performance indicators form the main evidence supplied to the Academic Board to ensure that programmes are meeting their stated aims and objectives. In line with the Quality Code, programme teams are required to make external examiner reports available to students. A summary of their reports is prepared for the Academic Board as part of the Quality Assurance Officer's Annual Report.

110 The ELIR team considered that the Conservatoire makes systematic and careful use of its external examiners.

4.3 Commentary on action taken since ELIR 3

111 The 2013 ELIR identified eight areas for development and the current ELIR team agreed with the Conservatoire that it has made satisfactory progress in addressing these.

112 In relation to the use of data, additional staffing has been put in place to support the bespoke Student Records System and the Current Research Information System (CRIS) has been installed. There is additional library, finance and HR staffing and a new Staff and Student Portal. A Statistical Analyst has been recruited, allowing for fuller engagement with the current Enhancement Theme. Committees now make greater use of data (paragraph 120). Heads of department who met the ELIR team indicated that the provision of data had improved considerably and they were now able to interrogate this data in much more informed and critical ways. They felt better able to reflect on performance indicators and the NSS results. The improved data also informs the Outcome Agreement with SFC. In particular, staff spoke very positively about the impact of the Statistical Analyst.

113 The Committee structure, roles, terms of reference and reporting relationships within the institution have been articulated in the Quality Assurance Handbook and a business process calendar is being produced. The Assistant Principal now has oversight and will evaluate efficiency as the next Strategic Plan is prepared. Progress has been made on strategies to complement the Strategic Plan, which include the operational plans and the Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy. A further International Strategy is under development. The IT Strategy (2013-16) was succeeded by the Digital Technology Strategy (2016-2018) and will be reviewed by the new IT Governance Committee. While the previous development point has been addressed, the current ELIR team would support the Conservatoire's intention to progress further alignment between institutional strategies.

114 The process for the review of public information has resulted in all public information (print and electronic) being signed off by the Marketing and Communications Manager, Director of External Relations and, where appropriate heads of programme/department. Information relating to research is overseen by the Research and Knowledge Exchange Team.

115 The issues raised over Transitions tutors, the management of Bridge Week and popular 'Choice Modules' have been addressed effectively. 97 per cent of students considered the Transitions tutors to be good or excellent. Students who met the ELIR team were very enthusiastic about options, indicating that these were very beneficial and had enriched the quality of their learning experience. The Choice, Collaboration and Credit-Rated Short Courses Committee has been formed and RCS is now able to allocate the vast majority of students to their first choice. In response to the development point relating to staff and student mobility, the Assistant Registrar (International and Student Experience) works with directors of school to promote mobility and, while staff outward mobility has increased slightly, the ELIR team noted that student mobility has fluctuated but it was also evident that RCS has taken reasonable measures to promote mobility.

4.4 Approach to using data to inform decision-making and evaluation

116 Data is generated from a range of sources to inform decision-making. The Academic Board considers whether programmes are meeting agreed aims and objectives using a variety of data drawn from Annual Dialogue, performance indicators, external examiner reports and reports from validations and reviews. The ELIR team learned that an internal audit of performance indicators had been undertaken recently with a view to establishing a refined list of data sources and measures of performance. It was intended that a key set of performance indicators would be developed to support the Strategic Plan.

117 Decision-making within the schools is informed by programme committees and senior management team meetings. The RA identified the ways in which the Statistical Analyst, in post since 2015, has been working with programme teams to improve the generation and interpretation of data in support of work relating to the NSS outcomes through the use of statistical significance tools. This approach has been further developed by the Academic Board introducing a new standard template in response to the NSS to ensure a strategic focus on significant trends and comparisons with appropriate benchmarks to assess the impact of interventions and to identify good practice to be shared across the institution. It is intended that the Quality and Standards Committee will analyse each programme's data and present an institutional view to the Academic Board. The team considered that these measures are positive but at too early a stage to form a definite view of their effectiveness. The team did note that previous work aimed at addressing low NSS scores on assessment and feedback had led to a comprehensive review which resulted in higher scores in 2016-17.

118 The Conservatoire adopted a broad interpretation of data, sharing examples of initiatives that had made use of evidence or had instigated the generation of additional data, such as the review of its Contextualised Admissions Policy. Given how recent many of the initiatives were, the ELIR team considered it was too early to form a full evaluation of their effectiveness. It was clear, however, that the impact of the Statistical Analyst post has been positive and was gaining momentum, for example with improved use of data informing programme committee discussions. Performance indicators are now reviewed holistically to produce school-level and Conservatoire-wide analysis for review by directors and the Quality and Standards Committee, both of which are very positive developments. The team also recognised the extent to which staff spoke very enthusiastically about the value of increasingly detailed data, and noted that this represented a significant positive development since the 2013 ELIR.

