



Royal Central School of Speech and Drama

Institutional Review
by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

June 2013

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About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (the School). The review took place on 3 to 7 June 2013 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Hilary Grainger
- Dr Frank Haddleton
- Mr Laurence McNaughton (student reviewer)
- Ms Boryana Peevska-Cutting (review secretary).

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

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

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

In reviewing the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [themes](#) for the academic year 2012-13 are the First Year Student Experience and Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and the institution is required to elect, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.² Background information about the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama is given on page 3. A dedicated page of the website explains the method for [Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland³ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

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

² www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx

Key findings

QAA's judgements about the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

- Academic standards at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama **meets UK expectations**.
- Information about learning opportunities produced by the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

- The School's admissions process, and its thoroughness and sensitivity to individual students' needs (paragraph 2.15).
- The integrated and targeted approach to employability and career advancement (paragraph 2.19).
- The highly effective and supportive approach to meeting the needs of students with disabilities (paragraph 2.22).
- The excellence of the School's responsiveness and engagement with developments and innovations in the industry and the contribution that it makes to the curriculum (paragraph 4.2).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following recommendations to the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

By the start of the 2013-14 academic year, the School should:

- ensure a signed memorandum of agreement with the National Theatre is in place (paragraph 2.32)
- revise their handbooks to ensure clarity and cogency in order to secure the distinction between regulation, policy, procedure and guidance (paragraph 3.2).

By January 2014 the School should:

- develop and begin to implement a formal strategy for staff development (paragraph 2.4).

By July 2014, the School should:

- develop a clear taxonomy of all its existing and intended collaborations (paragraph 2.30)
- embed robust mechanisms for the management and monitoring of all collaborative arrangements (paragraph 2.30).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms the following action** that the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The development of the School's continuing professional development framework to foster an increase in the number of staff with formal teaching qualifications (paragraph 2.3).

The first year student experience

The review team investigated the First Year Student Experience at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, and found that the School's arrangements for admissions, enrolment, induction and transition to higher education were good. The arrangements for admissions and induction are particularly significant.

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

About the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama

The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama was founded in 1906. The School offers undergraduate, postgraduate and research degrees, and short courses in acting, actor training, applied theatre, theatre crafts and making, design, drama therapy, movement, musical theatre, performance, producing, puppetry, research, scenography, stage management, teacher training, technical arts, voice, and writing. The School has been a constituent college of the University of London since 2005. It is a 'university conservatoire' encompassing conservatoire models of training together with conventional higher education, industry engagement, and a research environment of active staff research coupled with a research degree programme.

The School's mission is:

Placing students at the centre of its work, Central develops practitioners and researchers who shape the future of theatre and performance across the UK and beyond.

This is underpinned by its values, through which the School commits itself to:

- maintaining their distinctive ethos as an higher education conservatoire at the crossing-point of higher education, industry and community. This consists of a fluid

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx

combination of scholarship and research, industry-related vocational training and research-informed teaching

- recognition that enhancement of learning is a project for staff and students alike, and that it takes many forms and relationships
- active encouragement of diversity as a basis not only for an enriched learning experience but also for an enhanced working environment
- opening doors to disciplines for new thinkers, makers and practitioners in dispersed and diverse communities and seeking to lead participation in varied but interrelated communities of interest and study.

These reflect the School's strategic aims, which are as follows.

- Academic profile. To maintain, articulate and further develop the School's unique position in its subject as a 'university conservatoire'; to provide high quality opportunities for students across the full range of higher education awards and through outreach to new participant communities; to build on and gain benefits from a recognised leading role.
- Jobs, partners, opportunities. To produce graduates appropriate for a range of employment opportunities; to draw benefit from diverse partnerships; to increase the School's impact in an always-extending range of communities and businesses; to cultivate an ethos of continual enquiry and improvement.
- Culture and identity. To strengthen the School's profile within and beyond its constituencies, both as a leader in specialist education, training and research and as a culturally rich and diverse, innovative, supportive and well managed learning environment; to secure growing recognition as an example of what can be best about the discipline and its study.

At present, the School caters for 923 full-time equivalent students across three undergraduate programmes:

- BA (Hons) Acting (BA AC)
- BA (Hons) Drama, Applied Theatre and Education (BA DATE)
- BA (Hons) Theatre Practice (BA TP).

