



## Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of The Academy of Contemporary Music, October 2018

### Outcome of the monitoring visit

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

### Changes since the last QAA review visit

2 Since the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)), some significant changes, a corporate restructure and the acquisition of a new campus in Birmingham, have taken place. The Academy's awarding body, Middlesex University, conducted an approval process in April 2018 to approve the delivery of the BA Music Industry Practice programme at the Birmingham campus.

3 At the time of the annual return there were 1220 students enrolled on the BA Music Industry Practice programme, compared to 1167 at the time of the HER (AP). The majority of these students were studying at the Guildford campus; 77 students were enrolled on the programme delivered at the new Birmingham campus where the annual monitoring visit took place. The Birmingham centre had, under its previous ownership, offered programmes in partnership with the University of Wolverhampton. Students who were previously studying on these programmes (43) have now transferred to the Middlesex University programme through an accreditation of prior learning (APL) process. At the time of the visit, the Academy had 141 staff, 91 academic (50 sessional tutors and the remainder, full-time or fractional posts), 33 administrative and 17 management.

4 The Academy has appointed a Head of Education, responsible for the degree programme at the Birmingham Campus, who reports to the Group Head of Education. A full-time Centre Manager oversees all facilities and general management of the site at Birmingham. Academic matters at the Centre, including curriculum development, monitoring and review, teaching and learning, and assessment and maintenance of student records, are overseen by the Guildford Centre. Student academic support and pastoral support are provided locally with some additional services, such as counselling, provided as a shared service from the Guildford campus.

### Findings from the monitoring visit

5 The team found that the Academy has continued with and taken forward good practice concerning the extensive engagement and links with industry (paragraph 6); the audition process (paragraph 7); the holistic approach to learning and teaching (paragraph 8); the wide-ranging initiatives and support activities (paragraph 9); and the integration of the Academy's approach to enhancement with its vision, mission and strategy (paragraph 10). The Academy has made progress in addressing the first recommendation from the HER (AP), to ensure that the complaints and grievances procedure is accessible and transparent to all stakeholders, and is appropriate for the consideration of admission appeals (paragraphs 11 and 12). The second recommendation, to ensure that the academic appeals

procedure is transparent to all stakeholders and has appropriate independent ratification of decisions, has been fully addressed (paragraph 13).

6 The Academy continues to embed co-curricular opportunities within the programme, and dedicated industry link tutors provide opportunities for students to connect with the wider industry. Summer Live concerts involve students in a live concert setting. The Academy's concert series simulates industry practice through students applying, auditioning, rehearsing and performing in its concert series. An 'Industry Night' staffed by industry experts allows students to present and get feedback on work from industry representatives. The Exit Specialism module enables students to consolidate the skills and experience gained, as evidenced through the creation of a practical project. Masterclasses have been embedded within the student timetable. An enhanced programme of professional workshops was endorsed by the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee in March 2018 to deliver a wider range of workshops to ensure that all pathways are supported. Staff confirmed that the industry engagement opportunities for students based in Birmingham are the same as for students on the other campuses.

7 The good practice related to the audition process has been maintained and further developed. Tutors use the admissions process to assess applicants' practical suitability and aptitude for their chosen programme, how well informed they are about the programme, and their intention to study. The Academy reviews its admissions procedures annually. The admissions review of November 2017 identified a need for specific guidance for admissions and education teams on aspects of the admissions process and auditions procedure including the 'decisions rubric', guidance on the moderation process, and guidance on alternative entry requirements. Enhanced guidance material has been developed to provide support and information for admissions staff and tutors, and staff training has been provided to support its use. Students stated that they had all had auditions and that they found the process useful in preparing them for admission to the Academy.

8 The Academy has undertaken a review of the Level 4 Personal and Professional Development module to report on how best to develop practice within this module. In order that all students benefit from the Level 4 Personal and Professional Development module, it has been added to all students' timetables in the form of a mandatory zero credit module in the first trimester. The module focuses on research skills and support in academic writing. The module is supported with a range of online resources available on the Academy's virtual learning environment (VLE). The Curriculum Content Manager has also developed an IT Induction programme which included an introduction to the use of anti-plagiarism software and a music theory primer for students, both of which are available via the VLE.

9 The Academy provides access to learning resources to support study skills for students, by introducing drop-in sessions for academic writing skills, providing access to research databases and highlighting the student support services available. Students seemed unsure of the online learning resources available to them, but they were all new to the programme. Staff confirmed that the Academy's membership of the Southern University purchasing consortium provided access to a range of on-line resources and that further resources were accessible via the VLE. The availability of these resources is covered at induction.

10 Three actions have been undertaken to further support the good practice on the integrated approach to enhancement. Committee terms of reference now include student representation across all committees and the student representative co-chairs the HE Board of Studies. The Academy has also widened the availability of committee minutes and tracking of actions, making them available through the VLE to all staff and students. Students met at the visit had been made aware of the student representative system and had been asked for expressions of interest in the role, however, the process for appointing

representatives had not yet been completed. Staff confirmed that all committees within the governance structure had student representation within their terms of reference.

11 The Complaints and Grievances Policy and the Student Complaints and Grievances Procedure have both been revised since the HER (AP). The procedure is accessible and includes clear guidance as to the responsibilities for dealing with various types of complaint. Students confirmed that they were aware of the Complaints and Grievances procedure but that none of them had needed to use it. The Complaints and Grievances Policy states that prospective students and applicants may utilise the Policy and Procedure during the admission and auditions process, up to and including the point of an offer being made, and request a review of the admissions decision and the process followed and completed in issuing an offer of study.

