

# Degree awarding powers assessment report for Royal Northern College of Music

## Full research degree awarding powers assessment

**Provider legal name:** Royal Northern College of Music

**Provider trading name:** Royal Northern College of Music

**UKPRN:** 10007837

**Assessment conducted:** 2 December 2024 to 10 December 2025

**Reference** OfS 2026.01

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# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction and background</b>	<b>6</b>
Context	6
<b>Assessment process</b>	<b>9</b>
Information gathering	9
<b>Assessment of DAPs criterion A: Academic governance</b>	<b>11</b>
Criterion A1: Academic governance	11
<b>Assessment of DAPs criterion B: Academic standards and quality assurance</b>	<b>33</b>
Criterion B1: Regulatory frameworks	33
Criterion B2: Academic standards	42
Criterion B3: Quality of the academic experience	53
<b>Assessment of DAPs criterion C: Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of staff</b>	<b>75</b>
Criterion C1: The role of academic and professional staff	75
<b>Assessment of DAPs criterion D: Environment for supporting students</b>	<b>88</b>
Criterion D1: Enabling student development and achievement	88
<b>Assessment of DAPs criterion E: Evaluation of performance</b>	<b>103</b>
Criterion E1: Evaluation of performance	103
<b>Assessment of DAPs criterion F: Academic staff</b>	<b>112</b>
Criterion F1: Academic staff	112
<b>Assessment of DAPs criterion G: National guidance</b>	<b>129</b>
Criterion G1: National guidance	129
<b>Assessment of DAPs criterion H: Minimum number of doctoral degree conferrals</b>	<b>138</b>
Criterion H: Minimum number of doctoral degree conferrals	138
<b>Assessment of overarching criterion for the authorisation of DAPs</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>Annex A: Abbreviations</b>	<b>145</b>

# Executive summary

Type of assessment:	Quality and standards assessment for full research degree awarding powers
For:	Royal Northern College of Music

1. This report represents the conclusions of an assessment for degree awarding powers (DAPs) at Royal Northern College of Music ('the college'). The college is seeking authorisation for Full DAPs for research awards ('Full Research DAPs') up to and including Level 8 in all subjects. The college currently holds Full DAPs for taught awards ('Full Taught DAPs') up to and including Level 7 in all subjects. These were awarded by the Privy Council in 2007.
2. To carry out the assessment, the Office for Students (OfS) appointed an assessment team, which included three academic experts and one member of OfS staff. The assessment included an on-site visit to the college. This report contains the advice and judgement of the team following its assessment.
3. The team concluded that the college continues to meet all the criteria for Full DAPs authorisation for taught awards and meets all the criteria for Full DAPs authorisation for research awards (see Table 1). This report does not, however, represent any decision of the OfS to authorise the additional powers to award research degrees.

**Table 1: Summary of findings against the DAPs criteria**

Underpinning DAPs criteria	Summary
Criterion A: Academic governance	Met
Criterion B1: Regulatory frameworks	Met
Criterion B2: Academic standards	Met
Criterion B3: Quality of the academic experience	Met
Criterion C: Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of staff	Met
Criterion D: Environment for supporting students	Met
Criterion E: Evaluation of performance	Met
Criterion F: Academic staff	Met
Criterion G: National guidance	Met
Criterion H: Minimum number of doctoral degree conferrals	Met
Overarching Full DAPs criterion	Summary
The provider is a self-critical, cohesive academic community with a proven commitment to the assurance of standards supported by effective quality systems.	Met

## Full degree awarding powers assessment

The OfS may authorise a registered higher education provider to grant taught awards, or research awards, or both, under section 42 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA).<sup>1</sup>

A provider that is registered with the OfS and has a three-year track record of delivering higher education, either through an arrangement with a degree awarding body or under its own existing powers to award degrees, can apply for a Full degree awarding powers (Full DAPs) authorisation.<sup>2</sup>

A Full DAPs authorisation will normally be awarded on a time-limited basis. At the end of a specified time, the provider will be able to apply for an authorisation to grant awards without a time limit. This is referred to as 'indefinite degree awarding powers'.

A provider may seek authorisation for Full DAPs for the following awards:

- foundation degrees only;
- awards up to, and including, bachelor degrees;
- all taught awards; and/or
- research awards (if Full DAPs for taught awards are already held or are applied for at the same time).

Providers may apply for these authorisations on a subject-specific basis or covering all subjects. When choosing which level of DAPs authorisation it wishes to apply for, the provider must:

- have no fewer than three consecutive years' experience, immediately preceding the year of application, of delivering courses at a level at least equivalent to the level of DAPs authorisation for which the provider is applying
- meet the criteria set out in paragraph 249 of the OfS regulatory framework for higher education in England (the OfS's regulatory framework).<sup>3</sup>

## Assessment and decision-making process

Before making a decision about whether to award a Full DAPs authorisation, the OfS will undertake a Full DAPs assessment. The purpose of a Full DAPs assessment is to gather evidence to inform a judgement on the extent to which a provider's arrangements:

- meet the DAPs criteria, including the overarching criterion for Full DAPs

<sup>1</sup> See [Higher Education and Research Act 2017, section 42](#).

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of different types of degree awarding powers, see [Degree awarding powers - Office for Students](#).

<sup>3</sup> See [Regulatory framework for higher education in England - Office for Students](#).

- provide, and maintain the provision of, higher education of an appropriate quality
- apply, and maintain the application of, appropriate standards to that higher education.

The full requirements of the DAPs criteria are detailed in Annex C of the OfS's regulatory framework.<sup>4</sup>

OfS officers first undertake an eligibility and suitability assessment of the provider. This initial assessment determines the scope and level of detail of the assessment, and an initial position on whether the assessment should be desk-based or include a visit to the provider.

Assessments for DAPs are conducted by teams, which include academic experts appointed by the OfS has appointed. The outcome of the assessment is typically a report, produced by the assessment team, summarising its findings.

The report is then considered by the OfS's Quality Assessment Committee (QAC). The QAC is responsible for providing advice to the OfS under section 46 of HERA on the quality of and standards applied to the higher education being delivered by providers for which the OfS is considering granting, varying, or (in certain circumstances) revoking authorisation for DAPs.<sup>5</sup>

After considering the assessment report, the QAC provides advice to the OfS regarding quality and standards.

In making its decision about whether to authorise Full DAPs on the basis sought by the provider, the OfS will have regard to any assessment report and the QAC's advice. The OfS will also consider its own risk assessment of the provider and will have regard to advice received from others where this has been sought. It will also take into account other relevant considerations, such as the OfS's general duties under section 2 of HERA.<sup>6</sup>

### **Further information**

We have published further information about providers seeking New DAPs and Full DAPs in Regulatory advice 12.<sup>7</sup>

4. Royal Northern College of Music ('the college') is a music conservatoire which was founded in 1973 following a merger of the Royal Manchester College of Music and Northern School of Music. The college provides a range of undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research courses from its campus in Manchester, UK.
5. Since 2010 the college has worked in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) as the awarding body for its doctoral degree programme, through a framework

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<sup>4</sup> See the regulatory framework at [Annex C – Guidance on the criteria for the authorisation for DAPs - Office for Students](#).

<sup>5</sup> See [Higher Education and Research Act 2017, section 46](#).

<sup>6</sup> See [Higher Education and Research Act 2017, section 2](#).

<sup>7</sup> See [Regulatory advice 12: How to apply for degree awarding powers - Office for Students](#).

collaborative agreement. The research programmes are undertaken and supervised at the college.

6. In accordance with the OfS's regulatory framework and the guidance on how to apply for DAPs, the college is eligible to be considered for Full Research DAPs because it currently holds Full Taught DAPs and has been delivering higher education for more than three years at this level and meets the eligibility criteria set out the OfS's regulatory framework.
7. The OfS appointed an assessment team on 8 November 2024. The team was asked to give its advice and judgements about the quality of, and standards applied to, higher education courses at the college and whether the college meets the criteria for the Full Research DAPs authorisation being sought, and continues to meet the criteria for its current Full Taught DAPs authorisation, including the overarching criteria for a Full DAPs authorisation.
8. The assessment team considered a range of information submitted by the college in support of its application for Full Research DAPs. This report does not represent any decision of the OfS in respect of whether the Full Research DAPs award the college is seeking should be granted.
9. This report will be considered by the OfS's QAC at its meeting of 12 November 2025. QAC will formulate its advice to the OfS regarding quality and standards at Royal Northern College of Music, having considered this report. In accordance with the regulatory requirements set out in HERA,<sup>8</sup> QAC's advice will also be informed by the view of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).
10. The OfS will have regard to this assessment report, and QACs advice, in deciding whether to grant the college's Full Research DAPs on the basis requested. The OfS will also consider its own risk assessment of the college and will have regard to advice received from others where this has been sought. It will also take into account other relevant considerations, such as the OfS's general duties under section 2 of HERA.

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<sup>8</sup> See Higher Education and Research Act 2017, section 46.

# Introduction and background

11. This report represents the conclusions of an assessment for degree awarding powers (DAPs) at Royal Northern College of Music ('the college').
12. The college is seeking authorisation for Full Research DAPs for awards up to and including Level 8 in all subjects. The college currently holds Full Taught DAPs for awards up to and including Level 7 in all subjects. These were awarded by the Privy Council in 2007.
13. The OfS's Quality Assessment Committee (QAC) will consider the report and formulate its advice to the OfS regarding the quality and standards at the college. In accordance with the regulatory requirements set out in HERA, QAC's advice will also be informed by the view of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).
14. The OfS will consider this assessment report and QAC's advice in deciding whether to grant Royal Northern College of Music's Full Research DAPs authorisation on the basis requested. The OfS will also consider its own risk assessment of the college and will have regard to advice received from others where this has been sought. It will also take into account other relevant considerations, such as the OfS's general duties under section 2 of HERA.<sup>9</sup>

## Context

15. Royal Northern College of Music is a music conservatoire founded in 1973 following a merger of the Royal Manchester College of Music and Northern School of Music. It operates from its campus in Manchester, UK. The college provides a range of undergraduate courses including:
  - Bachelors' of Music with Honours (BMus) (Hons)
  - Bachelors' of Music with Honours in Popular Music (BMus) (Hons)
  - Graduate Diploma of the RNCM (GRNCM), delivered alongside the Bachelors' of Music with Honours (MusB (Hons)) at the University of Manchester.
16. The college also delivers a variety of postgraduate degree courses including:
  - Masters' of Education
  - Masters' of Music
  - Masters' of Performance
  - Postgraduate Diploma Advanced Studies
  - International Artist Diploma
  - European Chamber Music Masters'
  - PGCE in Music with Specialist Instrumental Teaching.

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<sup>9</sup> See Higher Education and Research Act 2017, section 2.

17. The college's postgraduate research delivery is offered through the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) which are awarded by Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) through a framework collaborative agreement that has been in place since 2010. The research programmes are undertaken and supervised at the college and cover five pathways:
  - Performance
  - Composition
  - Musicology
  - Music Psychology and cognate disciplines
  - Music Education and pedagogy.
18. The college also delivers programmes through partnership arrangements, including the RNCM/Hallé Advanced Orchestral Strings Programme.
19. Overall, based on the latest available 'Size and shape of provision data dashboard', the college had a student population in 2022-23 of 890 students. This included 590 undergraduate students (all full-time). There were 280 postgraduate students; 20 of these students were part-time.<sup>10</sup>
20. The college employs 325 academic staff members and 180 non-academic staff members, based on the latest available Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) staff data for 2023-24.<sup>11</sup>
21. On 13 October 2023, the college applied for Full Research DAPs (for awards up to and including Level 8) in all subjects.
22. In accordance with the OfS's regulatory framework and guidance on how to apply for DAPs, the OfS undertook an initial eligibility and suitability assessment of the college. It decided that a Full DAPs assessment should be undertaken to gather and test evidence to inform a judgement about whether the college meets the DAPs criteria and has the ability to:
  - provide, and maintain the provision of, higher education of an appropriate quality; and
  - apply, and maintain the application of, appropriate standards to that higher education.
23. The OfS appointed an assessment team on 8 November 2024, which consisted of three academic expert assessors and a member of OfS staff in the following roles:
  - Professor Michael Young – committee chair and lead assessor
  - Dr Ivan Garcia Álvarez – deputy committee chair and assessor
  - Dr Martin Clarke – deputy committee chair and assessor

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<sup>10</sup> Available at [Size and shape of provision data dashboard: Data dashboard - Office for Students](#).

<sup>11</sup> Available at [HESA, HE staff data](#).

- Ruth Tucker – committee member and assessment coordinator.

24. On 17 December 2024 the OfS appointed Izzy Navarrete as a replacement committee member and OfS assessment coordinator with effect from 27 January 2025.
25. On 24 February 2025, the OfS appointed Francine Norris as a replacement committee chair and lead assessor following the voluntary resignation of Professor Michael Young from the committee.
26. The OfS asked the team to give its advice and judgements about the quality of and standards applied to higher education courses at the college and whether the college continues to meet the DAPs criteria. This includes the overarching criteria for its current DAPs authorisation as well as whether it meets the criteria for a Full Research DAPs authorisation.
27. The assessment team considered a range of information submitted by college in support of its application for Full Research DAPs.

# Assessment process

## Information gathering

28. In accordance with the process outlined in the operational guidance for providers on DAPs assessment by the OfS, the college submitted a self-assessment document on 2 December 2024.<sup>12</sup> The self-assessment sets out how the college considers that it continues to meet the DAPs criteria for its current Taught DAPs authorisation, as well as how it considers it meets the criteria for Research DAPs authorisation.
29. To support the statements made in the self-assessment document, the college also submitted a range of documentary evidence including information related to academic policies and processes, academic governance functions and its research environment and outputs.
30. On 6 December 2024 the UKRI shared a contextualised data report with the OfS to fulfil the OfS's regulatory requirements set out in section 46 of HERA, and to support the assessment team's scrutiny of the college.<sup>13</sup>
31. In accordance with the process outlined in the OfS's regulatory framework and the guidance on how to apply for DAPs, the assessment team undertook an initial assessment of the college's submission. The purpose of the initial assessment is to assess the credibility of the provider's self-assessment as the basis for the full scrutiny process.
32. On 19 February 2025, the assessment team recommended to the OfS that the college was ready to proceed to the full scrutiny stage of the assessment. The provider was informed of the decision to proceed on the same day.
33. Following the initial assessment of the college, the assessment team requested further evidence to inform the full scrutiny stage. The assessment team met with senior staff from the college on 24 February 2025 to discuss the evidence request. The additional evidence was submitted on 14 March 2025.
34. The scrutiny stage activities included online observations of the following committees:
  - Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee on 12 March 2025
  - Student Experience Forum on 30 April 2025
  - Research Degrees Committee on 21 May 2025
  - Education and Quality Committee on 18 June 2025.
35. Papers for discussion were shared with the team in advance of each meeting.
36. The scrutiny stage activities also included a two-day visit the college on 7 to 8 May 2025. During the visit the team undertook a tour of the provider's facilities and met with a range of the college's staff and students. The team also observed a postgraduate research conference

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<sup>12</sup> See OfS, [Operational guidance for providers on DAPs assessment](#).

<sup>13</sup> See [Higher Education and Research Act 2017, section 46](#).

session and received a demonstration of the provider's online systems and virtual learning environment (VLE).

37. Following the visit, the team requested additional evidence, which was submitted by the college on 4 July 2025.

# Assessment of DAPs criterion A: Academic governance

## Criterion A1: Academic governance

### Advice to the OfS

38. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion A1: Academic governance because it meets the requirements of subcriteria A1.1, A1.2, and A1.3 for its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.
39. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows in summary that the college has sound academic governance and management structures that deliver effective academic governance with clear and appropriate lines of accountability. It engages students as partners in the academic governance and management of academic standards and quality.
40. The college has appropriate oversight to ensure that where it works with other organisations to deliver learning opportunities, its governance and management are robust and effective and that decisions to work with other organisations are the result of a strategic approach rather than opportunism.
41. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside any other relevant information.

### Subcriterion A1.1

**A1.1: An organisation granted degree awarding powers has effective academic governance, with clear and appropriate lines of accountability for its academic responsibilities.**

### Advice to the OfS

42. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion A1.1 because it has effective academic governance with clear and appropriate lines of accountability for its academic responsibilities.
43. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows that the college has met the evidence requirements for A1.1 and any other relevant evidence requirements.

### Background

44. As set out in the introductory section of the report, the college is a small specialist provider that has had Full Taught DAPs authorisation since 2007. Since 2010, the college has delivered postgraduate research provision via a doctoral degree programme validated by MMU and the current agreement covering this arrangement runs until January 2026.
45. The college is constituted as a corporation with a Board of Governors and the senior academic authority is the Academic Board.

46. The Academic Board has four subcommittees: the Education and Quality Committee, the Board of Examiner, Professorial Title Panel and the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee. Each of these has a range of further subcommittees with responsibility for the degree provision, ethics and the college's collection and archives.

## **Reasoning**

47. To assess whether the college's higher education mission and strategic direction and associated policies are coherent, published, understood and applied consistently, and whether its academic policies support its higher education mission, aims and objectives, the team examined the college's academic governance arrangements and reviewed a range of documentary evidence, including:

- Instrument of Governance
- Articles of Government
- Scheme of Delegation
- Regulations of College Governance
- membership of the Board of Governors
- a report of a recent Effectiveness Review of the Board of Governors
- Strategic Plan 2020-26 and supporting strategies for education, research and knowledge exchange, financial sustainability and the artistic strategy
- the college's Academic Regulations and associated academic policies
- minutes of meetings of the Board of Governors and Academic Board.

48. The team found that, in summary, the college's overall governing body, the Board of Governors, is responsible for the determination and periodic review of the educational character and mission of the college and the oversight of its activities. Specific responsibility for the implementation of the college's Academic and Research Strategy is delegated to the Academic Board, which is the senior academic authority and responsible for ensuring that the college is ready to assume the responsibilities of Full Research DAPs.

49. The college's research culture is central to its ethos and learning environment and is embedded in the Strategic Plan 2020-26, which is published on the college's website and recognises research skills as a key aspect of entrepreneurial artistic training across undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research degrees studies. The embedding of research within these programmes is underpinned by the Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy 2021-26 and by the Education Strategy 2021-26, both of which include a commitment to the college gaining Full Research DAPs by 2026. The college's Board of Governors endorsement and support of this aspiration and strategic commitment was demonstrated to the team during meetings with members of the Board of Governors, together with evidence of Board of Governors' Strategy Days that took place in 2023 and 2024.

50. In 2023 the college's Strategic Plan was updated and its end date extended from 2025 to 2026 to allow additional time to complete capital and non-capital strategic projects that had been impacted by the various challenges to the sector in recent years and in response to continued uncertainty in the sector. The plan aims to deliver the vision to 'develop exceptional musicians with the artistic integrity, creativity and imagination to drive the music profession forward and ensure music remains relevant to future generations'. The Board of Governors contributed to the process of reviewing and updating the Strategic Plan through annual Strategy Days, which enable members to examine the challenges and opportunities facing the sector particularly with a focus on music education. For example, at the Strategy Days in 2023 and 2024 Board members contributed to discussions about current issues, such as the impact of artificial intelligence (AI), international recruitment and endorsed the college's ambition to remain competitive through a commitment to supporting innovation.
51. The governors who the team met with during the visit explained how there was consideration given by the Board to the decision for the college to apply for Full Research DAPs. The governors expressed that the growing institutional maturity of the college, the distinctive nature of research at conservatoires and the international reputational benefits had been identified as reasons for seeking Full Research DAPs. The governors also confirmed that there was effective information flow between the senior management and the Board of Governors. For example, a draft of the college's Full Research DAPs self-assessment submission had been shared with them for comment. The team concluded that the Board of Governors was engaged and supportive of the college's strategy and effective in ensuring its alignment with the college's overall ethos and mission.
52. The college's Strategic Plan sets out 11 key measures of success, which includes specific measures related to research. For example, there is an ambition to significantly increase the proportion of staff engaging with research and to increase income generated from knowledge exchange activities. Furthermore, the Strategic Plan details five supporting strategies – education, artistic strategy, access, research and knowledge exchange and financial sustainability – that detail the steps required in each area to achieve success. The team found there is a high level of coherence between the Strategic Plan and the supporting strategies, evidenced, for example, by the framing of all plans around a common set of core cultural values which are to:
  - promote creativity and artistic integrity
  - promote diversity and encourage diverse opinions and voices
  - collaborate and work in partnership to ensure that students gain vital and inspiring real-world experiences and challenges
  - nurture a welcoming, collegial and supportive environment that is inclusive, respectful, open and accessible.
53. The supporting strategies follow a common model in which strategic aims are mapped to a set of delivery objectives and key performance measures. The education and research strategies are clearly aligned with the overarching Strategic Plan, highlighting the interdependencies and points of intersection between them. For instance, objectives from the Research Strategy, such as increasing research outputs by teaching staff and fostering graduate entrepreneurial

activity, are also referenced as success indicators within the Education Strategy. Other specific aims of the educational strategy include strengthening the student experience, enhancing student outcomes, supporting and enhancing health and wellbeing, strengthening recruitment and transition, widening participation and realising the college's digital ambitions. The team found that this approach demonstrates the coherence of the college's strategic direction and enables effective understanding and the consistent application of the Strategic Plan and associated objectives.

54. The assessment team found evidence of the impact of the application of the college's Education Strategy in the 2023 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) assessment, for which it achieved an overall rating of Gold, with Gold awarded for both the Student Experience and Student Outcome categories. The TEF panel report identified several outstanding quality features, for example the use of research in relevant disciplines, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and employer engagement to contribute to an outstanding academic experience. The report also noted how high quality features of the provision applied across all student groups including research students.
55. The team triangulated this evidence during the visit when it met with teaching staff and student representatives from across undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research programmes. The team heard examples of research-led teaching and engagement with professional practice and personalised student support that provided further evidence that the high quality of the student experience is consistent across the provision. For example, the team found strong evidence of the success of the college's focus on student support through the establishment of a Student Support Framework, which brings together a wide range of student support policies that are clearly signposted to all students. The team also heard how the Student Health and Wellbeing Hub team is proactive in offering interventions alongside providing access to a wide range of support specifically in relation to musicians' health and wellbeing. This evidence demonstrated to the team one way in which the college has a strategic approach to developing its academic and student support provision and the policies that support its higher education mission, aims and objectives.
56. Similarly, the assessment team found evidence of the ongoing effectiveness of the application of the college's Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy 2021-26, which is discussed in detail under Criterion F and commits the college to developing high quality practice-led research. The strategy aims to ensure that research practice underpins teaching, learning and creative practice while seeking external funding and communicating its research activities effectively. Through its Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 submission the college demonstrated that it had achieved and exceeded the success measures set out in the previous 2015-20 Research Strategy, including achieving a REF result of 3-4\* for its research environment. The team determined that the college's development in this area has been supported through two key funded projects:
  - a. The establishment of the PRiSM (Practice Research in Science and Music) Centre from UKRI funding, focused on music, creativity and AI, which significantly increased the college's internationally excellent and practice-led research and provided dedicated research staff and a physical hub for research activity in the college.
  - b. An OfS-funded StART Entrepreneurship Project, which is a collaboration between the college, University of the Arts London and the Royal Central School of Speech

and Drama. This comprises an entrepreneurship training catalogue within the curriculum for higher education students, preparing them to be agile and successful in the professional creative industries and strengthening connections between learning and teaching, research and the college's artistic programme.

57. The college's 2021-26 Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy is aligned to both the Vitae Researcher Development Framework<sup>14</sup> and UKRI Knowledge Exchange Framework<sup>15</sup>, which the team considers set out appropriate and effective approaches to guide research and knowledge exchange activity. These frameworks are widely recognised across the sector and set out national expectations for the purpose and application of research in a broader context. The Vitae framework is focused on the individual research student such that their research degree enables them to develop skills that will support their long-term career. The UKRI framework is intended to ensure that research outcomes are shared externally whether with business or communities, for economic or social benefit.
58. The college's research activity is focused across four clusters:
  - practice – based research in music performance
  - music education
  - music and science
  - music and wellbeing.
59. The team found that these research areas reflect where the college considers it has the depth of experience and staff expertise to recruit and supervise research students. During the visit the team met with a range of research active staff which confirmed to the team that this approach had led to a successful track record in research degree completions as well as positively impacting curriculum development. For example, the team heard how the college's new masters' in Music Education (MEd) had been developed and led by a member of staff's research and professional experience. This demonstrated to the team that priorities set out in the college's Strategic Plan, and supporting education and research strategies, have been effective in aligning with the development of the provision over the period of their operation – further reflecting how the college's higher education mission and strategic direction and associated policies are coherent, understood and applied consistently. The team considered that this evidence, alongside the college's Staff Induction Policy which sets out the requirement for staff to understand and work in line with the college's overall Strategic Plan and Education Strategy, demonstrated how staff effectively understand, engage with and implement the college's higher education mission and strategic direction and associated policies.
60. To assess how the college's academic policies also support and demonstrate its higher education mission, aims and objectives, the team reviewed the college's Academic Regulations and associated policies. The team found that the college has an established regulatory framework, which is reviewed and updated annually, and sets out the credit

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<sup>14</sup> See [The Vitae Researcher Development Framework - Vitae](#).

<sup>15</sup> See [Knowledge exchange framework – UKRI](#).

framework for taught awards and specifies the level and duration of study for all awards, including PhDs. For its current postgraduate research provision, the college applies the Postgraduate Research Regulations of its validating partner, MMU. It has developed its own draft Postgraduate Research Regulations and Procedure to Support Postgraduate Research Progress in preparation for taking responsibility for awarding its own research degrees, the detail of which is discussed further under criteria B1 and B2.

61. In support of its academic regulations, the assessment team found that the college has a comprehensive set of policies and procedures, covering all aspects of its higher education provision including, where applicable, its current responsibilities for postgraduate research, and that these provide an effective framework for academic governance. Further detailed discussion of the college's academic frameworks and regulations is set out under criterion B1, but in summary, the team found that its academic policies are comprehensive and cover all expected aspects of academic and student support provision, including Admissions, Academic Appeals, Academic Integrity, Good Research Conduct, Code of Conduct and Discipline and Work-Based and Placement Learning.
62. The team found evidence of how these academic policies demonstrate and support the college's higher education mission, aims and objectives, for example the team noted that the Good Research Conduct, Collections Development and Work-Based and Placement Learning policies align specifically to the college's strategic objectives in respect of promoting research and professional experience. The Good Research Conduct Policy explicitly relates to external frameworks and standards for postgraduate research degrees including the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) Code of Practice for Research and UKRI Policy on the Governance of Good Research Practice (2022) and sets out the procedures to be followed in the case of alleged academic misconduct in relation to research. The Collections Policy sets out the objective to maintain an historic and diverse collection of instruments to specifically enhance the resources available for teaching, research and performance in the college. Furthermore, the Work-Based and Placement Learning Policy demonstrates how practical, real-world learning opportunities are integrated into all taught programmes, with appropriate facilitation, support and risk management in place, thus supporting the provider's strong commitment to preparing students for future professions in performance and creative practice.
63. The college's academic regulations and associated policies, including MMU's Postgraduate Research Regulations, are publicly available on the college's website<sup>16</sup> as well as internally via its VLE, Moodle. Regulations and policies are also described in a comprehensive document entitled Student Regulations and Information. Students met by the team unanimously confirmed that they are initially made aware of regulations and policies during induction and they are signposted to them regularly throughout their studies. Postgraduate research students described a clear understanding of navigating both MMU's Postgraduate Research Regulations, together with the college's own regulations and policies. They also reported how staff highlight the relevant national research frameworks, such as Vitae, such that students know how to access and understand relevant regulatory information and understand the broader context in which they are undertaking their research degree.
64. The procedures for applying academic regulations are set out in an Academic Quality Handbook which describes programme regulations, procedures for programme approval and

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<sup>16</sup> Available at [College Documents - Royal Northern College of Music](#).

review, programme monitoring, assessment, work-based learning and procedures for student appeal and complaints. The consistent and practical implementation of policies is further evidenced by overarching reports to Academic Board from the Academic Registrar, Director of Programmes and Director of Research and through the Continuous Monitoring Framework, which is part of the Academic Quality Handbook and results in annual reports providing a critical appraisal of programme delivery for all taught programmes.

65. In preparation for seeking Full Research DAPs, all regulatory and policy documents were reviewed to ensure their applicability to postgraduate research students, and a separate Postgraduate Research Handbook has been prepared in draft form, which is discussed under criteria B1 and G1. The assessment team found evidence of the systematic way in which policy review was being progressed. For example, in the meeting of the Academic Board in March 2024 an update was received from the Head of Quality and Standards on the progress of a review of policies to incorporate research degrees. Three policies had been reviewed by the Research Team and the policy owners and were presented for formal approval by Academic Board. Minor amendments to the policies on academic appeals and Academic Registration Fees and Debt to extend their scope to include students on research degrees were approved, along with the addition of the Associate Director of Research as a decision maker for Stage 1 of the Fitness to Study Policy for postgraduate research students and the addition of part-time students where programmes permitted. This led the assessment team to conclude that the review of policies was comprehensive and intended to support the college's strategy in relation to the award of research degrees.
66. The team therefore concluded that the college's higher education mission and strategic direction and associated policies are coherent, published, understood and applied consistently. The team also conclude that the college's academic policies support its higher education mission, aims and objectives.
67. To determine if there is clarity and differentiation of function and responsibility at all levels in relation to the college's academic governance structures and arrangements for managing its higher education provision, the assessment team examined the college's academic governance committee structure, Committee Handbook and governing documents such as the Articles of Government. The team assessed these documents alongside reviewing the terms of reference and delegations for a range of committees including Academic Board, Education and Quality Committee, Undergraduate Degrees Committee, Postgraduate Taught Degrees Committee, Research Degrees Committee and Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee. To consider the differentiation and clarity of responsibility of committees in practice, the assessment team also undertook observations of meetings focused on the research degrees provision including the March 2025 Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, the April 2025 Student Experience Forum, the May 2025 Research Degrees Committee and the June 2025 Education and Quality Committee.
68. As noted in paragraph 4848, overall responsibility for the college's academic governance sits with the Board of Governors and is set out within the Instrument of Government. Devolved responsibilities from the Board of Governors are set out in a Schedule of Delegation to the Academic Board and the Principal, as specified in the Articles of Government and the Regulations of College Governance. The Instrument and Articles of Government set out the characteristics of the Board of Governors, including its membership, the appointment and tenure of members and establishment of subcommittees. The Schedule of Reserved and

Delegated Powers further sets out the relative responsibilities of the Board of Governors, Academic Board and Principal. As the schedule states, this scheme of reserved and delegated powers forms the basis of distinct systems of governance and management, with delegation exercised to the most appropriate level within the organisational structure, which the team found enables the college to effectively demonstrate clarity and differentiation of function and responsibility.

69. The details of the constitution and arrangements for the Board of Governors and Academic Board, the designation of management authority, and policy with respect to managing conflicts of interest are set out clearly in the Regulations of the College Governance. The college's Committee Handbook, which also includes each committee's terms of reference, sets out the responsibilities and delegated authority of each academic committee. For example, that the Education and Quality Committee has delegated responsibility to approve policies relating to learning and teaching, academic standards and quality assurance from the Academic Board. Similarly, the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee is responsible to the Academic Board for all matters relating to research and knowledge exchange, and the maintenance of academic standards for research degrees. Additionally, the Principal has delegated authority for the management of the college, which is exercised through an Executive Committee with responsibility for financial, estates and human resource management to develop and deliver the strategic and operational plans for the college. Subcommittees of the Executive Committee include Health and Safety, Human Resources, Student Recruitment and Student Awards. There are also two forums – the Student Experience Forum and the Belonging, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Forum, both chaired by the Academic Registrar.
70. The team found clear differentiation between the responsibilities of committees at different levels in the governance structure evidenced in the approval of changes to policies. For example, at the Academic Board meeting in July 2024 amendments to the Student Conduct and Discipline Policy 2024-27 were approved in respect of the inclusion of postgraduate research students, and it was noted that as the policy was a Regulation of the College, it required final approval by the Board of Governors. Furthermore, governors and senior staff met by the assessment team confirmed that there is clear differentiation between the functions of committees with which they are involved in terms of strategic and operational matters, such as audits of the institutional performance being appropriately reported to both Academic Board and the college's Executive Committee. Governors met by the team further explained that formal assurance mechanisms are working well, such as the Academic Board Report to the Board of Governors, and that this continues to provide the Board of Governors with confidence in the college's academic governance function and responsibility.
71. The team observed a clear differentiation of responsibilities during the meetings attended. For instance, in the March 2025 Research and Knowledge Exchange meeting, there was evident distinction between the roles of the senior committee, responsible for setting Research Strategy and policy, and its subcommittees, which focus on ensuring operational alignment and consistency. The meeting included operational updates from the Research Ethics Committee and the Research Degrees Committee, as well as activity reports from the schools and Research Centres. The team also observed clear differentiation between matters for discussion, matters for approval, matters for receipt and matters for report. All the committees observed by the team demonstrated effective governance, authority, organisation, deliberation and decision making. Papers were clearly organised, structured and detailed and papers covering items for approval were shared in advance, which enabled effective discussion,

including from student representatives. In the case of the Research Degrees Committee there was evidence that the chair had met with students in advance of the meeting ensuring they were informed and able to engage effectively. This demonstrated to the team that there is clarity and differentiation of function and responsibility at all levels in the college in relation to academic governance structures and arrangements for managing the college's higher education provision.

72. The Articles of Government set out that the Academic Board is the senior academic authority of the college and is responsible for the academic governance, regulation and oversight of the education and academic progress of the students at the college, and for the promotion of research. The Academic Board is responsible to the Board of Governors and its terms of reference set out its responsibilities, including for academic strategy, the promotion of scholarship, learning, teaching and research, the selection, admission, education and assessment of students, and the maintenance of academic standards and the enhancement of quality. The Academic Board has two main subcommittees with delegated responsibilities for specific aspects of the delivery and quality assurance of its higher education delivery – the Education and Quality Committee and the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee.
73. The Education and Quality Committee's responsibilities include educational strategy, the student learning experience, maintaining standards on taught programmes, regulations and policy and the professional development of teaching staff. It has two subcommittees, the Undergraduate Degrees Committee and the Postgraduate Taught Degrees Committee that undertake on its behalf the 'day-to-day' management of quality and standards and communication with students. The Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee's responsibilities include research strategy, promotion of a research culture at the college and regulation of the current externally validated research degrees programme. It has subcommittees with specific responsibilities for the administration and quality of research degrees, research ethics and the management of the college's collection.
74. The team found evidence that the Academic Board was preparing for the changes in scope and membership that would arise if Full Research DAPs were granted. For example, it was reported at the December 2023 meeting that the inclusion of roles and responsibilities in relation to research degrees into the college's academic committee structures was underway and that the terms of reference for each affected committee would be revised to incorporate these changes.
75. The team determined that the Academic Board exercises its function and responsibilities effectively and consistently through evidence of agendas, minutes and reports. Agendas and minutes demonstrated effective function as each meeting follows a standard meeting agenda that covers strategic, reporting and approval matters. Reports presented to the Board, and subsequently to the governors, reflect appropriate and thematic matters including, for example, an Academic Board Report to the Board of Governors, an annual Report of Student Complaints and Academic Appeals to the Board of Governors, Board of Examiners Report to Academic Board and regular Principal's Reports to Board of Governors. The team found that these reports show how detailed and relevant higher education delivery and performance information is shared with the Academic Board, which in turn enables it to discharge its delegated responsibilities for academic standards and quality. This information is reported to the governing body to provide assurance that it is undertaking its responsibilities in accordance with the Articles and Regulations of the college.

76. The Academic Board oversees the performance of higher education delivery, provision and outcomes by reviewing continuous monitoring reports, external examiner reports and reports from its subcommittees. For example, in April 2024, the Academic Board received a detailed analysis of awards approved by the Board of Examiners for discussion. The analysis showed that the distribution of degree classifications has been consistent over a three-year period, except for Popular Music which had awarded a high number of 1st degrees. This led to a detailed analysis of student marks and possible contributing factors being undertaken and scrutinised by the Education and Quality Committee. The Academic Board required further analysis and external benchmarking to provide assurance which confirmed to the assessment team that the Academic Board is rigorous in its oversight of the academic provision. In summary, the evidence reviewed led the team to conclude that the responsibility of the Academic Board as the senior academic authority is clearly articulated and consistently applied.

77. The team considered the college's senior staff structure and membership of the Board of Governors to determine if there is appropriate depth and strength of academic leadership. The Board of Governors comprises 13 external members, two staff and the Students' Union President. External members are expected to have experience of, and to have shown capacity in, industrial, commercial or employment matters or the practice of any profession. Current governors are highly experienced individuals with senior level experience in industry and commerce, higher education and music,<sup>17</sup> including a former university vice chancellor, a former higher education quality assurance specialist and the founder of an access to higher education provider. Governors who the team met with during the visit to the college explained that the college considers its membership and the skills needed to support the college very carefully, and the team concurred that the size and make-up of the governing body was appropriate and demonstrated strength in academic leadership.

78. The Principal is the most senior employed officer at the college and exercises responsibility for academic management through delegation to a senior leadership team of nine Deputy Principals and Directors, set out in the college's senior staff structure. The Principal maintains external currency and perspective through their ongoing role as chair of Conservatoires UK, the mission group for specialist music colleges, which the team considered to also demonstrate the Principal's standing in the field. The leadership team forms the membership of the Executive Committee, and each has defined responsibilities in the specific areas of performance, programmes, research and academic administration and quality. Each of these roles is in turn supported by a number of direct reports, again with specific areas of responsibility. Academic leadership is provided by the team of three senior academic staff: the Deputy Principal (Performance and Programmes), the Director of Programmes and the Director of Research. The Deputy Principal has strategic oversight of the performance aspect of programmes of study, with the Director of Programmes having strategic oversight of, and overall responsibility for, the design and delivery of each taught programme of study.