The School also caters for a portfolio of specialist postgraduate programmes extending from PGCE Drama provision to taught master's courses and MPhil/PhD degrees.

The last Institutional Audit occurred in June 2008. Since then the School has further embedded its distinctive 'university conservatoire' model to create a new kind of institution, from the dialectic between two distinct academic cultures informed as much by research as by its industries.

The current Academic Plan proposes diversification of the academic offer, both in terms of subject and qualification. It has led to the development of relationships with the skills sector and with a range of international institutions. The School is also developing more formalised working relationships with its industries in order to enhance student learning outcomes and research impact, which is reflected in the wide range of placement opportunities for students. The School has also strategically developed its research degrees, in tandem with the developing research staff base and Research Centres, and has restructured various areas within the Academic Administration to facilitate and accommodate these changes.

Explanation of the findings about the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama

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

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

1 Academic standards

Outcome

The academic standards at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 The School meets external qualifications benchmarks. Each of the qualifications that it offers is allocated to the appropriate level in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. The School provides a Handbook of Quality Assurance and Enhancement outlining the committee structures, processes and frameworks that contribute to the management of quality and standards and a Handbook of Academic Regulations. These handbooks together articulate the various mechanisms by which the School defines and assures the academic standards of its awards. The School has fully implemented its master's framework, which ensures that all awards have a common unit size, the contribution of credit to the final degree mark is uniform and all courses include a common research methods unit and a common sustained independent project as a final unit. The common classification and credit structure for all but one of its undergraduate courses has been introduced. BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education will follow in 2013-14 after its periodic review.

Use of external examiners

1.2 The School makes scrupulous use of external examiners, who are appointed by the Faculty Board for a maximum of four years and appointed either to courses, pairs of courses or to shared units across a level of provision. The roles and responsibilities of external examiners are clearly outlined in the Handbook of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, which also defines the terms and process of appointment and the School's expectations in respect of briefing and guidance offered. Responsibility for the receipt and consideration of external examiner reports resides at local and institutional level.

Assessment and standards

1.3 The design, approval, monitoring and review of assessment strategies is effective in ensuring that students have the opportunity to demonstrate learning outcomes of the award.

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

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

⁷ See note 4.

The 2008 QAA Institutional Audit report recommended that the School 'ensure minimum expectations in the communication of assessment activities and criteria, to minimise the current variability and inconsistencies within and across courses, levels and documentation'. The School responded by implementing changes in the design, approval and monitoring of assessment strategies and these are articulated in the Handbook of Academic Regulations and Guidance, the Handbook of Quality Assurance and Enhancement and the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Handbook.

1.4 Recently, the School's faculty have been reviewing and updating various aspects of assessment to achieve greater rationalisation and consolidation. Work has been undertaken on practice skills assessment and group assessment, as well as standardising assessment frameworks within levels.

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.5 The design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes enables standards to be set and maintained and allows students to demonstrate learning outcomes of the award. The School Academic Board is the sovereign committee and takes responsibility for, and authority over, academic standards in the institution. Authority is delegated to a number of its sub-committees, including Faculty Board, Academic Management Committee and the Research Degrees Committee. It receives the validation and periodic review reports and gives final approval for courses. The School's policy and practice in respect of managing approval, monitoring and review of courses is articulated clearly in the Handbook of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, and guidance for teams is also provided.

Subject benchmarks

1.6 Subject benchmark statements and qualification statements are used effectively in programme design, approval, delivery and review to inform standards of awards. School staff were fully cognizant of the relevant QAA subject benchmarks (Dance, drama and performance; and Art and design) and other external indicators of academic standards required by professional bodies.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 Professional standards for teaching and support of learning are upheld. The School has put in place a range of measures designed to enable staff to develop and enhance their teaching skills. Due to the nature of the institution, it relies on a significant number of industry professionals without a formal academic teaching qualification, which places a greater emphasis on the need for appropriate staff induction, mentoring and development strategies and processes. The School recognises this and has prioritised the development of teaching skills in its policies.

2.2 The School's arrangements for inducting and mentoring new academic staff are described in the Handbook of Quality Assurance and Enhancement and in Human Resources policies. New staff are assigned a mentor, and familiarised with School processes and benefits through a thorough induction process followed by a 12-month review

period. Visiting lecturers undergo a version of the induction process and are supported by a discrete handbook.