12 The Admissions Policy states that information relating to the Admissions Appeals procedures will be made available to applicants on request; that applicants may request a review of an admissions decision by accessing the procedures available to them under the Complaints and Grievances Policy, but that they are not able to appeal against the decision. Admissions letters state that applicants may request a review of an admissions decision, and contain a link to the Complaints and Grievances policy. However, the link from the sample letter seen by the monitoring team was directed towards a previous version of the policy. The Policy states that it can be used for applicant complaints and grievances, but does not provide clear guidance to unsuccessful applicants as to how they can complain about the decision. The Student Complaints and Grievances procedure does not clearly apply to admissions and, although it is available in the policies section on the website, it is not signposted or made easily accessible to applicants.

13 The Academy has recently revised the Academic Appeals Policy and the Academic Appeals Procedure, which has three stages. The Policy includes information on students' right to escalate complaints to the awarding body if they are not satisfied (stage three of the procedure). The procedure states that students who are dissatisfied after the three stages of an appeal have access to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). The programme handbook contains a section on assessment but does not contain any information in relation to academic appeals. However, the team was told that the necessary information was well signposted on the VLE. The online proforma for complaints and academic appeals provides some further guidance. Students met at the visit were aware of the grounds on which they could appeal academic decisions. The Academy has separated policy, procedure and guidance into three documents. There had previously been a single document which encompassed all three areas, but the three separate documents supporting the academic appeals process were developed in response to feedback from students that separate documents would provide greater clarity.

14 The Academy continues to recruit students through a range of different activities including UCAS events, school visits, Open Days, organised tours of Academy facilities, Parent Information Evenings and information presentations, and through events for current students on further education programmes. All students are recruited in accordance with the approved procedures at the Guildford site. An Admissions Officer is located at the Birmingham campus but oversight and records are held centrally at Guildford. Information regarding entry requirements for each programme is published on the website. Admissions staff are available to discuss the application process over the telephone or by appointment. The admission policy and procedures, and the Equality and Diversity policy, facilitate timely processing of all applications in a fair, inclusive and transparent manner. All applicants are invited to an audition and interview. Applicants can use the Complaints and Grievances Policy to request a review of an admissions decision and the process followed. Where appropriate, reasonable adjustments are considered for applicants with diagnosed learning needs, in consultation with members of the Education Guidance team. All applicants are

required to meet the minimum requirements for English Language applicable to their programme; applicants from outside the UK are required to provide evidence of competency, for example, by proof of completion of an IELTS, achieving a minimum of 5.5 in each component and a score of 6.0 overall. The Academy uses the Middlesex University guidelines for other acceptable English language qualifications. Applications are reviewed carefully to ensure that each applicant meets the entry requirements for their programme. Final results for school leavers are checked online or through verification of original copies of academic statements, where results or records of achievement are not available through UCAS. The annual review of admissions processes provides an opportunity to test integrity and ensure that processes continue to support inclusiveness and accessibility.

15 The Academy has a number of policies and procedures which ensure the fairness and rigour of its assessment processes, including those for APL. The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy, which details the processes for assessment, is made available to tutors and students on the VLE. The Academy provides regular assessment training workshops to improve and enhance assessment practices and the quality of assignment feedback. During the first week of induction, students are provided with guidelines for avoiding plagiarism. Anti-plagiarism software is used to identify cases of plagiarism for all academic written work. Students met at the visit stated that the Academy had briefed them on plagiarism, including a tutorial session on the use of anti-plagiarism software. All assessment submissions are managed centrally through the Academy's VLE. First and second markers are determined prior to module delivery and a moderation schedule is established before each finalist assessment board by the Head of Quality and Student Experience. External examiners, appointed by Middlesex University, examine student work at each academic level on the Academy's VLE prior to the finalist assessment board.

16 The Academy makes good use of student data to evaluate and enhance its provision. The figures for 2015-16 cohorts show retention rates of 74 per cent (472 students from 639). The Academy is aware that retention has been an issue and is taking action to improve this by means of the Retention Review process and changes to admissions processes. The Academy has also introduced an enhanced monitoring and outreach framework and recently appointed a Student Engagement Manager. For the 2016-17 cohort of 726 students, 589 (81 per cent) are still retained on programme, while for the 2017-18 intakes totalling 485 students, 460 (95 per cent) are still on programme, with two-year and three-year students showing in-year retention of 97 per cent and 92 per cent respectively. The 2015-16 cohort had an 89 per cent pass rate overall (421 of 472 students). In addition, 81 (48 per cent) of the 167 students who discontinued or did not achieve their full qualification from this cohort, achieved exit awards. These programmes are now completely taught out with any continuing students transferring to the BA (Hons) Music Industry Practice programme with appropriate APL.

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

17 The Academy demonstrates appropriate on-going engagement with the Quality Code. External points of reference are used to inform and support practice and enhance the quality of the provision, and a recent review of governance included consideration of the arrangements for monitoring and evaluating practice against the Quality Code and other benchmarks. The programme is validated by Middlesex University and the Academy is required to comply with the University's requirements for programme design and approval. Programme documentation clearly references the appropriate levels of the FHEQ, and the relevant QAA Subject Benchmark. Staff are involved in a number of external organisations and committees such as those relevant to student services, HESA and Jisc. The Academy is actively engaged with Advance HE and has 15 staff with HEA fellowships and a further 20 staff working on applications.

## Background to the monitoring visit

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

19 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Peter Hymans, Reviewer, and Ms Julia Baylie, QAA Officer, on 23 October 2018.

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