79. The day-to-day running of the undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes is overseen by the following members of staff which report into the Director of Programmes:

- Head of Undergraduate Programmes (BMus (Hons) and Graduate Diploma in Music)

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<sup>17</sup> See [About the Governors - The Royal Northern College of Music](#).

- Head of Popular Music

- Head of the Graduate School.

80. The Director of Research is responsible for the strategic leadership of research and related knowledge exchange activities across the college, such as the postgraduate research degrees provision, and is supported by the Associate Director of Research who is responsible for the day-to-day running of the doctoral programme.
81. The team reviewed the job descriptions, CVs and online biographies<sup>18</sup> of the college's senior staff and found that there is evidence of a breadth of experience in the wider higher education environment and relevant sector-related and subject-specific associations. Staff are actively engaged in research, teaching and professional activity, which is set out as a requirement in the job descriptions. Further discussion of the depth and strength of the college's academic research leadership and culture, underpinned by its research active staff, is set out in detail under criterion F1.
82. In summary, the evidence reviewed demonstrated to the team that the structure and make-up of the college's senior staffing and governing body have been designed to provide appropriate depth and strength of academic leadership across all levels. More specifically, the college has demonstrated depth and strength of academic leadership across its research activity and postgraduate research provision.
83. To assess if the college develops, implements and communicates its policies and procedures in collaboration with its staff and students and external stakeholders, the team considered evidence in relation to the development and review of policies including a Policy Review Schedule, the Committee Handbook and minutes of meetings, for example of the Education and Quality Committee. The college's academic regulations and policies are reviewed annually according to a published schedule that also specifies which committee has responsibility for approving each policy. Policies that have direct relation to the student experience, such as academic integrity, library services and student engagement, are approved by the Education and Quality Committee, which benefits from effective and representative student engagement. For example, alongside representation of the Students' Union (SU) President on the Education and Quality Committee, there are four student representatives with specific responsibility for representing the following groups of students and students' interests: undergraduate, postgraduate, diversity and education. Full discussion of the engagement of students in the college's academic governance and management of its higher education provision is set out under subcriterion A1.2.
84. Similarly, staff at various levels across the college's provision are well-represented across the college's governance, most extensively on the subcommittees of Academic Board responsible for education and research, with staff representation covering all areas of provision and academic activity. In addition, there is extensive staff representation on the reporting subcommittees that feed into these: undergraduate and taught postgraduate degree committee and Research Ethics Committee. The team found evidence of effective engagement of staff in the college's governance functions through recent policy changes. For example, the team heard from staff during the visit that the college recently amended its

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<sup>18</sup> Available at [Meet Our Staff - Royal Northern College of Music](#).

Academic Integrity Policy to take account of plagiarism involving the use of AI. Staff explained how they were able to input into the amendments of this policy. Staff also reported that changes to academic policies had been made in response to their feedback, for example, in relation to the required length of assessment feedback.

85. The team found evidence of a range of means by which the college consults with external stakeholders to inform the development of its policies and programmes. For example, the Safeguarding Policy was developed with reference to relevant external agencies and the Dignity at Work Policy with reference to Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service guidelines, which the team considered to reflect best practice. In addition, the college used its RNCM Engage<sup>19</sup> activities, which include learning and participation initiatives for five to 18 year olds, in the development of the access and participation policy. External perspectives also inform the formal approval of policies, as the membership of Academic Board includes two external members intended to provide external music and higher education expertise. Similarly, to ensure external perspectives inform the research degrees provision, the Research Ethics Committee also includes an external member.
86. Further evidence of the contributions and consultation with external stakeholders was demonstrated through the college's programme development and review procedures together with its external examiner process and programme reapproval procedures. These procedures are discussed further under criterion B2 and B3, but in summary, teaching staff met by the team explained how external input had influenced the introduction of pathways in the BMus programme. They also described how, in the most recent postgraduate taught reapproval process, dialogue with BBC Philharmonic Orchestra and Manchester Camerata about how students could be supported for freelance careers led directly to the development of a new module, 'The Freelance Musician'. Additionally, membership of Conservatoires UK and the International Benchmarking Group and Interplay enable the college to position its practice in relation to the broader national and international context.
87. In developing its policies and procedures for research degrees, the college has taken account of feedback from current staff and students and referenced relevant national research frameworks such as the Vitae framework for researcher development, which has led to the proposed extension of training for students beyond the first year of study. Senior staff met by the team described how they were proposing to change the approach to the Annual Review Panel by introducing an external specialist into the assessment process at the halfway point of the PhD. Staff emphasised the importance for artistic researchers who were developing non-standard types of PhD submission to get specialised but independent views at this key mid-point of programme.
88. The team found that the college uses a range of strategies to ensure staff and students are informed about and able to implement policies. The Staff Handbook and Student Regulations and Information document set out relevant policies and provide signposting to the college's internal SharePoint sites and VLE for further information. Additionally, the annual Teaching and Learning and Staff conferences are used to discuss and disseminate information related to policies and procedures, as well as providing opportunities for practical workshops on topics such as the college's approach to assessment, AI and student engagement. Staff met by the team confirmed how this effective communication equips staff to understand college

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<sup>19</sup> See [RNCM Engage - Royal Northern College of Music](#).

processes in areas such as assessment and provides opportunities for sharing practice and experience. This further demonstrated to the team evidence of the ways in which the college develops, implements and communicates its policies and procedures in collaboration with its staff and students and external stakeholders.

89. The assessment team considered evidence to determine if the college is likely to successfully manage the responsibilities that would be vested in it were it to be granted Full Research DAPs. The college has held taught level Full DAPs since 2007, which enables it to provide a wide range of evidence to demonstrate that it has a strong track record in managing DAPs and the effectiveness of its processes for the setting, maintaining and monitoring of academic standards. As discussed throughout this criterion section of the report, the team found evidence to demonstrate the clarity and alignment of the college's mission and strategy, its deliberative committees and staffing structures in place to govern and manage its responsibilities, along with its robust regulations and policy framework and its monitoring report and review procedures. Furthermore, the team determined that the governance and management of the college's current research activity including research degrees is also strong, strategically aligned and overseen by effective committee and staffing structures. The Principal's Reports to the Board of Governors confirm the strategic commitment to supporting research and how the college is building its infrastructure for the management of research in preparation for awarding research degrees. For example, that the research staffing team has been reviewed to define roles and responsibilities with a clearer focus on internal and external communication and partnership building. This demonstrated to the team that the college has made appropriate steps in readiness to successfully manage the extension of its degree awarding responsibilities to research degrees.
90. Moreover, as discussed under paragraph 49, the delivery of the Research Strategy is overseen by a dedicated committee structure comprising the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, with responsibility for the formulation and implementation of the Research Strategy and regulation of the research degrees programme. In addition, the Research Degrees Committee has operational responsibility for the administration, management and quality assurance of the college's research degrees programme. The team found that the academic governance of the college's research programmes is already well established and effective with the Research Degrees Committee monitoring student progress and achievement as well as responding to student feedback on curriculum and resourcing issues. The Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee oversees regulatory matters including the approval of research-related policies.
91. The development of the research culture of the college is discussed in depth under Criterion F1. However, the team found that the delivery of the Research Strategy to date has resulted in research activity and outcomes being effectively integrated into the wider college and the college successfully attracting competitive external funding to support its postgraduate research students and research infrastructure. This provided evidence of the high quality research environment that the college has developed in preparation of supporting its delivery of research degrees. In addition, in readiness for seeking Full Research DAPs, a Handbook and Regulations for the college's own research degrees has been developed alongside a review and alignment of all academic policies and planning work for the move of all student data processes and procedures on to the college's systems. For example, the college has been proactive in the development of its policy on Good Research Conduct, which is aligned with the college's ethics scrutiny and approval processes, which the team heard had taken

account of current student feedback. This demonstrated to the team how the college makes use of internal feedback and external benchmarks to monitor, review and improve its practices, which demonstrated further that the college is likely to successfully manage the extension of its degree awarding responsibilities to research degrees.

### **Conclusions for subcriterion A1.1**

92. The team concluded that the college continues to meet criterion A1.1 in relation to its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and meets criterion A1.1 for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.
93. The evidence demonstrates that the college has effectively managed and governed its taught level Full DAPs to date, through the clarity and alignment of its mission and strategy, the effective operation of its deliberative committee and staffing structures, along with the application of robust regulations and policies and its monitoring and review procedures.
94. This evidence, alongside the college's draft regulations and policies in readiness for Full Research DAPs, demonstrated to the team that the college has effective academic governance, with clear and appropriate lines of accountability for its academic responsibilities.

### **Subcriterion A1.2**

**A1.2: Academic governance, including all aspects of the control and oversight of its higher education provision, is conducted in partnership with its students.**

### **Advice to the OfS**

95. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion A1.2 because all aspects of the control and oversight of its higher education provision, is conducted in partnership with its students.
96. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence that shows that the college has met the evidence requirements for A1.2 and any other relevant evidence requirements.

### **Reasoning**

97. To consider the college's approach to ensuring that students are seen as 'partners' in the academic governance and management of its higher education provision, the assessment team reviewed how students are integrated into the college's academic governance structure and considered a range of documentary evidence including:
  - the college's Committee Handbook
  - terms of reference for key committees including the Education and Quality Committee and Research Degrees Committee
  - student handbooks
  - training and induction materials for student representatives
  - samples of minutes from committee meetings to understand how students are engaged in practice.

98. The evidence reviewed demonstrated to the team that students individually and collectively are engaged in the governance and management of the organisation and its higher education provision, with students supported, to be able to engage effectively. As discussed under subcriterion A1.1, the college's Committee Handbook sets out the terms of reference and membership of Academic Board and its subcommittees, and the Executive Committee and its subcommittees. This shows that students are represented across the college's academic governance structure. For example, the President of the SU is a member of the Academic Board, Education and Quality Committee as well as subcommittees of the Executive Committee such as the Belonging, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (BEDI) Committee and Health and Safety Committee. In addition, the President of the SU is a member of the Board of Governors.

99. The team found evidence that the SU President was an active participant in discussions ensuring the student voice across the provision was being heard effectively. For example, at the Academic Board meeting in December 2023, the SU President presented a proposal to include student representatives from non-validated and short courses on degree committees. Although the proposal was not agreed, the importance of the representation of these groups was accepted and membership of the Student Experience Forum extended to include them.

100. The assessment team noted that SU officers, including the President, are paired with Executive Team mentors with whom they have regular meetings. Each SU officer works with their allocated Executive partner across the year. For example, the Director of Programmes is partnered with the SU Education Officer and the SU Popular Music Officer and meets with them on a termly basis. These partnerships provide the opportunity for the Executive Team to ensure that the strategic leadership of projects such as, for example, the approach to student wellbeing and BEDI, is informed by student thinking. The assessment team considered this to be evidence of good practice in working in partnership with students. SU officers also convene student panels where required to support the review of proposed policies or to write submissions, for example, for the college's 2023 TEF submission and Access and Participation Plan. The team found that this partnering approach provides an opportunity for SU officers to receive mentoring, support and advice on how to effectively gather information from the student body and how to approach matters in committees. SU officers met by the team confirmed that they can see the impact of their input and described how changes that they had proposed, for example to the BEDI Policy, had been adopted by the college. This demonstrated to the team how the college develops, implements and communicates its policies and procedures in collaboration with its students.

101. In addition to the role of SU officers, there is also comprehensive representation by degree students across the subcommittees and sub-subcommittees of Academic Board indicating that students are widely involved in both strategic and operational aspects of education and research. For example, there are students representing undergraduate and taught postgraduate students on the Education and Quality Committee and students representing research and taught postgraduate students on the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee. Minutes seen by the team show that students are active participants in committee meetings and at Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee reports from student representatives are a standing agenda item. During the visit, the team heard from students that they felt they were treated as equals in terms of their contributions to committees.

102. The college also has in place specific committees for each area of the provision - an Undergraduate Committee, a Taught Postgraduate Committee and a Research Degrees Committee each with responsibility for managing the day-to-day academic quality and standards of the respective programme and for ensuring effective engagement of and communication with students on programme related matters. During the visit the team heard how students' views are sought at programme level via these committees with relation to curriculum, teaching and resources and that the degree committees were effective. The team found evidence that the Research Degrees Committee is effective in identifying and addressing issues raised by postgraduate research students related to their specific experiences and feeding back actions taken. For example, following student feedback, the college took action to enable postgraduate research seminars and workshops to be accessed via Zoom. Furthermore, postgraduate research-specific wellbeing workshops were introduced as a direct response to postgraduate research student feedback.

103. All students met by the team during the visit across the undergraduate, graduate taught and research schools reflected the views of SU officers in that they felt effectively engaged in the college's committees and that it actively seeks students' views and opinions to develop the provision. The team found that the college's approach to closing the loop on student feedback is via a 'you said, we did' mechanism. For example, during the May 2024 Research Degrees Committee meeting, issues were raised in a pre-meeting between student representatives and the chair regarding the relevance of research training sessions and the timeliness of ethics approval processes. These issues were responded to and an action recorded for the Assistant Director of Research to feedback to all postgraduate research students after the meeting. Similarly, at Undergraduate Degrees Committee meeting in May 2024, issues raised by students including the scheduling of masterclasses and potential changes to the mitigating circumstances process were discussed and feedback given. The team found this is to be effective in encouraging engagement with students by demonstrating their impact and roles as partners.

104. Alongside the formal committee meetings, the college also operates an overarching Student Experience Forum which includes student representatives across the undergraduate, graduate taught and research schools. The forum is responsible for monitoring the quality of the wider student experience outside of course delivery. The meeting, which is chaired by the Academic Registrar, is attended by a range of staff from professional support areas including facilities, catering, wellbeing, library, recruitment and IT. This enables issues raised by students to be addressed in the meeting or, if necessary, recorded for follow-up action.

105. The assessment team observed the April 2025 meeting of the forum and found the meeting to be effectively run with action plans capturing and assigning responsibility and completion of actions tracked. For example, at the meeting in February 2025, students sought clarification of the criteria set out within the college's Extenuating Circumstances policy. This issue was appropriately assigned and actioned outside the meeting by the Academic Registrar and a communication clarifying the policy was subsequently circulated to students. Confirmation that this action had been completed was noted at the next meeting in April 2025.

106. In addition, at the April 2025 meeting, the assessment team observed the open and constructive way issues raised at the forum were addressed by staff, with emphasis placed on explaining, when actions could not be taken, the reasons for this. For example, students requested that musical scoresheets be made available digitally for ensemble work so that they

could be accessed on tablets and staff explained the copyright barriers that meant this was not currently possible. This evidence further demonstrated to the team how the college's academic governance is conducted in partnership with its students.

107. The team found that the college supports its students to be able to engage effectively with its academic governance and higher education management procedures. For example, the team reviewed a comprehensive interactive training session for student representatives which pays particular focus on how to contribute effectively to committee meetings. This training covers areas such as how to gather feedback from students and the importance of feeding back. The training includes information about the terminology used in committee work and emphasises the importance of using the opportunity of committee meetings to influence change. Additionally, before each committee, the chair invites student representatives to an agenda briefing session a week before the committee. Depending on the level of committee, this provides distinct functions for example for degrees committees, it is an opportunity for the chair to hear a range of student feedback and to ensure that all student feedback is heard and actioned as necessary. The team observed the May 2025 Research Degrees Committee which demonstrated this approach in practice with the chair meeting with representatives before the meeting to ensure a shared understanding of the agenda items to be covered, which the team found demonstrated excellent and effective practice in engaging students as partners in academic governance.

108. The team noted that the effectiveness of the college's approach to student engagement was identified as a strength in the outcome of TEF 2023 TEF. Student participation in course design and development was noted as a positive, in addition to students' representation on committees. This reflected the team's view, and the evidence reviewed. For example, the team saw evidence of the Director of Programmes involving students in the development of the college's new 20-year academic strategy through scenario planning exercises undertaken by the Education and Quality Committee during the autumn term 2023-24. Meeting minutes reviewed by the team demonstrated effective student involvement in the exercise, which was based on group discussions involving five student representatives. The exercise generated themes about how the college and degree programmes might adapt and drive change in response to the challenges and opportunities of contemporary global issues such as AI and environmental sustainability, and the changing work patterns of musicians.

109. In preparation for gaining Full Research DAPs, the assessment team found that the college had taken steps to proactively increase the engagement of postgraduate research students in the academic governance of the provision. For example, during the 2023-24 academic year, student representatives were included in the membership of the Research Degrees Committee for the first time and the terms of reference were updated to enable this. The minutes for the February and May 2024 meetings demonstrated to the team that student representatives actively influenced discussions and subsequent actions regarding topics such as attendance at seminars and workshops, as well as improving the interactions between the SU and postgraduate research students.

110. Postgraduate research students met by the team during the visit further confirmed that the opportunities for them to engage were developing and enabling an increased involvement in decision making. The assessment team heard how the current postgraduate research student representative had introduced regular surveys and circulated reports outlining the outputs being achieved to strengthen awareness and information sharing with the Research Degrees

Committee. The team heard a specific example of how this had led to changes in the annual student research conference to include a stronger element of performance in response to student input. Similarly, the team heard how postgraduate research student representation on the ethics approval panel had led to changes in the timetable for the approval process which were more supportive to students' research programmes.

111. The team was therefore satisfied that the college develops, implements and communicates its policies and procedures in collaboration with its students. The team also concluded that students are individually and collectively engaged in the governance and management of the organisation and its higher education provision, with students supported to be able to engage effectively. The team noted the recent developments made to ensure that postgraduate research students were specifically included in this approach.

### **Conclusions for subcriterion A1.2**

112. The team concluded that the college continues to meet criterion A1.2 in relation to its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and meets criterion A1.2 for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

113. The evidence demonstrates that the college's academic governance, including all aspects of the control and oversight of its higher education provision, is conducted in partnership with its students.

### **Subcriterion A1.3**

**A1.3: Where an organisation granted degree awarding powers works with other organisations to deliver learning opportunities, it ensures that its governance and management of such opportunities is robust and effective and that decisions to work with other organisations are the result of a strategic approach rather than opportunism.**

### **Advice to the OfS**

114. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion A1.3 because where the college works with other organisations to deliver learning opportunities, it ensures that its governance and management of such opportunities is robust and effective and that decisions to work with other organisations are the result of a strategic approach rather than opportunism.

115. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence which shows that the college has met the evidence requirements for A1.3 and any other relevant evidence requirements.

### **Reasoning**

116. The college currently has four formal partnership arrangements with other organisations to deliver learning opportunities. These are with the following organisations:

- MMU
- Hallé Orchestra

- European Chamber Music Academy
- The University of Manchester.

117. To assess whether these arrangements are based on a strategic approach and informed by the effective assessment of risk including the carrying out of due diligence, the team considered the following evidence:

- Strategic Plan and supporting strategies for research and knowledge exchange and education
- Strategic Risk Register
- Memoranda and Agreements with MMU and the Hallé Concert Society
- MMU Postgraduate Research Regulations and the college's provisional Research Regulations and Policy Replacement Plan
- minutes of the college's Research Degrees Committee and MMU's Research Degrees Committee.

118. The team found evidence that current partnerships are strategically aligned, defined in written legal agreements and are subject to the same robust oversight and governance as the rest of the organisation's provision. The college's primary academic partnership is the current validation arrangement with MMU for its research degrees provision. This arrangement is subject to an annually reviewed Memorandum of Understanding. A specific set of Postgraduate Research Regulations from MMU regulate the operation of the college's partnership and are subject to annual approval by MMU.

119. The MMU Academic Board retains overall responsibility for the academic governance and higher education management of the programme and for the maintenance, monitoring and evaluation of academic standards. Responsibility for the maintenance of the academic standards is exercised through the MMU Research Degrees Committee. The college's own Research Degrees Committee reports to this committee and both committees are provided with minutes of its respective committees' proceedings. MMU is responsible for the appointment of the supervisory team for each postgraduate research student, which includes a Principal Supervisor, who is a member of MMU staff and is responsible for the administration of their programme. On a day-to-day basis the programme is overseen by the college's Programme leader and supervisory team who provide supervision, guidance and subject expertise.

120. In readiness for college gaining Full Research DAPs, MMU has set out and agreed transition arrangements with the college such that students already enrolled with MMU will continue to be registered with them with the opportunity for a percentage to transfer to RNCM. Should the college be authorised with Full Research DAPs, new postgraduate research students will be enrolled directly with the college and an agreement will be made as to the percentage of continuing students who will transfer. The college has prepared in readiness its own set of Postgraduate Research Regulations and mapped its current policies to those of MMU to ensure all areas are covered appropriately. The assessment team considered that these arrangements had been planned appropriately to minimise risks to students' progression and

experience in the event of any transition. The team were therefore satisfied that the evidence of the management function of the validation arrangements with MMU are subject to the same robust oversight and governance as the rest of the organisation's provision – from both partners.

121. In addition to the college's validation arrangement with MMU, the college also has two taught masters' programmes where learning opportunities are delivered with partner organisations – Hallé Orchestra and the European Chamber Music Academy. These are aligned to the college's Strategic Plan by providing integrated 'real-world' learning environments where students [...] benefit from transformational placement, apprenticeship and mentoring opportunities. The college considers both partnerships to be of strategic importance as they connect the college's postgraduate taught programmes directly with industry: the RNCM/Hallé Advanced Orchestral Strings Programme providers orchestral string players the opportunity to study for a Postgraduate Diploma and the details and respective responsibilities are set out in a written legal agreement. The second, the RNCM's European Chamber Music Masters, a two-year joint programme developed by the European Chamber Music Academy is currently not being run pending a new agreement being formed following the UK's exit from the European Union.
122. Similarly, the college has a long-standing collaboration in place with the University of Manchester which leads to the award of Diploma (GRNCM). The programme offers students with outstanding musical and academic ability to study both a music degree (MusB) at the University of Manchester and to access to instrumental tuition at the college throughout their programme and an additional fourth year of dedicated study for the award. The details of the collaboration including respective responsibilities are set out clearly in a new Memorandum of Understanding, which comes into effect from September 2025 when the programme re-opens following a recent pause.
123. The team found evidence that taught programmes delivered in partnership with other organisations are subject to the same oversight and governance as other programmes at the college. The college's Ethics Framework sets out the requirements for due diligence when establishing partnerships, and during the visit the team heard from staff that this due diligence process is carried out prior to proposed partnerships being presented for approval at either Academic Board or Executive Committee. New academic partnerships are approved by the college's Academic Board and professional/non-academic partnerships are approved by the Executive Committee.
124. Senior staff confirmed that partnerships are seen as an important part of the college's strategy, and are aligned with the vision and aim to be in the joint interest of students, the college and the partner. The due diligence process scrutinises all potential academic collaborations with other higher education institutions, professional bodies or organisations to ensure they will support the college's strategic aims, bring mutual benefits and provide assurance that partners are of an equivalent quality and ethical standard. Senior staff also confirmed that in the case of these interests ceasing to be aligned that partnerships are made dormant.
125. Additionally, programmes delivered in partnership with other organisations are subject to the same quality processes and scrutiny as the rest of the college's provision. For example, evidence from the 2023 Graduate School reapproval showed that a specific instance was

identified where, due to its professional nature, the International Artists Diploma offered in partnership with Hallé is not structured into modules and so retaking parts of the programme had not been permitted. While the course team defended this position on the grounds that a professional experience with an external organisation could not be directly replicated to enable this, the college's approval panel made it a condition to develop a mechanism for alternative assessment arrangements to be used in cases of partial failure in order to bring the programme into line with sector standards and quality procedures across the college. This demonstrated to the team one way in which the college was exercising its responsibilities for its current taught level DAPs robustly in its scrutiny of programmes delivered in partnership and that its partnerships are subject to the same robust oversight and governance as the rest of the college's provision.

126. Furthermore, the team found evidence that the college has developed a wide range of professional partnerships to underpin the strategic objective of ensuring students have opportunities to engage with and develop professional networks. The team heard how professional partnerships with approximately 18 orchestras and ensembles were managed centrally by the Head of Ensembles through a Professional Experience Scheme. The assessment team found that this scheme is considered an important part of the college's strategy and conservatoire ethos, enabling students to learn with external professionals. All students can apply to receive a professional audition with feedback and a potential opportunity to play with one of the partner ensembles.

127. The college also delivers a range of core and optional modules across its programmes that involve an element of work-based and placement learning, primarily with long-established placement providers. These arrangements are set out in a Work-based Learning policy and the team heard from staff during the visit how these are managed locally by module coordinators, with clear expectations set out in advance with the placement hosts. All placements for students are formally approved by the relevant module coordinators under the supervision of the appropriate Head of Programme. The policy outlines the approach to risk management and requires Placement Provider information and risk assessments to be submitted annually and held centrally by the Academic Services Department. The assessment team agreed that these arrangements were appropriate in terms of regard for due diligence and risk management of learning opportunities in partnership with other organisations.

### **Conclusions for subcriterion A1.3**

128. The team concluded that the college continues to meet criterion A1.3 in relation to its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and meets criterion A1 for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

129. The evidence demonstrates that college ensures that its governance and management of its partnership arrangements is robust and effective and that decisions to work with other organisations are the result of a strategic approach rather than opportunism.

### **Conclusions for criterion A1**

130. The assessment team concluded that the college has effective academic governance and management structures that demonstrate clear and appropriate lines of accountability.

131. The college effectively engages students as partners in the academic governance and management of academic standards and quality.

132. Furthermore, the team concluded that the college ensures that its governance and management of its partnership arrangements are robust and effective and that decisions to work with other organisations are the result of a strategic approach rather than opportunism. The college's current partnerships reflect this, with a clear alignment with its strategy to ensure its provision is professionally focused.

133. The evidence reviewed demonstrated that the college has successfully exercised and managed its taught level Full DAPs since 2007 and has effectively developed and delivered its Research Strategy along with its governance and management arrangements in readiness for gaining Full Research DAPs. The college has taken effective steps to ensure that research degrees students are fully embedded within across all levels of the organisation, including for student engagement in academic governance.

134. Therefore, the team concluded that the college continues to meet criterion A1 in relation to its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and meets criterion A1 for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

# Assessment of DAPs criterion B: Academic standards and quality assurance

## Criterion B1: Regulatory frameworks

### Advice to the OfS

135. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion B1: Regulatory frameworks because it meets subcriteria B1.1 and B1.2 for its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

136. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence which shows in summary that the college has in place a transparent and comprehensive set of academic frameworks and regulations that govern how it awards academic credit and qualifications. In addition, the college has prepared, in readiness for Full Research DAPs, a comprehensive set of academic regulations to govern and manage how it will manage the awards of research degrees.

137. The college maintains a definitive record of each programme and qualification that it approves and these constitute the reference point for delivery, assessment, monitoring and review of each programme. The college has made appropriate plans for the incorporation of research degrees into these existing mechanisms.

138. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside any other relevant information.

### Subcriteria B1.1 and B1.2

**B1.1: An organisation granted degree awarding powers has in place transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how it awards academic credit and qualifications.**

**B1.2: A degree awarding organisation maintains a definitive record of each programme and qualification that it approves (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.**

### Reasoning

139. To understand if the college has in place transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how it awards academic credit and qualifications, the assessment team considered a range of documentary evidence including:

- academic regulations and policies for taught degrees
- the college's Student Regulations and Information document
- a sample of programme handbooks

- draft postgraduate research regulations and Postgraduate Research Handbook – ‘Provisional’ in readiness for Full Research DAPs.

140. The team also considered a range of committee meeting minutes and reports that provided evidence of the regulations and policies in operation, such as Academic Board minutes and Board of Examiners.

141. The team found that the academic frameworks and regulations governing the college’s higher education provision covers all relevant areas including student admissions, assessment, progression, award, appeals and complaints. The team considered the frameworks and regulations to be appropriate to its current status and are implemented fully and consistently. The college’s Academic Regulations set out the full range of higher education awards delivered at the college, the credit framework for these awards and the respective alignment to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ). The regulations currently refer to the structure, level and maximum and minimum length of registration for postgraduate research degrees. The regulations also outline the requirements and responsibilities for the approval, review and withdrawal of programmes, including requirements for collaborative provision. For example, the requirement for all taught programmes to undergo periodic review every five years and for all programmes to take account of student feedback as well as external input into their development and review.

142. The regulations also establish the requirements regarding students’ admission and registration, including those relating to English language qualifications and recognition of prior learning. There are details set out regarding provisions for modes of study, associate and exchange students and the management of students’ progress, including for interruption of study, repeating a year of study, transfer to another provider or termination of study. Furthermore, the regulations detail the requirements and procedures for assessment, including those for research degrees, such as:

- the duties of the Board of Examiners
- the role of external examiners
- the management of assessment
- marking, moderation and feedback practices
- reassessment and compensation
- academic integrity
- academic appeals.

143. The team found that the college’s regulations for the award of credit and qualifications are comprehensive and subject to effective oversight by a Board of Examiners. The Board of Examiners, which operates under delegated authority from the college’s Academic Board, considers the assessment, outcomes and performance of all taught and research students. The role and function of the Board of Examiners is discussed further under criterion B2 but in summary, the minutes of the Board of Examiners demonstrated to the team rigorous application of the college’s regulations regarding assessment, progression and award.

Furthermore, the Board of Examiners submit an annual report to the Academic Board which includes confirmation that the assessment process has been carried out in accordance with the college's academic framework and regulations and reports on outcomes in relation to previous year's results against national benchmarks. The report also includes summary comments from external examiners and an overview of extenuating circumstances, resits, interruptions and withdrawals. The team found the reporting from the Board of Examiners to be thorough and provided further evidence that the assessment and award procedures, as defined within the college's academic framework and regulations, are implemented fully and consistently. Detailed discussion of the implementation of the college's assessment procedures is set out under criteria B2 and B3.

144. The college's Academic Regulations are complemented by a comprehensive set of detailed academic policies and procedures regarding such matters as student engagement, academic appeals, extenuating circumstances, complaints, academic integrity, research conduct and student conduct and discipline. Appeals against the outcome of assessment are covered by the college's Academic Appeals Policy with further guidance for students set out in the Student Information Handbook and clearly signposted to in results letters issued at the end of the academic year. The Board of Examiners has oversight of the consistent implementation of these procedures. Minutes reviewed by the assessment team demonstrated how it provides effective oversight and monitoring of the application of academic policies (including appeals and academic integrity) by receiving a report at each of its meetings of the number and outcomes of all appeals and cases of academic malpractice.
145. Additionally, the minutes record details of individual cases enabling consistent interpretation of the regulations. For example, discussions at the November 2023 Graduate School Board of Examiners indicate robust consideration of when capped marks were applicable and when submissions were to be treated as first submissions. The college also has in place robust processes for handling complaints from and about students, which are covered by the Student Conduct Policy and Disciplinary Procedures and Student Complaints Policy. Detailed discussion of the implementation of the college's assessment, appeals and complaints procedures is set out under criterion B3.
146. The regulations and accompanying policies are set out clearly, logically and concisely, and use plain language. They made are available for staff and students in the Handbooks section of the college's VLE and are also published online on the college's website.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the college produces an extensive document, the Student Regulations and Associated Information, as a comprehensive information source for students that includes the regulations and policies described above and a wide range of other information relating to the practicalities of study and student life at the college. Furthermore, the team noted that programme handbooks for undergraduate, taught postgraduate and the provisional Postgraduate Research Handbook prepared for when the college awards its own research degrees provide information to students about their studies. These provide full details regarding each programme including the aims, learning outcomes and structure of the programme(s), information about each module in taught programmes, assessment and marking and student support services.

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<sup>20</sup> Available at [Academic Policies - Royal Northern College of Music](#).

147. The consistent application of the college's academic regulations is monitored through the internal committee structure and through the production of regular reports to Academic Board and the Board of Governors. For example, a consolidated Complaints and Appeals report is prepared annually by the Deputy Registrar and provides evidence of the oversight of the application of the Appeals, Student Complaints Policy and Student Conduct and Disciplinary Policy. These reports are shared at all levels of the college, including with the Board of Governors.

148. As discussed previously under subcriterion A1.3, the college's postgraduate research degrees, specifically PhDs, are currently awarded through the validation arrangement with MMU. The regulations pertaining to these are set out within MMU's Postgraduate Research Regulations for the college, which are based on MMU's academic regulations with the addition of some requirements specific to the college's context as a music conservatoire. These regulations provide details on all matters related to the research student journey, including admission and enrolment, supervision arrangements, training and development, progress monitoring and submission arrangements, assessment procedures and awards criteria. The team found that the regulations are clear in specifying the specific requirements for the college's practice-based research programmes alongside the more general principles. For example, the requirement for applicants to nominate their chosen pathway (Composition, Music Education, Music Psychology, Performance, or Musicology) and where applicable submit a portfolio of works or performances alongside a written research proposal at the point of application.

149. Similarly, the regulations specify the supervision arrangements with each of the college's student's supervisory team typically consisting of a Principal Supervisor, who is a member of MMU staff, and a primary supervisor and one or more secondary supervisors who are members of staff at the college. The Principal Supervisor is responsible for liaising with the Faculty Research Degrees Team at MMU and may or may not take an active part in the supervision of the student. The team found that postgraduate research degrees delivered via MMU are managed through an online portal called SkillsForge, which is used to record supervisions and progression. The regulations specify that there is a minimum requirement for ten formal supervisions a year for both full and part-time students, which are required to be written up and submitted on the system. In the case that supervisors have concerns about a student's progress, MMU have in place a procedure for supporting research students. Full discussion of how the college fully and consistently implements its existing Postgraduate Research Regulations is set out under criterion G1.

150. During the visit the team met with a representative group of postgraduate research students who all confirmed that they were made aware of the respective regulations at induction and were often signposted to them throughout their studies. All the students expressed that they understood the expectations of them as research students, in relation to the academic regulations. Similarly, a representative group of postgraduate taught and postgraduate taught students confirmed that they knew how to access relevant regulatory and policy information via the VLE and that this is regularly reinforced and signposted by staff. Students gave examples of how, for instance, assessment regulations and marking matrix are discussed with them at induction and regularly through the year, so that they have a good understanding of how academic judgements are made, which they find helpful. The team found this to be an effective approach to ensure that students have both access to and understand the academic frameworks relevant to their programme. The team therefore determined that the evidence

reviewed demonstrated that the college has in place transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations governing its higher education provision. These comprehensively cover student admissions, assessment, progression, award, appeals and complaints, are appropriate to its current status and are implemented fully and consistently.

151. In readiness for gaining Full Research DAPs, the college has created its own draft set of regulations and procedures for postgraduate research degrees. The college intends that these, in addition to the academic regulations it already has in place for taught degrees, will form a comprehensive academic and regulatory framework that will be appropriate for the granting of its own research qualifications. The team reviewed the draft Postgraduate Research Regulations and Postgraduate Research Handbook and found that they form a comprehensive regulatory framework covering all stages of the student journey from admission, supervision and progression through to final assessment. Additionally, the regulations provide links to a range of supporting guidance documents including those covering academic integrity and good research conduct. The regulations map closely to those currently in place through the MMU validating arrangement, but with some minor modifications for example, to the regulations covering the composition of supervisory and assessment panels reflecting the college's increased responsibilities.
152. To ensure the new framework is comprehensive and to support a smooth transition to the new arrangements, a mapping template titled Policy Replacement has been prepared that indicates where equivalent procedures are set out across the existing MMU regulations and the college's draft regulations. For instance, MMU regulations currently have separate policies covering maternity and disability provisions, and the college has mapped these across to its own Concessions Policy and Academic Regulations, which covers the same content. Similarly, MMU regulations currently have separate policies for Investigation of Misconduct in Research and Ethics and Research Governance, which the college has mapped across to be covered by the extension of its existing Academic Integrity Policy and its Good Research Conduct Policy.
153. The draft Postgraduate Research Regulations and handbook were approved by the college's Academic Board at its meeting in July 2024 in readiness for seeking Full Research DAPs. Staff involved in the postgraduate research provision met by the team explained that the new regulations had provided the opportunity to make alterations and improvements to the existing regulations framework to ensure the specific and unique context of the college is reflected. For example, extending the opportunities for research training to students and introducing external assessors at mid-point assessments. The team heard that such changes were included in response to the experiences and feedback of current staff and students.
154. The college's approach of mapping across the existing MMU Postgraduate Research Regulations against its existing regulations, together with evidence of critical reflection on areas for potential enhancements, led the assessment team to conclude that the college has created, in readiness, appropriate academic frameworks and regulations for the granting of its own research qualifications.
155. The team reviewed the college's record of qualifications and records systems to understand if the college maintains a definitive record of each programme and qualification that it approves (and of subsequent changes to it), and to assess whether these records constitute the

reference point for delivery and assessment. The team's analysis was informed by the following evidence:

- current programme handbooks
- Academic Quality Handbook
- the college's Programme Review Guidelines and Appendices
- a case study of the Reapproval of the Graduate School
- sample transcripts provided to students.

156. The team also observed a demonstration of the college's student information and records system, UNIT-e.

157. The college maintains a definitive record of taught qualifications in the form of a full set of programme specifications that sets out information relating to each programme, including admission criteria, programme learning outcomes, learning and teaching methods, assessment and student support. These are made available to students in the form of handbooks for each taught award which also include detailed module specifications. The team reviewed the 2024-25 programme handbooks for the BMus (Hons), the BMus (Hons) in Popular Music and the Graduate School handbook which covers the programme details of all the college's postgraduate taught awards:

- Master of Music
- Master of Performance
- European Chamber Music Masters
- Postgraduate Diploma: Advanced Studies
- Postgraduate Diploma: International Artist and Hallé/RNCM Advanced Orchestral Strings Programme.