2.3 The School has extended its current peer-observation process to include all full and part-time staff. It is intended that the process will be further developed in the next academic year to inform annual appraisals; although it remains unclear how the new process will be monitored at the level of individual staff. The School recognises the importance of developing the teaching skills of its staff and plans to offer a programme of continuing professional development units. To this end a re-designed postgraduate certificate in Learning and Teaching, suitable for accreditation by the Higher Education Academy, is planned to be introduced by September 2013. The Review Team **affirms** that the School has identified the need for the development of the School's continuing professional development framework to foster an increase in the number of staff with formal teaching qualifications.

2.4 Although the School has made the strategic decision to develop a coordinated framework for staff development, there is no formal staff development policy or strategy to inform future development and ensure a consistent approach to staff development. All staff are supported by a programme of staff development to further develop their skills, experience and expertise including an ongoing series of staff development sessions focusing on teaching, learning and assessment and practice-as-research. Staff development funding enables staff to pursue a range of other activities and events, often related to an appraisal target. The Human Resources department maintain records of all activity that has been supported by the School. The review team **recommends** that, by January 2014, the School should develop and begin to implement a formal strategy for staff development.

Learning resources

2.5 Learning resources at the School are appropriate to allow students to achieve the learning outcomes of their programmes. The collective expertise of the staff is suitable and available for effective delivery of the curricula, for the overall teaching, learning and assessment strategy and for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. Additionally, appropriate technical and administrative support is available. Students are supported through a range of mechanisms in the School, for instance pastoral support is effectively promoted through the Student Handbook and through the Student Centre. The Course Support Office provides students with administrative support and the Technical Support Department supports practical learning and research activities across the School.

2.6 There is an effective overall strategy for the deployment of learning resources. The School provides a high standard of accommodation which includes a variety of studio and performance spaces which are overseen by the Head of Academic Facilities, in consultation with course teams. New and substantially amended courses undergo a feasibility study before progressing to validation stage in order to ascertain the provision of resources for the course. The School has plans to expand its accommodation in line with its Key Planning Objectives to improve access and meet student demand.

2.7 Subject book and periodical stocks are appropriate and accessible and students and staff have access to a specialised library with necessary book and periodical stocks and a variety of digital resources. Students have access to good electronic resources to support their learning and are also able to use the University of London's Senate House library. Suitable equipment and appropriate information technology facilities are available to students, and where the School does not have suitable resources, budgets are available to hire appropriate equipment following approval.

Student voice

2.8 There is an effective contribution of students to quality assurance, and students are represented on institutional decision-making bodies both at School and course levels. This involvement is described, and guidance is provided in a range of publications, for instance the Handbook of Quality Assurance and Enhancement and 'Using your Voice' which is a guide to student representation. The Academic Board takes responsibility for reviewing the effectiveness of its institutional policies and procedures for promoting the contribution of students to quality assurance and enhancement. Students met by the review team consider themselves to be very well represented, attend a wide range of committees and meetings and are enthusiastic in their participation.

2.9 Students are supported in making their voice heard in decision-making bodies, for example, through training or briefing, and there are close links between senior institutional managers and students' representative bodies. The Students' Union features prominently in School life, and is represented on a range of School committees and boards.

2.10 Effective arrangements are in place to gather feedback from all students on their learning experience and hard to reach students, such as those studying part-time or off-campus, are contacted by their course leader and course representatives. The School is proactive in acting on feedback, for instance the results of the National Student Survey are used for enhancement of students' learning opportunities.

Management information is used to improve quality and standards

2.11 There is effective use of management information to safeguard quality and standards and to promote enhancement of student learning opportunities. The preparation of annual course monitoring reports is supported by a range of annual statistical data sets. Cohorts are broken down by gender, ethnicity and disability, but the review team could find little analysis of how these categories of student perform in terms of progression or completion. However, the longer term data that is presented to support the course periodic review process does analyse the performance of these categories. A recent review of data quality at the School has identified a number of concerns to do with the ineffective use of data. In response, the Academic Registrar's Office plans to develop a Data Management Strategy, to establish the forms of management information data that need to be collected and monitored, and how it is used.