4.5 Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards

119 The Conservatoire has effective arrangements for setting and securing academic standards, in particular making systematic use of its external examiners.

4.6 Effectiveness of the institution's approach to self-evaluation, including the effective use of data to inform decision-making

120 The Conservatoire is committed to reviewing and evaluating the full range of its activity including the implementation of strategies, academic and professional service provision and even the nature of review itself. There are many examples of this evaluative activity bringing about enhancements to the student experience and improved ways of working. The Conservatoire has also improved its approach to using data as part of its deliberative and decision-making activity. Nonetheless, the Conservatoire's approach to evaluation would benefit from further reflection on the range and purpose of the plethora of mechanisms currently in place. Such reflection would assist the relatively new senior team to determine which activities could be conducted through committees and other dialogic opportunities, which require periodic review and the level of proportionality that could be applied, as well as considering the timescales overall with a view to bringing about greater synchronisation of strategies and initiatives. Such a period of holistic reflection would enable the Conservatoire to derive greatest benefit from the totality of these activities.

121 The Conservatoire is also recommended to improve the communication of key institutional policies and regulations to staff and students, giving thought to the content, format and mode of dissemination with the aim of ensuring policies are accessible and readily understandable.

5 Collaborative provision

5.1 Key features of the institution's strategic approach

122 Currently, the Conservatoire has three taught programmes which it delivers collaboratively with an external partner: the BMus Traditional Music: Piping (with the National Piping Centre), the MMus/MA Pianist for Dance (with Scottish Ballet) and the MA Learning & Teaching (Gaelic Arts) (Sabhal Mòr Ostaig). The first two programmes are well established having been offered for over 10 years and the third programme was first offered in 2014-15. A total of 27 students (or 2 per cent of student population) study on these programmes. Research degrees are awarded by the University of St Andrews. The MPhil and PhD were first offered in 2000-01 and the DPerf in 2015-16. There are 29 students registered on these research programmes. The Conservatoire also validates two 5-credit CPD programmes delivered by the Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT).

123 There have been changes in the Conservatoire's collaborative activity since the 2013 ELIR with some programmes that were collaborative now being delivered solely by RCS. This includes the BEd Music which was delivered in collaboration with the University of Glasgow since the mid-1990s and became an exclusively RCS programme in 2017. Senior staff characterised this shift as marking the development of the Conservatoire's relationship with the General Teaching Council for Scotland and establishing RCS as a teacher education institution following the development of the MEd programme. From July 2018, the MMus (Historically Informed Performance Practice, HIPP), formerly awarded by the University of Glasgow with some modules delivered by RCS, moved to be awarded by RCS as an MA (HIPP), although joint delivery with the University will continue. It was agreed between the two institutions that this repositioning is likely to attract more students.

124 The ELIR team learned that the Conservatoire was in the process of developing a small number of international partnerships including signing a memorandum of understanding with a conservatoire in China in relation to a Master's programme and holding discussions with an academy in Beijing for a 2+2 year programme in Music Theatre. Some further possible collaborations in North America were in the early stages.

125 Currently, taught collaborative provision is reviewed through quality assurance processes similar to on-campus provision and the ELIR team learned of examples where the Conservatoire had been responsive and willing to make changes to assure the quality of the student experience. If the international collaborative provision is approved, the Conservatoire will need to ensure it introduces additional arrangements to secure academic standards and assure quality given the greater geographical distances involved.

126 The relationship with the University of St Andrews is overseen by a joint board which meets bi-annually. The Pro-Dean for Research from the University of St Andrews is a member of the RCS Research Degrees Committee.

127 The RA emphasised that the Conservatoire also collaborates with other providers in order to offer a rich and distinctive learning experience, founded on praxis. Maintaining strong links between the Conservatoire and the national arts organisations in Scotland is a key strategic aim of the institutional strategy. There are clear successes in the collaborative partnerships RCS has forged with Scottish Ballet, Scottish Opera, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, National Theatre of Scotland and Scottish National Orchestra. Such partnerships facilitate collaborative work between these organisations and RCS students, as well as leading to the development of specific provision, for example pathways on the MEd Learning and Teaching in the Performing Arts programme emerging from work with Scottish Ballet, and the BA Performance in British Sign Language and English programme which emerged from collaborative work with the Solar Bear theatre company.

5.2 Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative provision

128 The Conservatoire has an effective approach, exercising the necessary oversight of its current collaborative provision.

129 The Conservatoire does not currently have an explicit strategy for its collaborative provision. It is in the process of developing an international strategy and there would be value in considering its international partnerships linked to that.

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