158. The team found that the individual module specifications within the handbooks set out the detail of the curriculum content of each module including delivery methods. The specifications clearly indicate the level of the module, the learning hours required and, where applicable, how modules relate to each other and if pathway specific content is required. For example, the BMus (Hons) Handbook differentiates between the common shared modules taken by all students such as Artist Development and Music in Context and the Principal Study modules which vary slightly between schools and for students on performance pathways compared to those studying Composition.

159. Information relating to the specification of the college's postgraduate research programme is collated on the college website, which provides links and downloads to key documents. There is a comprehensive Guide for Applicants that sets out the college's accepted definition of research with reference to that of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the application requirements for each subject specialism, the research interests and academic profiles of supervisory staff. The postgraduate research programme webpage also provides a

link to the current MMU Postgraduate Research Regulations, which are comprehensive, setting out the programme specification for the programme and clarifying the relevant regulations and technical requirements for doctoral students and their supervisory teams including registration periods, arrangements for supervision, review and progression, and the availability of training and development for students.

160. In preparation for seeking Full Research DAPs, the college has also developed its own provisional procedure for monitoring and recording student progress which will replace the current MMU SkillsForge system. This comprises a supervision log and an intervention procedure to support students if they are making insufficient progress. Should the college gain Full Research DAPs, full records of supervision for research students will be uploaded to UNIT-e, the college's student records system. The evidence reviewed of programme specifications demonstrated to the team that the college maintains and publishes definitive records of each qualification to be awarded and each programme offered, and these are used as the basis for the delivery and assessment of each programme. Draft documentation and discussions during the visit additionally demonstrated to the team that the college has made appropriate preparations for extending its current responsibilities for maintaining definitive documentation to include research degrees in anticipation of gaining Full Research DAPs.
161. The college's process for approval, periodic review and minor modifications of programmes is set out in the Academic Quality Handbook. The procedures describe a focus on rigorous development, scrutiny and approval to ensure all new programmes are aligned with the college's Education Strategy and Academic Regulations as well as any requirements of external bodies and regulators. The details of the college's programme development, approval and review processes are discussed in detail under criterion B2. However, in terms of the maintenance of records the procedure sets out that following approval, the programme leader will complete the definitive programme handbook and the Secretary of the approval panel, who is normally the Head of Quality and Standards will issue the formal Programme Record of Approval and release the Programme Specification and Programme Handbook for publication.
162. The minor modifications process enables course teams to make amendments between periodic reviews and is specified in the Academic Quality Handbook. Any minor modification or the introduction of a new course module requires approval by the relevant external examiner and the completion of a detailed proposal form which is submitted to the Education and Quality Committee for approval before being signed off by Academic Board. A record is kept of all minor modifications made to each programme to monitor the extent of changes over time, which are considered as part of the programme's continuous monitoring process. There is an annual process of updating programme handbooks, and it is the responsibility of the Programmes and Assessments Team, in consultation with Head of Quality and Standards and the Programme Leaders to ensure the programme handbooks are updated annually to reflect amendments approved during the previous academic year.
163. For postgraduate research programmes, approval of any changes to the programme are currently the responsibility of MMU's Academic Board and are communicated to the college via the MMU Research Degrees Committee. The approval, periodic review and minor modifications of the postgraduate research programmes will come under the college's processes should it gain Full Research DAPs and the college's Academic Quality Handbook was amended in July 2024 to extend its coverage to research degrees in readiness for this. This evidence led the team to conclude that the college's processes for maintaining definitive

programme documentation are appropriately managed through all stages of programme development, review and modification and at all levels of the provision including postgraduate research in prospect.

164. The Academic Regulations set out the requirement for the college to keep a permanent record of all awards that it makes and the process by which certificates are prepared and issued. The team learned that the college had recently changed its student information system to UNIT-e, which, as noted above, is an online data management tool enabling the college to manage this process effectively. During the visit the team observed a demonstration of UNIT-e and saw how access to UNIT-e is restricted so that only key staff can enter and amend information. An interface called Staff Advantage has been developed to enable wider access to managers and teaching staff, and this allows staff to access a student record with a range of personal details and which, if applicable, has links to other relevant documents such as, for example, the Personal Learning Plan. Staff can also see marks for modules by cohort, individually and in relation to the cohort average enabling them to monitor progress and performance. The team saw how UNIT-e enables students to access and update their own details, enrolments and see their grades and observed how, following the end-of-year or final award outcomes have been approved by the Board of Examiners, students are notified of their outcomes and results via a downloadable transcript. Alongside this, students are also automatically emailed with any relevant guidance for examples relating to any resits required.

165. The team reviewed a sample of a student transcript which showed that the college has a comprehensive approach and clearly sets out all module titles, marks, grades and credits that make up an award as well as the final award title and overall grade. Transcripts identify the student through their name, student ID and date of birth. The transcript also indicates the status of the awarding body within the UK higher education system, the language of delivery and the marking bands used, which the team agreed ensures that the level of student achievement can be clearly understood within a national and international context.

166. The thorough management of definitive programme information and the systematic approach to making minor course modifications along with the consistent and comprehensive use of the student information system led the team to conclude that the college maintains a definitive and up to date record of each programme and qualification that it approves. These records constitute the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.

## **Conclusions for B1**

167. The assessment team concluded that the college meets subcriterion B1.1 because it has in place transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how it awards academic credit and qualifications. These regulations cover the academic standards of qualifications, admissions, the engagement of students and appeals against academic decisions.

168. The college has prepared, in readiness for Full Research DAPs, a comprehensive set of academic regulations to govern and manage the award of research degrees. These set out the arrangements for the award of academic credit and qualifications at Level 8 and reflect the effective framework it has been operating under its current validation arrangements with MMU, making appropriate adaptions to reflect its unique context and practice-based provision.

169. The team further concluded that the college meets subcriterion B1.2 because it maintains a definitive record of each programme, which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.

170. The college has, in readiness for Full Research DAPs, prepared and adapted its systems and capabilities to ensure its approaches can be effectively applied to its record of postgraduate research programmes and made provision to include full records of all postgraduate research students across its existing records system.

171. Therefore, the team concluded that the college continues to meet criterion B1 in relation to its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and meets criterion B1 for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

## Criterion B2: Academic standards

### Advice to the OfS

172. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion B2: Academic standards and quality assurance, because it meets subcriteria B2.1 and B2.2 for its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

173. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence that shows in summary that the college has clear and consistently applied mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its qualifications.

174. It has demonstrated that it can design and deliver courses and qualifications that meet sector-recognised standards and the FHEQ. It has demonstrated that it sets and maintains standards above the threshold, comparable to those set and achieved by other UK degree awarding bodies.

175. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside any other relevant information.

### Subcriteria B2.1 and B2.2

**B2.1: An organisation granted degree awarding powers has clear and consistently applied mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its higher education qualifications.**

**B2.2: Organisations with degree awarding powers are expected to demonstrate that they are able to design and deliver courses and qualifications that meet the threshold academic standards described in the FHEQ. Organisations with degree awarding powers are expected to demonstrate that the standards that they set and maintain above the threshold are reliable over time and reasonably comparable to those set and achieved by other UK degree awarding bodies.**

### Reasoning

176. To establish if the college's higher education qualifications are offered at levels that correspond to the relevant levels of the FHEQ and sector-recognised standards, the team reviewed the following evidence:

- regulatory documentation including the regulatory framework, associated policies and Quality Handbook
- current programme specifications for undergraduate and taught postgraduate courses
- MMU Postgraduate Research Degrees Regulations 24-25
- the college's draft regulations and programme handbook for postgraduate research degrees.

177. The evidence demonstrated to the team that the standards set for the college's higher education qualifications are fully aligned with the relevant sector-recognised standards<sup>21</sup> and FHEQ level descriptors and are comparable to standards across the sector. Programme specifications for undergraduate and taught postgraduate qualifications reference FHEQ levels throughout and learning outcomes employ appropriate language clearly differentiating between the requirements for each level. Programme-level learning outcomes are cross-referenced throughout module specifications, and a curriculum map provides a comprehensive overview of how these are met in totality across a programme. There are clear and detailed statements of the standards that students are expected to demonstrate for their awards, which the team considered align with the relevant qualification descriptors at Levels 4 to 7 of the sector-recognised standards and FHEQ. For example, the BMus (Hons) programme specification sets out that students are successively expected to demonstrate 'high', 'excellent' and 'the highest possible' technical proficiency in performance and composition, reflecting an appropriately gradated and cumulative approach to attainment in these core elements of the college's taught provision across Levels 4 to 6.

178. The team found that standards for the current postgraduate research degrees provision are set out in the MMU Research Degrees Regulations. The regulations clearly specify the minimum entry requirements for candidates and describe assessment as the principal instrument by which student achievement is measured and academic standards maintained. The regulations include the descriptor for a higher education qualification at Level 8 on the sector-recognised standards and FHEQ. Samples of interim progress reviews and final assessments, including examiner reports, for recent PhD graduates confirmed to the team that these standards are currently effectively set and upheld. For example, one such report observed that the thesis in question represented 'a significant contribution to knowledge', while another stated that on completion of minor corrections, the thesis would be 'an important contribution to the field of queer performance practice'. These examples both align with the descriptors of sector-recognised standards and FHEQ Level 8 (doctoral) qualifications, which require successful candidates to demonstrate 'the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication.'

179. In preparation for awarding its own research degrees the college has developed a provisional set of regulations which also makes clear and detailed reference to the sector-recognised standards and FHEQ Level 8 descriptors in setting out the standards expected for doctoral awards. The team agreed that this provided evidence that going forward the college's research degree qualifications would continue to be offered at the relevant levels of the FHEQ and sector-recognised standards.

180. In order to determine if the college's setting and maintaining of academic standards takes appropriate account of relevant external points of reference and external and independent points of expertise, including students, the team reviewed documentation including:

- the Quality Handbook Section F – Programme approval/reapproval process

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<sup>21</sup> Available at [Sector-recognised standards - Office for Students](#).

- sample documentation of reapproval of existing programmes and approval of a new programme
- external examiner reports covering all of the college's taught programmes over the past three academic years
- samples of progress reviews and interim and final assessment reports for recent doctoral students.

181. The team found evidence of the contributions by and consultation with external stakeholders including students to inform the setting and maintenance of academic standards. This is demonstrated throughout the college's programme development and review procedures together with the external examiner process and operation of its deliberative committees. The process for programme approval and reapproval clearly stipulates that input to the development should be sought from external and internal sources, specifically requiring consultation with external academics, practitioners, professional partners, and former students along with internal academics, professional services and students. During the visit the team met with representatives of teaching staff who provided examples of this in practice, explaining for instance how external input had influenced the introduction of pathways in the BMus (Hons). In addition, the team heard that during the recent reapproval of postgraduate taught programmes, staff communicated with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra and Manchester Camerata about how students could be supported for freelance careers, which led directly to the development of a new 30 credit 'The Freelance Musician' module at Level 7.

182. There is also a requirement for external and student members of programme approval panels. To be eligible for appointment as an academic member of a panel, externals must normally hold an academic post in a UK higher education institution, be experienced in the subject and have appropriate teaching experience. The role of programme approval panels, as part of the college's programme approval process, are set out in the college's Academic Quality Handbook. Panels are required to specifically consider the level of the programme in relation to sector-recognised standards and FHEQ, along with assessing the suitability of the programmes structure, content and scheme of assessment. Furthermore, panels are to consider the proposed programmes against external reference points, including the OfS B Conditions of Registration, student outcome benchmarks and the TEF.

183. The team reviewed the college's draft Postgraduate Research Regulations and programme handbook along with evidence of the work undertaken in mapping relevant MMU policies onto its own which showed the college's preparations for gaining Full Research DAPs for research degrees. The team found that during 2023-24 the college revised and updated its existing regulatory framework and policies covering taught degrees to explicitly set out its responsibilities for programme development, approval, monitoring and review for postgraduate research. Therefore, the team determined that any new postgraduate research programme the college develops, should it gain Full Research DAPs, will be subject to the same design, development and approval processes as taught degree programmes. This will involve external and independent points of expertise, including students. In addition, the college plans to include an external member on all formal interim assessment panels for its postgraduate research students should it be granted Full Research DAPs, as set out in its draft Postgraduate Research Regulations and handbook.

184. Evidence seen by the team of the participation of external members and student representatives in programme approval events demonstrated that the college's own processes and policies, in relation to external expertise and external points of reference, are followed consistently. For example, the team reviewed evidence of the programme approval event for the Master of Education degree which provided evidence of the input of three highly experienced external panellists who effectively contributed to discussions around the process for non-standard entry decisions and the comparative word counts of assignments between institutions. Further evidence of responses from external academic and industry experts and stakeholders, as well as current students during the reapproval of the BMus (Hons), demonstrated that wide ranging feedback was actively sought and acted upon during the processes. For example, comments from external academics and industry experts highlighted the importance of embedding EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) principles into practice throughout the college, which led to the introduction of a wider range of co-curricular events such as the 'Julia Perry Week' in 2024.

185. Additionally, documentation for the reapproval of Graduate School programmes showed evidence that the review panel had garnered extensive feedback from the students and used this to inform the conditions and recommendations in their final report. For example, on matters such as providing further guidance on support in the programme handbooks and on revising the assessment for joint principal study options.

186. The team found that the college operates a robust external examiner process to ensure external expertise informs the maintenance of academic standards on an ongoing basis. The process is set out in the college's Academic Regulations, which confirms that at least one external examiner is appointed for each taught award and programme of study with a standard appointment period of four years. External examiners review samples of assessed work as well as meeting annually with students and are required to provide an annual report on their findings with recommendations.

187. Reports from external examiners for all levels of the college's taught provision from 2022-23 and 2023-24 confirmed that standards were appropriately set and assessed with examiners across all programmes answering 'yes' to all the proforma questions regarding standards and quality without exception. As noted under paragraph 178, examiner reports for recent PhD graduates confirmed to the team that these standards are currently effectively set and upheld. These confirmations were amplified in the written commentary supplied by external examiners; for example, the examiner for the BMus and GRNCM programmes highlighted the 'outstanding professional work' in Composition and Production 3 and 4 modules, which 'is either at or already getting very close to being of a standard to be found in the industry', while the examiner for the BMus (Hons) Popular Music programme commended the programme team 'for the quality of their work to provide students with a robust, creatively ambitious, and supportive environment in which they can develop their musicianship to a very high level.'

188. As discussed under subcriteria A1.1 and A1.2, the team found that external expertise and student voice are thoroughly integrated into the college's committee and governance structure providing a mechanism to ensure that the setting and maintenance of standards is informed by internal and external perspectives. Undergraduate and taught postgraduate students met by the team reported that marking criteria and the curriculum maps detailing programme-level outcomes were thoroughly explained in induction and consistently applied in assessments and feedback. They expressed confidence in the system and the support available for appealing

marks. Research students reported on the effectiveness of the annual review process in providing independent reassurance beyond the supervisory team that appropriate standards were being met. Further discussion of the monitoring of research degree programmes and the supervision of research students is set out under criteria F1 and G1.

189. Therefore, the team is satisfied that, for all levels of its provision, including postgraduate research, the college's higher education qualifications are offered at levels that correspond to the relevant levels of the FHEQ and sector-recognised standards and that the college's setting and maintaining of academic standards takes appropriate account of relevant external points of reference and external and independent points of expertise, including students.

190. The team reviewed the college's approach to the design, development and approval of programmes to assess whether these are robust, applied consistently, and ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations. The team also reviewed the college's programme monitoring and review arrangements to assess whether these are robust, applied consistently and explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree awarding body are being maintained. The team considered the following evidence:

- Academic Regulations
- Academic Quality Handbook 2024-25
- sample documentation of reapproval of existing programmes and approval of a new programme
- minutes of committee meetings
- continuous monitoring documentation
- draft documentation for postgraduate research degrees.

191. The evidence reviewed demonstrated to the team that the college has clear processes in place to ensure academic standards are achieved, that responsibilities are clearly defined from module to programme level, and that processes are applied and followed in a robust and considered fashion. The Academic Regulations include clear statements on the responsibilities of module coordinators and programme leaders and the strategic responsibility of the Director of Programmes in terms of the effective running of modules and qualifications and their assessment.

192. The college's Academic Quality Handbook includes a thorough description of the processes for programme approval and reapproval, including explicit statements on the inclusion of external experts and student representatives on approval panels. The Quality Handbook details the role of the internal Programme Approval Scrutiny Group (a subgroup of the Education and Quality Committee) in reviewing proposals prior to the convening of the Programme Approval Panel. It also details the formal governance functions of the Education and Quality Committee, the Academic Board and the Executive Committee in regard to programme approvals and reapprovals. Appendices to the handbook include templates and

further guidance for the required documentation to ensure that cases are approached consistently and comprehensively. Clear requirements are set out in terms of the roles of external, internal and students reviewers and the process of approving review panel membership. All programmes are normally reviewed at five-yearly intervals by an independent panel with at least one student and two external specialists.

193. The team reviewed templates of programme approval and reapproval documents, including completed documentation for reapproval of Graduate School programmes and approval of a new MEd qualification. This evidence demonstrated an integrated approach to the setting and monitoring of academic standards, with clear expectations for modular and programme learning outcomes. For example, following the Programme Approval Panel stage, a condition was made across all Graduate School programmes concerning the need for consistent language in grading criteria, while bespoke elements of different programmes were also given careful attention, such as the permitting resits on the International Artist Diploma, in line with sector norms. Attention to academic standards was evident in the minutes of programme approval panels and Programme Approval Scrutiny Group, for example in the setting of reapproval conditions relating to the consistent use of language in grade descriptors and permitting re-sit opportunities in line with sector norms and a recommendation concerning specific marking criteria for pass/fail elements of study.
194. The team found that the college also takes a rigorous approach to maintaining the coherence of academic standards of programmes between the approval of the programme and any changes made to it through the minor modifications procedures. The process for minor modifications is set out in the Quality Handbook and includes changes such as the introduction of new modules. The process requires the approval of the relevant external examiner prior to internal committee approval. Minutes of the Education Quality Committee seen by the team confirmed that this process was applied in practice, for example, the team observed the consideration and approval of a minor modification to the GRNCM programme regarding the distribution of credit between the different years of the programme and expanding to allow Popular Music as an option. The modification was approved following confirmation that feedback had been provided from students, external examiners and the college's partner at University of Manchester, as well as gaining the approval of the Undergraduate Degrees Committee.
195. The college's monitoring and review arrangements shifted from an annual review of programmes to a continuous monitoring approach in 2022-23. The three individual degree committees hold responsibility for this process, with outcomes reported to the Education Quality Committee. The college's continuous monitoring is intended to be a risk-based process ensuring that the standard of programmes is maintained and drives improvements. External examiner reports, National Student Survey (NSS) results and student outcome data are used to identify priorities, and data analysis informs action planning for the current and future academic years with degree committee minutes recording an audit trail of progress. For example, in the 2023-24 continuous monitoring report for the Graduate School, the team found evidence of reflection and innovation in relation to the assessment policy in the example of the Artistic Project module, which was the first pass/fail module introduced in the PG programmes in response to student feedback.
196. As part of the continuous monitoring procedures, each programme develops and maintains a Student Experience Enhancement Record (SEERs). SEERs capture actions and targets for

enhancements to the college's programmes, which are framed by the college into themes. For example, the 2023-24 SEERs for all taught programmes reviewed by the team included 'Enhancement Theme 6: Widen participation'. Under this theme there were actions and enhancements made to improve staff and students understanding of the term 'underrepresented' within the subject field. The SEERs also demonstrated evidence of a robust and consistent approach and of actions being completed in a timely fashion. For example, actions identified in 2023-24 included improving the availability of study spaces, consistency of staffing for recital assessment panels and minor amendments to assessments and the team found that all were recorded as complete in semester 2 of 2024. A Continuous Monitoring Schedule is maintained to ensure clarity around timescales and expectations for staff, and a summary of the reports are presented to the Academic Board annually following Education Quality Committee analysis.

197. Under the terms of its validation arrangement, the MMU's Research Degrees Committee has responsibility for the monitoring of the college's research degrees programme. The team found that the college's own Research Degrees Committee also has oversight of the monitoring of the research degree programme. Since 2022-23, the postgraduate research programme has participated in the college's continuous monitoring process alongside taught programmes in readiness for the additional responsibilities it will gain should it be authorised with Full Research DAPs. Furthermore, the college has made plans to expand the SEER process for its postgraduate research programmes, with additional strategic oversight of this through the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee. Further discussion of the internal and external monitoring of academic standards for postgraduate research is set out under criterion G1.
198. Therefore, the team determined that the evidence reviewed showed that the college's approach to the design, development and approval of programmes is robust, applied consistently, and ensures that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations. Furthermore, the team also considers that the college's programme monitoring and review arrangements are robust, applied consistently and explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree awarding body are being maintained.
199. The team reviewed the college's approach to assessment and feedback to ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where the achievement of relevant learning outcomes has been demonstrated through assessment, and both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the relevant degree awarding body have been satisfied. This was demonstrated through review of the following evidence:
  - samples of assessed work and feedback
  - programme handbooks
  - samples of moderation reports and external examiner reports covering all of the college's taught programmes over the past three academic years
  - minutes of the Board of Examiners and a Degree Outcomes Statement.

200. The sample of student assessed work examined by the team was representative, as it included 24 modules from all levels of study across the college's undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes. It also incorporated assessed work from postgraduate research students at all six stages of their research degree programmes.

201. The evidence reviewed demonstrated that the college has robust procedures in place to ensure that credit and qualifications are appropriately awarded when the relevant learning outcomes have been satisfied and the relevant standards met. Programme handbooks set out clear and consistent rules on progression, compensation, entitlement to resits and the determination of results and as noted under paragraph 177, module level learning outcomes are clearly mapped onto programme-level learning outcomes, which appropriately reflect UK threshold standards.

202. The team considered that evidence of robust procedures for double marking and moderation are also in place. At undergraduate level, in practical modules where the marking of assessments takes place in a 'live' situation, for example, Principal Study end-of-year recitals, assessments are double marked, meaning they are witnessed and marked by at least two assessors. Assessors conduct their marking independently before meeting to agree a final mark and in cases where agreement cannot be reached on differences of ten plus marks, these are referred to external examiners. Where moderating is used, samples are selected by the moderator and must comprise at least 10 per cent of the module cohort. A Moderation Panel is convened to moderate Principal Study Recitals at Levels 6 and 7. Similar arrangements are in place for taught postgraduate programmes, where moderation of approximately 20 per cent of written submissions is required.

203. To determine the effectiveness of these procedures in practice the team reviewed a sample of moderation reports for end-of-year recitals in 2024 for the BMus (Hons) and BMus (Hons) Popular Music programmes. This evidence confirmed that the processes documented in programme handbooks were implemented consistently, with accounts of how final marks were determined thoroughly reported and moderators confirmed that standards were consistently applied. Moderation reports reviewed by the team showed a high level of correspondence in the marks of members of the assessment panels and also between the moderator and assessment panels, which demonstrated to the team a collective understanding of required standards by all those involved in the assessment process.

204. The team reviewed samples of work from across all years of study from the BMus (Hons), BMus (Hons) Popular Music and GRNCM undergraduate programmes (Levels 4 to 6) and from the MMus and MPerf postgraduate taught degrees in performance, composition and conducting (Level 7). The team found that the work assessed is clearly aligned with the college's frameworks, sector-recognised standards and FHEQs. For example, written tasks demand greater intellectual sophistication and independent thought as levels progress, while performance requirements begin at a high level, in line with the college's FHEQ Level 4 learning outcomes and show evidence of increasing technical and artistic demands through to Level 6. Discussion of the assessment and award of the college's research degree programmes (Level 8) against UK threshold standards is set out under criterion G1, which in summary sets out that the college satisfies relevant national guidance relating to the award of research degrees.

205. Furthermore, the team found that assessment feedback reviewed across all samples (Levels 4 to 7), was thorough and consistent in relation to module learning outcomes and provided clear justifications for the grades awarded. Terminology from the relevant marking criteria was reliably employed across all levels. For example, feedback on modules ranging across composition, musicology, music education consistently used the high-level descriptions for grading bands. Feedback provided included specific terminology related to the particular area of study, covering matters such as the suitability of a composition or performance for the intended audiences, the clarity of writing and use of academic conventions in written work, and aspects of instrumental and vocal technique in performance. The team determined that this provided evidence that the college has well defined processes and procedures regarding the assessment of student work and the award of credit and qualifications.

206. The college has in place a Board of Examiners that operates under delegated authority from the college's Academic Board, which provides oversight of the assessment process through considering the assessment, outcomes and performance of all taught and research students. For taught degree students it agrees final results for units and approves the overall result for each student regarding progression and award, including retrieval arrangements. For research students, it agrees the overall result for each student regarding progression and award on the recommendation of the Research Degrees Committee. Minutes of the Board of Examiners provided evidence to the team of the rigorous application of the regulations, the detailed consideration given to individual students' circumstances and the feedback from external examiners. The team determined that the evidence of the effective operation of the Board of Examiners, along with the samples of external examiner reports and assessed work, demonstrated that the college has robust procedures in place at all levels, including postgraduate research, to ensure that credit and qualifications are appropriately awarded when the relevant learning outcomes have been satisfied. In addition, the team concluded that credit and qualifications are appropriately awarded when both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the college have been satisfied.

207. The assessment team also reviewed the college's procedures to ensure that in establishing, and then maintaining, threshold academic standards and comparability of standards with other providers of equivalent level qualifications, the college makes use of appropriate external and independent expertise. The team found that in addition to following sector-standard practices regarding the rigorous use of external examiners as described under paragraphs 186 to 187, the college also uses specialist external assessors as part of assessment panels for principal study final recitals at undergraduate and postgraduate taught levels, as detailed in programme handbooks. These assessors are appointed as full members of the assessment panel for individual students based on their academic or professional expertise and are provided with clear guidance on their remit. Given the specialist nature of the college's provision, these assessors provide vital external perspectives in ensuring that credit is appropriately awarded and that standards are comparable to those achieved by students in other similar providers. Meetings with undergraduate and postgraduate taught students affirmed the value of these appointments to students in assuring them of the robustness and fairness of the outcomes they achieve. Criterion G1 sets out discussion of how the college ensures that its postgraduate research qualifications are of comparable standards with other providers of equivalent level qualifications.

208. Reports from external examiners seen by the assessment team further demonstrated that standards were appropriately upheld, and that credit and qualifications were only awarded

where learning outcomes had been met. Responses to external examiner reports confirm that observations and recommendations are carefully considered and acted upon, for example enhancing opportunities for all staff involved in assessment to gain a shared understanding of expectations regarding the level and detail of feedback to students.

209. The Board of Examiners, as outlined in paragraphs 143 and 206, also has responsibility for assuring the college about the comparability of standards with other providers of equivalent level qualifications and makes use of appropriate external and independent expertise. The Board of Examiners submits an annual report to the Academic Board that includes confirmation that the assessment process has been carried out in accordance with the college's academic framework and regulations and includes a summary of degree outcomes, with reference to UK threshold standards.
210. Furthermore, the college's published Degree Outcomes Statement provides a detailed, public-facing statement on student outcomes and the processes and regulations used to determine them. This covers the classification of degree qualifications over a five-year period, as well as data on the outcomes for students with declared disabilities and according to declared ethnicity. It confirms that the college is compliant in regard to principles for tackling grade inflation, which is backed up by external examiner reports. In the sample of these reports reviewed by the team, all examiners answered 'Yes' to the question about the rigorousness and fairness of the marks awarded in relation to the stated learning outcomes and the quality of work they had seen. This confirmed the team's view that appropriate use of external and independent expertise was made in the awarding of credit and qualifications in line with the relevant standards for the levels of curriculum offered.
211. A sample of reports from postgraduate research external examiners demonstrated that the college follows the requirements of its current validating partner MMU and that appropriate procedures are in place to ensure that the required academic standards are met for this part of the provision. The samples reviewed included instances of outcomes requiring students to make amendments, and confirmation that these had been satisfactorily completed before being awarded the degree. The college's Research Degrees Committee maintains oversight of assessment, progress and completion of current postgraduate research students, alongside the MMU Research Degrees Committee, as discussed under criterion B1. Final examination panels comprise an internal and external examiner and an independent panel chair, unless the candidate is employed by the college, in which case two external examiners are appointed. The college's provisional handbook for postgraduate research degrees confirms that these procedures and standards will be maintained and applied to postgraduate research degrees should Full Research DAPs be granted. This assured the assessment team that at doctoral level, the college makes appropriate use of internal and external expertise in determining that student outcomes are appropriate and accurately reflect sector standards and that overall across all programmes the evidence reviewed demonstrated that the college makes appropriate and effective use of external and independent expertise in ensuring standards are met and are comparable to other providers.

## **Conclusions**

212. The team concluded that the college meets subcriterion B2.1 as the evidence demonstrates that the college has clear mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its higher education qualifications, and that these are consistently applied.

213. The team further concluded that the college meets subcriterion B2.2 as the evidence demonstrates that it designs and deliver programmes and qualifications that meet the threshold academic standards described in the FHEQ and that reflects appropriate sector-recognised standards.

214. The standards that the college sets and maintains above the threshold are reliable over time and reasonably comparable to those set and achieved by other UK degree awarding bodies.

215. The college has robust processes in place for monitoring the progress of postgraduate research students and ensuring that degrees are awarded only when appropriate standards have been satisfied. The involvement of internal staff beyond postgraduate research supervision teams in formal reviews and the use of external examiners provide necessary external perspectives and expertise. The college already has thorough documentation in place regarding the administration of the postgraduate research programme and detailed plans to map this onto its own policies should it gain Full Research DAPs.

216. Therefore, the team concluded that the college continues to meet criterion B2 in relation to its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and meets criterion B2 for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

## **Criterion B3: Quality of the academic experience**

### **Advice to the OfS**

217. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion B3: Quality of the academic experience, because it meets the requirements for this criterion for its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

218. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows in summary that the college effectively designs the curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment and feedback in way that delivers a high quality academic experience for all students.

219. The college demonstrates robust quality assurance of the academic experience to ensure its intentions are being delivered in practice.

220. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside any other relevant information.

### **Criterion B3.1**

**B3.1: Organisations with degree awarding powers are expected to demonstrate that they are able to design and deliver courses and qualifications that provide a high quality academic experience to all students from all backgrounds, irrespective of their location, mode of study, academic subject, protected characteristics, previous educational background or nationality. Learning opportunities are consistently and rigorously quality assured.**

### **Reasoning**

#### **Design and approval of programmes**

221. To assess how the college approaches the design and approval of programmes, the team examined evidence including:

- Self-Assessment Document
- Academic Regulations and the Academic Quality Handbook
- Committee Handbook
- programme specifications and handbooks
- case studies of Programme Approval and Reapproval
- evidence of consultations during programme approval and reapprovals
- minutes of programme degree committees.

222. The team also met with academic staff at the college during the visit and observed the June 2025 meeting of the Education and Quality Committee, where minor programme amendments to the postgraduate programmes and the GRNCM programme were considered.

223. The team assessed whether the college operates effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes, and whether relevant staff are informed of and provided with guidance and support on these procedures. The team also assessed whether staff are provided with guidance on their roles and responsibilities in relation to the procedures. The team found that the college operates rigorous processes for the design, development and approval of its academic programmes. These processes are comprehensively outlined in the Academic Quality Handbook, which serves as a key reference for staff, providing the policies, procedures and guidance that 'define and assure the academic standards and quality of the college's programmes'. As discussed under criterion B2, the team found that these processes are in alignment with the college's Academic Regulations and sector-recognised standards.

224. The team also noted that, in preparation for seeking Full Research DAPs, postgraduate research programmes at the college are monitored by the Research Degrees Committee, which will be responsible for overseeing any minor amendments to existing programmes. These amendments will then be recommended to the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee for approval, with final sign-off by the Academic Board. As discussed under criterion B2, any new postgraduate research programmes will be subject to the same design, development and approval processes as taught degree programmes, as outlined in the Academic Quality Handbook.

225. The college's processes involve multiple layers of internal scrutiny, beginning with the initial proposal and market research and culminating in final approval by the Academic Board. Responsibilities are clearly assigned among various college staff and committees, ensuring broad engagement and appropriate oversight. Notably, as discussed in detail under criterion B1, both internal and external perspectives are sought throughout the approval process, including input from students, staff and external advisers. In the team's view, these arrangements are effective, offering a robust, transparent and well-structured framework for the design, development and approval of programmes. Evidence of these procedures being applied in practice is set out in full under criterion B1 but, in summary, the recent approval of the new MEd programme and the reapproval of the college's postgraduate taught programmes demonstrated that both procedures were applied effectively and consistently and demonstrated full understanding and engagement with the processes by relevant staff involved.

226. The team found that the college ensures relevant staff are informed and supported throughout these processes. The Academic Quality Handbook is a primary source of guidance setting out the purpose of programme approval in setting academic standards, and the Head of Academic Quality and Standards is responsible for the operational management of programme development and acts as the first point of contact for any procedural questions. Programme leaders and panel members receive guidance on the processes outlined in the handbook and are further supported by the Head of Academic Quality and Standards throughout the programme approval process.

227. The academic staff the team met during the visit expressed that they are actively involved in the design, development and review of new programmes, contributing through regular consultations and team meetings, where they share their practice and experience, often leading to changes such as adjustments in assessment types. Academic staff also relay direct feedback from students, which plays a key role in shaping programme developments. The

team also heard that annual review meetings, led by curriculum leads, further supports this process by considering student feedback to inform minor revisions to programmes and to identify areas for future development as part of programme reapprovals.

228. The team therefore concluded that the college operates effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes, and that relevant staff are informed of and provided with guidance and support on, these procedures and their roles and responsibilities in relation to them.
229. The team reviewed whether responsibility for approving new programme proposals is clearly assigned, including the involvement of external expertise. The team also considered whether subsequent action is carefully monitored, and that close links are maintained between learning support services and the college's programme planning and approval arrangements. The team found that new programme proposals are developed and approved under the oversight of the college's Academic Board. The Executive Committee plays a key role by reviewing and approving the business case for new programmes in relation to the college's Strategic Plan and available resources. Programme Leaders are responsible for completing the necessary approval documentation, which is scrutinised by the Programme Approval Panel and the Education and Quality Committee before a final recommendation is made to the Academic Board. Additional internal scrutiny is provided by the Programme Approval Scrutiny Group, which assesses proposals and submits recommendations to the Education and Quality Committee. The team therefore formed the view that responsibility for approving new programme proposals at the college is clearly assigned through the college's academic governance structure which ensures comprehensive scrutiny and oversight.
230. The team also found that external expertise is an integral component of the programme approval process. The formal Programme Approval Panel, central to the approval process, is constituted to include at least two external members with relevant academic and professional expertise. Additionally, external examiners contribute significantly by approving programme amendments, with their reports formally considered by the Degrees Committee and the Education and Quality Committee. Market research for new programmes also involves external consultation with external academics, practitioners, professional partners, and former students, ensuring that proposals are developed with a strong evidence base and external stakeholder input.
231. This approach was evident in the documentation the team examined relating to the reapproval of the college's postgraduate taught programmes and the approval of the MEd programme. The reapproval process began in late 2022, with proposals scrutinised internally by the Programme Approval Scrutiny Group in September 2023. The team noted that this subcommittee of the Education and Quality Committee thoroughly reviewed the draft proposals to ensure they aligned with the college's regulations. The Programme Approval Scrutiny Group meet with programme leaders which resulted in recommendations to enhance the proposals, such as making the programme's flexibility more explicit and formalising mid-programme assessments. The formal Programme Approval Panel, which included three external members, convened in October 2023. It met with students and staff, resulting in a set of conditions and recommendations, such as reviewing the marking criteria for consistency and appending student outcomes data. The panel also commended areas of good practice, notably the student-centred approach adopted across the suite of programmes. Following confirmation that all conditions were met, the Academic Board gave final approval in March

2024. Similarly, the MEd programme underwent a thorough approval process which commenced with a business case being presented to the Executive Committee in February 2023, which approved the proposal subject to revised costings. The MEd was then included in the Graduate School reapproval process, undergoing scrutiny from the Programme Approval Scrutiny Group and the Programme Approval Panel. The final approval for the MEd was granted by the Academic Board in March 2024.

232. The team saw further evidence of the college's approach to programme design and development in the documentation presented at the June 2025 meeting of the Education and Quality Committee, which considered proposals for minor amendments to the MEd and BMus programmes. The proposed amendments included three key changes. Firstly, a modification to the placement module was proposed, allowing students to opt for a 30-credit 'Minor Placement' instead of the 60-credit 'Major Placement'. The rationale for this was to offer students greater flexibility and choice, enabling them to take other taught modules to enhance their teaching practice or develop specialisms, such as a vocal pedagogy focus. Secondly, a change was proposed to allow students enrolled on the PGDip Ed or PGCert Ed to transfer onto the full MEd programme. This was designed to support students, particularly those in employment, who might find they are able to extend their studies after initially enrolling on a shorter programme. Finally, a proposal was put forward for a new optional module, 'Vocal Leadership' in the BMus programme. This module was developed in response to a recognised need for specialist pedagogical training in group singing, identified through consultations with students and external music education providers. The proposal highlights a planned partnership with the National School's Singing Programme, supporting the college's strategic aim to connect its curriculum with national initiatives and enhance graduate employment opportunities. In the team's view, these amendments, which had been approved by the relevant Degrees Committee and supported by the external examiner, exemplify how the college's approach also facilitates the continuous enhancement of its curriculum. Taken together, this evidence demonstrated to the team that the college's arrangements for programme design, development, and approval are robust and operate in practice as described in its policies and procedures.