2.12 Management information is used by committees in the overall management of the institution, through the Executive Management Group and Academic Management Committee. For instance, a set of academic key performance indicators were recently approved by the School, are monitored by the Academic Management Committee, and are used for planning purposes.

Admission to the School

2.13 Policies and procedures used to admit students are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied. The School's policies and procedures for admission aim to identify applicants who are most able to benefit from its demanding courses. This is confirmed by course completion data which shows that the vast majority of students complete their chosen course of studies. The process of selecting applicants draws on a variety of evidence of aptitude and ability, and it is recognised that the general nature of traditional entry qualifications does not in itself provide sufficient indication of the qualities and level of specialist commitment required to succeed on the School's courses. Admissions criteria and other documentation are published on the School's website, and are very clear.

Most students take part in auditions or interviews as a part of the admissions process. Clear protocols for audition panels and interviewers are an essential part of the process, and these are provided in the form of the Admissions Handbook and the Panellist Handbook for audition panels. Both handbooks are very thorough, demonstrate good practice, and reflect the demanding admissions processes required where there is less reliance placed on traditional qualifications. Feedback is available to all applicants upon request.

2.14 All applicants who disclose a disability on application are sent information about the Disability and Dyslexia Service, and are encouraged to contact the Disability Services Coordinator or Dyslexia Service Coordinator to discuss their needs and concerns. This includes reviewing any aspect of a course, auditions, interviews or other specialist resources/facilities, where adjustments might be required. In addition students are placed in contact with the Student Centre to receive advice and support on financial and accommodation issues.

2.15 Admissions are primarily monitored at course level through the Course Committee and the Annual Course Monitoring Report. In addition an Admissions and Recruitment Group has been established as an official subgroup of the Executive Management Committee and meets regularly to examine recruitment numbers, evaluate recruitment activity and discuss recruitment strategy. The review team considers the School's admissions processes, and its thoroughness and sensitivity to individual students' needs, to be **good practice** that make a positive contribution to the students' learning experiences.

Complaints and appeals

2.16 There are effective complaints and appeals procedures. The School's complaints and appeals procedures follow general principles of openness, transparency and equity. The School encourages students to raise any issues informally before pursuing the formal route. The Academic Registrar's Office keeps a log of all formal complaints and appeals received by the School as a resource towards enhancing not only the complaints and appeals procedures but also the provision of the School generally.

2.17 The complaints and appeals processes are described in a number of locations, for instance information is provided to students via the Student Handbook and the School's virtual learning environment, and support is provided by the School's student centre and the Students' Union. Additionally the Handbook of Quality Assurance and Enhancement includes a section on complaints and appeals, and the Academic Regulations Handbook also covers appeals. The complaints procedures are cross-referenced with each other, but the appeals processes are not; also the grounds for appeal in the Academic Regulations are inconsistent with the grounds for appeal in the procedures. The potential for confusion with this approach is recognised by the Academic Board.

Career advice and guidance

2.18 There is an approach to career education, information, advice and guidance that is adequately quality assured. The School is closely connected to its industry, and career education information, advice and guidance is considered to be a high priority. This is reflected strategically in the School Corporate Plan and academically through the Annual Course Monitoring Report which includes a section on career education and employment. Industry is able to inform the curriculum through the inclusion of industry specialists at validation and through employer events designed to advise staff and students.

2.19 Employability is routinely developed in the curriculum, for instance, through key competencies, skills development and professional preparation, with a number of courses

incorporating specific events including showcases, festivals, exhibitions, 'live' industry projects, conferences and productions to which members of the industry are invited. Performance based courses actively promote students through the School's website using online Curricula Vitae. In addition, opportunities exist in many courses to undertake work experience and placements. These are supported by the School's Placements Coordinator. Staff are encouraged through the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy to use scholarship and research and relevant industry awareness to inform and maintain currency for their teaching of employable students. The review team considers the integrated and targeted approach to employability and career advancement to be **good practice** that makes a positive contribution to the students' learning experiences.

Supporting disabled students

2.20 The quality of learning opportunities is managed to enable the entitlements of disabled students to be met. The School embraces diversity and inclusivity among the staff and student body, a commitment that is reflected in its corporate plan and Learning and Teaching Strategy. The Equality and Diversity Committee takes a lead in promoting a culture of diversity and equality of opportunity throughout the School. Its chair is also responsible for the Learning Centre, a newly established unit providing support to all students in terms of their academic and learning needs. This also acts as a focal point for coordinating the disability and dyslexia service to ensure that students are assessed, diagnosed and supported professionally in relation to their disability. The School annually reviews its processes for managing the entitlements of disabled students, but does not routinely analyse disabled student performance.

2.21 Disabled students are identified at the point of enquiry, and provided with comprehensive guidance on how to access support. They are contacted by the School to establish their needs, to enable their full participation in all stages of the learning experience. Further guidance is provided at induction; through the Learning Centre's Disability Service and Dyslexia Service virtual learning environment pages; the Student Handbook; and the Handbook of Academic Regulations, which provides regulatory guidance on the admission and initial testing for adjustments and assessment of students with disabilities. Where appropriate, placement providers are also made aware of students' disabilities and the School provides necessary support while students are on placement.

2.22 Disabled students met by the review team commended the support that they were able to access, and confirmed that one-to-one support from tutors is effective. They further confirmed that the Learning Centre provides a sympathetic approach to support, with an open door policy, discretion, and helpful guidance. The review team considers the highly effective and supportive approach to meeting the needs of students with disabilities to be **good practice** that makes a positive contribution to the students' learning experiences.

Supporting international students

2.23 The quality of learning opportunities for international students is appropriate. International students constitute around 16 per cent of the School's student count and are provided with comprehensive support from the outset. The International Students' Handbook is a very comprehensive and helpful guide to prospective and new international students, sent out in advance and covering learning and teaching, financial and other information. During the admissions process, the School offers well received support with visas, accommodation and financial matters. On arrival, the Learning Centre provides academic and pastoral-related support in the form of a one-week pre-course for international students, allowing students to better integrate into the UK. The Learning Centre also offers support for academic English. International students met by the review team feel themselves to be well

represented and the Students' Union's Black and Minority Ethnic group is considered to be a very positive feature.

2.24 The School has put in place measures to further develop their provision for international students; for instance, the School initiated two focus groups for international students to provide further feedback on issues that had arisen. These groups led to, among other things, better visa information and information sheets for overseas auditions.

Supporting postgraduate research students

2.25 Appropriate support and guidance is provided to enable postgraduate research students to complete their programmes and to enable staff involved in research programmes to fulfil their responsibilities. The School received the right to award doctorates when it became a member of the federal University of London, and is now responsible for the administration and management of the programme. Its strategy is to be recognised internationally for a leading role in research in theatre and performance, in accordance with the School's unique identity. The School has comprehensive regulations, policies and guidance handbooks covering research. The Research Degrees programme is formally monitored and reports to the Research Degrees Committee, as does a Research Student Course Committee. The Research Office administers and manages the programme, and it is overseen by the Programme Convenor who reports academically to the Deputy Principal (Academic).

2.26 The School has a maturing research environment with more staff planned to be submitted to the next Research Excellence Framework, the formation of Research Centres, an expanding Visiting Professor scheme and visiting research fellows, and a lively programme of research lectures and conferences. The Research Degrees programme operates within a dynamic research environment, with annual events and a research seminar series providing an opportunity for students to present their work to an environment of peers.

2.27 Research applicants undergo a rigorous admissions process, involving a proposal to the School, feedback on and extended discussions on that proposal, selection of the supervisory team and then an interview process. The Research Degrees Committee formally approves the outcome of the process. Supervisor roles are clearly outlined in the Research Degrees Handbook and the Handbook of Doctoral Supervision. All research students are informally reviewed at six months, and then formally reviewed at 12 months for progression to a PhD by a panel which includes external members. They continue to be informally reviewed at six-monthly intervals.

2.28 The School has effective methods for the development of research and other skills, including a two-day induction programme, followed by a research and professional skills training programme. All research students have the opportunity to teach on the School's bachelor's and master's programmes and undertake a pedagogic taught unit at the start of their research studies, in parallel with research skills training. Supervisor roles are clearly outlined in the Research Degrees Handbook and the Handbook of Doctoral Supervision. The School has increased its research supervision capacity in line with the growing number of research students through a number of means. Supervisory teams that have neither completed doctoral study nor previously supervised to completion are assigned an experienced mentor. Although it is unusual that both supervisors are inexperienced, the January 2013 periodic review of the Research Degrees programme have recognised this possibility as a concern, advising that the approval mechanisms for supervisory teams and projects for new students be reviewed.