233. The team also found that, following programme approval, subsequent actions are rigorously monitored through a structured process to ensure the continuous enhancement of the college's academic provision. The Academic Board is responsible for overseeing the progress of newly approved and reapproved programmes, while operational responsibility lies with the Undergraduate Degrees Committee and the Postgraduate Taught Degrees Committee, which monitor the implementation of the SEER action plan. The team reviewed the minutes of the degrees committees and found that the subsequent monitoring of actions was effective. For example, following the reapproval of the BMus (Hons) Popular Music programme, the external examiner identified inconsistencies in the quality of feedback provided to students. In response, the college implemented clearer assessment briefs, scaffolded support for first-year students, and additional staff training. Moreover, the team noted that the minutes of the degrees committees, together with the SEER action plan, form a comprehensive record and audit trail of programme monitoring activities. These are reported to the college's Education and Quality Committee ensuring, in the team's view, transparency and accountability in the ongoing enhancement of programme quality following the approval of programmes.

234. The team saw evidence that close links are maintained between learning support services and the college's programme planning and approval arrangements. For example, the programme

proposal process outlined in the Academic Quality Handbook explicitly requires consultation on resource requirements with the Director of Finance and the Head of Library Services, ensuring that necessary learning resources are identified and in place from the outset. Specifically, the Head of Library Services is consulted to 'report on the required library provision and related costs to support the proposed programme's bibliography and content'. The programme approval documentation must also include discussion of 'how the programme articulates with central college resources' and 'the facilities available to support learning, teaching and the professional development of students on the programme'. Furthermore, programme specifications, prepared as part of the college's programme planning and approval process, are expected to describe 'the academic support structures that will be available to students on [a] programme', such as assistance with study skills, academic writing and research.

235. To triangulate this evidence, the team met with staff responsible for learning support services at the college, who confirmed that close and effective links are maintained between academic services and programme planning and approval processes. These staff provided examples such as the MEd programme, where early discussions between the library team and the programme leader addressed resourcing implications. Similarly, the reapproval of the BMus (Hons) Popular Music programme involved significant input from professional services teams to evaluate equipment and space requirements. Staff also highlighted that their membership of the Education and Quality Committee ensures continued input into programme design, development, and approval decisions, which are subsequently reflected in the college's annual business planning cycle. The team noted that no new postgraduate research programmes have yet been through the programme approval process at the college, however, discussion of the role of learning support services, including links with postgraduate research programmes and students, are discussed more generally under criterion D1.

236. Therefore, the team concluded that responsibility for approving new programme proposals is clearly assigned, including the involvement of external expertise, and subsequent action is carefully monitored, and that close links are maintained between learning support services and the college's programme planning and approval arrangements.

237. To assess whether the coherence of programmes with multiple elements or alternative pathways is secured and maintained, the team examined the evidence set out in paragraph 221. The team also received a live demonstration of the college's student records system, UNIT-e, as well as its VLE during the visit. The team considered that the evidence demonstrated to the team that the college secures the coherence of programmes with multiple elements or alternative pathways through a robust framework set out in its Academic Quality Handbook. As part of the college's programme design and approval process, programmes are reviewed to ensure close alignment between programme aims, learning outcomes and structures, securing coherence across multiple elements or alternative pathways. This coherence is maintained over time through the college's periodic review and reapproval of its existing programmes every five years. The team also noted that 'the introduction of a new named pathway or route within a programme' is formally classified by the college as a major amendment, requiring additional review and possibly a full reapproval process. In the team's view, this rigorous scrutiny ensures that the coherence of any changes that might significantly affect programmes with multiple elements or alternative pathways over time is effectively maintained.

238. Currently, both BMus (Hons) and BMus (Hons) Popular Music programmes enable students to follow pathways on different specialisms. The team found that the college's programme specifications and handbooks articulate coherence across pathways and therefore play a critical role in securing and maintaining the integrity of programmes with multiple elements or alternative study routes. These documents offer detailed guidance on module and pathway selection, enabling students to make informed choices that support their academic progression in alignment with the overall aims of their programme. The team received confirmation that students' pathway specialisms are recorded in UNIT-e and reflected in their academic transcripts.

239. The team also found that the programme handbooks systematically outline which modules correspond to specific elective strands or developing specialisms and set out clear eligibility criteria for pursuing pathway options. For example, in the fourth year of the BMus (Hons) programme, students are advised that they may choose an additional 'Pathway Option' in an area of emerging specialism only if they have already completed two or more modules from the relevant elective strand and are enrolled in the 40-credit 'Principal Study Option' in their final year. The team determined that this approach is robust and ensures that students' module choices align with their developing areas of specialism.

240. The academic staff the team met during the visit further expressed that the college maintains coherence of programmes with multiple elements or alternative pathways through a carefully structured system of oversight and support. A key example cited was the new MEd programme, which is intentionally designed for flexibility to accommodate a geographically dispersed student body. Despite this flexibility, academic coherence is maintained through clearly defined research-led and professional practice-led pathways, each supported by module prerequisites that guide progression and ensure alignment with the programme's aims and learning outcomes.

241. The team noted that the college's personal tutoring system was also identified by academic staff as a critical mechanism for maintaining the coherence of programmes with multiple elements or alternative pathways. As discussed further under criterion D1, tutors meet with students at least once per semester to provide tailored advice on module selection, ensuring that each student's chosen pathway remains coherent, academically rigorous, and aligned with their individual goals. This evidence led the team to form the view that the coherence of programmes with multiple elements or alternative pathways is secured and maintained.

242. Overall, the team's view was that the college's approach to the design and approval of courses contributes to a high quality experience for students, irrespective of their background. The team is assured that the college's existing procedures and processes will be effectively and consistently applied to postgraduate research programmes should it gain Full Research DAPs.

### **Learning and teaching**

243. To assess how the college approaches the learning and teaching of its degree programmes, the team examined evidence including:

- Strategic Plan and Supporting Strategies
- programme specifications, student and programme handbooks

- TEF submission and panel statement
- Academic Regulations, Quality Handbook and Student-Facing Policies
- the college's Staff Handbook and Code of Conduct
- documents relating to the audit of the college's VLE.

244. The team also met with staff and students during the visit and had access to the college's VLE.

245. To assess whether the college articulates and implements a strategic approach to learning and teaching which is consistent with its stated academic objectives, the team reviewed the college's Strategic Plan and supporting strategies, which articulate its objectives and approach to learning and teaching at a strategic level. Echoing the discussion under criterion A, which presents examples of the college's consistent application of its strategy and mission, the team found that this strategic framework combines the pursuit of artistic excellence with innovative pedagogy, seeking to develop exceptional musicians who possess not only technical mastery but also the creativity to shape the future of the music profession. The team also noted that at the core of the college's vision lies a commitment to providing 'a world-class, inspiring and progressive learning experience' that values individual aspirations while nurturing 'highly skilled creative practitioners and entrepreneurs' through deep engagement with 'real-world' professional practice. This includes placements, apprenticeships and mentoring programmes that develop both musical and leadership skills.

246. The college's programme specifications, Academic Quality Handbook, and student and programme handbooks clearly demonstrate that the college also implements a strategic approach to learning and teaching consistent with its stated academic objectives, particularly through its emphasis on creative practice. The team considered this approach to be pedagogically sound and conducive to achieving those objectives. For example, the emphasis on one-to-one teaching, supported and enriched by masterclasses, rehearsals and authentic assessments in professional settings, clearly contributes, in the team's view, to the college's aim of developing student employability.

247. The team also noted evidence of external recognition that supports this evidence of the college effectively delivering a strategic approach to learning and teaching aligned with its stated academic objectives. For example, the college received a Global Teaching Excellence Award in 2018 as an internationally recognised provider of music study, and college was awarded Gold in the TEF for a second consecutive time in 2023. Therefore, the team concluded that the college articulates and implements a strategic approach to learning and teaching which is consistent with its stated academic objectives.

248. The college provides a broad range of physical, virtual and social learning environments to support students' academic and artistic development. Specialist teaching spaces, practice rooms and fully equipped performance venues offer high quality facilities for individual and collaborative work. Digital resources include campus-wide Wi-Fi, an online room booking system and a VLE that supports access to learning materials and resources. The library provides extensive print and digital collections, as well as access to archives and special collections. Students can also access a range of support services through the Health and

Wellbeing Hub, covering areas such as finance, counselling, disability support and performance health.

249. Through its Strategic Plan, the college commits to creating a 'welcoming, supportive and collegial environment that is inclusive, respectful, open and accessible', empowering students and graduates to 'advocate for an inclusive, safe and supportive working environment for all'. This commitment is reinforced in the Student Charter, which affirms the college's responsibility to provide 'access to high quality facilities and resources to support [students'] learning', while also setting the expectation that students will 'treat college facilities and learning resources with care and respect and adhere to regulations on their use'.
250. The team found that the college meets these commitments through a coherent framework of policies and procedures. These include the Health and Safety Policy Statement, the Safeguarding Policy and the Student Conduct and Discipline Policy, which outlines expectations for student behaviour. All staff are also required to follow the Staff Handbook and Code of Conduct. In the team's view, these policies and procedures are comprehensive and robust, and are being implemented effectively by the college, resulting in learning environments that are secure, inclusive and consistently supportive of students' needs. For example, the newly adopted reporting tool 'RNCM Raise It' enables students to raise concerns about their welfare or report incidents of bullying or harassment, ensuring that they have accessible and confidential mechanisms for seeking help and support.
251. The recent enhancement of the college's VLE platform demonstrated a further example of how the college is embedding these commitments into day-to-day practices that maintain learning environments that are not only functional, but also inclusive, respectful and responsive to the evolving needs of its student community. Following an internal audit that identified gaps in governance and functionality, the college redesigned the VLE's interface aimed at improving navigation, reducing information overload and enhancing the overall user experience. Accessibility and inclusivity were central to this redevelopment, with the introduction of consistent page templates to support diverse learning needs and training programmes to improve digital literacy among staff and students. Additional measures included the integration of wellbeing resources directly into the VLE, enabling students to access essential support services at any time.
252. The students the team met during the visit confirmed that the college maintains physical, virtual and social learning environments that are safe, accessible and reliable, and that these are used in ways that promote dignity, courtesy and respect. Students described a range of induction activities that support safe and effective use of facilities, including early introductions to studios, stage areas and specialist spaces such as Studio 8. Health and safety guidance is embedded into academic programmes from the start, for example through tours led by stage managers and discussions during welcome week, including sessions on protecting hearing. Students who require additional support, such as access to quiet rooms or enhanced accessibility, reported that the college responds to their needs sensitively and effectively.
253. The library team and other support staff were praised for their helpfulness, and students also spoke positively about the comprehensive induction sessions covering the use of physical and digital resources. Peer support also plays a valuable role, with students noting the availability of other musicians, ensembles and informal departmental networks to enhance their learning experience. Moreover, the VLE was described as helpful and accessible, with recent

improvements such as better scheduling visibility and streamlined use of Microsoft Forms for gathering information. Students appreciated that the platform is regularly updated and that their feedback on the user experience is taken seriously. Similarly, postgraduate research students described the learning environment at the college as progressive and enabling, with staff willing to accommodate experimental or non-traditional approaches to practice and research. They felt encouraged to challenge conventions and supported to develop independently within a respectful and collegial culture.

254. The team noted that the college does not currently offer any academic programmes delivered by distance learning. However, it found that the college has established a robust infrastructure to support students enrolled on campus-based programmes who, exceptionally, need to study or access learning materials remotely. Central to this provision is the college's VLE, which enables students to access learning resources and support materials for all modules, submit work for assessment and participate in forums, discussions and notice boards at a distance, supporting independent learning. Assessment is marked online, with grades and feedback communicated directly through the VLE platform.

255. The team also found that teaching across many of the college's modules is delivered through a combination of in-person and online formats, including one-to-one lessons, small group classes, directed band rehearsals and a range of other interactive activities. To facilitate high quality online learning, the college holds an institutional Zoom licence, enabling students to engage in live online sessions and international masterclasses. For example, Zoom is used in the BMus (Hons) Popular Music programme to enhance students' adaptability to digital platforms and provide access to global music industry professionals.

256. The provision of online resources is also integral to the students' ability to learn independently and flexibly. The library offers comprehensive access to audio-visual streaming services, databases, e-books, journals and digital sheet music platforms, complementing its physical holdings. These digital resources are accessible via the college's VLE and are available to all students, including those studying, exceptionally, at a distance, which the team considered an effective means of supporting their learning.

257. Training sessions for postgraduate research students are primarily delivered face-to-face, but the college provides remote access links to those unable to attend in person. The team saw evidence that hybrid delivery of research training has become standard practice, offering greater flexibility to meet individual student needs. The postgraduate research students met by the team confirmed that the use of Zoom supports high quality audio and ensures that online participation remains effective. Students also reported having full access to the library's online resources and found the college's VLE to be 'helpful to students studying at distance'. The team also met with staff supervising postgraduate researchers, who gave examples of students based overseas attending essential events at the college, while also benefiting from studying at a distance through sessions delivered via Zoom and access to asynchronous learning resources. The team therefore formed the view that the college maintains physical, virtual and social learning environments that are safe, accessible and reliable for every student, promoting dignity, courtesy and respect in their use. The team also concluded that robust arrangements exist for ensuring that the learning opportunities provided to students at the college who may be studying at a distance are effective.

258. To assess whether every student is enabled to monitor their own progress and further their academic development, the assessment team reviewed:

- student and programme handbooks
- information from the college's VLE
- MMU Postgraduate Research Regulations and the college's provisional Postgraduate Research Regulations
- provisional postgraduate research supervision log template and provisional procedure to support postgraduate research progress.

259. The team also met with students during the visit.

260. The team found that the college actively enables all its students to monitor their performance through effective formative and summative feedback on their academic work, supported by standardised feedback templates and academic transcripts that help track academic progress. This is further enhanced by weekly support from principal study tutors, specialist academic staff who provide one-on-one, intensive tuition in a specific instrument or vocal area. Guidance on study options is offered through meetings, online resources and direct consultations with year tutors and heads of programme, fostering the students' academic development.

261. In response to student feedback, the college introduced a personal tutor system in the 2023-24 academic year, which has now been extended to all undergraduate students. This system complements the existing one-to-one principal study tutor support by providing tailored academic and professional guidance, such as individual study choices, professional development needs and broader opportunities within their degree programmes.

262. As outlined under criterion B1, students can access their exam board-approved marks and annual results via UNIT-e. The team also found that the college utilises its VLE effectively to enable all students to monitor their own progress and further their academic development. For instance, the 'Research Lecture Recital' module incorporates online formative assessments where students submit proposed titles and sources, receiving direct feedback via the VLE. The integration of quiz tools allows students to self-assess their knowledge and understanding of the subject. Similarly, undergraduate modules such as 'Music in Context 1' employ online interactive lessons, quizzes and videos to deliver early assessment and feedback, fostering the development of study skills. Practical tools, such as the Excel-based mark calculator in the 'Theory and Musicianship 1 and 2' modules, enable students to track their performance across semesters. Furthermore, stand-alone resources like the online 'Hearing and Exploring Modes' course, which is accessible to all students, offer immediate feedback for improvisation and musicianship practice. In the team's view, these examples demonstrate how the college enables every student to monitor their progress and advance their academic development through a combination of personalised academic support and accessible digital resources.

263. The team found that, under current MMU regulations, postgraduate research students track their own progress through reports signed by their primary supervisor after each meeting. An informal initial project review with the primary supervisor establishes annual objectives, which are subsequently monitored by an independent progression review panel during the formal annual review. The student's primary supervisor also reports on progress at this stage. Part-

time postgraduate researchers participate in annual 'check-ins' during their first and third years of study.

264. In preparation for gaining Full Research DAPs, the college intends to maintain this support model. Supervision logs will continue to be completed after each meeting, and an annual plan will be jointly developed by the student and primary supervisor at the start of each academic year to enable targeted academic development. Students will be required to submit materials appropriate to their stage of study and deliver an oral presentation to the progression review panel, a process which the team considered effective in facilitating targeted formative feedback and cultivating the academic independence and professional-level practice expected of postgraduate researchers.

265. A new procedure to support postgraduate research progress will replace the current framework provided by the college's validating partner, offering enhanced support to students who require assistance to stay on track. This procedure outlines a structured process to address and manage cases where postgraduate research students at the college are identified as making unsatisfactory academic progress or failing to engage adequately with their studies. Additionally, the proposed formal assessment of progress will include a viva-style evaluation with an external academic providing, in the team's view, valuable preparation for the final oral examination.

266. Students the team met during the visit reported feeling well supported in monitoring their progress and academic development. They highlighted the value of being assigned a member of staff with whom they could hold regular meetings to discuss progress. Postgraduate researchers echoed similar views, noting that supervision logs, consistently updated with feedback from supervisors, serve as a continuous tool for reflection and tracking development. Formal milestones, such as the annual review, were also reported to provide an independent perspective that students find reassuring, complementing input from their supervisory teams. The postgraduate research conference was cited as another valuable opportunity for students to monitor their progress and further their academic development. Based on this evidence, the team concluded that every student at the college is enabled to monitor their own progress and further their academic development.

267. Overall, the team's view was that the college's approach to the learning and teaching of its programmes contributes to a high quality experience for students, irrespective of their background. The college articulates and implements a clear strategic approach to learning and teaching aligned with its academic objectives, combining artistic excellence with innovative pedagogy to develop highly skilled, creative practitioners. The college provides inclusive, accessible and well-resourced physical, virtual and social learning environments, reinforced by comprehensive policies and systems. Should it gain Full Research DAPs, the team is assured the college will continue to apply its existing approaches to its postgraduate research programmes and students.

## **Assessment**

268. To assess how the college approaches the assessment of its degree programmes, the team reviewed evidence including:

- Academic Regulations, Quality Handbook and student-facing policies

- programme specifications, student and programme handbooks
- student assessment feedback templates and student transcript
- external examiner reports covering all of the college's taught programmes over the past three academic years
- sample of student assessed work
- assessment moderation reports.

269. In addition, the team met with students during their visit to the college.

270. The assessment team found that the college operates valid and reliable assessment processes, outlined in the Academic Regulations and Academic Quality Handbook, which are aligned with the OfS's B conditions of registration and the sector-recognised standards. The team reviewed a sample of student assessed work. The sample was representative as it comprised 24 modules spanning every level of the college's undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes and included assessed work from postgraduate research students at all six stages of their research degrees. The team cross-referenced this work against programme specifications and student handbooks and found that it demonstrated that assessment tasks are appropriately designed and linked to module and programme learning outcomes. Moreover, the online feedback forms showed that written feedback referred directly to these outcomes and was supported by clear marking criteria and grade descriptors.

271. For example, in the BMus (Hons) Popular Music module 'Production 2', students are assessed through the creation of a 15-minute production and engineering portfolio, comprising a live band recording, a remix and an original composition using a sample-based performance system. This is accompanied by a reflective commentary delivered either as a 1,000-word essay or a five-minute video presentation. The assessment is clearly aligned with the module learning outcomes, which included demonstrating knowledge of recording, mixing and mastering techniques, applying creative music production practices, critically analysing stylistic and technical approaches and deploying production methods in the creation of new work. The team considered that these outcomes reflect the broader programme learning outcomes, which focus on developing technical and creative proficiency in music production, critical reflection and professional readiness.

272. The team additionally reviewed a sample of student work from this module and found clear alignment between the assessment task, intended learning outcomes and the feedback provided. For instance, one student received detailed feedback on the technical execution of their live band recording, including commentary on instrumental clarity, vocal processing, use of stereo imaging and the dynamic range of the mix. The feedback also acknowledged the student's use of hardware in the remix project, highlighting how this creative decision influenced their production approach. Moreover, the feedback praised the student's original composition for its inventive use of sampling and lo-fi aesthetics, while offering constructive suggestions for further development, such as incorporating a broader range of transformed sounds. The video commentary submitted by the student was commended for clearly articulating their creative and technical decision making and for the depth of their production skills. This evidence demonstrated to the team that assessment tasks are carefully designed

to align with learning outcomes and that feedback is both detailed and developmental, supporting students in refining their technical, creative and reflective practice.

273. Triangulating this evidence further, the team found that all external examiners' reports reviewed, covering all of the college's taught programmes over the past three academic years, provided explicit confirmation that assessments are conducted in accordance with the college's policies and regulations and reported that 'the assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programmes'. The team noted that external examiners at the college consistently confirmed in their annual reports that students are afforded adequate opportunity to demonstrate through assessment their achievement of programme aims and learning outcomes.

274. The team also found that the college operates an appropriate and thorough process for the recognition of prior learning. Students may receive credit for prior certificated or experiential learning, typically at the point of entry, to count towards a degree award. The Academic Board oversees the procedures for recognising prior learning and credit transfer, which are managed by the Academic Registrar and approved by the Board of Examiners. Normally, no more than 50 per cent of the total credit for any award at the college may be granted through these routes, which do not contribute to classification calculations. Once approved by the Board of Examiners, all prior learning credits are standardly recorded on student transcripts.

275. The team therefore concluded that the college operates valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

276. The team assessed whether staff and students engage in dialogue to promote a shared understanding of the basis on which academic judgements are made. The team found that, as outlined in the Academic Quality Handbook, one of the guiding principles for assessment design at the college is that 'all assessment activities have clearly articulated assessment criteria, weightings and level descriptors that are understood by all students and staff involved in the assessment process'. This shared understanding is further supported through the provision of detailed assessment briefs via the VLE at the start of every module and the inclusion of detailed marking descriptors for different assessment types in the Student and Programme Handbooks. The team considered that the systematic use of these descriptors ensures that both markers and students understand the criteria associated with each grade band, thereby promoting transparency and consistency.

277. The team also found that students are provided with structured written feedback using a standardised template. Academic staff are expected to 'use supportive, constructive feedback statements that refer directly to the learning outcomes of the module'. The team's review of a sample of assessed work confirmed that the feedback provided was clearly linked to the marking criteria and grade descriptors. Across all stages, modules and types of assessment, the college employs a thorough and consistent model for providing feedback, which has two elements. The first is a matrix in which generic and module specific criteria for each assessment are given a rating (Excellent (1st), Very Good (2:1), Good (2:2), Adequate (3rd), Fail), which provide students with summary of the strengths and weaknesses of their submission and a guide to how their mark was determined. Full discussion of the evidence of assessment feedback provided to students is set out under criterion C1, paragraphs 359 to

366. Students may also request to receive face-to-face feedback on an individual basis, which the team considered an effective mechanism for fostering a shared understanding of the basis on which academic judgements are made.

278. During the visit the team heard from students that they actively engage in constructive dialogue with staff to understand how academic judgements are made. In addition to receiving an overall grade, students are given written feedback and a completed feedback grid mapping their performance against the module learning outcomes. Tutors were described as consistently reinforcing marking criteria and expectations throughout the course, helping to build clarity. Students also reported having opportunities to discuss feedback directly with module leaders or other academic staff, who were viewed as approachable and open to discussion. This ongoing communication was regarded as instrumental in clarifying expectations and supporting the students' understanding of academic judgements.

279. Postgraduate research students similarly highlighted positive engagement with staff regarding academic expectations and judgements. One student described to the team the effectiveness of their supervision process and the timely provision of feedback. Another student spoke positively about the flexibility of the supervisory approach, which supported both their academic and practice-based work. These accounts suggested to the team that open communication between postgraduate researchers and their supervisors plays a significant role in building a shared understanding of academic expectations in the research environment at the college. Based on this evidence, the team reached the conclusion that staff and students at the college engage in dialogue to promote a shared understanding of the basis on which academic judgements are made.

280. To confirm that students are provided with opportunities to develop an understanding of, and the necessary skills to demonstrate, good academic practice, and that the college operates processes for preventing, identifying, and responding to unacceptable academic practice, the team examined the evidence set out in paragraph 268, together with:

- the college's Academic Integrity Policy
- Good Research Conduct Policy
- the Student Health and Wellbeing Hub
- the college's 2024 Welcome Week Programme and Induction Material
- discussions with students during the visit to the college.

281. The team found that the college provides students with opportunities to develop an understanding of, and the necessary skills to demonstrate, good academic practice. Advice and guidance on academic integrity, and how to avoid common forms of unacceptable academic practice, are made available to students through the Student and Programme Handbooks. This also forms part of the students' induction into their study programmes, for example the Welcome Week Programme and Induction Material shows that sessions include accessing academic support from the library, and on research ethics and integrity. In the team's view, the advice offered to students is clear, detailed and comprehensive, with broader guidance and support also integrated into programme-level teaching and learning activities, such as participation in specialist workshops and essay writing tasks. Moreover, the Student

Health and Wellbeing Hub, accessible on the college's VLE, contains a link to resources on 'Study Strategies and Academic Integrity', which includes detailed and practical guidance on topics such as academic referencing, using sources, avoiding plagiarism and academic malpractice, and essay writing.

282. The team also found that the college has established comprehensive processes for preventing, identifying and responding to unacceptable academic practice, which are outlined in the Academic Integrity Policy and the Good Research Conduct Policy. As emphasised in its Academic Quality Handbook, the college's approach to assessment is 'designed to minimise opportunities for students to commit academic misconduct'. The handbook also makes explicit the college's commitment to ensuring that 'policies and procedures relevant to academic integrity are clear, accessible and actively promoted rather than simply made available'.

283. The college uses plagiarism-detection tools for the submission of student work, and concerns of unacceptable academic practice regarding postgraduate researchers can be raised informally with supervisors or with the Associate Director of Research, who assesses allegations before escalating if necessary. When unacceptable academic practice is found, the team noted that the college's response uses a structured, tiered approach based on the severity of the case and the student's level of study. Minor academic infractions, such as poor academic referencing, may result in warnings or mark deductions, while serious or repeat offences go before the Academic Malpractice Committee, with penalties ranging from resubmission to expulsion. Research misconduct triggers a formal investigation by an impartial panel, which examines evidence and interviews involved parties before determining the outcome. Upheld allegations may lead to disciplinary action, while minor issues are normally resolved through additional training. The team's review of the minutes of the Board of Examiners meetings demonstrated the college's structured response to academic malpractice. For example, the November 2023 meeting recorded three upheld malpractice cases, while the July 2024 meeting noted seven cases, six of which were upheld. Penalties included resubmission with capped marks. The team found that this approach was robust, enabling the college to maintain high standards in the academic practice of its students.

284. Students reported to the team that they had multiple opportunities to develop an understanding of, and the necessary skills to demonstrate, good academic practice. For example, they noted that academic staff regularly reinforced expectations regarding good academic practice during taught sessions, and that library staff delivered dedicated drop-in sessions on academic integrity support and understanding copyright and the fair use of resources. Students also highlighted the availability of online materials to support good academic practice, including referencing guides accessible via the library's website. The team also received confirmation that induction sessions at the start of the academic year covered appropriate referencing practices and the use of online tools to support the detection of plagiarism. Similarly, postgraduate research students reported that those learning to use a different referencing system were provided with suitable training and resources. They also emphasised the value of specialist music knowledge within the library, particularly in navigating copyright permissions for music editions.

285. The team therefore concluded that students are provided with opportunities to develop an understanding of, and the necessary skills to demonstrate, good academic practice and that the college operates processes for preventing, identifying and responding to unacceptable academic practice.

286. To assess whether processes for marking assessments and for moderating marks are clearly articulated and consistently operated by those involved in the assessment process, the team examined the evidence set out in paragraph 268. The team found that the college's processes for marking assessments and for moderating marks are clearly articulated in its Academic Quality Handbook, as well as in the Student and Programme Handbooks, all of which are available via the college's VLE. All assessments are marked using criteria clearly set out in the programme handbooks. The team considered the handbooks' coverage of marking and moderation processes to be comprehensive, with guidance presented in a clear and accessible manner for both staff and students.

287. The team reviewed a sample of student assessed work from across all undergraduate, postgraduate taught, and postgraduate research programmes at the college, and found that processes for marking and moderation are consistently implemented by those involved in assessment. This was evident in the assessed work, which adhered to the college's marking and moderation framework and included structured feedback aligned with the established marking criteria. The team also noted the consistent use of standard templates, such as the Student Assessment Feedback Templates, which supported clarity and uniformity in feedback. The use of a checklist-based system and explicit references to grade bands further reinforced the transparency and consistency of marking decisions across modules and programmes.

288. The external examiner reports reviewed by the team provided further evidence of the consistent operation of marking assessments at the college. For example, comments from external examiners for the college's BMus (Hons) and GRNCM programmes included: 'feedback on all modules is [...] constructive', 'well-considered, always qualifying the next steps for improvement throughout the range of achievement' and 'plenty of suggestions for improvement across the range'. The team concluded that feedback aligns with the college's stated aim of ensuring that feedback is 'constructive and designed to help even the best students improve'. Additionally, the team's scrutiny of taught moderation reports showed that marks were rigorously reviewed through a transparent and consistently applied process, with assessors and moderators using agreed criteria to reach appropriately justified outcomes. The team also found that, across panels, internal and external assessors engage in structured discussions which reference the marking criteria. For example, in the School of Wind, Brass and Percussion Master of Music examination, assessors were invited to explain their rationale, focusing on technical proficiency, ensemble quality and programming. In the team's view, the consistent use of tools such as tick boxes aligned with grade bands and feedback templates strengthens the moderation process and contributes to fair and consistent outcomes for students. The process also reflects a commitment to inclusivity, with reasonable adjustments from Personal Learning Plans incorporated where appropriate.

289. The team also found that staff at the college are supported in developing and maintaining effective assessment practices through a structured and collaborative framework. As discussed under criterion C1, this includes opportunities for regular individual and collective reflection, such as through the Professional Development Review process. Programme Leaders also play a central role, holding responsibility for the design, approval, and organisation of assessment and reassessment tasks, and ensuring the appropriate arrangements for examinations are in place. In addition, the Director of Programmes provides strategic oversight and guidance on assessment policies and practices, supports programme leaders in their responsibilities and ensures that marking and moderation are carried out in line with established procedures. The team therefore concluded that processes for marking

assessments and for moderating marks are clearly articulated and consistently operated by those involved in the assessment process.

290. Overall, the team's view was that the college's approach to the assessment of its programmes contributes to a high quality experience for students, irrespective of their background. The college operates valid and reliable assessment processes, clearly articulated in its regulations and handbooks, which enables learning opportunities to be consistently and rigorously quality assured.

### **External examining**

291. To determine whether the college makes scrupulous use of external examiners, including in the moderation of assessment tasks and student assessed work, the team reviewed a range of evidence that included:

- Academic Regulations, Quality Handbook and student-facing policies
- programme specifications, student and programme handbooks
- student assessment feedback templates and student transcript
- moderation reports
- external examiner reports covering all of the college's taught programmes over the past three academic years responses to these
- sample of student assessed work
- minutes of the Board of Examiners, Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Degree Committees and Education and Quality Committee.

292. The team also reviewed this evidence to assess whether the college gives full and serious consideration to the comments and recommendations contained in their reports, providing them with a considered and timely response to their comments and recommendations.

293. External examiners are appointed to all taught programmes at the college to ensure academic standards align with sector-recognised standards and are comparable to those set and achieved by other UK degree awarding bodies. The role of the external examiner is clearly set out in the college's Academic Regulations and Academic Quality Handbook. External examiners are full members of the Board of Examiners and are expected to attend each of its meetings. Their responsibilities include reviewing and moderating samples of assessed work, offering feedback on marking standards and approving final awards. They also meet annually with students on the programmes they oversee and submit a formal report on their findings, including any recommendations for improvement. The team reviewed the external examiner reports and the minutes of the Board of Examiners, confirming that the expectations set out in the college's Academic Regulations and Academic Quality Handbook are systematically met.

294. The team found that the college enables external examiners to conduct their role effectively through a range of structured measures. For example, programme leaders facilitate opportunities for external examiners to meet with the programme team and discuss the programme in advance of attending a Board of Examiners meeting, to promote a clear

understanding of the programme and its context. Each external examiner is provided with a copy of the 'College Guidelines for Examiners' and given access to all relevant programme documentation, including the programme handbook and detailed assessment and marking criteria. In addition, newly appointed external examiners are invited to engage in further discussions about their role with programme leaders and heads of school, helping to familiarise them with the expectations of the role. In the team's view, this approach enables the college to make scrupulous use of the external examiners it appoints. The team therefore formed the view that the college makes scrupulous use of external examiners by integrating them at all stages of the assessment process, including the moderation of student work. External examiner's role is clearly defined in academic regulations, they are supported through structured engagement with staff, students and relevant documentation, and they contribute directly to key decision-making bodies such as the Board of Examiners, all of which demonstrates a thorough and purposeful approach to their engagement.

295. The team also found that the college takes a systematic approach to the consideration and use of external examiners' reports. Reports are addressed to the Principal and circulated to the Director of Programmes, programme leaders, heads of schools and the Director of Academic Governance. The relevant Degrees Committee and the Education and Quality Committee then formally review each report. A summary of points for action, along with areas of good practice, is compiled and presented to the Academic Board, which also receives the full report. This summary highlights any issues requiring action at college level. Students are invited to comment on external examiners' reports during meetings of the Degrees Committees and the Education and Quality Committee.

296. External examiner reports are also considered at Board of Examiners meetings and form part of the annual reporting process, which is reviewed by the Education and Quality Committee and summarised for the Academic Board. The college's Quality Assurance Handbook sets the expectation that these reports form 'part of the continuous monitoring of programmes', and programme leaders are responsible for providing responses and action plans to address any concerns or recommendations and for identifying and sharing examples of good practice in the reports. In the external examiners' report template, the college makes explicit its commitment to 'give a considered response directly to examiners on the issues raised in [their] reports' and to include any action taken by the college following consideration of the reports. External examiners are also asked to confirm, through this document, that they are satisfied that the issues raised in previous reports have been, or are being, addressed.

297. The team saw evidence that the college gives full and serious consideration to the comments and recommendations contained in their reports, providing them with a considered and timely response to their comments and recommendations. For example, in response to feedback from the external examiner for the BMus (Hons) Popular Music programme regarding students' understanding of grading criteria, the programme leader acknowledged the issue and committed to continued work in this area. Similarly, another external examiner pointed to inconsistencies in the quantity and depth of feedback on the BMus (Hons) Popular Music programme. The programme leader recognised the importance of consistency and noted ongoing efforts to address it. These examples illustrated to the team how the college engages directly and constructively with feedback from external examiners to inform programme-level improvements. The team found that this approach is also evident in the minutes of the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Degree Committees and the Education and Quality Committee, where external examiner reports are discussed. For example, the Postgraduate

Taught Degrees Committee minutes from May 2024 show active engagement with examiner feedback, which highlighted issues regarding parity of feedback and library access. Specific actions were assigned to appropriate members of staff at the college, such as updating supervision arrangements for large taught research modules.

298. The team also found that the college provides timely responses to external examiner comments, as evidenced by the programme leader responses to external examiner reports document, which compiles feedback and actions within the same academic year. Committee minutes, including those of the Undergraduate Degrees Committee and Postgraduate Taught Degrees Committee, show regular and prompt discussion of examiner reports, in line with the college's Continuous Monitoring Schedule. Under the current MMU Postgraduate Research Regulations, external monitoring of the college's academic standards for postgraduate research programmes is provided through the final viva voce examination. Further discussion of this process is set out under criterion G1 but, in summary, the examination team consists of two independent examiners, one internal and one external, unless the candidate is currently a member of staff at RNCM, in which case both examiners are external. If granted Full Research DAPs, the college plans to strengthen this external oversight by appointing an external examiner to a newly established formal mid-point assessment panel. This would supplement the existing practice, ensuring robust and independent scrutiny at key stages of the research degree process.

299. Therefore, the team concluded that the college makes scrupulous use of external examiners, including in the moderation of assessment tasks and student assessed work, and that it gives full and serious consideration to the comments and recommendations contained in their reports, providing them with a considered and timely response to their comments and recommendations.

300. Overall, the college demonstrates a rigorous approach to the use of external examiners, integrating them effectively at all stages of the assessment process, including the moderation of student work. The college explicitly commits to providing considered and timely responses to examiners, with evidence showing detailed programme leader responses addressing specific feedback, confirming that the college gives full and serious consideration to the comments and recommendations from external examiners, leading to informed programme-level improvements.

### **Academic appeals and student complaints**

301. To assess whether the college has effective procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of the academic experience, and that these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement, with appropriate action taken following an appeal or complaint, the team reviewed a range of evidence including:

- Academic Regulations, Quality Handbook and student-facing policies
- student and programme handbooks
- Academic Appeals Policy and Student Complaints Policy
- MMU Postgraduate Research Regulations

- a redacted academic appeal and a redacted student complaint
- the Annual Report of Academic Appeals and Student Complaints.

302. The team also met with students during the visit to the college.

303. The team found that the college has in place detailed Academic Appeals and Student Complaints policies, which are reviewed regularly to ensure they continue to meet students' needs. These policies are accessible via the college's VLE and are clearly referenced in the Student Regulations and Information Handbook, the college's draft Postgraduate Research Handbook and in individual programme handbooks. Students are also informed of their right to appeal against a Board of Examiners decision through the Academic Appeals Policy in the letter they receive with their assessment results. Under its current validation agreement with MMU, complaints made by postgraduate research students relating to their experience at the college are considered under the college's own policy, while those concerning the college's validating partner are addressed under the complaints policy of MMU. In preparation for the seeking Full Research DAPs, the college has reviewed and amended its Academic Appeals and Student Complaints policies.

304. The team found that these procedures are comprehensive, written in accessible language and set out clear grounds for submitting an academic appeal or student complaint. The processes additionally incorporate evidence-based reviews of the concerns raised by impartial decision-makers and follow clearly defined stages with timelines for action.

305. To determine whether appropriate action is taken following an academic appeal or complaint, the team reviewed redacted case files provided by the college and met with students during the visit. These cases demonstrated that complaints and appeals were addressed in line with institutional procedures, within clearly defined time frames and with timely communication of outcomes. In the team's view, this documentation also reflected the college's commitment to procedural fairness, responsiveness to student concerns, and using case outcomes to enable enhancements. The team also found evidence that the college retains an external investigations company to investigate complex and serious complaints to ensure they are conducted impartially and with the benefit of the investigators' additional experience and expertise.