2.29 Feedback from students occurs via the Research Student Course Committee and the School's participation in the Postgraduate Research Experience, which recently reported a decline in student satisfaction and prompted the School to introduce its own one-off end of course survey. Research students met by the review team take an active role in the organisation of their programme and on the Research Degrees Committee, the Research and Ethics Committee and the Academic Board on which they are represented.

Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements

2.30 The quality of learning opportunities delivered as part of collaborative arrangements is managed effectively to enable students to achieve their awards. The School has a variety of arrangements with external partners; however, there is a lack of clarity surrounding the formal process of securing these relationships, for instance one historical relationship with the School led to a formal agreement not being implemented. The team noted that a better articulation and understanding of terminology across collaborative arrangements is necessary in order for the School to ensure itself that sufficient risk assessment and due diligence has been carried out. The review team **recommends** that given the School's ambitions for further collaborative work, the School develop a clear taxonomy of all its existing and intended collaborations. This should be completed by July 2014. Additionally, the review team **recommends** that the School should embed robust mechanisms for the identification, management and monitoring of all collaborative arrangements. This should be completed by July 2014.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.31 The quality of learning opportunities delivered through flexible and distributed arrangements, including e-learning, is managed effectively. Responsibility for e-learning is managed at various levels of the School. The virtual learning environment is used primarily as a repository for general and course information. Virtual learning environment training is provided by the Learning Centre. Students met by the review team reported that they find Learnzone a valuable resource. There are a number of supportive systems in place throughout the School's courses to help students achieve their awards. In terms of information uploaded to Learnzone, there is a minimum requirement for all courses.

Work-based and placement learning

2.32 The quality of learning opportunities delivered through work-based and placement learning is effective. Placements form a significant part of most courses at the School. Although the nature of procurement varies, all placements are administered by the Placements Coordinator. Almost all placement providers sign an agreement with the School, however the collaborative relationship between the School and the National Theatre has existed for 18 years and currently there is no formal memorandum of understanding or agreement between the theatre and the School which would confirm respective responsibilities. The review team **recommends** that the School should ensure a signed Memorandum of Agreement with the National Theatre is in place. This should be completed by September 2013.

2.33 Regular dialogue exists between the placement host and the School. Depending on the course, this may include visits from the course tutor. Reviewers heard from employers that there was generally a clear understanding of the respective responsibilities of the partner and the institution. Nevertheless, some employers would welcome further clarification, for instance on their role in dealing with student complaints, although this is specified in the Student Handbook. Placement hosts do not undertake assessment; where relevant to the course, assessment is handled by the School.

2.34 Students are supported on placement by a Placement Handbook, but students met by the review team also reported that they would welcome further support from the School, particularly around respective responsibilities for assessed work on placement.

Student charter

2.35 A student charter is available and has been recently renewed.

3 Information about learning opportunities

Summary

The information about learning opportunities produced by the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

3.1 The School produces information for their intended audiences about the learning opportunities they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. All information relating to courses is the responsibility of Course Leaders and Deans. These documents are signed off by the Academic Board. The prospectus and other marketing information is signed off by the Executive Management Committee. Students met by the review team stated that the information they receive is excellent and information they received in advance of starting their courses has proven to be an accurate reflection of their experience at the School. Students also reported that any errors in material were corrected rapidly by the School.

3.2 The review team found a number of inconsistencies in information contained in different handbooks, and students met by the review team noted some inaccuracies in course submission dates published on the School virtual learning environment and in student handbooks. Additionally, the team found inconsistencies in information published in the placement handbook, which should be reviewed to address areas of ambiguity, particularly around some of the principles governing the management of placement learning, namely around distinction between regulation, policy, procedure and guidance. The review team **recommends** that the School revise their handbooks to ensure clarity and cogency in order to secure the distinction between regulation, policy, procedure and guidance. This should be completed by October 2013.

3.3 The Review team also noted inconsistencies in the information displayed by partners on their websites about the School. Course leaders met by the review team were not aware of what information was displayed by partners and there is no clear policy for monitoring the information that they publish.

3.4 The School publishes online profiles of acting students on their website. They are monitored by course leaders and the marketing department and are valued by students looking to enter a highly competitive industry.