306. The students the team met with expressed broad confidence in the college's academic appeals and complaints processes. They reported that guidance on how to submit an appeal or complaint was readily available via the VLE, with additional anonymous reporting options available through the 'Raise It' platform. Students described the procedures as accessible and timely, and noted that tutors often acted as 'advocates' when concerns were raised. Postgraduate research students echoed these views, confirming that they found the procedures fair, timely and clearly signposted within the VLE. The team found that, across all student groups, there was a consistent perception that the college is committed to ensuring the fair and timely resolution of academic concerns, supported by robust procedures.

307. The team found that the academic appeals and student complaints processes serve as crucial mechanisms for institutional enhancement, as demonstrated by the annual reports on Academic Appeals and Student Complaints. Every meeting of the Board of Examiners considers the appeals that have been made and discusses any resulting actions for

enhancement. The Academic Appeals Panel monitors outcomes and reports annually to the Education and Quality Committee, while the Student Complaints Policy requires annual reporting to the Academic Board or Executive Committee. In the team's view, this structured approach goes beyond addressing individual student concerns and contributes to identifying and resolving broader issues, thereby strengthening the college's policies and student support mechanisms. For instance, the increase in academic appeals during the 2022-23 academic year, attributed to clearer guidance in results letters and a rise in mental health-related extenuating circumstances, prompted the college to refine its assessment results letter template, enhancing the students' understanding of valid appeal grounds. The prevalence of extenuating circumstances appeals also highlighted the need for additional student support. Recommendations from the Academic Appeals Panel, such as strengthening oversight of the Professional Experience Scheme and improving support for direct entry students, have led to targeted enhancements in student support and academic procedures at the college. Similarly, analysis of student complaints prompted refinements to its existing processes, including ensuring that heads of school are notified of unacceptable academic practice outcomes to offer targeted support.

308. Therefore, the team concluded that the college has effective procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of the academic experience, and that these procedures are fair, accessible and timely and enable enhancement, with appropriate action taken following an appeal or complaint. The college has also demonstrated readiness for applying its current procedures and policies to postgraduate research students should it gain Full Research DAPs.

## **Conclusions**

309. The assessment team concluded that the college demonstrates that it designs and delivers courses and qualifications that provide a high quality academic experience to all students from all backgrounds.

310. The team found that college operates rigorous and transparent processes for programme design, development and approval. Responsibilities are clearly assigned, with multiple layers of scrutiny involving internal and external stakeholders, including students and external experts. Staff are well supported through guidance and structured oversight, ensuring coherence and alignment with sector standards.

311. The college articulates a clear strategic approach to learning and teaching, combining artistic excellence with innovative pedagogy. Its physical, virtual and social learning environments are safe, accessible and inclusive, supported by robust policies and systems.

312. The college employs valid and reliable assessment processes, aligned with learning outcomes and sector standards. External examiners confirm the rigour and fairness of assessments, while structured feedback and moderation ensure consistency. Students are supported in developing good academic practice, with clear processes to address unacceptable academic practice. Recognition of prior learning is managed transparently, contributing to a high quality academic experience.

313. External examiners are integral to the college's assessment processes, with their feedback systematically reviewed and acted upon. Their reports inform continuous improvement, with timely responses and documented enhancements at both programme and institutional levels.

314. Moreover, the evidence demonstrated that the college's robust frameworks for programme design, teaching, assessment and quality assurance are equally applicable to its research degrees. The college's readiness for Full Research DAPs is further confirmed by its transparent academic governance, systematic engagement with external expertise and proven ability to enhance its academic provision based on internal and external feedback.

315. Therefore, the team concluded that the college continues to meet criterion B3 in relation to its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and meets criterion B3 for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

# Assessment of DAPs criterion C: Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of staff

## Criterion C1: The role of academic and professional staff

### Advice to the OfS

316. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion C1: The role of academic and professional staff because it meets the requirements of this criterion for its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

317. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows in summary that the college has demonstrated that it has appropriate numbers of staff to teach the students, and that all staff are appropriately qualified to teach and support the students at the levels of the qualifications being awarded.

318. The college ensures that staff maintain a professional understanding of current developments in research and scholarship in their subject and keep in touch with their professional practice. The college has also demonstrated that the assessment of students is carried out in a professional, rigorous and consistent way.

319. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside any other relevant information.

### Criterion C1.1

**C1.1: An organisation granted powers to award degrees assures itself that it has appropriate numbers of staff to teach its students. Everyone involved in teaching or supporting student learning, and in the assessment of student work, is appropriately qualified, supported and developed to the level(s) and subject(s) of the qualifications being awarded.**

### Reasoning

320. Reflecting the college's status as a small specialist provider, the college's current staffing base, at the time of the assessment, consists of a small number of staff on full-time (29) or part-time (35) academic contracts, and a larger body of 276 part-time adjunct staff. Staff on academic contracts have responsibility for research and research supervision and adjunct staff provide essential professional experience and expertise to the principal study of instrumental and vocal teaching that is at the core of the college's undergraduate programmes and several of its postgraduate taught programmes.

321. Directors hold strategic leadership responsibility for various aspects of the college's work, such as Programmes, Research, Undergraduate Studies and Taught Postgraduate Studies. In relation to curriculum, directors oversee the work of programme leaders for each degree qualification programme, alongside whom there is a parallel leadership structure for areas of specialism, such as Heads and Deputy Heads of Strings, Composition and Popular Music. For taught degree programmes, each module has a designated module leader, who coordinates the work of other staff involved in teaching it, as well as contributing to its delivery themselves.

Research degrees programmes are overseen by the college's Associate Director of Research, who reports to the Director of Research. Academic and teaching staff across all levels of provision are supported by professional services staff across a range of roles and teams that reflect the college's dual purpose as both a higher education institution and a live music venue in the centre of Manchester.

322. The team considered that the college runs an effective staff induction, performance and development framework that reflects the differing ways in which its academic and teaching staff are engaged. The Director of Programmes holds institutional responsibility for academic staff development. Staff on academic contracts undertake Performance Development Reviews (PDRs) annually, while part-time teaching staff are required to complete these reviews at least every three years. Provision is made within the staff development programme to pay part-time teaching staff to participate in training and development relevant to their roles.

323. The team reviewed how staff are provided with opportunities to engage in reflection and evaluation of their learning, teaching and assessment practice, and how this informs relevant learning, teaching and assessment practices.

324. The team reviewed the following evidence in relation to this criterion:

- a sample of programme handbooks
- Teaching and Learning Conference programmes
- SEERs
- a sample of PDRs.

325. The team also met with a representative group of teaching and research staff during the visit to the college.

326. The evidence reviewed demonstrated that staff engage in a variety of activities to reflect and evaluate both individually and collectively on their learning, teaching and assessment practice and that such reflection and evaluation informs ongoing practice. For example, the topic of the college's annual Teaching and Learning Conference in 2024 was 'Building belonging through pedagogy' and focused on underrepresentation and inclusive curriculum design. This included sessions with clear subject-specific focus relevant to the college's higher education delivery, such as 'How to find belonging for new professionals' delivered by a Professor of Cello. The college's BEDI Impact Report for 2023-24 evidences the impact of this conference and staff's reflections and pedagogical development regarding this topic. For example, the 2023-24 BEDI Report detailed college-wide activities such as 'Julia Perry Week' in March 2024, which marked the centenary of an African American composer through a range of teaching, research and performance activities.

327. Furthermore, SEERs, which capture actions and targets for enhancements to the college's programmes, demonstrate how outputs of staff reflection and evaluation mechanisms are captured, mapped and implemented to directly inform learning, teaching and assessment practice. For example, as noted under criterion B2, the 2023-24 SEERs for all taught programmes show how the college frames continuous monitoring and enhancements of its programmes into themes, including 'Enhancement Theme 6: Widen participation'. Under this

theme, the 2023-24 SEERs show that work undertaken to improve staff and students understanding of the term 'underrepresented' resulted in cultural change in 2024-25 and enhanced the diversity of repertoire performed across the institution by encouraging students and tutors to investigate music by underrepresented composers.

328. SEER reports also document a range of activities that evidence reflection and evaluation of teaching, learning and assessment practices and resultant impact. For example, the 2023-24 SEER for the BMus Popular Music programme highlighted changes to assessment and feedback to enhance consistency in feedback, to provide greater scaffolding and to ensure greater parity where optionality is permitted; all these actions were subsequently reported as completed. At postgraduate taught level, the SEER showed evidence of broadening the curriculum through the introduction of two new specialisms, including in pedagogy, as a result of reflection on enhancing students' career opportunities.

329. At an individual level, the sample of PDRs the team reviewed demonstrated evidence of reflection and evaluation in the development of new modules and revisions to existing curriculum. The PDR process involves individual staff members writing a reflective commentary on their activity over the past year, including successes, challenges and professional practice/performance or research, and professional development, as well as identifying future goals. One-to-one meetings with line managers allow reflection and discussion of these areas, resulting in agreed actions for the next year. The development of the new 'Artistic Project' module showed staff reflection on the importance of crediting student engagement in a wide variety of musical activities beyond those formally linked to other modules and the value of viva voce examinations in helping staff to enhance their personalised knowledge of individual students. Similarly, the Head of Popular Music's PDR demonstrated reflection on the importance of involving industry professionals in the delivery of parts of the curriculum, which was recognised as both a success and an area for future expansion. Furthermore, the PDRs showed how staff involved in instrumental and vocal teaching reflected on the importance of participating in masterclasses and engaging in training on neurodiversity to enhance their pedagogical practice.

330. The team found that staff development is supported through the college's Curriculum Development and Enhancement Fund, to which staff can apply for financial support to participate in conferences, workshops and other events to enhance their experience of curriculum design, enrichment and to build networks. The fund also supports projects related to any aspect of the college's Education Strategy, including pilots of new approaches to teaching and its evaluation. Staff are actively encouraged to gain Advance HE recognition and can use this fund to support applications. Further evidence of how staff at the college engage with Advance HE is discussed in detail in paragraphs 348 to 351. Details of funded staff developments in 2023-24 recorded staff attendance at a variety of pedagogical conferences, participation in accredited professional development courses such as 'Applied Neuroscience and Voice' and participation in events that offered professional development relevant to their specific roles, such as attending the European Saxophone Congress. During the team's meeting with members of the teaching body, staff highlighted examples of the support they had received, such as to complete doctoral degrees linked to their areas of teaching, and of the high value of the college's internal research expertise in music education and pedagogy, which is a significant focus for research.

331. In summary, the team determined that the evidence shows that relevant learning, teaching and assessment practices are informed by reflection, evaluation of professional practice and subject-specific and educational scholarship.

332. The team reviewed details of the college's staffing base to evaluate its academic and professional expertise.

333. The team reviewed the following evidence in relation to this criterion:

- a sample of staff CVs
- staff profiles on the college's website<sup>22</sup>
- REF 2021 results.

334. The team found that CVs and staff profiles for academic staff evidenced academic and professional expertise appropriate to their roles and responsibilities. Staff hold academic and professional qualifications which are, as a minimum, appropriate to the level of qualifications to the degree programmes they teach on, including doctoral degrees and pedagogical accreditations such as Advance HE Fellowship. Staff profiles also included a wide range of outputs for staff engaged in research, the quality of which is confirmed by the college's REF 2021 results, in which more than 90 per cent of its submitted outputs were rated 2\* or higher. Further discussion of staff's research outputs is set out in detail in Criterion F1.

335. Many staff serve or have previously served in leadership roles for learned societies and other bodies, such as the Royal Musical Association, Society for Music Analysis, European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music and the Department for Education's Music Hub Advisory Group. The large body of part-time teaching (adjunct) staff comprises musicians of national and international standing across all of the specialist fields offered by the college. Instrumental and vocal staff perform frequently as both soloists and members with leading ensembles throughout the UK and worldwide, while composition teachers have received commissions from a range of prestigious ensembles. In addition, masterclasses and workshops are frequently led by visiting international musicians. Therefore, the team determined that the evidence shows that staff have the necessary academic and professional expertise to fulfil their roles.

336. To determine whether staff display active engagement with the pedagogic development of their discipline knowledge, understanding of current research and advanced scholarship in their discipline and that such knowledge and understanding directly inform and enhance their teaching, the team reviewed evidence of professional development activities and met with representative of the teaching body to discuss pedagogical support and development. The team also reviewed this evidence to consider whether teaching staff actively engage with research and advanced scholarship to a level commensurate with the level and subject of the qualifications being offered.

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<sup>22</sup> See [Research Staff - Royal Northern College of Music](#).

337. The team reviewed the following evidence in relation to this criterion:

- programmes of the college's Teaching and Learning Conferences
- discussions with representatives of academic staff
- reports of activities supported by internal professional development funds
- the college website, including staff profiles
- the college's staff development funds and policies
- samples of academic CVs.

338. The team found that the college supports and develops its academic staff to engage with the pedagogic development of their discipline knowledge, understanding of current research and advanced scholarship through its Staff Development Fund. Staff can apply to this fund for development opportunities such as attending conferences, discipline knowledge training or pedagogical training. According to the college's report, over 20 members of staff received funding through this route in 2023-24 and activities included seeking Advance HE Fellowship and a 'JISC AI and teaching' training event. The team found that one member of teaching staff used this funding to pursue research on AI in music education, the outcome of which was shared with the college's Education Quality Committee. The team found that this research enabled effective discussion at the committee regarding how the college can further support students to engage critically with AI tools. The Head of Undergraduate Studies held oversight for this work, providing sufficiently senior leadership to ensure that the college maintains a consistent approach and response to the use of AI across the curriculum.

339. The emphasis placed on teaching that is research-led, professional practice-led, or both has resulted in the college supporting members of teaching staff to complete research degrees in their areas of specialism. During the team's meeting with representatives of the teaching staff, it heard how this emphasised the vital link between their expertise and their pedagogy. For example, the Head of Composition and Programme Leader for the Master of Education (Med) expressed how such opportunities had led to career advancement by appointment to their present roles.

340. The StART Entrepreneurship Project (StART), led by the college in collaboration with two other higher education institutions, demonstrates the college's engagement with pedagogic developments in the creative industries by providing support and resources to help its students develop entrepreneurial skills essential to many careers. The team found that this is embedded and reflected across the college's degree programmes, for example, modules in Artist Development embed these opportunities within the undergraduate curriculum, while an optional Freelance Musicians module is offered to postgraduate taught students. The appointment of a Head of Enterprise (Academic) to lead and oversee this and related work has enabled students to benefit from placements, workshops and other opportunities to engage with industry professionals, readying them for the graduate workplace.

341. The team found that the college's teaching scheme for its PhD students also emphasises the importance of professional development in pedagogy. Students accepted onto the teaching programme are mentored and supported to prepare, deliver and reflect on their teaching as

part of applications to gain Associate Fellowship of Advance HE status. During the visit, staff highlighted the importance of this as a structured and mentored programme to support PhD students in gaining teaching experience, while postgraduate research students highlighted how they were actively encouraged to identify the modules that best fitted with their interests in order to gain teaching experience that provided maximum benefit for them and the students they taught.

342. A sample of academic CVs reviewed by the team demonstrated that research active staff are actively engaged in publishing peer-reviewed research that places them within critical discourses in their disciplines at levels appropriate for teaching across the college's provision, including at doctoral level. Across the college, 43 members of staff are currently engaged in research as defined by their contracts, the vast majority of whom are also engaged in teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels as well as in supervising research degree students. Further discussion of research active staff is provided under criterion F1.

343. The team found that both full-time and hourly paid teaching staff are engaged in a wide range of professional activities that place them at the forefront of the music industry, meaning that they are suitably equipped for teaching at the levels offered by the college. This is the case across all areas of the college's provision; for example, staff in the School of Composition are all active composers whose work is performed by leading soloists and ensembles, while the recent development of the Master of Education programme has built on the research expertise of the programme leader and other active researchers in the college. Similarly, staff in the School of Popular Music are active as performers and composers, appearing with bands and ensembles and as soloists at a range of performance venues and festivals. Hourly paid teaching staff typically pursue portfolio careers as members of leading orchestras, chamber ensembles and other groups, as well as significant solo careers.

344. Therefore, the team determined that the evidence shows that staff, including PhD students undertaking teaching, are well supported to engage actively with pedagogic developments in their discipline. Furthermore, the evidence shows that staff are actively engaged in high-level research and scholarship in their disciplines that informs their teaching and equips them to teach and supervise across all the qualification levels offered by the college.

345. To determine whether staff have access to development opportunities aimed at enabling them to enhance their practice and scholarship, the team reviewed the college's policies and processes for staff development and met with representatives of the college's academic staff.

346. The team reviewed the following evidence in relation to this criterion:

- the college's staff development policy and process documentation
- staff grading review documentation
- staff guidance on academic development opportunities
- details of the college's accredited Advance HE Fellowship scheme
- discussions with representatives of academic staff.

347. The evidence reviewed demonstrated that the college provides a wide range of development opportunities for its staff, including financial support, and that these are closely focused on enhancing practice and scholarship.

348. Academic and professional services staff are required to complete a range of mandatory training. Their induction includes training courses on Communicating with Care, Dignity at Work and Equality and Diversity. All staff who work with under 18s, for example through the college's 'Junior RNCM programme', are also required to complete safeguarding training as part of induction. There are further mandatory training courses in IT, Health and Safety, and specific sessions for line managers on unconscious bias and reasonable adjustments. Non-mandatory training covers a wide range of themes and topics, including sessions on neurodiversity, mental health, coaching and line management.

349. In addition to mandatory training, the college's induction policy requires line managers to develop bespoke objectives for a new starter's probationary period and to ensure that a mentor is provided to support the achievement of these. The policy also confirms the college's commitment to offering new academic staff opportunity to gain a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice or equivalent and highlights the college's Advance HE accredited scheme in relation to this.

350. The team found that the college's staff development guidance outlines the process and procedures for requesting financial support for professional development. The Academic Staff Development Fund supports a wide range of activities, including additional pedagogical training, management and leadership training for those positions of responsibility, subject-knowledge training, while the Curriculum Development and Enhancement Fund provides support for teaching enhancement projects that relate directly to any theme of the college's Education Strategy. Summaries of the uses of these funds detail staff attendance at pedagogical conferences, support for Advance HE Fellowship (see below) and specialist training to enhance staff expertise for specific areas of instrumental and vocal teaching.

351. The college's teaching fellowship scheme, the Conservatoire Professional in Practice (CPP), has been accredited by Advance HE since 2016 and supports applications for Associate Fellowship, Fellowship and Senior Fellowship. Recognising the nature of the college's teaching staff, the scheme offers a dedicated pathway aimed at practising musicians. Applicants to the scheme are supported by mentors, who themselves receive extensive training. More than 35 staff have gained fellowships, many of whom are actively engaged in supervising research students. During the team's discussions with representatives of teaching staff, the team heard how staff valued the college's Advance HE Fellowship scheme. Staff who had completed it commented on its usefulness in reflecting on practice, the value of the mentorship aspect of the scheme, and the practical benefits it brought to their ongoing pedagogy.

352. The team considered that staff, including those with responsibility for postgraduate research supervision, have access to and make effective use of development opportunities aimed at enabling them to enhance their practice and scholarship.

353. To assess whether staff have opportunities to gain experience in curriculum development and assessment design and to engage with the activities of other higher education providers, for example, through becoming external examiners, validation panel members or external

reviewers, the team considered a range of policy documents and staff records and engaged in discussion with representatives of the teaching body. The team also used this evidence to assess whether staff with programme management responsibilities had appropriate experience of curriculum development and assessment design.

354. The team reviewed the following evidence in relation to this criterion:

- a sample of staff CVs
- a sample of staff PDRs
- the college's Academic Staff Grading Review Procedure.

355. The evidence demonstrated to the team that staff have a variety of opportunities to gain experience of curriculum development and assessment design and to engage with other higher education providers and networks. Staff CVs documented many external examiner appointments throughout the UK and beyond, from undergraduate to doctoral levels, including at other conservatoires in the UK, while senior staff had also external quality assessment roles, serving on validation and periodic review panels. For example, the Head of Music, Health & Wellbeing has led Advance HE training sessions on external examining, the Principal is a mentor on Advance HE's Aurora programme, and the Director of Programmes is a trustee of MusicMark.

356. The team determined that the college's staff development and review processes ensure that teaching staff are supported to gain experience of curriculum development and assessment design. In discussions with staff, several summarised their own career trajectories, for example progressing from being a module tutor to module leader and then programme leader for the development of a new postgraduate taught qualification. Staff affirmed the rigour of the college's curriculum development processes and the value of mentoring provided by senior leaders. Staff PDRs showed evidence of reflection on achievements in curriculum and assessment as well as setting clear goals for career development in these areas and programme review documentation provided examples of refinements to module and assessment design in practice, based on staff expertise and student feedback. These also reflected the involvement of staff in different ways; heads and deputy heads of school along with programme leaders were responsible for presenting the documentation for reapproval while scrutiny panels drew on internal expertise from staff with extensive experience of curriculum leadership, such as heads of department and programme leaders, under the direction of the Director of Programmes.

357. The team reviewed the college's Academic Staff Grading Review Procedure and found that it provided evidence of the expectations of staff at different levels in terms of their contributions to curriculum development and assessment design, reflecting a clear career trajectory and appropriately increasing levels of influence and responsibility. For example, grade 7 roles require 'additional' breadth or depth of knowledge beyond what would be expected for a post-doctoral position, alongside familiarity with pedagogical strategies, whereas by grade 9, a staff member 'Designs, develops, and delivers teaching at a variety of levels [and] may review specific aspects of course content'. Staff CVs of staff with leadership responsibilities at programme level, including for doctoral study, and staff with strategic oversight of undergraduate, taught postgraduate and college-wide programmes confirmed that they had

experience of curriculum development and assessment design commensurate with their responsibilities. These staff had typically held more junior leadership roles at the college or at other providers earlier in the careers and had served in a variety of external appointments related to curriculum review and assessment, including at doctoral level.

358. The team therefore considered that staff have opportunities to gain experience of curriculum development and assessment design as well as opportunities to gain relevant experience from external roles, including as examiners, leaders of professional development for higher education bodies and across the arts sector more broadly. The team also considers that staff with management responsibilities at programme level have appropriate experience of curriculum development and assessment design to fulfil their roles.

359. To determine whether staff have expertise in providing feedback on assessment that is timely, constructive and developmental, the team considered sample of assessed work and discussed marking and feedback with representatives of the student body, including undergraduate and taught postgraduates from a wide cross section of programmes. The team also reviewed external examiner reports covering all levels of taught degrees across the previous three academic years.

360. The team reviewed this evidence and determined that students at the college receive high quality and timely feedback on their work. The team viewed samples of work from across all years of study from the BMus (Hons) and GRNCM undergraduate programmes and from MMus and MPerf degrees in performance, composition and conducting offered by the Graduate School. These samples consistently contained feedback that was clearly related to module outcomes, rewarded student achievement, made clear suggestions for improvement and development and signposted appropriate resources for further support.

361. At undergraduate level, the sample included work in a wide variety of formats, including written and spoken submissions (Music in Context 2, Applied Music Psychology), performances (Performance Studies, Opera Scenes, Professional Audition), composition (Composition and Performance, Composition and Production 3 and 4), and multi-format submissions (Creative Project, Advanced Teaching Skills for Pianists). Across all stages, modules and types of assessment, the college employs a thorough and consistent model for providing feedback, which has two elements. The first is a matrix in which generic and module specific criteria for each assessment are given a rating (Excellent (1st), Very Good (2:1), Good (2:2), Adequate (3rd), Fail), which provide students with summary of the strengths and weaknesses of their submission and a guide to how their mark was determined. The matrices sampled all contained five criteria, providing sufficient granularity to ensure meaningful feedback without overwhelming students with too much detail. The samples showed that the matrices were not used in a formulaic fashion, but instead to provide a nuanced assessment of the work. Alongside this, markers provide written feedback, which varies in length relative to the weighting of the assessment. Here, comments were consistently individualised, offered a constructive critique of the student's work alongside suggestions for future development, and were well aligned with both learning outcomes and grade descriptors.

362. At taught postgraduate level, the sample included extended written work (Major/Minor Dissertation), research-led performance (Research Lecture Recital) and multi-format submissions related to particular specialisms (Practical Pedagogy, Arrangement). Here, feedback was provided only in the form of written comments, which was appropriate given the

more specialised and research-led work that postgraduate students submitted. As with undergraduate samples, feedback was thorough, precise and, where appropriate, included focused suggestions for future improvements. On modules such as Research Lecture Recital involving an element of live assessment, comments were provided from two markers. Across several of these modules, most notably Major/Minor Dissertation, the advanced level of study and the range of topics addressed necessitated many markers with varied research expertise. There was nonetheless a strongly consistent approach in terms of both quality and quantity of feedback, indicating high levels of experience and expertise across the staff body in providing feedback.

363. External examiner reports from 2022-23 and 2023-24 made frequent reference to high quality feedback across all programmes, with occasional minor suggestions for further refinement. These were appropriately acknowledged in the college's formal responses to external examiners and actions recorded in the relevant degree committee minutes. For example, an external examiner report in 2022-23 highlighted that a small number of markers on years 1 to 2 of the BMus programme did not supply summary comments at the end of their feedback; action was assigned to the Head of Undergraduate Programmes to clarify expectations with all markers, and the samples of feedback seen by the team from 2023-24 were consistent in the inclusion of such summaries.
364. The team found that matters of assessment and feedback fall within the remit of the Director of Programmes and the college's Education and Quality Committee and relevant degree committees. Minutes of this committee confirmed that audit trails relating to improvements in marking and feedback were thorough, for example noting in 2024 that 'actions were demonstrably taken on comments relating to marking and feedback' from the previous year's external examiner reports. Furthermore, student representatives from across undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes were unanimous in the positive view of the feedback they received. They specifically commented on the timeliness of feedback and the willingness of teaching staff to supplement written feedback with verbal guidance, including opportunities for informal feedback on mock assessments, in workshops and on formative work. At undergraduate level, students expressed awareness and appreciation of the different modes of feedback employed. Students also expressed confidence in the processes for appealing grades.
365. During the visit, the team heard how staff representatives commented favourably on the usefulness of the training and mentoring they receive on marking and feedback. Staff involved in teaching and assessment highlighted the value of this especially in relation to modules using multiple markers, as it ensured consistency both in ethos and in practical matters such as the volume of feedback expected. Staff also highlighted the value of marking meetings among the undergraduate programme teaching team in establishing common principles, and to review and calibrate their own practice alongside their colleagues. At both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the availability of module coordinators to advise on marking queries was highly valued by staff, while processes, templates and support from professional services staff were all highlighted as ways in which the efficiency, fairness and consistency of the marking process was enhanced.
366. The team therefore determined that the college's staff have expertise in providing feedback on assessment that is timely, constructive and developmental.

367. To consider whether the college has made a rigorous assessment of the skills and expertise required to teach all students and the appropriate staff to student ratios ,the team reviewed minutes of governance committees and strategy documents relating to key areas of work.

368. The team considered that, as a mature provider, the college has demonstrated an established staff base appropriate to its status as a small specialist provider with an international reputation in its field. As noted above, the provision of expert one-to-one teaching by professional musicians is at the core of the college's undergraduate and taught postgraduate curriculum, meaning that maintaining its large base of hourly paid instrumental and vocal tutors is of paramount importance. The sample of CVs reviewed by the team provided further confirmation of appropriate expertise among the staff body. Strategic responsibility for this rests with the Deputy Principal (Performance and Programmes). Job descriptions for this and other senior roles with strategic oversight of teaching, research and academic governance indicate that robust monitoring and planning for staffing numbers and expertise across the college's activities is a centrally important aspect of senior leaders' roles.

369. To support its goal of gaining Full Research DAPs, the college established this as a key requirement when appointing a new Director of Research and has further enhanced its preparations through the recruitment of a new Head of Doctoral Programmes to succeed the current Associate Director of Research upon their retirement. The Principal's Reports to the Board of Governors integrate consideration of staffing implications and developments in discussion of all matters related to teaching and research, while the Governing Body's Remuneration and Human Resources Committee maintains ongoing strategic oversight of staffing. A subgroup of the Executive Team, including the Principal and other senior staff, reviews and approves staffing requests in-year and ensures that the highest quality of teachers are appointed and that resource is reviewed against business plans to ensure financial sustainability.

370. The college's assessment of its staffing needs is underpinned by its strategic commitment to providing students with exceptional support from both academic and professional services staff. Its commitment to postgraduate research is emphasised by a key measure of success in its strategy for 2020-26 to increase staff engagement in research by 25 per cent, ensuring a viable and expanded team of potential supervisors in preparation for the college gaining Full Research DAPs. The evidence shows careful consideration of the staffing requirements to achieve these aims, including appropriate levels and expertise. At doctoral level, the college had 38 registered students at the time of submitting its Full Research DAPs application, with 30 staff members involved in supervision as primary or secondary supervisors, or both, indicating viable ratios and which reflects the UKRI data on admissions. At undergraduate and postgraduate taught levels, the consistent level of approximately 300 staff on teaching-only contracts alongside approximately 30 on research or teaching and research contracts indicates appropriate ratios for its taught provision, given its strong emphasis on one-to-one tuition.

371. The college's Education Strategy for 2021-26 demonstrates its commitment to enhancing the pedagogical expertise of its teaching staff by setting a target for a 50 per cent increase in the number of staff holding Advance HE accreditation. It also defines areas for growth in staff research, including in supporting research students, such as Music, Health and Wellbeing, and Music Education.

372. In summary, the evidence reviewed demonstrated to the team that the college has made a rigorous assessment of the skills and expertise required to teach all students and of the appropriate staff to student ratios for such teaching, in line with the demands of its specialist provision. The team is also assured the college has applied this approach to ensure it is ready for Full Research DAPs responsibilities.

373. To determine whether the college has appropriate staff recruitment practices, the team reviewed staffing policy documents and minutes of relevant committee meetings. The evidence demonstrated that the college has clear policies, processes and practices in place regarding staff recruitment. Policy documents regarding recruitment set out transparent requirements in terms of the rationale for the role, the expected norms in terms of academic qualifications and professional expertise, as appropriate. There is also clear guidance to ensure that policies and statutory requirements regarding fair selection and protected characteristics are correctly followed. Procedures and policies are in place to provide new staff with thorough orientation and induction, including professional development opportunities and to review their progress through probation.

374. The team found that minutes of the Governing Body evidenced appropriate discussion and strategic oversight of staffing and recruitment, while oversight is maintained by the Remuneration and Human Resources Committee of the Governing Body. Operational decisions on staffing are managed through a subgroup of the Executive Team to ensure that in-year requests for additional staffing can be assessed and, where required, met as required. This reflects a necessarily responsive approach to the differing specialisms and demands of the student body from year to year and the attendant need for specialist teaching staff with high levels of professional expertise.

375. Samples of staff CVs and public profiles on the college's website confirm that these practices are effectively deployed in practice, ensuring that the college has a staff base of appropriate size, experience and academic and professional expertise. For example, staff with strategic oversight at director level have prior extensive experience of leadership roles in the college and at other providers, including conservatoires, while teaching staff in instrumental studies and composition maintain professional careers working with and having music performed by ensembles of international repute.

376. Therefore, the team concluded that the college has appropriate staff recruitment practices in place.

## **Conclusions**

377. The assessment team concluded that the college has the appropriate numbers of staff to teach its students and that all staff involved in teaching or supporting student learning, and in the assessment of student work, are appropriately qualified to the levels(s) and subjects of the qualifications being awarded.

378. Furthermore, the team concluded that all staff are appropriately supported and developed to the levels(s) and subjects of the qualifications being awarded and staff of all levels maintain a professional understanding of current developments in research and scholarship in their subject and keep in touch with their professional practice.

379. The college has a thorough understanding of its staffing needs and ensures these are met in terms of both numbers and expertise. Staff maintain active professional profiles in pedagogy, research and practice, contributing to professional organisations within higher education and the arts sector, while drawing on these experiences to enhance their teaching.

380. The college encourages staff to take up external roles and provides a thorough programme of staff development, ensuring consistent expertise in assessment, feedback and curriculum development. Senior leaders have experience of teaching, research and management appropriate to their roles.

381. Therefore, the team determined that the college continues to meet criterion C1 in relation to its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and meets criterion C1 for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

# Assessment of DAPs criterion D: Environment for supporting students

## Criterion D1: Enabling student development and achievement

### Advice to the OfS

382. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion D1: Enabling student development and achievement, because it meets the requirements for this criterion for its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

383. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows in summary that the college has appropriate academic procedures, frameworks and resources, which effectively enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. The arrangements for supporting this development are monitored and evaluated appropriately.

384. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside any other relevant information.

### Criterion D1.1

**D1.1: Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

### Reasoning

385. To establish whether the college takes a comprehensive strategic and operational approach to determine and evaluate how it enables student development and achievement for its diverse body of students, the assessment team examined evidence which included:

- Strategic Plan and supporting strategies
- BEDI Policy
- Committee Handbook
- Continuous Monitoring Framework
- a sample of Continuous Monitoring Reports
- completed Student Experience Enhancement Records for the BMus (Hons), BMus (Hons) in Popular Music, and the Graduate School programmes
- Strategic Risk and Assurance Register
- minutes of the Research Degrees Committee and the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee.

386. The Strategic Plan is the overarching foundation of the college's strategic framework for enabling student development and achievement. This framework also includes the Education Strategy, the Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy, the Artistic Strategy and the BEDI Policy, each of which supports and develops the priorities set out in the Strategic Plan. As discussed under criterion A1, the Strategic Plan captures the college's commitment to offering its students a 'research-led and industry-relevant learning experience, enriched by technology and fully integrated with a busy public-facing performance venue'. The plan places a strong emphasis on the development of students' professional practice and industry readiness, encouraging real-world learning, innovation and exploration of how technology can drive creativity. The college aims to achieve these strategic objectives by, for example, enabling students to 'work side-by-side with some of the world's most inspiring and imaginative artists and artistic leaders' and benefit from 'placement, apprenticeship and mentoring opportunities' where they can develop both their musical and leadership skills in real-world contexts.

387. The plan also undertakes to 'actively promote student enterprise and start-up activities'. This is enabled through the college's partnership networks, giving students access to specialist support and mentoring as well as expert guidance that enhance their professional development and future careers in music. Equally, the plan recognises the critical role that both academic and professional services staff at the college play in providing 'exceptional student services and support', creating a learning environment where every student can thrive academically and professionally.

388. The team found that the delivery of the overarching strategic aims is set out through its supporting strategies. The Education Strategy makes explicit the aim to strengthen the student experience through closer integration of curricular and co-curricular activities. It also links the support of diverse student outcomes to professional readiness explicitly, setting an objective to 'broaden professional and industry partners within the curricula' and monitor graduate employment data. Similarly, the Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy seeks to promote student development by embedding research-led teaching and create pathways for students to engage in practice-based research as part, for instance, of collaborative projects with external partners. Knowledge exchange initiatives, such as the 'StART Entrepreneurship Project', are closely connected to employability outcomes for students at the college, with success measured through growth in graduate start-up activities.

389. The Artistic Strategy complements this by situating student development within a professional performance context, emphasising opportunities for collaboration and work in partnership 'to ensure that students gain vital and inspiring real-world experiences and challenges'. The strategy seeks to further embed creative engagement projects to help broaden the skills of students, explicitly linking artistic training to community engagement and impact. Finally, the BEDI Policy provides a framework for ensuring these strategies reach all students equitably, through the monitoring of access and attainment rates, as well as curriculum reviews, to ensure content and assessment methods are inclusive, and directly address barriers to achievement.

390. The assessment team formed the view that this strategic approach is comprehensive, as it integrates all relevant dimensions of the student experience, bringing together academic, personal and professional development priorities to enable students to realise their potential during their studies and in their future careers. Progress towards these objectives is monitored

strategically and operationally through the following academic governance, management and quality assurance procedures, which are further discussed under criteria A1, B2 and E1:

- the college's key deliberative committees
- Strategic Risk Register, approved by the Audit and Risk Committee and monitored by the Executive Committee
- Continuous Monitoring Framework.

391. The degrees committees, reporting to the Education and Quality Committee and the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, exercise strategic and operational oversight of all relevant dimensions of the student experience. This includes addressing the academic, personal and professional development needs of the college's diverse student body, beyond the arrangements for learning, teaching and assessment linked to criterion B3. These committees ultimately report to the Academic Board, which holds responsibility for monitoring and enhancing the quality of the college's academic provision. Additionally, the Student Experience Forum considers extracurricular matters related to the student experience, such as the enhancement of student services, support and facilities. It reports annually to the Executive Committee.

392. Furthermore, the team found that all the college's supporting strategies included detailed aims, objectives and measures of success and impact relating to enabling student development and achievement, and that these contributed to the systematic implementation and evaluation of the strategies. For example, an increase in the number of students taking options that include co-curricular work is used to evaluate the aim of strengthening the student experience. Similarly, positive recognition in student feedback and NSS scores are used explicitly as a key measure of success and impact to evaluate the future effectiveness of placing audience and creative engagement at the centre of the performance programme and student training.

393. Should the college gain Full Research DAPs, it intends to build upon its existing reporting and monitoring mechanisms to continue to support the development and achievement of its postgraduate research students. Currently, the Associate Director of Research monitors the progress and training programmes of postgraduate research students on a termly basis, and programme reports are reviewed by MMU. The college intends for these reports to be operationally overseen by the college's Research Degree Committee, with strategic oversight provided by the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee. A review of the minutes from these committees demonstrated to the team that these arrangements form the basis of a comprehensive strategic and operational approach to evaluating how the college enables the development and achievement of its postgraduate research students. This is because the minutes show regular, structured consideration of student progress and professional development needs, with clearly recorded follow-up actions aligned with the college's broader strategic goals. For example, at the Research Degree Committee meeting on 22 May 2024, the committee reviewed progression data, noting a 96.2 per cent satisfactory progression rate for annual assessments in 2023-24, and identified one late review for further action. The committee also responded to student feedback by offering targeted workshops and streamlining administrative processes, such as the postgraduate researcher allowance.

application. These actions were systematically recorded in the minutes and tracked in an associated action plan.