4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1 Deliberate steps are taken at institutional level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. Enhancement is the first aim of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and is embedded at all levels of the School, which takes full advantage of the innovative nature of the subjects being taught. Reviewers heard in all meetings with staff from the School that enhancement is an integral part of all School activities.

Examples of the many enhancement initiatives at the School include: work with other specialist institutions, various festivals, work in prisons, productions involving children, work with people with disabilities, and industry leading initiatives such as the School production of *Cabaret* that featured the use of sustainable production practices. The School has also started a student initiative called 'sitting in' where students can go and see other students at work in order to broaden their education beyond their own particular course.

4.2 The Dean of Studies Office oversees all enhancement activities and disseminates good practice to course leaders. Certain enhancements are captured in an e-newsletter on the School's virtual learning environment and through internal emails. The review team noted as **good practice** the excellence of the School's responsiveness and engagement with developments and innovations in the industry.

5 Thematic element: First Year Student Experience

Each academic year a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for especial attention by QAA's Institutional Review teams. In 2012-13 there is a choice of two themes: First Year Student Experience or Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

The review team investigated the First Year Student Experience at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

Supporting students' transition

5.1 Almost all students surveyed at the School (93 per cent in 2012) were satisfied or more than satisfied with their experience of admissions. The School auditions or interviews most students for its courses, and students met by the review team were all positive about the process. In particular, students commented favourably on the sensitivity of the process to individual student needs, the matching of student skills and interest to disciplines at the School and in the case of research students, the involvement of students in choosing their supervisory team.

5.2 Information about admissions is comprehensive and well received by students. The Admissions process is clearly defined in the School's prospectus and on the School's website. Detailed guidance to applicants is provided in the Admissions Handbook. There is a clear Panellist Handbook for members of audition panels.

5.3 All students receive up to one week of intense induction, which includes both general and course-specific information. International students have the opportunity to attend an additional one-week pre-course to assist them with specific questions and to smooth their settling into London. At the start of the first term, undergraduate courses

arrange 'community building' initiatives, which include theatre visits, London exploration and question and answer sessions with the Students' Union and second-year students.

The Learning Centre runs its own induction, which invites disability disclosure and also includes dyslexia screening. One student reported that a helpful self-test in the Induction Pack helped diagnose their dyslexia and dyspraxia, of which they had been unaware.

Information for first year students

5.4 During open days and interviews/auditions, staff give information on the study expectations at the School. If a student applies successfully they are sent an offer pack, which includes financial information, term dates and information on the Student Centre and the Learning Centre. Following acceptance, students receive a registration pack, which contains information on enrolment, as well as welcome letters and timetables. Upon arrival at the School, students are provided with detailed information, in the form of talks and presentations but also handbooks; for example, course handbooks, the Student Handbook, the International Student Handbook for international students, and the Research Degree Handbook for research students. All information is also available on the School virtual learning environment. Students confirmed that this information was helpful both prior to their arrival and during their initial weeks.

5.5 Academic advice and guidance is provided by personal and strand tutors. Programmes have skills development and assessment embedded within the course design. Student progress in the acquisition and mastery of skills is recorded, monitored and reviewed individually with the student.

5.6 The School provides a range of learning resources to support students' academic study and professional preparation. These include:

- the Student Centre, which provides general administrative, financial, and accommodation advice
- the Learning Centre which offers study skills tuition and dedicated support to students with learning difficulties
- the School's specialised library, as well as access to the University of London's Senate House Library
- IT facilities including a virtual learning environment and specialist software
- the Technical Support Department which provides specialised spaces, equipment and support in learning and research activities.

Assessment and feedback

5.7 The School has been active in reviewing and updating various aspects of assessment to achieve greater rationalisation and consolidation. Work has been undertaken on practice skills assessment and group assessment, as well as standardising assessment frameworks within levels. The first year of undergraduate programmes is assessed as either pass or fail. Students have reported that their transition onto year two graded assessment has been supported with targeted guidance.

Monitoring retention and progression

5.8 Retention and progression are monitored by course teams on an ongoing basis, and formally reviewed as part of annual programme monitoring. The School's continuation rates for the 2010-11 cohort are 97 per cent. From 2012-13 the School has introduced a student withdrawal survey to further monitor the causes for non-continuation.

Glossary

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

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email enquiries@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

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