394. Therefore, the team concluded that the college takes a comprehensive strategic and operational approach to determine and evaluate how it enables student development and achievement for its diverse body of students.

395. To confirm that students are advised about, and inducted into, their study programmes in an effective way and that account is taken of different students' choices and needs, the team considered the following evidence:

- academic policies and the Student Regulations and Information
- Programme handbooks including the draft Postgraduate Research Handbook
- the college's online prospectus<sup>23</sup>
- induction materials
- evidence of academic and language support provision.

396. The team also met with students during their visit to the college.

397. As part of its admissions process, the college aims to provide 'accurate and timely information' to all applicants. This commitment to advising students about their study programmes is also reflected in the college's Student Charter, in which the college undertakes to provide students with accurate and up to date information about their studies. Students receive information about their specific study programmes and the broader student experience at the college through both student and programme handbooks, as well as through programme pages on the college's VLE. The team found that this information is consistent with the content of the college's prospectus and the marketing information available on its website.<sup>24</sup>

398. In the team's view, the handbooks offer clear and detailed guidance on the student journey, including on academic regulations and student-facing policies and procedures. For example, the BMus (Hons) programme handbook provides a thorough overview of the programme structure and assessment methods, making it easier for students to understand their workload and progression requirements. The language used in the handbooks is also accessible and practical, and key policies are explained in straightforward terms, often with step-by-step instructions. Sections on the college's academic services, such as Student Finance, English language support and the Health and Wellbeing Hub, offer tailored advice for a range of personal needs and circumstances, explaining how to access these services while offering contact details, thus making it easy for students to seek help.

399. The team also found that the college delivers a comprehensive and well-structured induction process designed to help students settle into their study programmes, while accommodating

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<sup>23</sup> See [RNCM-Prospectus-2024.pdf](#).

<sup>24</sup> See [Study Here - Royal Northern College of Music](#).

their diverse choices and needs. For example, the college's welcome week activities for new students include a range of academic and pastoral events on key topics such as:

- the use of the college's specialist facilities
- the ASIMUT<sup>25</sup> scheduling, room booking and event management system
- wellbeing and personal safety
- safeguarding
- the college's approach to belonging, equity, diversity and inclusion.

400. The inclusion of induction sessions on Hearing Conservation and the Alexander Technique further demonstrated the college's awareness and support of the specific needs of music students. Continuing students also receive year-specific induction information from their Head of Programme and Academic Services staff.

401. As discussed under criteria B1 and G1, the college takes proactive steps to ensure that all postgraduate research students are fully informed of MMU's academic regulations and understand the relationship between the college and its current validating partner, including their respective roles and responsibilities throughout the student journey. Postgraduate research students additionally benefit from a dedicated Research Induction Day, which includes sessions on library resources, research ethics and opportunities to meet academic staff and peers. The provision of detailed information about supervisory arrangements, progression reviews and funding opportunities contributes to students being well-informed about the expectations and resources available to them. As part of their induction, postgraduate research students also meet with the Director of Research, the Associate Director of Research and Programme Leader, the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee, student representatives and other relevant academic and professional services staff. The team considered that this targeted approach enables postgraduate research students to receive information relevant to their level of study and particular research interests, while delivering specific and appropriate guidance. The team also noted that all the students who took part in the latest postgraduate research survey at the college confirmed that they had received an appropriate induction to their research degree programme.

402. Students with disabilities or additional support needs are encouraged to meet with staff from the college's Disability and Wellbeing Services early in their induction to begin creating a Personal Learning Plan. The Personal Learning Plan identifies any reasonable adjustments required to assist their learning and fulfil the college's responsibilities under the Equality Act. International students are likewise encouraged to engage with the English language support team to access tailored guidance and resources. This evidence demonstrated to the team that the college's induction process is effective because it is tailored and inclusive, addressing the academic and personal needs of students across all backgrounds and levels of study.

403. During the visit to the college the team met with a representative group of students from across all levels of study, all of whom confirmed that the information provided about their study programmes had been suitably comprehensive and responsive to their individual needs and

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<sup>25</sup> ASIMUT software – Used by the best schools of music, drama and art.

circumstances. The students also reported being highly satisfied with the college's academic induction process, describing it as being 'comprehensive' and offering 'a clear overview of the year ahead as well as non-academic support', noting its value for international students. The students also confirmed that the college's induction programme strikes the right balance between pastoral and programme-specific information.

404. Based on this evidence, the team concluded that students are advised about and inducted into their study programmes in an effective way and that account is taken of different students' choices and needs.

405. To determine the extent to which the effectiveness of student and staff advisory, support and counselling services is monitored, and any resource needs arising are considered, the team reviewed evidence which included:

- minutes from the college's Degree Committees, Education and Quality Committee and Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee
- a sample of continuous monitoring reports
- completed SEERs for the BMus (Hons), BMus (Hons) in Popular Music, and the Graduate School programmes
- Health and Wellbeing Hub provision documents
- the Strategic Risk and Assurance Register
- the Uniac Report on the Health and Wellbeing Hub.

406. The team also met with staff during their visit to the college.

407. The college offers a comprehensive set of advisory, support and counselling services including, for example, the Health and Wellbeing Hub, Student Disability and Wellbeing, the Alexander Technique, Counselling, English Language Support and Student Finance. The team considered how the effectiveness of student and staff advisory, support and counselling services is strategically monitored at senior level, and how it is subsequently monitored locally through the degree committees.

408. The team found that the effectiveness of these services is continuously monitored by the respective degree committees, reporting to the Education and Quality Committee and the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee. As stated in the terms of reference, both the Undergraduate Degrees Committee and the Postgraduate Taught Degrees Committees 'consider information on the student experience, ensuring that prompt action is taken where possible' and 'monitor and review progress in the Student Experience Enhancement Report for each programme'. Likewise, the Research Degrees Committee is tasked with managing, monitoring and reviewing 'arrangements for the admission, registration, supervision and progress of postgraduate research students'.

409. The team examined the minutes of meetings of these committees together with supporting documentation and found evidence that the effectiveness of student and staff advisory, support and counselling services is actively monitored, with resource needs considered

through regular discussions, actions and feedback mechanisms. For example, at the meeting of the Research Degrees Committee on 26 October 2023, it was reported that postgraduate research students had requested 'bespoke wellbeing support' which led to the introduction of termly wellbeing workshops during the same academic year. Similarly, at its meeting on 31 October 2023, the Undergraduate Degrees Committee discussed an action, prompted by student feedback, to explore the purchase of an assistive technology application to support neurodiverse students with note taking. This discussion led to an action for the Wellbeing Hub to investigate whether the college could offer a subscription to this service. Moreover, the use of Health and Wellbeing Hub services is monitored annually to inform requests for additional resources as part of the college's business planning cycles.

410. The Strategic Risk and Assurance Register, approved by the Audit and Risk Committee and monitored by the Executive Committee, provides further evidence of the college's ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of its support services. For example, in response to an identified risk concerning student wellbeing, the college established a new Health and Wellbeing Hub 'with additional staffing resource' as part of a wider Student Support Framework, which also includes collaboration with the Greater Manchester Universities Student Mental Health Service. The success of this initiative has been further validated by Uniac's recent Internal Audit Report of Student Wellbeing, commissioned by the college, which awarded it sector leading ratings in risk assurance and efficiency.

411. The team also met with senior academic and professional services staff during their visit to the college. Staff confirmed that the college has adopted a strategic, academically-led approach to its support services, based on both 'whole institution' and 'whole person' principles. They explained how both internal and external student surveys, such as the NSS, are used to evaluate the effectiveness of the college's support services. Staff also provided examples of how the college's Continuous Monitoring Framework feeds into academic planning and resource allocation. For example, in response to feedback regarding long NHS waiting lists, the college introduced an on-site physiotherapy service to support students in need. Additionally, increased international recruitment to one of the college's postgraduate programmes led to an expansion of English language support.

412. The team therefore concluded that the effectiveness of student and staff advisory, support and counselling services is monitored, and any resource needs arising are considered.

413. To determine whether the college's administrative support systems enable it to monitor student progression and performance accurately and provide timely, secure and accurate information to satisfy academic and non-academic management information needs, the team examined evidence that included:

- Academic Services Organisational Chart
- Quality Handbook
- minutes of the Board of Examiners
- the Student Attendance and Engagement Monitoring Policy
- MMU SkillsForge Report

- combined Reports for the Academic Board
- Continuous Monitoring Framework and a sample of Continuous Monitoring Reports
- completed SEERs for the BMus (Hons), BMus (Hons) in Popular Music, and the Graduate School programmes
- minutes of the college's deliberative committees.

414. The team also met with academic staff during the visit and received a comprehensive demonstration of the college's administrative systems and VLE during the visit.

415. The college's Academic Services Team are responsible for all aspects of academic administration, maintaining detailed records of student progression and performance, including for postgraduate research students, and supporting accurate and informed decision making leading to Board of Examiner meetings. This team is led by the Academic Registrar, a senior member of staff at the college whose key responsibilities include 'leading on all user-related aspects of student records systems and processes, ensuring accuracy and integrity of data and information, and the timely provision of data to inform management and strategic decision making'. In the team's view, this senior role provides high-level oversight, accountability and assurance of the strategic alignment of student data management with the college's priorities.

416. As discussed under criterion B1, all student attainment information is stored securely on UNIT-e which has been developed in accordance with the college's data security and records retention regulations. During the visit, the team received a comprehensive demonstration of the college's use of UNIT-e and found that the system is effectively maintained, enabling the accurate recording and reporting of student progression and performance data. The demonstration provided evidence that staff at the college can access relevant information to support informed decision making and regulatory compliance in both academic and non-academic matters. The team also formed the view that the information held within UNIT-e is secure because the college uses appropriate data collection processes and protocols, which are aligned to its Records Retention Schedule, as well as to the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR).<sup>26</sup>

417. The Academic Services Team is also responsible for monitoring student attendance and engagement. In line with the college's Student Attendance and Engagement Monitoring Policy, the college maintains 'records of attendance for all scheduled academic classes'. Attendance and engagement data is reviewed monthly during term time by the Student Engagement Monitoring Group, chaired by the Head of Student Disability and Wellbeing Services. The group focuses primarily on taking proactive measures to promote student progression and wellbeing but also making referrals to programme teams or external bodies like UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) or Student Finance, as needed.

418. As discussed in detail under criterion B1, in readiness for gaining Full Research DAPs, the college has in place active plans to monitor the progression and performance of postgraduate research students in the same way, with a custom-built section on the VLE and UNIT-e. Attendance and engagement are currently monitored by the college's Research Degrees

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<sup>26</sup> Available at [Data protection: The UK's data protection legislation - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-protection-the-uks-data-protection-legislation).

Committee and tracked via MMU's SkillsForge platform and Annual Review Forms. During the visit, the team met with academic staff responsible for postgraduate research students, who described how the experience of using the SkillsForge platform had helped to inform the development of functionality within the college's own VLE under its own Research DAPs in the future.

419. The team examined minutes of the Board of Examiners and of the college's deliberative committees, along with the supporting documentation. The team found that discussions of student progression and performance are supported by reports that are both accurate and timely, as they enable effective decision making and are delivered in line with the timeframes set out in the college's Continuous Monitoring Schedule, with senior oversight provided by the Academic Registrar. For example, the minutes of the Undergraduate Degrees Committee include a detailed review of student progression trends, comparing cohort performance across academic years. The report showed an increase in the number of good degrees awarded in the BMus (Hons) programme, which was attributed to its flexibility, allowing students to focus on their specialisms, and noted a reduction in early withdrawals, which was linked to the positive effect of the academic and pastoral support offered.

420. Furthermore, as discussed under criterion A1, the April 2024 meeting of the Academic Board received a report containing a detailed analysis of awards approved by the Board of Examiners. The report, which highlighted potential inconsistencies in the distribution of degree classifications across courses, was first scrutinised by the Education and Quality Committee before being presented to the Academic Board. The minutes of the Academic Board meeting demonstrate that the report facilitated effective analysis and discussion, resulting in appropriate follow-up actions. The team therefore concluded that the college's administrative support systems enable accurate monitoring of student progression and performance, and provide timely, secure and reliable information to meet both academic and non-academic management needs. Based on its current approach, the team is confident that the college is well equipped to extend these systems to the monitoring of postgraduate research progression and performance under its own Research DAPs.

421. The team assessed whether the college's approach to providing opportunities for all students develops skills that enable their academic, personal and professional progression. The team also considered whether the college provides opportunities for all students to develop skills to make effective use of the learning resources provided, including the safe and effective use of specialist facilities, digital and virtual environments. In doing so the team considered a range of evidence that included:

- Student Regulations
- Programme Specifications and programme handbooks including the draft Postgraduate Research Handbook
- Academic Quality Handbook
- external examiner reports across the previous three academic years
- Student Support Framework
- language support information

- documents related to the college's Health and Wellbeing Hub
- the college's induction material
- Research Degree Student Training Programme
- information related to postgraduate research funding
- the North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership Funding
- screen shots of VLE site for research events and Cross-Staff-Student Reading Groups.

422. The team also took part in a comprehensive tour of the specialist facilities at the college and met with students and staff during their visit to the college.

423. The team found that the college offers a wide range of opportunities for students to develop skills that support their academic, personal and professional progression, as part of a structured framework designed to foster holistic growth, enabling students to succeed in their studies and future careers. The Student Charter reflects the objectives in the Strategic Plan and explicitly sets out mutual commitments between the college and its students, emphasising the provision of a 'high quality, conservatoire-based, professionally orientated learning experience', alongside access to 'high quality facilities and resources' to support the students' learning. The Charter also provides an undertaking that the college will provide support for students to 'develop intellectually, personally and professionally', and to help them successfully complete their programmes of study. Students are encouraged to 'take an active interest in developing [their] personal, professional, entrepreneurial, and employability skills', and 'actively participate in activities and opportunities that will enhance [their] future career', thus reflecting the college's strong focus on employability and professional development.

424. The college offers comprehensive and individualised support that reflects the conservatoire model. Academic and pastoral support is provided by designated staff, including instrumental and vocal tutors, learning support tutors and other academic and professional services staff. Additional help is available in areas such as study skills, academic writing and English language development. The college's library offers extensive physical and digital resources, specialist software and access to external academic libraries, supporting students' academic and creative work across all discipline areas. The college has developed a VLE that allows students to access resources and support materials across all modules, submit work for assessment and engage in discussion groups and notice boards. This learning environment is further enhanced by specialist facilities and purpose-built rehearsal and performance spaces, supported by experienced technical staff. Additional services designed to support the students' academic, personal and professional progression include the Health and Wellbeing Hub, counselling services, disability support and student finance.

425. The team found that the college's holistic approach to providing opportunities for all students to develop skills that enable their academic, personal and professional progression is firmly embedded in the curriculum. This is evidenced through the structure of the college's academic programmes, where modules are designed to not only promote subject content, knowledge and application, but also to 'develop a range of transferable and graduate skills'. For example, modules such as 'Artist Development 1' explicitly support personal and professional growth by encouraging students to reflect on their identity as creative musicians and develop 'tools, skills

and abilities needed for a career in music'. This module includes reflective portfolios and vlogs, which help students articulate their progress and engage with digital tools. Professional and entrepreneurial skills are further developed through other 'Artist Development' modules, such as 'Professional Placement' and 'Creative Project', where students undertake work-based learning or independent projects, like organising concerts or making musical recordings. The team determined that these experiences help to 'create career-developing opportunities, contacts, and networks,' effectively preparing students for the music industry.

426. The team also took part in a comprehensive tour of the specialist facilities at the college and found that students benefit from a wide range of professional-standard learning and performance environments. For example, the college offers a variety of general and specialist music teaching spaces, including 68 acoustically-treated tutorial rooms, eight studios and purpose-built soundproofed rehearsal rooms for BMus (Hons) Popular Music students. Major performance venues such as the 700-seat Concert Hall, RNCM Theatre, Studio 1 and the Carole Nash Recital Room are fully equipped with AV, lighting, sound and recording infrastructure, supporting both live and streamed events. Students can book teaching and rehearsal spaces through the ASIMUT scheduling system, with 15 additional open practice rooms available for personal use. These facilities are supported by an experienced team of technical staff who offer the students training and guidance. In addition to these teaching and performance spaces, students have access to an internationally recognised archive and museum, a studio equipped with Meyer Constellation technology and the PRiSM Centre, which supports research into music, science and generative AI.

427. The college additionally provides extensive opportunities for all students to develop skills that support their academic, personal and professional progression by integrating co-curricular activities, such as public performances, professional placements and community engagement, into its programmes of study. These activities are not optional add-ons but form a core component of each student's education and training. For example, all first- and second-year BMus (Hons) students are required to record and reflect on their co-curricular work, fostering critical engagement with their learning. Similarly, postgraduate taught students can earn academic credit through modules that assess professional or co-curricular work via reflective accounts and viva voce examinations, encouraging a deep understanding of their practice in a professional context. Initiatives like RNCM Engage further support skills development in areas such as education and leadership. In addition, the college offers all students the opportunity to audition for its highly successful Professional Experience Schemes with prestigious external partners, including the BBC Philharmonic, the Hallé, Opera North and Manchester Camerata.

428. The team found that students have access to a comprehensive range of resources and support services at the college designed to enable their academic, personal and professional progression. For example, the Student Support Framework, accessible from the college's VLE, includes detailed handbooks and links to all the college's student-facing policies and procedures. The Health and Wellbeing Hub, also accessible online, serves as a further central point for student support, offering tailored assistance through services such as the Alexander Technique, the Counselling Service, Disability Support, Hearing Conservation and English Language Support. The college's membership of the Greater Manchester Universities Student Mental Health Service enhances this provision.

429. Furthermore, the team found that the college provides opportunities for all students to develop the skills needed to make effective use of the available learning resources, including the safe

and effective use of specialist facilities and the use of digital and virtual environments learning resources. As discussed under criterion B3, this is achieved through the college's comprehensive induction process, detailed guidance in student handbooks and information available via the college's VLE and website.<sup>27</sup> For example, the student handbooks include guidance on manual handling, instrument safety and noise and hearing conservation. The team found that the induction programme also features mandatory sessions covering these topics, as well as practical information on using Moodle, the VLE and the college's extensive specialist facilities, including practice rooms, recording studios and performance venues, which students are encouraged to use independently. In the team's view, the use of Moodle is effectively embedded across all programmes, providing a consistent platform that supports the development of students' digital literacy skills. In meetings with students, the team heard positive feedback about the accessibility, clarity and usefulness of the VLE, with students highlighting its role in helping them manage their learning and access key resources efficiently.

430. The assessment team also considered how the college enables the development and achievement of its postgraduate research students and any developments it has made in readiness for Full Research DAPs. The team found that, as discussed earlier in this section, postgraduate researchers are supported from the outset via an in-depth induction programme involving senior academic and professional services staff, equipping them to engage effectively with a comprehensive range of learning resources and specialist facilities. Research skills development is embedded through a structured first-year training programme aligned to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework, a widely recognised approach to researcher development. This programme comprises workshops, methodology seminars and advice sessions, complemented by participation in research forums and discussion groups. These forums help integrate students into the broader research culture at the college, connecting them with academic staff, post-doctoral researchers and peers at other institutions. Opportunities for students to propose external speakers and engage in inter-institutional research activities, including those offered by the North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership, further broaden their academic and professional engagement.

431. Postgraduate research students also benefit from extensive wellbeing support and their professional and personal development is enabled through a range of targeted initiatives, such as career development workshops, training on research ethics, and mandatory 'Training for Teaching in HE' sessions, with opportunities to apply for teaching roles at the college. All postgraduate researchers receive a personal research allowance to fund activities such as conference participation or publication costs, with additional support available through the college's 'Internal Research Fund'. Postgraduate researchers funded through the North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership can also access funding for outreach and impact activities. To support their research, postgraduate researchers are provided with dedicated workspaces and access to specialist software, such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Sibelius and Ableton Live, alongside training in open-source alternatives to ensure adaptability in varied research settings. Additionally, all students are enrolled as members of the Royal Musical Association, facilitating their access to national research events and communities throughout their studies.

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<sup>27</sup> See [Facilities - Royal Northern College of Music](#).

432. Postgraduate researchers additionally benefit from creative opportunities such as 'Lab Week' and the 'Creative Innovators Awards', as well as access to the college's extensive arts infrastructure, which facilitates experimentation and performance. The Centre for PRISM offers these students access to cutting-edge research environments and externally funded specialist equipment. Students also engage in staff-led reading groups that foster cross-institutional academic dialogue. The team found that the college already offers a well established and collegial research environment for its postgraduate research students, with structured mechanisms in place to support their progression and development. Given the strong support framework already in place, and the college's clear commitment to continuous enhancement in this area, the team is confident that it would continue to provide a robust, supportive and enabling environment for postgraduate researchers if granted its own Full Research DAPs.

433. The team met with staff and students across all levels during their visit. Both groups described how the college provides opportunities for all students to develop skills that support their academic, personal and professional progression, and how the learning resources are effectively used. Staff also confirmed that students were effectively signposted to the support services available at the college. Students praised the college's Health and Wellbeing Hub, which was described as 'fantastic', as well as the availability of on-site counsellors. Students provided many examples of opportunities they had to develop their academic, personal and professional skills, including gaining valuable teaching experience at the college and participating in professional placements with external industry partners.

434. The team therefore determined that the college provides such opportunities to all students, as they are actively integrated into the induction process and consistently embedded throughout both curricular and extracurricular activities across all levels of study. The team concluded that the college offers opportunities for all students to develop both skills that enable their academic, personal and professional progression, and skills to make effective use of the learning resources provided.

435. The team assessed whether the college's approach is guided by a commitment to equity by reviewing the following evidence in relation to this criterion:

- Strategic Plan 2020-26
- Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy 2021-26
- Education Strategy 2020-26
- Artistic Strategy 2020-26
- BEDI Policy
- BEDI Impact Report 2023-24
- Access and Participation Plan.

436. The evidence reviewed demonstrated to the team that the college's approach to equity, diversity and inclusion is consistently embedded across its strategies, policies and action plans. The Strategic Plan pledges to 'open doors to people of all backgrounds', a vision

underpinned by values that explicitly ‘promote diversity and encourage diverse opinions and voices’ and ‘nurture a welcoming, collegial and supportive environment that is inclusive, respectful, open and accessible’.

437. The team found that this commitment is implemented through initiatives clearly articulated in the college’s core strategies and in its Access and Participation Plan. For instance, the RNCM Engage programme exemplifies a targeted, action-oriented approach to dismantling barriers within music education, offering progression routes into higher education for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, from underrepresented ethnic groups and disabled students. Similarly, the college’s Artistic Strategy aspires to ‘seek out and celebrate collaborations with the most diverse range of artists and organisations’. These efforts are systematically supported by measurable targets and indicators of success and impact, including increasing student diversity across all the college’s programmes, enhancing engagement with underrepresented communities, and eliminating the attainment gaps for neurodivergent students and those experiencing poor mental health.

438. The BEDI Policy further underscores the college’s commitment to equity by explicitly recognising and upholding the protected characteristics defined in the UK’s Equality Act (2010), while also striving to address broader societal inequalities. The policy outlines clear responsibilities for implementation, assigning accountability to the Board of Governors, line managers and the college’s BEDI Forum, which monitors progress and is tasked with ensuring that any planned actions align with the college’s equity goals. This joined-up approach, underpinned by a clear strategic focus and measurable actions, assured the team that the college is not only committed to equity, diversity and inclusion in principle, but is also effectively embedding this commitment across its culture and educational practices.

439. Progress is tracked and reported annually in the BEDI Impact Report, which is submitted to the Board of Governors via the Executive Committee. The team’s examination of the most recent report showed that it included concrete actions and quantifiable outcomes, such as the successful delivery of RNCM Disability Week, the continued reduction of the mean gender pay gap and the introduction of ‘Workplace Adjustment Plans’ for staff, which mirror Personal Learning Plans for students.

440. The team received confirmation from the senior academic staff they met during the visit that the commitment to equity guiding the college’s approach was a ‘golden thread’ running through the curriculum, in alignment with its Strategic Plan and supporting strategies. These staff were able to provide numerous examples of how this commitment was being put into practice, such as integrating equity principles into policies and procedures, championing inclusive pedagogies in the classroom, supporting neurodiversity and providing appropriate equity training for both staff and students. Furthermore, students the team met during the visit also expressed that they had contributed to the development of the college’s BEDI Policy, which reflected the staff’s view of the college’s approach to its commitment to equity.

441. Therefore, the team determined that the college’s approach is guided by a commitment to equity.

## Conclusions

442. The assessment team concluded that the college demonstrates that it has in place, monitors and evaluates arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

443. The team found that the college has established a comprehensive and coherent strategic and operational framework to support student development and achievement. This is articulated through a series of aligned strategies that promote academic, personal and professional growth across all levels of study, underpinned by structured oversight and regular monitoring of progress and development.

444. The college's commitment to student wellbeing is firmly embedded across its support structures and extends to postgraduate research students through targeted provision. Students are advised and inducted effectively through a process that is inclusive and takes account of individual needs.

445. Opportunities for academic and professional skills development are integrated into both the curriculum and co-curricular activity with postgraduate research students engaged in structured training aligned with sector expectations and have access to learning resources that support their research and professional growth.

446. Furthermore, the team found there to be a clear and sustained commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion underpins the college's approach. The college works to ensure that all students, including postgraduate researchers, are supported equitably and can thrive within an inclusive academic community.

447. Therefore, the team concluded that the college continues to meet criterion D1 in relation to its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and meets criterion D1 for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

# Assessment of DAPs criterion E: Evaluation of performance

## Criterion E1: Evaluation of performance

### Advice to the OfS

448. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion E1: Evaluation of performance because it meets the requirements for this criterion for its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

449. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows in summary that the college takes effective action to critically assess its own performance, respond to identified weaknesses and develop further its strengths. The evidence also shows that there are clear mechanisms for scrutiny and monitoring of academic provision, and there are opportunities for ideas to be drawn into arrangements for programme design, approval, delivery and review.

450. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence for this criterion alongside other relevant information.

### Criterion E1

**E1: An organisation granted degree awarding powers takes effective action to assess its own performance, respond to identified weaknesses and develop further its strengths.**

### Reasoning

451. To assess whether the college takes effective action to assess its own performance, the team reviewed a range of evidence that included:

- reports to the Board of Governors
- Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy and Education Strategy
- Committee Handbook
- the college's TEF 2023 submission
- Policy Review Schedule 2024
- SEER templates and completed SEERs for BMus (Hons), BMus (Hons) in Popular Music, and Graduate School programmes
- Strategic Risk Register
- Continuous Monitoring Framework and a sample of Continuous Monitoring Reports
- minutes from the college's key deliberative committees.

452. The team also observed several meetings of the college's deliberative committees.

453. The team assessed whether critical self-assessment is integral to the operation of the college's higher education provision and whether action is taken in response to matters raised through internal or external monitoring and review. The team found that the college's academic governance is primarily overseen by the Board of Governors, which holds overall responsibility for the college's educational character and mission, with specific academic and research strategy implementation delegated to the Academic Board. Key monitoring procedures are embedded through various committees, such as the Education and Quality Committee and the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, which have delegated responsibilities for approving policies, maintaining academic standards, and overseeing research and knowledge exchange activities.

454. The Board of Governors receives regular reports from the Principal, covering sector-wide issues impacting the provider and reports from the Director of Programmes and the Director of Research on matters relating to the provider's academic and research performance. The Academic Board also reviews continuous monitoring reports, external examiner reports and subcommittee reports to ensure the quality and standards of higher education delivery. In the team's view, this robust approach to academic governance reflects the college's strong commitment to critical self-assessment and the continuous enhancement of its academic provision.

455. The evidence reviewed by the team showed that critical self-assessment is embedded in the college's operations. For instance, the college's Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy and Education Strategy incorporate clear objectives and measurable success indicators, such as increasing the number of postgraduate research students in priority research areas and expanding engagement in entrepreneurial activities with industry partners. Progress against these targets is regularly monitored through committees such as the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee and the Education and Quality Committee. For example, the minutes of the November 2023 meeting of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee show that progress against the targets set out in the Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy is actively monitored and discussed, with committee members considering how workload models for academic staff could better support the college's research ambitions.

456. The Strategic Risk Register provides, in the team's view, further evidence of the college's commitment to critical self-assessment through its comprehensive documentation of risks, mitigation strategies and ongoing actions in response to both internal and external reviews. For example, entries concerning cyber security and student experience and wellbeing include specific updates on recent actions taken following independent internal audits and external feedback. The register also shows how emerging issues or concerns arising from internal audits are systematically addressed, with clearly defined timelines and designated responsibilities for each action allocated to accountable individuals or staff teams.

457. The team considered that the inclusion of net risk scores and movement indicators in the RNCM's Strategic Risk and Assurance Register demonstrates a structured and reflective approach to risk management, enabling the college to critically evaluate the effectiveness of its practices and adapt its responses accordingly. Risks such as Cyber Security/Information Governance and Financial Sustainability are assigned gross and net risk scores, with movement indicators showing how risk levels evolve over time. This approach ensures that

mitigating actions are regularly reviewed and updated, as evidenced by the reduction in net risk for Belonging, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, following policy enhancements and staff training. Accountability is embedded through routine reporting by risk owners, such as the Deputy Principal for Operations and the Academic Registrar, to the Executive Committee and the Board of Governors. The Executive Committee, which meets monthly, reviews the full risk register and monitors progress on mitigation strategies, while the Board of Governors receives high-level summaries focused on strategic risks exceeding tolerance thresholds, such as those related to Climate Change and Financial Sustainability.

458. The college's commitment to continuous improvement is further evidenced by its use of internal audits and self-initiated reviews, including a 2023-24 UKVI compliance audit that led to procedural refinements, a Safeguarding Policy review by the NSPCC in February 2024 that resulted in a new Code of Conduct for working with under-18s, and regular penetration testing to ensure the robustness of cyber security controls. In the team's view, these examples reflect an iterative risk management cycle, where findings from audits and reviews feed directly into policy and operational enhancements.
459. The team found that the college's commitment to critical self-assessment is evident at both institutional and programme levels. At the institutional level, practices such as risk management, strategic planning and internal audits ensure regular and reflective oversight of the college's operations. This commitment is further reflected in the continuous monitoring of its degree programmes, where the college adopts a similarly structured and evidence-based approach as discussed under criterion B2. As part of this continuous monitoring process, programme teams engage in structured reflection on the previous academic year, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative evidence to inform action planning for the year ahead. To support this activity, the Continuous Monitoring Schedule provides a cyclical timeline for the systematic review of key data sets, including admissions statistics, progression and award rates, student attrition and programme survey responses.
460. Further evidence of critical self-assessment and regular review of the college's provision was found through the college's annual review presented to Academic Board of student academic appeals and complaints, and in reports that evidence the effective use of the external examining system across the entire college portfolio. These show, for example, the actions taken by the college to assure itself when anomalies are identified in the performance of a particular cohort. The team considered this evidence demonstrated one way in which action is taken in response to matters raised through internal review.
461. The team examined the minutes of the college's deliberative committees and found evidence that action is systematically taken in response to issues raised through internal and external monitoring and review. For example, the minutes of the May 2023 meeting of the Undergraduate Degrees Committee record that a student representative raised concerns about conflicts between professional placement portfolios and recitals, prompting a review of the relevant submission deadlines. This action was marked as being completed in the minutes of the October 2023 meeting of the committee. Similarly, the minutes of the Education and Quality Committee show that the college acted on NSS feedback by appointing a Digital Learning Manager and a Space Utilisation Manager to address concerns regarding the online learning management system and timetabling.

462. The team also observed several meetings of the college's deliberative committees, during which members actively engaged in reflective discussion of matters arising from both student and external stakeholder feedback and agreed targeted actions in response to the issues identified. For example, at the March 2025 meeting of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, postgraduate research student representatives were proactively invited to contribute to discussions on the college's research centres review process. This led to an action to include them in a planned evaluation working group. The committee also reviewed and refined the college's guidance on internal funding applications with the help of postgraduate research feedback, enhancing transparency and fairness in resource allocation for postgraduate researchers.

463. The team found that the college demonstrates a strong commitment to self-criticality as evidenced, for example, by its robust system for continuous performance monitoring. This includes critical self-reflection during submissions for significant external evaluations like the World-Leading Specialist Provider Funding and the 2023 TEF, leading to the identification of areas for enhancement. In addition, the college routinely reviews all key policies and procedures, with a structured Policy Review Schedule and a proactive approach to incorporating feedback from students and external networks. In the team's view, this ongoing self-assessment and responsive approach to institutional development underscores the college's preparedness to effectively manage the responsibilities associated with Full Research DAPs.

464. The team thus concluded that critical self-assessment is an integral part of the operation of the college's higher education provision and that action is taken in response to matters raised through internal or external monitoring and review.

465. The team considered whether clear mechanisms exist for assigning and discharging action in relation to the scrutiny and monitoring of the college's academic provision. As discussed in detail under criterion A1, the evidence reviewed demonstrated that, in the team's view, the college's deliberative committee framework facilitates effective and transparent academic governance, with clear mechanisms in place for assigning and discharging actions related to the scrutiny and monitoring of the college's academic provision. The Committee Handbook stipulates that the college's committees must regularly monitor and evaluate performance, with defined reporting lines to ensure accountability. Evidence from committee minutes and observations confirmed that these functions and responsibilities are consistently applied in practice.

466. For example, the Education and Quality Committee is expected to 'undertake scrutiny of the outcomes from and the effectiveness of academic quality processes', and to 'review matters related to the student experience and academic quality arising from the undergraduate and postgraduate taught committees'. This was evident in the minutes of the November 2024 meeting, where the committee actively addressed student feedback from the NSS by reviewing and approving targeted actions to improve the academic experience. In response to concerns about wellbeing support, for instance, the committee endorsed the development of a Student Wellbeing Policy, including a visual guide for signposting services, and requested the inclusion of wellbeing information in weekly student newsletters.

467. Each of the college's committees is required to submit an annual report of its activities to its parent committee, such as the Academic Board in the case of the Education and Quality

Committee, to 'provide evidence (through the minutes of meetings and other documents as appropriate) to show that it has exercised its delegated authority properly'. The use of delegated authority is reviewed annually by each parent committee as part of its evaluation of subcommittee membership and terms of reference.

468. The Handbook further states that committees have delegated authority to make decisions within their remit on behalf of their parent committee and may direct other committees to do the same. Meeting minutes clarify who is responsible for implementing each decision via an accompanying action plan, and decisions made by subordinate committees are reported to their parent committees. The team therefore determined that the mechanisms at the college for assigning and discharging action in relation to the evaluation of its academic provision were clear.

469. This conclusion is further confirmed by the minutes of the Education and Quality Committee. For example, following discussion of the NSS results, actions related to wellbeing and assessment clarity were assigned to specific staff and subsequently completed. The development of the Access and Participation Plan was tracked by assigning tasks to designated individuals and integrating them into wider strategic planning. Ongoing work on recital management, copyright guidance and the VLE also involved clearly delegated responsibilities and structured follow-up. The consistent use of action plans with named leads and deadlines evidenced, in the team's view, a transparent approach for assigning and discharging action in relation to the evaluation of the college's academic provision.

470. The college's continuous monitoring process involves the production of a SEER, a programme-level action plan that is monitored throughout the academic year. This process is currently applied across all taught provision. These reports are submitted to the Education and Quality Committee for discussion and review before being forwarded to the Academic Board. The reports are a standing agenda item at the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Degrees Committees in the following academic year, and the team thus found that they constitute an effective mechanism for the tracking of actions and the continuous monitoring and scrutiny of the college's academic provision.

471. The team reviewed completed 2023-24 SEERs for the BMus (Hons), the BMus (Hons) in Popular Music, and the Graduate School programmes, and found them to be a clear and structured mechanism for assigning and discharging actions related to the scrutiny of the college's academic provision. This is because each programme uses a standardised template outlining specific actions, responsible staff, deadlines, and completion status, an approach the team found effective in promoting accountability and transparency. For example, the SEER for the BMus (Hons) programme included an action requiring the Head of Undergraduate Programmes to liaise with the Head of School of Composition regarding the number of composition lessons provided to students. This action was assigned to specific members of staff with a clear deadline and a completion marker, which the team found reflected a systematic approach to task allocation and follow-up. The team also saw evidence that SEERs were taken to both the relevant Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Degree Committees for discussion and then taken to the college's Education and Quality Committee for consideration.

472. Similarly, the Graduate School report tracked actions over multiple academic years, such as exploring placement opportunities with more partners or embedding health and wellbeing into

college activities, with tasks clearly assigned to the responsible staff. The incorporation of 'Red, Amber, Green' ratings further enhance the monitoring process by highlighting the priority and risk level of each action. The team determined that this evidence showed that there is a transparent framework for continuous scrutiny and monitoring of the college's academic provision, where responsibilities are clearly defined and discharged, and progress against deadlines is tracked systematically.

473. The team also found that the college has also established clear mechanisms to assign and discharge action in relation to the scrutiny and monitoring of its postgraduate research provision. Oversight of research strategy, including postgraduate research provision, is led by the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, which reports directly to the Academic Board. Operational responsibility for the day-to-day management and quality assurance of postgraduate research programmes is delegated to the Research Degrees Committee. Thus, the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee is responsible for 'the maintenance of academic standards for research degrees' and 'the formulation and implementation of the RNCM Research Strategy', while the Research Degree Committee has a narrower focus, with its remit covering 'the administration, management and quality assurance of the college's research degrees programme'.

474. The monitoring of research degrees is carried out operationally through ongoing feedback from students and supervisors. Recommendations arising from this monitoring process are reported to the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee after the first full year of implementation. The team formed the view that this hierarchical structure, with clear lines of accountability across the two committees, helps to support the assignment of actions at the strategic level and their execution at the operational level. The minutes of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee reviewed by the team included detailed action plans specifying responsible parties and deadlines, such as consulting the Director of Finance on funding thresholds or updating the Concessions Policy. The minutes of the Research Degrees Committee meetings also revealed a consistent process of reviewing, evaluating and responding to internal feedback. For example, student feedback was regularly collected and discussed, with specific actions assigned to address concerns such as attendance at seminars or the accessibility of learning resources.

475. As previously set out under criterion B2, should the college gain Full Research DAPs, it intends to use its existing mechanisms to bring its postgraduate research provision under the same continuous monitoring approach as its taught provision, with operational oversight by the Research Degree Committee and strategic oversight by the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee.

476. The team therefore concluded that clear mechanisms exist for assigning and discharging action in relation to the scrutiny and monitoring of the college's academic provision. Furthermore, the team formed the view that the college has appropriate plans in place to extend these mechanisms to postgraduate research provision, should it be granted Full Research DAPs.

477. To determine whether ideas and expertise from within and outside the college are drawn into its arrangements for programme design, approval, delivery and review, the team reviewed the following evidence:

- Committee Handbook
- Academic Quality Handbook
- Student Regulations and Information
- external examiner reports and responses to these reports
- minutes of the Board of Examiners
- information on the role of Specialist External Assessors
- programme reapproval case study including evidence of consultations for BMus (Hons) in Popular Music
- documents from a Programme Design Consultation
- minutes from the Degree Committees and the Education and Quality Committee.

478. The team also met with students during the visit and observed several meetings of the college's deliberative committees.

479. The team found that the evidence demonstrated that ideas and expertise from both within and outside the college contribute to the evaluation of its activities, including programme design, approval, delivery and review. This is achieved through structured engagement with academic staff, students, external examiners and industry partners. Academic staff are central to programme design and development. When approving new programmes, the college's Academic Quality Handbook sets the expectation that input should be sought 'from external and internal sources'. This is typically implemented via an external consultation with academics, practitioners, professional partners, and former students, and an internal consultation with academic staff, the Registry, professional services staff and current students.

480. The evidence reviewed by the team shows that, as discussed under subcriterion A1.2, students play an active role in shaping programmes through formal representation and feedback mechanisms. They are members of key committees, including the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Degrees Committees, the Research Degree Committee and the Education and Quality Committee, where they contribute to discussions on programme design and delivery, and on broader student experience. Students are also members of programme approval and reapproval panels. In addition, student feedback, gathered through surveys, focus groups and informal discussions with staff, is systematically reviewed as part of the college's continuous monitoring process, with actions taken to address concerns or implement enhancements. For instance, student representatives played a key role in shaping the reapproval of the BMus (Hons) programme, emphasising the need for flexible pathways and cross-genre collaboration. Their feedback directly influenced the programme structure to better support diverse career aspirations and artistic development.

481. During the visit, the team met with students, including those carrying out postgraduate research. These students confirmed that they had contributed to the college's arrangements for programme design, approval, delivery and review. They described an inclusive, non-hierarchical environment where their contributions were valued and they reported being regularly informed of actions taken in response to their feedback.

482. The team found that external examiners and specialist external assessors also provide critical independent scrutiny of the college's arrangements for programme design, approval, delivery and review. For example, external examiners, appointed for each taught programme, review academic standards and submit annual reports that are considered by the Degrees Committees and the Education and Quality Committee. Similarly, specialist external assessors participate in practical assessments, offering an external perspective on marking and moderation. These assessors 'provide externality and subject expertise', helping to ensure that assessments align with sector practice. Additionally, the Programme Approval Panel, which evaluates proposals to ensure they satisfy the college's requirements for quality and standards, as well as other external reference points, includes at least two external members with relevant academic or professional expertise.

483. As discussed under criterion B3, at present external examiners of the college's postgraduate research programmes attend the final viva voce examination. If granted Full Research DAPs, the college plans to strengthen this external oversight by appointing an external examiner to a newly established formal mid-point assessment panel.

484. Industry partners contributed valuable perspectives on professional relevance as part of the reapproval of the BMus (Hons) and BMus (Hons) in Popular Music programmes, for example regarding the role of technological developments and entrepreneurial skills in ensuring alignment with current industry demands and future trends, which resulted in enhancements to the programmes. The team also found that the college's Graduate Diploma, which is delivered in agreement with the University of Manchester, combines resources and expertise to offer a dual-award programme. Furthermore, the team considered how policies are also informed by ongoing dialogue with external networks, including the Conservatoires UK Registry Group, the JISC mail forum on plagiarism, and the North West Universities Casework Group. The team found that drawing on external expertise in these ways promoted alignment with best practice across the sector and with broader sector-wide developments.

485. The team reviewed the minutes of the college's three Degree Committees and the Education and Quality Committee and observed meetings of some of these committees. The team found that ideas and expertise from both within and outside the institution are actively incorporated into programme design, approval, delivery and review. This was evident in the way that academic staff, students, external examiners and other external partners contributed meaningfully to shaping policies and procedures, refining the curriculum offer, enhancing assessment practices and improving student support.

486. For instance, feedback from external examiners at the Undergraduate Degrees Committee resulted in improvements to assessment feedback and staff training, while student feedback about accompanist access and room bookings prompted operational changes. Internal expertise was also brought to bear through discussions among heads of schools, who contributed to curriculum content revisions, including the diversification of the repertoire in recital programming. Feedback from postgraduate research students at the Research

Degrees Committee led to improvements in workspace provision and enhancements to the content of student workshops, which now include sessions on 'publishing, funding and post-doctoral opportunities'. Consultation with the college's admissions team informed revisions to admissions schedules, while benchmarking the college's IELTS entry requirements against data from Conservatoires UK and other higher education providers supported the decision to maintain the existing language requirements.

487. Based on this evidence, the team concluded that ideas and expertise from both within and outside the college are systematically embedded in its arrangements for programme design, approval, delivery and review.

## **Conclusions**

488. The team concluded that the college takes effective action to assess its own performance, respond to identified weaknesses and develop further its strengths.

489. This is because there is comprehensive evidence that critical self-assessment is integral to the college's higher education provision, with robust mechanisms in place to monitor performance, identify areas for improvement and implement actions timely. The college's approach is characterised by a continuous cycle of reflection, data analysis and enhancement, driven by collaboration between staff and students and informed by external feedback.

490. The evidence reviewed by the team also demonstrates that the college has clear mechanisms for scrutinising and monitoring its academic provision, including postgraduate research, and opportunities to incorporate both internal and external ideas and expertise into the design, approval, delivery and review of its programmes. The team is assured that the college would continue to apply this approach in a self-critical manner to its postgraduate research provision should it be granted Full Research DAPs.

491. Therefore, the team concluded that the college continues to meet criterion E1 in relation to its existing Full Taught DAPs authorisation and meets criterion E1 for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

# Assessment of DAPs criterion F: Academic staff

## Criterion F1: Academic staff

### Advice to the OfS

492. The assessment team's view is that the college meets the requirements for criterion F1: Academic staff.

493. The assessment team's view is based on its review of the evidence, which shows in summary that the college's supervision of its research students, and the teaching it undertakes at doctoral level, is underpinned by academic staff with high levels of knowledge, understanding and experience of current research and advanced scholarship in their subjects of study.

494. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence for this criterion alongside other relevant information.

### Criterion F1

**F1: The organisation's supervision of its research students, and the teaching it undertakes at doctoral level, is underpinned by academic staff with high levels of knowledge, understanding and experience of current research and advanced scholarship in their subjects of study.**

### Reasoning

495. The team assessed whether the college's policies and procedures relating to research, advanced scholarship and research degree programmes are appropriate, effective and reflect sector best practice. The team also assessed whether these policies and procedures are understood and applied consistently, both by those involved in the delivery of research degrees and, where appropriate, by the students involved.

496. The team reviewed the following evidence in relation to this criterion:

- the college's current research-related policies and procedure documents
- current policies and documentation on the college's research degrees, including relevant policies from its current validator
- proposed documentation relating to research degrees prepared in anticipation of Research DAPs
- discussions with research supervisors and postgraduate students during the visit to the college
- minutes of the committee meetings for Research Degrees Committee, Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, MMU's Research Degrees Committee.

497. The evidence reviewed demonstrated that the college has a robust and comprehensive set of policies and procedures in place to support research and, in conjunction with the current

validating partner, for research degrees. As set out under criterion A1, the team found that the college's Research and Knowledge Exchange Supporting Strategy 2021-26 establishes the strategic framework for the relevant policies, indicating how they are used, evaluated and refreshed to enable research, including research degrees. The strategy also commits the college to developing high quality practice-led research, is aligned to the Vitae Researcher Development Framework and UKRI knowledge exchange framework and focuses research activity in four clusters in which there is significant expertise among the staff body:

- Music Performance, Composition and Practice
- Educating in and through Music
- Music and Science
- Music and Wellbeing

498. The college's Good Research Conduct Policy is the key policy that underpins all research activity and reflects best sector practice in its explicit alignment with UKRI policies on research conduct and the Concordat for Research Integrity.<sup>28</sup> Minutes of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee provided evidence of the scheduled review and amendment of this policy. The policy sets out the responsibilities of individual researchers and strategic leaders alongside a clear statement of the college's commitment to research and its researchers. In parallel, the college's own Ethics Framework sets out clear expectations and responsibilities regarding ethical research, which (in terms of research) are overseen by the Research Ethics Committee. The team found that minutes of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee showed that reports from the Research Ethics Committee were received and discussed, including the effectiveness of a triaging system to deal with increased volume of applications.

499. The college also has a suite of policies and procedures to support research and researchers, covering matters such as research leave, internal funding and professorial title. The Research Leave Policy sets out eligibility and criteria for academic staff to request longer blocks of research time, either of one month or one term, than would normally be possible alongside their other duties. In applying for such leave, staff are required to demonstrate the alignment of their proposed project with the college's Research Strategy, its potential contribution to the college's REF submission, and their plans for seeking external research funding. Maintaining research student supervision duties is a condition of any successful application.

500. Procedures and guidance related to internal research funding establish clear criteria against which applications are evaluated. Nine criteria are set out to ensure that applications are well aligned with the college's priorities for research and are appropriate in scope and ambition:

- alignment with strategic goals
- impact
- innovation and creativity

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<sup>28</sup> See [The Concordat to Support Research Integrity – UKCORI](#).

- feasibility
- budget justification
- sustainability
- collaboration and partnerships
- risk assessment
- ethics clearance.

Delegation of decision-making responsibility is clearly defined according to the amount of funding being sought, with higher amounts being considered by the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee.

501. The Professorial Title Policy establishes criteria for the award of personal, emeritus and honorary professorships. Research is identified as one of the areas in which successful applicants for a personal chair may demonstrate the required international standing, which should demonstrate clear links to the college's strategic priorities. Evidence required for researchers includes a substantial track record of internationally recognised research outputs, awards, residencies or other external indicators of merit, significant knowledge exchange or collaborative research activity, and success in obtaining external research funding. The title of Honorary Research Professor is used to formalise collaborations between the college and external experts who make a substantial and ongoing contribution to its academic activity. Awards are made for a three-year period and are renewable.

502. The regulations regarding research degrees are currently set by its validating partner, MMU. As discussed in detail under criterion B1 and G1, these provide comprehensive coverage from admissions and enrolment, through academic criteria for the award, period of study, supervision and progress monitoring arrangements, ethics, training and development, and support mechanisms to arrangements for the preparation and examination of the thesis and possible outcomes. The college has used MMU's regulations as the basis for its own in preparation for gaining Full Research DAPs. It has enhanced them by tailoring them more precisely to the specialist requirements of several of its own pathways, such as composition, performance, music education and music and wellbeing, particularly in relation to expectations around ethical research conduct.

503. The college has also reviewed its own existing policies and regulations related to research and teaching to prepare provisional regulations and a handbook for postgraduate research students. It has undertaken a mapping exercise to identify which of its own policies will apply, with amendments where required, to the postgraduate research programme. The team found that these provisional documents, and the associated planning, acknowledge and sustain the college's experience and existing good practice in research degree supervision since 2010, while introducing modifications and enhancements, such as the involvement of external experts in interim progress reviews, that are more tailored to the specialist nature of its provision.

504. The team reviewed minutes of committee meetings, held discussions with research students and staff, and observed a meeting of the college's Research and Knowledge Exchange

Committee to assess how policies and procedures to support research are understood and implemented. Minutes of the college's Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee provided evidence that applications for internal research funding were considered in line with the guidelines and reports from staff who had been granted research leave under the terms of that policy were also received. Observation of this committee and the Research Degrees Committee also provided evidence of engagement with the Research Ethics Policy and its implementation through a request for feedback on recent changes. Thorough updates from the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at these meetings demonstrated transparent and consistent treatment of applications. There was also evidence that the CUK Ethics Committee was used to provide external expert guidance where required. Furthermore, during discussions with the team, staff expressed that they were familiar with procedures for applying for research leave and internal research funding, with two staff members reporting how successful applications for internal research funding had provided the necessary resources and support to enable them to pursue external grants, one of which had been awarded, one of which was in progress.

505. During the team's discussions with a representative research students, students expressed a thorough knowledge of the policies and procedures in place related to their academic progress, professional development and pastoral support. In particular, students highlighted how the supervision log provided a record of feedback from and dialogue with supervisors, which helped to build trust in supervisors. Students explained how policies and procedures were covered in induction sessions, with updates highlighted at the start of each academic year. In terms of interpreting and understanding policies regarding the required standards of doctoral work, students spoke positively about the college's use of the Vitae framework. Students understood the expectations of them in terms of progress reporting and review and spoke of the effectiveness of the procedures in this area. In particular, they highlighted the value of receiving independent feedback on their projects.

506. Students also expressed appreciation of the valuable input of college staff in interpreting MMU's regulations considering the specialist nature of their research, for example in how MMU's rules on thesis word length should be interpreted for a portfolio of compositions. Regular training sessions for postgraduate research students were viewed positively as a means of communicating updates and ensuring common understanding of policies and procedures. The support of the college's library staff was also acknowledged in helping students adhere to regulations regarding use of copyrighted material. In terms of the Research Ethics Committee and policy, students were appreciative of recent changes in response to feedback, as discussed by the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee. Students also highlighted the proactive efforts of supervisors in highlighting opportunities for financial support and professional development available within the college and their practical support in helping students to take up these opportunities.

507. Therefore, the team determined that the college's policies and procedures relating to research, advanced scholarship and research degree programmes are appropriate, effective and reflect sector best practice. The team was satisfied that these policies and procedures are understood and applied consistently by those involved in the delivery of research degrees and by the students involved.

508. To determine whether the college has a strong and sustainable research culture, which directly informs and enhances the supervision and teaching of research degree students, the

team reviewed evidence of staff and student research activity and opportunities, including through a visit to the college.

509. The team reviewed the following evidence in relation to this criterion:

- UKRI contextualised data report of the college
- observation of the college's annual postgraduate research conference
- discussions with staff and postgraduate research students during the visit
- documentation of postgraduate research and supervisor training opportunities
- observation of a meeting of the college's Research Degrees Committee.

510. As noted under criterion A1, the college's research culture is central to its ethos and learning environment and is embedded in the Strategic Plan 2020-26, which highlights the importance of research skills as a key aspect of entrepreneurial artistic training across undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research degrees studies. The Strategic Plan is underpinned by the Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy 2021-26 and the Education Strategy 2021-26, both of which include a commitment to the college gaining Full Research DAPs by 2026.

511. The college's research culture is underpinned by 30 members of academic staff who are research active, and 13 additional instrument-specific professors who are regularly actively involved in and support research activity across the institution's key research areas of:

- Music Performance, Composition and Practice
- Educating in and through Music
- Music and Science
- Music and Wellbeing.

512. The team noted that there are also currently 30 members of staff are involved in supervising research students.

513. During the visit the team heard about the role of review panels in enabling the broader supervisory staff to learn about different methodologies and subjects and how attendance at review panels is used to support the development of new supervisors by enabling them to understand the college's processes and academic standards. Furthermore, during discussions with senior staff, the team heard how staff recognise the opportunities to benefit from the scale of the college and the focus on working collaboratively across the key research areas.

514. The team found that analysis of evidence, together with its observation of research activity, demonstrated a rich and well established research culture in which postgraduate research students and their supervisors are thoroughly integrated. The organisation of the college's research into the four key areas noted above maps onto its research student recruitment, creating viable groups of staff and students with shared interests within the college's larger research community. The college expressed that this approach supports the resilience of the research degree programme. These areas are sustained by activities such as reading groups,

for example on Music Education and Music and Psychology, which are open to staff and research students. In addition, UKRI's contextualised data report on the college highlighted its track record of research assessment exercises (RAE) and REF submissions and drew attention to the high quality of its research environment demonstrated in the REF 2021, which further demonstrated to the team the strength of the college's strong and sustainable research culture.

515. The team considered the contextualised data provided by UKRI for the college which shows that it has consistently received research funding from different funding streams including QR funding or competitively awarded funds, such as the Research England Development Fund. These awards respectively supported the college's PRISM research centre and, in collaboration with two partners, the StART Entrepreneurship Project, both of which significantly enrich its research environment. PRISM was founded at the college in 2017, led collaboratively by the college's Head of Artistic Research and senior academics from Oxford universities. It has commissioned new work from many musical artists and has been central to creating a community of research students within the college. Seven PhD students are currently affiliated with PRISM, demonstrating that the centre directly enhances the supervision of research students. One staff member, currently employed as a Knowledge Exchange Fellow, completed their PhD at the college in 2021 and was then appointed to a post-doctoral position within PRISM, through which he led and participated in collaborative research projects and developed key skills in knowledge exchange, leading to his current appointment. This further demonstrated to the team the strength of the college's research culture, which directly informs and enhances the supervision and teaching of research degree students.

516. The team determined that the range of research activities, including dedicated events scheduled for postgraduate research students and a wider range of extracurricular events, offered by the college enrich its research culture. Dedicated workshops and seminars for research students draw on the expertise of staff and external speakers in covering a range of topics relevant to students working on a wide range of topics, including literature reviews, methodologies, research ethics, funding opportunities and training for teaching. The college's Sir John Manduell Research Forum brings in external experts from a variety of academic specialisms within music and integrates research students into the college's wider research culture. Students are also able to claim free tickets to the many performance events held within the college. The team's discussion with a representation of research students demonstrated that students found these events valuable both for the formal content they delivered and for the informal opportunities they provided for discussion and feedback, and for making them feel part of a research community.

517. Furthermore, the college's annual postgraduate research conference provides an opportunity for all research students to present their work to an audience of peers and staff. The programmes of previous conferences reviewed by the team evidenced the participation of students from across the range of the college's research specialisms, including performance, composition, music education and musicology, with panels arranged to facilitate dialogue across these areas. Students can take an active part in the organisation and running of this event, and their feedback informs the planning in subsequent years, for example in extending invitations to alumni to attend and network with current students. In observing part of the 2025 conference, the team witnessed high levels of participation among research students and

staff, good quality presentations and discussion and debate that was both rigorous and supportive.

518. The team considered that the college's continued developments and enhancements to its postgraduate research delivery and supervision enables a sustainable research culture. For example, documentation of training sessions for research supervisors showed regular and effective engagement with UKRI expectations, regulatory and procedural updates from the college and its validating partner. These included new processes for submissions to the college's Research Ethics Committee, and opportunities to explore supervisor development through an outline of the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) Recognised Research Supervisor programme. The team's discussions with postgraduate research supervisors during the visit confirmed the usefulness of sessions such as these as opportunities for peer support and the sharing of good practice to improve supervision, with examples highlighted of supporting neurodiverse students and providing guidance for new supervisors.

519. In addition, the team's observation of a meeting of the college's Research Degrees Committee provided evidence of the active participation of postgraduate research students and the college's intentional approach to seeking their views and feedback to further enhance the college's research culture. For example, the meeting included a review of a 'You Said, We Did' report, which highlighted how postgraduate research suggestions for external speakers had been invited and received, and how a session on writing critical commentaries had been organised, alongside the evaluation of feedback on recent events for postgraduate research students.

520. Therefore, the team concluded that the range of activities, opportunities for staff and student training and development, and collegial approach to evaluation and feedback demonstrated that the college has a strong and sustainable research culture, which directly informs and enhances the supervision and teaching of research degree students. Further consideration of the college's strong and sustainable research culture is set out throughout the remainder of this criterion.

521. The team reviewed details of staff and student numbers and activity to consider whether the college has a critical mass of research staff and students, representing a viable and sustainable research community.

522. The team reviewed the following evidence in relation to this criterion:

- UKRI contextualised data report
- staff profiles and a sample of staff CVs
- minutes of meetings of the Research Degrees Committee.

523. At the time of the assessment, the college's staffing base consists of a small number of staff on full-time (29) or part-time (35) academic contracts, and a larger body of 276 part-time adjunct staff. The evidence demonstrated that the college has a viable and sustainable research community. For instance, the team noted that levels of research active academic staff at the college had remained stable over the period 2019-23, with around 25-30 staff on research or teaching research contracts. Current data provided by the college indicates a further 27 research active academic staff with smaller time allocations for research. It should

also be noted that the college's teaching-only staffing levels have been consistent, at around 300, both of which reflect the nature of its provision and the intensive one-to-one teaching that characterises its undergraduate and taught postgraduate provision.

524. The team considered the contextualised data provided by UKRI for the college indicates a small but regular intake of five to ten new postgraduate research students over the period 2019-23. The team considered that the number of students is proportionate to the college's supervisory capacity among its research and research and teaching staff.

525. Publicly available staff profiles and a sample of CVs from research active staff confirmed that there is significant activity in terms of research outputs and contributions to internal and external research groups and initiatives. Research outputs appropriately reflect the college's multiple areas of specialism within its single subject area, including published books and articles, compositions and performance projects; the college submitted 49 research outputs for 19.6 full-time equivalent staff to REF 2021 across seven output types. Examples included compositions performed by ensembles such as the London Sinfonietta and Luxembourg Philharmonie, and books and book chapters with publishers such as Routledge, Chicago University Press and Oxford University Press. The team considered that this evidence demonstrates a critical mass of research staff, representing a viable and sustainable research community.

526. The college's summary data on current postgraduate research students reflects the data set out in the UKRI's contextualised data report for the college, with typically five to ten new starters per year. Minutes of the college's Research Degrees Committee also documented numbers of enquiries and applications consistent with those found in the college's summary data and UKRI report for previous years. For instance, during the 2024-25 cycle, there were 21 enquiries leading to 15 applications spread across the college's areas of specialism in performance, musicology, composition, music education and music psychology. The team also noted that, papers for the Research Degrees Committee meeting observed by the team included an update on the progress of these applications, with clear details of the staff members responsible for reviewing each of them. Furthermore, the team found that the college's data on completions, discussed further under criterion H1, reflects an upward trajectory in terms of conferrals of doctoral degrees. The team considered that this evidence demonstrates a critical mass of research students.

527. Furthermore, the team noted that the college has been successful in gaining funding for research degree studentships through its participation in the AHRC's Northwestern Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership and collaborative doctoral awards in partnership with a range of organisations including Conway Hall, the BBC Philharmonic, Drake Music, Drake Music Scotland and the National Archives. In addition, programmes of previous postgraduate research conferences and the team's observation of its 2025 iteration demonstrated the active participation of a sufficient body of students to sustain a lively research community.

528. An oral report presented the postgraduate research representative to the Research Degrees Committee at the meeting observed by the team conveyed that the conference had been well received and demonstrated the growth in the conference in recent years. It was noted how, over time, the conference was increasingly being led and organised by postgraduate research students, which the team considered to demonstrate a growing viable and sustainable

research culture among research students. The team also heard from postgraduate research students who reported finding the annual postgraduate research conferences as a useful developmental and reflective exercise and allowed them to gain wider feedback on their work.

529. In summary, the team found that this evidence demonstrated that the college has a critical mass of research staff and students, representing a viable and sustainable research community.

530. The team considered the breadth of research activity undertaken by staff to consider whether the college actively engages in discipline-based and broader based communities of researchers and scholars external to the organisation and takes steps to engage the public at large with the research it undertakes. The team also considered how such activity demonstrates whether the college has established productive research-relevant links, formal or informal, with other higher education and specialist research institutions through, for example, joint research activities.

531. The team reviewed the following evidence in relation to this criterion:

- staff profiles and CVs
- the college's public-facing webpages about research-based activities, projects and events
- UKRI Research England Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) dashboards.

532. The evidence demonstrated to the team that staff are thoroughly engaged with academic and professional networks related to their areas of specialism and the music discipline more broadly. The sample CVs reviewed by the team demonstrated that all research active staff hold membership of learned societies such as the Royal Musical Association, the American Musicological Society, the Society for Music Analysis, Enterprise Educators UK and MusicHE, often serving as committee members or on specialist subcommittees, such as the AMS's Membership and Professional Development Committee.

533. Furthermore, CVs and online staff profiles demonstrated there is a substantial and continuing track record of staff engagement in a wide variety of research collaborations with scholars and institutions in the UK and beyond. Staff have held honorary and visiting appointments at other universities, such as Liverpool (Honorary Visiting Professor), Oxford (Visiting Research Fellow, The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities; Visiting Researcher, Oxford e-Research Centre), the Norwegian Academy of Music, and the University of Western Australia (Partner Investigator, Australian Research Council Discovery Project). The team found that research undertaken by college staff has also had wider public impact in several spheres. For example, research expertise in health and wellbeing contributed to a Conservatoires UK project, with the college's work particularly focused on music education and the music profession. Collaboration between PRiSM and Drake Music enabled artist in resident placements for deaf, disabled and neurodivergent musicians. Music history research contributed to a partnership with the National Trust, enhancing public understanding of music in several of its historic sites. Furthermore, staff CVs and the college's self-assessment documented a range of research outputs, including compositions, performances, journal articles and book chapters.

534. Through receiving funding via the Expanding Excellence in England Fund and the Research England Development Fund, the college has forged connections with other higher education institutions, particularly specialist providers like itself, on research-led projects such as PRiSM, which is discussed in detail under paragraph 515, and StART Entrepreneurship, establishing itself as a leading centre for performance-related research. The StART project draws together the college and its collaborators' expertise in creative arts research and teaching to develop resources and opportunities for students at each of the partner institutions to enhance their entrepreneurial skills in readiness for the portfolio and self-employed career paths increasingly common in the creative industries.

535. The team also identified many recent and current associations between staff with expertise in music composition and performance and high-profile ensembles, record labels, festivals, competitions and music venues nationally and internationally. These include recitals, composition performances and jury participation at venues and events including the Barbican Centre, the Aldeburgh Festival, the Tertis and Aronwiitz International Viola Competitions, the Irish Museum of Modern Art and The Warburg Institute, University of London. These emphasise the importance of composition and performance as strands of the college's research profile. As performers and composers, staff have been featured at major venues and festivals and on radio and television across a wide variety of genres, including the Royal Opera House, WOMAD and BBC Radio 3. Through such activities and associations, artistic research undertaken at the college reaches public audiences.

536. Knowledge Exchange forms part of the college's Artistic Strategy as well as its Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy and the team considered that this further underpins the college's commitment to engaging in discipline-based and broader based communities of researchers and scholars externally. For example, the 'RNCM Engage' project illustrates the college's use of its expertise in music education as part of its knowledge exchange work. Funded by the Benny Walker Charitable Trust in 2023, the project develops sustainable music education opportunities for young people in West Cumbria in partnership with Cumbria County Council and the Cumbria Music Education Hub. Furthermore, in 2023-24 the college-wide project 'The Future is Green' drew together staff and student researchers and performers to mount a series of public performances and events that used music to spark discussion and reflection on climate crisis.

537. UKRI's KEF dashboards<sup>29</sup> provide an overview of the performance of higher education providers across seven broad areas of knowledge exchange activity known in the KEF as 'perspectives'. The dashboards currently show that the college has high engagement in three perspectives:

- Public and Community Engagement
- Intellectual Property and Commercialisation
- Local Growth and Regeneration.

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<sup>29</sup> Available at [Knowledge exchange framework – UKRI](#).

538. Furthermore, the college is shown to have medium engagement in the following two perspectives:

- Continuous Professional Development and Graduate Start-Ups
- Working with the Public and Third Sector.

539. The KEF Institutional Context for the college highlights its reach to more than 7000 schoolchildren, and audiences in excess of 13 million through broadcast performances by staff or of their music and television and radio appearances. Therefore, the team found that the evidence shows that the college actively engages in discipline-based and broader based communities of researchers and scholars external to the organisation and takes steps to engage the public at large with the research it undertakes, as measured by details of individual staff activity and sector benchmarking through the KEF. The team also determined that through its leadership of collaborative research projects and initiatives, the college has productive research-relevant links with other higher education and specialist research institutions through, for example, joint research activities.

540. The team considered the college's staffing structure and the profiles and responsibilities of senior staff to determine whether it has a critical mass of research leaders, normally at professorial level, whose role is to support the development of research and an effective research culture. The team found that the evidence shows a critical mass of research active staff, with a total of 50 staff defined in this way in the evidence of Current Records of Academic Staff. Of the 23 of these 50 staff with significant responsibility for research, nine are at professorial level, who through their appointment to strategic leadership roles and engagement in research oversight, support and develop the college's research and research culture. For example, research active staff at professorial level serve in a wide variety of strategically significant roles across the institution, including Director of Research, Director of Programmes, Head of Undergraduate Studies, Head of the Graduate School, Head of Music, Health and Wellbeing, and Associate Director of Research and PGR Programme Leader.

541. In these roles, they ensure that the college's research culture permeates all areas of its activity. The Director of Research takes overall strategic leadership for research across the college and has responsibility for working closely with the Deputy Principal (Performance and Programmes), Director of Programmes and other senior leaders to ensure that research, learning and teaching and performance are thoroughly integrated with each other. The Director of Research's impact and influence is seen in their active engagement in leading Research Activity Reviews for staff as part of the annual professional development programme, effective and inclusive chairing of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee and through the provision of thorough reports on research and knowledge exchange for the college's Academic Board. The Associate Director of Research role is primarily responsible for leading doctoral programmes and reports to the Director of Research. The Associate Director leads the provision of training for doctoral students and supervisors and coordinates the annual postgraduate research conference with students.

542. As an example of the integration of research, teaching and performance, the college's Health and Wellbeing Hub, which has a vital role in supporting the physical and mental health of students preparing to pursue careers in the creative industries, draws on the research expertise of college staff to inform its work in educating and supporting students as a

research-led initiative. The Director of Programmes' research expertise in music education ensures that the college's pedagogy and staff development is thoroughly informed by current research. Members of research active staff at professorial level are also active as research degree supervisors in their areas of specialism, ensuring a rich research culture for postgraduate research students, in which their areas of research are thoroughly integrated into the wider life of the college.

543. The college's strategic commitment to ensuring research is embedded across the college is demonstrated in job descriptions across a wide range of academic leadership posts, ranging from Head of School (e.g. Popular Music, Composition), Head of Undergraduate Studies, and, at more senior levels, such as Director of Programmes. Research is embedded within these both in terms of establishing expectations that post holders will be and remain active researchers, and that they are expected to have oversight of and develop the integration of research in their areas of responsibility.

544. Research is one of four possible areas in which applicants are expected to demonstrate personal distinction and academic or professional leadership in the college's Professorial Title Policy. The policy's requirement that staff demonstrate outstanding achievement in one or more of the four areas and a significant contribution in at least one other category underscores the college's commitment to research and the development and expectations of its senior researchers alongside its work in teaching and learning, leadership, and professional/artistic recognition. The policy also covers the appointment of Honorary Research Professors, which the college uses to build and maintain formal relationships with established research leaders, including recent appointments in Music Psychology and Music and Science (through PRiSM).

545. During the visit, the team heard from research active staff that they were well supported in developing their research activity by research leaders, including supervision of postgraduate research students. Examples highlighted included support in preparing applications for funding, study leave and professional accreditation, as well as both formal and informal opportunities to review and receive constructive feedback on research. Alongside the formal annual reviews, termly meetings to receive peer feedback on drafts of outputs or funding bids were noted as being of particular value, emphasising the college's interdisciplinary and collegial research culture.

546. The team therefore considers that the college has a critical mass of senior researchers, including many at professorial level, who make clearly defined contributions in developing its research and the research culture.

547. The team reviewed details of research activities undertaken by staff to determine whether those involved in the delivery of research degree programmes, in a teaching and/or supervisory capacity:

- i. are themselves active researchers who produce externally recognised outputs in research and advanced scholarship
- ii. are examiners of research degrees, appointed as internal examiners by the awarding institution or as external examiners elsewhere

- iii. command the respect and confidence of academic peers across the sector as effected, for example, in REF outcomes, other authoritative external reviews, awards of distinction, through research contracts and/or funding, as invited/keynote speakers at national and international research events and conferences, as members of national and international research committees or bodies
- iv. have current knowledge of developments within the higher education sector relating to research and research degrees
- v. have access to a systematic and effective approach to staff development and appraisal that enables them to develop and enhance their knowledge of current research and advanced scholarship.

The team also considered whether a significant proportion of the college's full-time (29) and part-time (35) academic staff have recent personal experience of research activity in other UK or international higher education or specialist research institutions by, for example, acting as external examiners for research degrees, serving as panel members for the validation or review of research degree programmes, or contributing to collaborative research projects with other organisations (other than as a doctoral student).

548. In relation to this requirement, the team reviewed the following evidence:

- online staff profiles and a sample of CVs
- the college's public-facing webpages about research-based activities, projects and events
- logs of staff external research activity
- REF 2021 submission
- staff development policies and programmes
- discussions with research supervisors and strategic leaders.

549. The evidence showed that staff engaged in research supervision are active researchers producing high quality outputs and the college has submitted to the previous three research assessment exercises, from RAE 2008 to REF 2021. As discussed throughout this criterion, staff profiles and CVs demonstrated that research outputs included monographs, chapters in edited volumes, journal articles, reports and artistic outputs such as compositions and performances. This is reflected in the college's performance in REF 2021, in which 61.2 per cent of its submitted outputs were ranked as 3\* or 4\*, contributing to its overall result, in which 64 per cent of its research was either 3\* or 4\*. The college submitted 100 per cent of eligible staff for REF 2021, confirming that those engaged in research supervision are reflected in these outcomes.<sup>30</sup> Following its REF 2021 submission, the college's research environment was found to have been conducive to producing research of world-leading or internationally excellent quality - enabling outstanding or very considerable impact.

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<sup>30</sup> Available at [Royal Northern College of Music : Results and submissions : REF 2021](#).

550. Other indicators that demonstrate the college's staff command the respect and confidence of academic peers across the sector include leadership positions within learned societies, as discussed in paragraphs 540 to 546 above, and roles such as journal editorships such as Psychology of Music, and Music & Science. In addition, staff membership of editorial and advisory boards for journals, book series and other research organisations also demonstrated command in respect and confidence of peers across the sector. Staff had recently or currently held positions as committee members, working group chairs and committee chairs in organisations including the Society for Music Psychology Research, the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine and the International Conference of Dalcroze Studies. Staff also deliver keynote lectures and invited performances to a wide variety of conferences and events. Examples include:

- Jisc conference in 2023
- Cyborg Soloists conference in 2022
- British Council British Musical Showcase in 2017
- Amsterdam Hindemith Festival in 2021.

551. The projects detailed in paragraphs 534 to 535 further demonstrate how staff are engaged in collaborative research projects with other institutions.

552. The team found that more than 80 per cent of the college's research supervisors have served as internal examiners for PhDs and more than one third have been appointed as external examiners for doctoral degrees at a wide variety of institutions within the past three years. A sample of 17 staff CVs, representing approximately 40 per cent of academic staff who are active in research, showed that such appointments had been held at a wide variety of institutions, including the Royal College of Music, Birmingham Newman University, UCL, Kingston University, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Royal Irish Academy of Music, Durham University and University of Adelaide. Furthermore, one staff member served as an invited external reviewer for the doctoral programme at another British conservatoire in 2024 and another staff member served as an output assessor for REF 2021.

553. In addition to the college's robust programme of mandatory training and professional development opportunities for staff as discussed in detail under criterion C1, it also has an extensive programme of development and mentoring for its research active staff, including in doctoral supervision. An annual training event for all supervisors covers regulatory updates and highlights opportunities for external training and development, including the UKCGE's Research Supervisor Recognition scheme and training events offered by UKRIO, for both of which the college supports application or attendance. The annual training event is also a forum in which staff disseminate good practice based on their own training and development; for example, in 2025, the Associate Director of Research and PGR Programme Leaders shared their experiences of completing the UKCGE scheme. Furthermore, additional specific training on research ethics is also provided on an annual basis and discussion of ethics applications and review observed by the team confirmed that arrangements were appropriate and effective.

554. As discussed in paragraph 541, the Director of Research leads on Research Activity Reviews for staff which complements the annual PDR process undertaken by line managers. The PDR

process is discussed in full under criterion C1 and the team found that the Research Activity Reviews include a meeting with the Director of Research. During these meetings the Director of Research reviews staff's research and scholarly activity during the preceding 12 months; discusses contributions to the REF; sets objectives for the following 12 to 18 months and identifies development support needs. The team reviewed a sample of two Research Activity Reviews, which showed the effective implementation of these procedures and demonstrated the ways in which staff collated and reported on research outputs made and any funding applied for as well as any contributions to conferences and performances. In instances where teaching commitments have taken a priority, the review meeting evidenced discussion of balancing conflicting priorities with research activity, for example, proposing less time intensive development opportunities such as internal workshops or study days. The team considered that this effective and systematic approach enables them to reflect on their development, focusing on enhancing their knowledge of current research and advanced scholarship.

555. The college's provision of funding for research and researcher development as discussed under paragraph 500 enables researchers to collaborate with sector and professional partners on research projects, to gain professional accreditation as research supervisors, and to participate in external research activities that ensures they retain current knowledge of developments within the higher education sector relating to research and research degrees.

556. Therefore, the team concluded that the evidence reviewed demonstrated that those involved in the delivery of research degree programmes are:

- i. are themselves active researchers who produce externally recognised outputs in research and advanced scholarship
- ii. are examiners of research degrees, appointed as internal examiners by the awarding institution or as external examiners elsewhere
- iii. command the respect and confidence of academic peers across the sector
- iv. have current knowledge of developments within the higher education sector relating to research and research degrees
- v. have access to a systematic and effective approach to staff development and appraisal that enables them to develop and enhance their knowledge of current research and advanced scholarship.

557. Furthermore, the team determined that a significant proportion of its academic staff have recent personal experience of research activity in other UK or international higher education or specialist research institutions by, for example, acting as external examiners for research degrees, serving as panel members for the validation or review of research degree programmes.

558. The team gave further consideration to academic staff's research activity and outputs to determine whether a significant proportion of the college's academic staff are active and recognised contributors to at least one organisation such as a subject association, learned society or relevant professional body, through contributions to public outputs or outcomes that

demonstrate the research-related impact of academic staff on their discipline or sphere of research activity at a regional, national or international level.

559. As detailed in paragraphs 551 to 553, all research staff (100 per cent) are active members of learned societies and professional bodies related to their areas of expertise, including, in several cases, in leadership positions. Several of the college's research staff serve on committees and working groups of Conservatoires UK, including its Research Ethics Committee and Research and Knowledge Exchange Forum. The former includes staff contributing to the evaluation of research ethics applications from researchers and research students at partner institutions, while for the latter, the college's Director of Research has led work to develop shared training opportunities for postgraduate research students across all the network's members. Another member of staff founded and continues to coordinate the Royal Music Association's mentorship programme, a scheme aimed primarily at early career and independent researchers in music, pairing them with established researchers for mentorship on career progression and professional development.

560. Projects led by and involving the college's researchers have had a wide and extensive range of academic and public outputs and outcomes. For example, an ongoing research collaboration between one of the college's researchers and staff at other institutions on Music and Parkinson's has resulted in academic articles in 'Music and Science' and 'Frontiers in Rehabilitation' as well as public workshops and classes, and collaborations with composers. The 'Dive into a World of Immersive Sound' project, a partnership between a researcher at the college and two audio technology companies, has led to research outputs in the form of new compositions and public events in which audiences can have virtual reality experiences of concert performances.

561. Data from the REF 2021 results and the UKRI contextualised data report on the college confirm that all eligible staff were entered into the REF and in terms of overall quality, a notional 64 per cent of its submitted staff full-time equivalent represented research of 3\* or 4\* quality. In terms of research outputs, more than half its submitted staff produced 3\* or 4\* quality work. Therefore, the team determined that a significant proportion of the college's academic staff are active and recognised contributors to at least one relevant organisation through contributions to public outputs or outcomes that demonstrate the research-related impact of academic staff on their discipline or sphere of research activity at a regional, national or international level.

562. The team also considered that a significant proportion of the college's academic staff have recent personal experience of research activity in other UK or international higher education or specialist research institutions by acting as external examiners for research degrees, serving as panel members for the review of research degree programmes, and by contributing to collaborative research projects with other organisations.

563. To determine whether a significant proportion of the college's academic staff demonstrate recent achievements that are recognised by the wider academic community to be of national and/or international standing, the team reviewed the following evidence:

- UKRI contextualised data report for the college
- REF 2021 documentation

- staff CVs and public profiles.

564. As noted under paragraph 562, a significant proportion of the college's outputs submitted to REF 2021 achieved 3\* or 4\* ratings; overall, only 2 per cent of its outputs were rated as unclassified, meaning that 98 per cent of outputs were of at least national significance. While the REF 2021 data captures research undertaken more than three years ago, a sample of staff CVs comprising approximately 40 per cent academic staff who are active in research and public profiles on the college's website of all research active academic staff demonstrates that staff have continued to produce a comparable volume of outputs since 2021. These continue to be subject to the same external quality assurance procedures, appearing in a range of peer-reviewed academic publications, and, in terms of composition and performance, receiving performances in a range of high-profile contexts.

565. Publications since REF 2021 include articles published in peer-reviewed journals such as British Journal of Music Education, Musicae Scientiae, Frontiers in Psychology Performance Science, and Music and Science, and books and chapters published with, among others, academic presses such Routledge and Cambridge University Press. Examples of performance venues and ensembles at which compositions have been performed or at which college researchers have contributed as performers are noted above (see paragraphs 536 and 552). Therefore, the team considers that a significant proportion of the college's academic staff demonstrate recent achievements that are recognised by the wider academic community to be of national and/or international standing.

## Conclusions

566. The assessment team concluded that the college's supervision of its research students, and the teaching it undertakes at doctoral level, is underpinned by academic staff with high levels of knowledge, understanding and experience of current research and advanced scholarship in their subjects of study.

567. The college has a critical mass of researchers in terms of both numbers and experience, with professorial level senior staff playing critical roles in developing its research culture and supporting junior researchers, including postgraduate research students.

568. Supervision is well organised, and training and professional development for supervisors is thorough, timely and topical, and well received by staff. The depth and breadth of research quality is demonstrated by a variety of markers, including REF and KEF outcomes, publication in recognised peer-reviewed journals and with established academic presses, and composition and performance research associated with leading performers, ensembles and venues.

569. Research students are thoroughly integrated into the wider research culture of the college through seminars, workshops and other events, and their training and development needs are met through an evolving and reflective programme of bespoke events, which are shaped by ongoing feedback from students and supervisors.

570. Therefore, the team concluded that the provider meets criterion F1.

# Assessment of DAPs criterion G: National guidance

## Criterion G1: National guidance

### Advice to the OfS

571. The assessment team's view is that the college meets the requirements for criterion G1: National guidance.

572. The assessment team's view is based on its review of the evidence, which shows in summary that the college satisfies relevant national guidance relating to the award of research degrees. The college meets and will continue to meet the expectations of the qualifications frameworks in relation to the levels of its research degree programmes.

573. Furthermore, the college meets and will continue to meet the expectations of research degree management frameworks issued by relevant research councils, funding bodies and professional/statutory bodies.

574. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence for this criterion alongside other relevant information.

### Criterion G1

**G1: The organisation satisfies relevant national guidance relating to the award of research degrees.**

### Reasoning

575. In order to understand how the college satisfies relevant national guidance relating to the award of research degrees, the assessment team reviewed the college's academic governance structure and the terms of reference for its committees with responsibility for the research degrees provision, which are:

- Academic Board
- Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee
- Research Degrees Committee
- Education and Quality Committee.

576. The team also reviewed the college's current and proposed academic regulations, policies and procedures relating to research, advanced scholarship and research degrees including:

- Academic Regulations
- Academic Policies
- Academic Quality Handbook

- MMU's Postgraduate Research Regulations 2024-2025
- the college's draft Postgraduate Research Regulations
- Student Regulations and Information
- the college's draft postgraduate research programme handbook.

577. The team also met with staff and research students to discuss their understanding of the national context for their research degrees.

578. As set out in the introductory section of this report, the college has been offering research degrees since 2010 in partnership with MMU across five subject areas:

- Composition
- Performance
- Music Education
- Musicology
- Music Psychology.

579. Individual students research projects are aligned to the institution's key research areas of:

- Music Performance
- Composition and Practice
- Educating in and through Music
- Music and Science
- Music and Wellbeing.

580. The validation agreement with MMU defines the delivery of a PhD programme only and includes MPhil as an exit award. The MMU Framework Agreement and the MMU Postgraduate Research Regulations form the principle point of reference for the current programme ensuring its alignment with sector-recognised standards and the FHEQ. The team found that the college intends to continue to offer a PhD programme alongside expanding the range of Level 8 awards offered when it gains Full Research DAPs, and as discussed in detail under criterion B1, has developed its own regulatory framework building on the MMU regulations and aligned to other national guidelines and frameworks including the UKRI Statement of Expectations<sup>31</sup>, the AHRC Research Training Framework for Doctoral Students<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See UKRI, 'Statement of expectations for doctoral training' at [Statement of expectations for doctoral training – UKRI](#).

<sup>32</sup> See 'Research Training Framework for Doctoral Students' at [Research Training Framework for Doctoral Students – UKRI](#).

and Vitae Researcher Development Framework<sup>33</sup>, in preparation for taking on this responsibility.

581. The team considered that the current organisational structure and staff expertise within the college, along with the job descriptions for key staff with responsibility in this area, ensures adherence with national guidance for research degrees both currently and in future. The team found that the Director of Research has overall responsibility for advising the Principal and Board of Governors on all research and research-related activities including the process for independent Research DAPs. The Director of Research is responsible for leading the college's relationships with external stakeholders including UKRI, Research England, AHRC, Northwest Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership and collaborative and interdisciplinary research projects with national and international partners.

582. The Director works with the Associate Director of Research, who manages the research degree programme and who oversees the development of research students on a day-to-day basis. The Research Degrees Committee, which is chaired by the Associate Director of Research, has responsibility for the administration, management and quality assurance of the college's research degrees programme. This committee has a specific responsibility to assure the quality and standards of research degrees and to make recommendations on matters of policy. The Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee reviews and approves policies and procedures for the maintenance of academic standards and enhancement of student researchers learning experience and formulates new policies and initiatives for approval in response to national and international developments in research and knowledge exchange.

583. As discussed in detail under criterion B1, currently the college follows the Postgraduate Research Regulations and requirements of MMU. Under the terms of its validation arrangement, the MMU Academic Board retains ultimate responsibility for the academic management and control of the research degrees programme, its academic standards and quality, with the monitoring of these delegated to a Research Degrees Committee. This includes ultimate responsible for ensuring that the college's research degrees align to the FHEQ and sector-recognised standards.

584. The team reviewed MMUs Postgraduate Research Regulations for the college and found that these are also fully aligned to the requirements of Level 8 of the sector-recognised standards, FHEQ and its associated descriptors. For example, the regulations provide links to the UK Quality Code, OfS sector-recognised standards and include the full text of the Level 8 descriptor along with the AHRC definition of research. This is to ensure that research projects address clearly articulated research questions within a defined context using appropriate research methods. The regulations make clear that these underlying principles apply to all postgraduate research degrees provision including those delivered by collaborative partners, and that they apply to all work that contributes to the award at whatever point in the programme the work is undertaken. To be accepted on to the programme applicants are required to submit an appropriate research proposal the details of which are set out in guidelines for applicants that are linked to the Regulations and available on the college's website. Research proposals are evaluated against criteria to test the potential to achieve a Level 8 outcome including the scope to raise original research questions on a suitably focused

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<sup>33</sup> See [The Vitae Researcher Development Framework - Vitae](#).

topic and to make a valuable and original contribution to knowledge within the specified time and word limits.

585. Under the current arrangements, MMU does not require a written monitoring report from the college to MMU's Research Degrees Committee. The Framework Agreement between the college and MMU sets out that there is a designated Link Tutor, who is the Chair of the MMU Research Degrees Committee. The Link Tutor is responsible for offering critical support for the programme – offering assistance, guidance and support to the college's PhD programme team and playing the key role in monitoring compliance with MMU's regulations, academic standards and procedures. In practice for each research student, the monitoring of the college's academic standards by MMU is provided through the role of the Principal Supervisor on each supervisory team, who is an appointed member of MMU academic staff. Postgraduate research students' progress is monitored continuously via research supervisions recorded on the SkillsForge portal, which are reported to the college's Research Degrees Committee. The minutes of the college's Research Degrees Committee are provided for information to each meeting of the university's Research Degrees Committee.

586. The team found it is the responsibility of a student's supervisory team to ensure that the student can demonstrate whether they fully meet the criteria set out in the Level 8 descriptor through their research. Specifically, within their thesis or portfolio and critical commentary, which is assessed during the final examination. Students met by the team explained that they had a high level of trust in the expertise of their supervisors. Students expressed that the input of supervisors, together with feedback from externals through events such as the college's postgraduate Research Conference, provided them with confidence that they were meeting the relevant academic standards of Level 8 in their work.

587. Under the current MMU Postgraduate Research Regulations annual progress reviews are conducted by a review panel that is independent of the supervisory team. The review panel is appointed for the full period of the student's registration and consists of two reviewers, one of whom fulfils the role of panel chair. A formal mid-point assessment of progress is conducted 18-24 months post-enrolment (full-time students) and 24-36 months post-enrolment (part-time students). The final viva voce examination is scheduled after the student has received permission to submit, which currently requires the approval of the college's Associate Director of Research. The examination team consists of two independent examiners, one internal and one external, unless the candidate is currently a member of staff at RNCM, in which case both examiners are external. Examination teams are approved by the college's Research Degrees Committee and an independent chair is appointed to chair the viva voce examination.

588. Minutes of the college's Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee and Research Degree Committee meetings showed that the college monitors its own performance in relation to national qualification frameworks and engages regularly with MMU for guidance and feedback. For instance, the Research Degrees Committee has responsibility for monitoring standards, benchmarking quality and reporting on student progress internally and this is a standard agenda item at all meetings. In the October 2024 meeting, for example, the number of successful completions and student progression rates were benchmarked against previous year's performance and progression rates for annual assessment reviews in 2023-24 were reported. In addition to academic standards the committee regularly receives student survey feedback and the annual BEDI Report, which provided evidence to the team of the college also monitoring its performance on student experience and inclusion in relation to external

guidance from funding bodies. Specifically, through monitoring the number of underrepresented researchers at postgraduate research level in line with Northwest Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership policies and the more general continuous monitoring of postgraduate research student feedback with particular attention to that from global majority or neurodiverse applicants and students.

589. The college's Research Degrees Committee also receives a regular update on the proceedings of MMU's Research Degrees Committee. For example, at the same October 2024 meeting of the college's Research Degrees Committee, members heard that MMU were looking to improve their overall completion rates for research degrees and to achieve a benchmark in line national standards. The committee members discussed that the college already exceeded this target, an achievement that the assessment team triangulated and discuss further under criterion H1. The college's Research Degrees Committee noted that this was an indicator of excellence and would be a useful baseline performance indicator in light of the extension of the continuous monitoring process, which the college plans to run in parallel with MMU processes ahead of taking sole responsibility for monitoring quality and standards should Full Research DAPs be gained. Full data on the progress, status and achievements of research degrees students is reported on an annual basis by the college's Research Degrees Committee to Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee.

590. As detailed under criterion B1, the college has developed and approved its own Postgraduate Research Regulations in preparation for achieving Full Research DAPs. In addition, the college has reviewed and updated a range of existing procedures to integrate all necessary aspects of regulation and management of postgraduate research programmes into the college's overall regulatory, policy and quality frameworks. Minutes of meetings reviewed by the team demonstrate that progress on this work has been regularly reported to the college's Research Degrees and Research and Knowledge Exchange Committees including, for example, the continuous monitoring process which it will be extended to include the postgraduate research degrees programme. These changes were approved by the Academic Board at its meeting in July 2024.

591. Along with the draft Postgraduate Research Regulations, the college's draft Postgraduate Research Handbook is the principal document that describes the framework for the college's research degrees programme and sets out the requirements and expectations of achievement for the award of a PhD qualification at Level 8 as set out in the FHEQ and sector-recognised standards. For example, it describes the requirement for successful candidates to demonstrate a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field along with the ability to communicate with peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their research and areas of expertise.

592. The draft Postgraduate Research Handbook also sets out the requirements for an MPhil exit award and articulates the differences between this and the PhD award, specifically that it does not carry the same requirement for making an original contribution to knowledge as the PhD and can usually be completed in two years rather than three. The handbook also contains a detailed specification for the award of a PhD by published works, which includes information about the eligibility of publications and the content required in the accompanying critical commentary. Information about the availability of internal and external training for students and supervisors is also included in the handbook, with signposting to the requirement to follow

the college's Good Research Conduct Policy. This policy references a range of relevant external research degree management frameworks used by the college including those in relations to ethics and research integrity for example, the UKRIO's Code of Practice<sup>34</sup> and the Concordat for Research Integrity.

593. Should the college be granted Full Research DAPs, the college intends to increase the points for external monitoring of academic standards for individual students by introducing mid-term formal assessment of progress. The review will be conducted by an internal examiner, who will be the same member of staff from on the annual progression review panel, and an external examiner who will be appointed according to external examiner appointment processes as outlined in the college's draft Postgraduate Research Regulations. The team heard from staff during the visit that this change is intended to strengthen external scrutiny and provide an independent perspective at an earlier stage in the programme than is currently the case. Internal and external examiners will also continue to be appointed for the final examination similarly to the current MMU regulations but with final approval being given by the college's Research Degree Committee.

594. At a programme level, monitoring of standards will take place via the college's established continuous monitoring process, as described under criteria B2 and B3. This approach, together with the extension of the college's processes for programme approval, periodic review and minor modifications to incorporate postgraduate research degrees as set out in the Quality Handbook, will enable the college to review and monitor postgraduate research programmes to ensure they continue to meet the FHEQ and sector-recognised standards. As discussed under criteria B2 and B3, the Quality Handbook sets out that the alignment with these frameworks is a specific responsibility of programme approval panels. The team therefore determined that the evidence of both existing arrangements for setting, reviewing and monitoring standards, together with the college's proposed Postgraduate Research Regulations and monitoring procedures, demonstrated that the college meets fully and will continue to meet the expectations of the qualifications frameworks in relation to the levels of its research degree programmes.

595. To assess how the college makes use of research degree management frameworks issued by relevant research councils, funding bodies and professional and/or statutory bodies, the team reviewed evidence from the range of current funded research projects, UKRI contextual report of the college and other external independent organisations and documentation setting out the requirements of grant funding.

596. The college's mission is 'to develop exceptional musicians with the artistic integrity, creativity and imagination to drive the music profession forward and ensure music remains relevant to future generation'. The team found that the college's Strategic Plan 2020-26 reflects this mission through its focus on delivering research informed, research-led and research-based work, developed with reference to national research priorities, identified by organisations such as UKRI and the OfS, as well as the real-world context of the music industry. Furthermore, during the visit to the college, the team heard how the college's senior leadership team regards the institution's doctoral programme and the work of its students as significant in contributing to the wider research-led learning environment. The team heard examples from academic staff of how the work of individual staff members in areas such as music education

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<sup>34</sup> Available at [Code of Practice for Research - UK Research Integrity Office](#).

and research clusters contributes to an active research environment that impacts students at all levels, such as the digital and AI work of the UKRI-funded PRISM Centre.

597. As discussed in detail under criterion F1, the college has been successful in achieving recurrent QR funding, through two competitive grant schemes, the Research England Development Fund and Expanding Excellence in England. UKRI's contextualised data report on the college confirms the college's success in these schemes and the team considered this to provide further indicators of the quality of the research environment at the college.

598. In addition to the institutional-level funding that the college receives, which supports the developing research infrastructure, the college also supports individual postgraduate research students in achieving funding, which can impact the range of external frameworks to which research programmes need to align. This external funding record accounts for approximately 29 per cent of current PhD students and graduates and comprises the following:

- 16 students have received AHRC funding through the Northwest Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership
- two students received funding from the AHRC via Block Grant Partnerships
- two students were supported via AHRC grants made to staff
- three students have been funded through Collaborative Doctoral Awards
- one student has been funded through a Doctoral Training Partnership with The National Archives
- one student was awarded UKRI funding through the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund.

599. In addition, the college operates its own Awards Fund which provides full or part funding for a further group of 13 students.

600. As such, the college aligns its research degrees programme with relevant research council frameworks for doctoral training, including the overarching UKRI Statement of Expectations<sup>35</sup>, the AHRC Research Training Framework for Doctoral Students<sup>36</sup> and ESRC [Economic and Social Research Council] Postgraduate Training and Development Guidelines.<sup>37</sup> For funded postgraduate research students there are specific requirements from their funding bodies to report regularly on progress, outcomes and impact in relation to their research projects, which are managed individually through the supervision and annual review process. However, the team found that overall, the college has aligned the development of its own Research Strategy, policies and environment to reflect the requirements and current priorities of the research councils. For example, the college emphasises knowledge exchange and the development of policies and procedures covering support and student experience, research

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<sup>35</sup> See [Statement of expectations for doctoral training – UKRI](#).

<sup>36</sup> See [Research Training Framework for Doctoral Students – UKRI](#).

<sup>37</sup> Available [ESRC postgraduate training and development guidelines – UKRI](#).

skills and methods and professional skills development, all informed by the UKRI Statement of Expectations.

601. The team found that key elements from the UKRI Statement of Expectations, the AHRC Research Training Framework for Doctoral Students and ESRC Postgraduate Training and Development Guidelines specifically inform the research degrees programme. For example, through the emphasis on a commitment to the development of broader professional, digital and communication skills for research students, flexibility in training structures to support equity and access, and support for collaborative research with external partners, which are set out in the college's Good Research Conduct Policy.

602. Furthermore, the college assures there is effective wellbeing and support provision for all students through its Wellbeing Hub and opportunities for networking and collaborative working through its ensembles programme. The college also ensures that funded doctoral training opportunities include transferrable skills training to support a diversity of careers through providing students with the opportunity to develop teaching skills and organise the student-led research conference, all of which are discussed in detail under criterion D. Similarly, the annual research seminar programme, which is a requirement for all students whether in receipt of funding or not, ensures the research degrees programme curriculum aligns with research council priority themes including ethics, equity and sustainability alongside providing training and resources to underpin external impact and develop entrepreneurship.

603. The college's Good Research Conduct Policy states that the college expects all members of staff and students to observe the highest ethical and professional standards in their research and highlights that research councils and charities require this for any research they fund. The policy also sets out that, as a member institution of Conservatoires UK (CUK), the college adheres to the principles and guidance set out in:

- the UKRIO's Code of Practice for Research
- the Misconduct Investigation Procedure.

604. In addition, all researchers at the college must work in line with the Concordat for Research Integrity.

605. The team noted that these frameworks and codes of practice for research are also aligned with the UKRI Policy on the Governance of Good Research Practice<sup>38</sup>, for which all UKRI directly funded projects must adhere. The principles from the UKRI Policy on the Governance of Good Research Practice are also set out in full in the college's Good Research Conduct Policy which defines research as 'a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared'. The team noted that this was also in alignment with the definition used by the REF and directs students specifically to the UKRIO Recommended Checklist for Researchers<sup>39</sup> and how to use this to design their research programme.

606. The Good Research Conduct Policy also provides detailed information on unacceptable practices such as weak procedures, inadequate documentation of procedures or inadequate

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<sup>38</sup> Available at [Good research practice policies and guidance – UKRI](#).

<sup>39</sup> Available at [Code of Practice for Research & the Checklist for Researchers Updated! - UK Research Integrity Office/](#).

record-keeping as well as deliberate falsification and plagiarism. It provides guidance for students on how to address incidents of misconduct by peers or staff, who to report them to and the processes in place for the investigation of misconduct. The policy also makes clear to students that the college policies and processes are aligned with the external frameworks prescribed by UKRIO and UKRI.

607. This evidence of comprehensive guidance to students and staff demonstrated to the team that the college's frameworks and policies comprehensively guide its staff and students to the relevant research degree management frameworks and codes of practices, which the team considers to be reflecting good practice in the sector.

608. During the visit to the college, the team heard from senior staff that the research training delivered to all students is aligned with the Vitae Researcher Development Framework and through supervisory meetings and annual review meetings there is regular discussion on professional development, key milestones and support requirements. The team was also informed that if a student receives external funding the student is required to produce multiple progress reports to take account of the different reporting requirements of the college, university and funding council. During the visit the team heard from postgraduate research students that relevant national research frameworks are introduced to them from the beginning of their postgraduate research programmes, along with the requirements of MMU, and reported that this helped them understand the 'broader purpose' of their PhD and research culture. Students also confirmed the usefulness of the Vitae framework in reinforcing their understanding of expectations as researchers. This led the team to agree that the college effectively applies and follows the frameworks provided by funding councils and other appropriate bodies to benchmark and inform its research programme. The team concluded that this is effectively communicated to students to guide and support them in the development of their work and more broadly their professional practice and performance as researchers.

609. Therefore, the team was satisfied that the college meets fully and will continue to meet the expectations of relevant research degree management frameworks issued by relevant research councils, funding bodies and professional and or statutory bodies.

## **Conclusions**

610. The assessment team concluded that the college satisfies relevant national guidance relating to the award of research degrees and that it sets expectations for staff and students in relation to good research practice, ethics and research integrity. The college has demonstrated that it meets fully and will continue to meet the expectations of the qualifications frameworks in relation to the levels of its research degree programmes.

611. Furthermore, the college has also demonstrated that it meets fully and will continue to meet the expectations of research degree management frameworks issued by relevant research councils, funding bodies and professional and/or statutory bodies.

612. Therefore, the team concluded that the provider meets criterion G1.

# Assessment of DAPs criterion H: Minimum number of doctoral degree conferrals

## Criterion H: Minimum number of doctoral degree conferrals

### Advice to the OfS

613. The assessment team's view is that the college meets criterion H: National guidance because it meets subcriteria H1 and H2.

614. The assessment team's view is based on its review of the evidence, which shows the college has achieved more than 30 doctoral degree conferrals (including professional doctorates), awarded through partnerships with UK awarding bodies.

615. In addition, the college has demonstrated that the majority of conferred doctoral degrees have been achieved by students who are not also academic staff of the organisation. Furthermore, its completion rates meet sector norms.

616. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence for this criterion alongside other relevant information.

### Subcriteria H1 and H2

**H1: The applicant organisation has achieved more than 30 doctoral degree conferrals (including professional doctorates), awarded through partnerships with UK awarding bodies.**

**H2: In addition, the applicant organisation will need to demonstrate that:**

**H2a: The majority of conferred doctoral degrees have been achieved by students who are not also academic staff of the organisation.**

**H2b: Its completion rates meet sector norms.**

### Reasoning

617. To assess whether the college has achieved more than 30 doctoral degree conferrals, including professional doctorates, awarded through partnerships with UK awarding bodies, the team reviewed the following evidence:

- the college's Self-Assessment Document
- the Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy
- the UKRI Contextualised Data Report
- the college's doctoral degree conferrals (2013-2024)
- a complete list of Postgraduate Research Enrolments, Withdrawals, and Completions (2010-2025).

618. The team also met with academic staff responsible for postgraduate research students at the college during the visit to the college.

619. As discussed under criterion A1, the college is seeking Full Research DAPs to expand its portfolio of Level 8 qualifications. Since 2010, the college has run a doctoral degree programme validated by MMU, as part of a framework agreement which runs until January 2026. Building on the foundations of the college's 2015-20 Research Strategy, the current Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy reaffirms the college's commitment to expanding its research degree programmes, integrating them within its research clusters. As a key performance indicator, the strategy sets a target to increase the number of full-time equivalent staff engaged in research and supervision by 25 per cent.

620. The team's examination of the UKRI Contextualised Data Report showed that, based on HESA student records from 2019-20 to 2022-23, there were 30 Year One enrolments in postgraduate research degrees at the college. This aligns with the college's own student enrolment records, which are discussed in more detail below.

621. In 2023-24, a total of 38 postgraduate research students were enrolled at the college, with research areas comprising Composition (17), Performance (10), Music Education (5), Musicology (3), and Music Psychology (2). One member of staff was also undertaking a PhD by published works. In 2024-25, postgraduate research enrolments remained consistent at 38, with students distributed across Composition (14), Performance (10), Music Education (6), Musicology (4), Music Psychology (3), and one PhD by published works. In the team's view, this stable cohort size is indicative of a well supported and sustainable postgraduate research community, underpinned by the college's strategic commitment to continued growth in this area.

622. Although postgraduate research students account for just 3 per cent of the total student body, the college has established a strong track record of securing competitive external funding for postgraduate research. Thus, of its 86 current and former postgraduate research students, 25 have received external funding. Full discussion of the external funding received by postgraduate research students at the college is set out under criteria F1 and G1.

623. The team's review of the college's doctoral degree conferrals (2013-2024) and the complete list of Postgraduate Research Enrolments, Withdrawals, and Completions (2010-25) showed that the college has conferred a total of 48 doctoral awards between October 2013 and November 2024, validated by MMU, 20 of which were awarded in the past three years. This demonstrated to the team a clear upward trajectory in successful doctoral degree conferrals at the college. The team determined that the consistent cohort sizes and the increasing number of postgraduate research completions, underscores a clear institutional commitment to doctoral study within a research-led learning environment. In the team's view, all these factors not only demonstrate the college's established experience in supporting and delivering doctoral research but also indicate that it would be well positioned to sustain a healthy pipeline of doctoral degree conferrals in the future under its own Full Research DAPs.

624. Therefore, the team concluded that the college has achieved more than 30 doctoral degree conferrals, awarded through partnerships with UK awarding bodies.

625. To assess whether the majority of conferred doctoral degrees at the college have been achieved by students who are not also academic staff of the organisation, and that the college's completion rates meet sector norms, the team examined the following evidence:

- the Self-Assessment Document
- the college's doctoral degree conferrals (2013-2024)
- a complete list of Postgraduate Research Enrolments, Withdrawals, and Completions (2010-2025)
- the Committee Handbook
- minutes of the Research Degrees Committee
- the Research Degrees Committee's Continuous Monitoring Statistics Report
- the OfS's Student Outcomes Data Dashboard.<sup>40</sup>

626. The team's review of the college's doctoral degree conferrals (2013-2024) and the complete list of Postgraduate Research Enrolments, Withdrawals, and Completions (2010-25) showed that, of the 48 doctoral degree conferrals awarded by the college through its partnership with MMU between October 2013 and November 2024, 44 (91.7 per cent) were conferred on postgraduate research students without concurrent academic staff roles. This provides confirmation that the majority of conferred doctoral degrees at the college have been achieved by students who are not also academic staff of the organisation.

627. The college's Research Degrees Committee has responsibility for managing, monitoring and reviewing arrangements for the academic progress of postgraduate research students at the college, currently under the oversight of MMU, as the college's validating partner. The team found that the committee systematically oversees the academic performance of postgraduate research students, as evidenced by detailed meeting minutes and structured statistical reports, which include data on progression and awards. For example, the minutes track individual student milestones, such as Annual Check-Ins and Formal Reviews, along with associated deadlines and outcomes, such as '96.2 per cent satisfactory progression rate in all annual assessment reviews in 2023-24'.

628. Completion rates are also carefully monitored through this committee, with detailed records of viva outcomes and degree awards discussed and recorded in the minutes. This oversight is reinforced by the continuous monitoring reports, which analyses trends in progression and completions, such as the achievement of four doctoral awards in 2023-24 and eight in 2022-23. For example, the minutes of the college's October 2024 Research Degrees Committee meeting showed that postgraduate research completion rates are closely monitored against MMU's own benchmark of 70 per cent. The committee noted that the college was exceeding this target, suggesting it as a key performance indicator of excellence in the continuous monitoring process. As a result, the committee agreed to incorporate postgraduate research completion rates into the college's ongoing monitoring of its postgraduate research provision.

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<sup>40</sup> Available at [Student outcomes: Data dashboard - Office for Students](#).

629. The assessment team found that effective oversight by the Research Degrees Committee, along with other measures of support for postgraduate research students discussed earlier under criterion D1, has contributed to high completion rates at the college. For example, the academic staff the team met during the visit to the college confirmed that the review of upcoming student deadlines by the Research Degrees Committee was an effective mechanism for monitoring and supporting progression and timely completion.

630. The team found that no doctoral candidate has failed their programme of study at RNCM, and only 14 postgraduate researchers have withdrawn since the start of the doctoral programme to November 2024. Of these, six students were studying full-time and eight part-time. Five of the withdrawals occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily due to financial or personal reasons, with the latter often involving a reassessment of individual priorities. The college thus reported an overall completion rate of 85.27 per cent, and a 100 per cent completion rate for AHRC-funded studentships.

631. The team compared the college's data with the OfS's Student Outcomes Data Dashboard, which includes numerical thresholds for completion rates of 75 per cent for full-time postgraduate research students between 2016-17 to 2019-20 (entrants) and 60 per cent for postgraduate research students between 2014-15 to 2017-18 (entrants). The team found that the completion indicators for postgraduate research students for the college in the data dashboard are suppressed, as the cohorts being measured include more than two but fewer than 23 students. The team noted that this suppression is applied to avoid identifying individual students or drawing unreliable conclusions from very small sample sizes. Therefore the team could not draw a direct comparison against the college's report data against published OfS data.

632. Furthermore, the team noted that the data used to inform the OfS's dashboard is constructed in a specific manner that differs from the way in which the college's completion data has been presented. For example, the construction of the numerical thresholds as per the OfS's dashboard for completion rates at postgraduate research level includes doctoral degrees as well masters' degrees by research. However, from the evidence reviewed, the team determined that the college's reported overall completion rate of 85.27 per cent across all postgraduate research students to date lies comfortably above the OfS's published numerical thresholds and demonstrates an upwards trajectory in completion over time. While the reporting periods for the data reviewed do not wholly align in terms of benchmarking against OfS's numerical thresholds, the team concluded that, based on the available evidence, the college's reported completion rates are consistent with or above sector norms.

## **Conclusions**

633. The assessment team concluded that the evidence demonstrated that the college has achieved more than 30 doctoral degree conferrals awarded through partnerships with UK awarding bodies.

634. The college has additionally demonstrated that the majority of conferred doctoral degrees have been achieved by students who are not also academic staff of the organisation, and that its completion rates meet sector norms.

635. The college has delivered doctoral degrees through a partnership with MMU since 2010 and has articulated a clear strategic commitment to expanding its Level 8 provision.

636. The college's oversight of postgraduate research is robust, with the Research Degrees Committee systematically monitoring student progression and completion.

637. Therefore, the team concluded that the college meets criterion H.

# Assessment of overarching criterion for the authorisation of DAPs

**Full DAPs: A self-critical, cohesive academic community with a proven commitment to the assurance of standards supported by effective quality systems.**

## Advice to the OfS

638. The assessment team's view is that the college continues to meet the overarching criterion for Full DAPs and meets the overarching criterion for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

639. The assessment team's view is based on its review of the evidence, which shows in summary that the college develops and encourages a self-critical and cohesive academic community. It has clear commitment to the assurance of standards, supported by effective and robust quality systems.

640. This view is based on consideration of the evidence requirements for the DAPs criteria alongside any other relevant information.

## Reasoning

641. The assessment team found that **self-criticality** is demonstrated through the effective and transparent operation of the college's academic governance structures up to and including the role of the Board of Governors. Examples of this are evident in the comprehensive and analytical reports produced for internal scrutiny and action across all levels and aspects of the college's higher education provision including student outcomes, student support, complaints and appeals.

642. The team also determined that the college demonstrated self-criticality through the comprehensive inclusion of students as partners in all aspects of its academic governance and operations. Examples of this include the active involvement of students in the development of strategies and policies and the open approach to seeking and responding to student feedback across all levels of study.

643. The assessment team found that the college constitutes a highly **cohesive academic community** aligned to a common sense of purpose and with a clear strategic direction to define the future of music that is widely understood by staff across all levels.

644. The team determined that the college's research culture is central to its ethos, with research skills developed as a key aspect of entrepreneurial artistic training across all programmes and staff supported in their research such that new knowledge informs curriculum development at all levels.

645. The team also found that the college has a strong and collective focus on support for students' wellbeing as developing professionals, and that this was evidenced through all areas of the provision and a shared commitment to providing an inclusive learning environment.

646. The college has a proven commitment to the **assurance of standards**, as demonstrated through its track record of setting standards and the robust operation of its regulatory framework for taught degrees and the exercising of its DAPs responsibilities since 2007. Furthermore, this is evidenced through the preparations it has made for awarding its own research degrees.

647. The team found that under its current validation arrangement for postgraduate research degrees, the college has achieved the required number of award completions, and the quality of its research environment is demonstrated through its track record of success in achieving external competitive funding.

648. Further evidence of the college's commitment to standards was demonstrated through the college's strategic approach and effective operation of academic and music industry partnerships which support its mission to align its provision to the developing professional context.

649. The assessment team considered that the **effectiveness of the college's quality systems** is apparent in its policies and procedures relating to taught and research students, which are understood by staff and students and are applied consistently and through its committees that operate effectively with clear differentiation in scope and responsibilities.

650. The college operates an effective approach to monitoring the performance of individual programmes which is informed by robust data and requires the production of action plans, which encourage self-criticality and improvement. In addition, the team found evidence of the robust use of external expertise in support of maintaining and developing quality particularly from music professionals through course design to the assessment of individual students.

## **Conclusions**

651. In conclusion, the evidence demonstrates that the college has a self-critical, cohesive academic community with a proven commitment to the assurance of standards as supported by effective quality systems.

652. The assessment team therefore concluded that the college continues to meet the overarching criterion for Full DAPs and meets the overarching criterion for the Full Research DAPs authorisation it is seeking.

## Annex A: Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
AI	artificial intelligence
AMS	American Musicological Society
ASIMUT	software for scheduling, room booking and event management
BEDI	Belonging, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
BMus (Hons)	Bachelor of Music with Honours
CPD	continuous professional development
CPP	Conservatoire Professional in Practice
CUK	Conservatoires UK
DAPs	degree awarding powers
EDI	equality, diversity and inclusion
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies
GRNCM	Graduate Diploma of the Royal Northern College of Music
HERA	Higher Education and Research Act 2017
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
KEF	Knowledge Exchange Framework
MMU	Manchester Metropolitan University
MusB	Bachelors' of Music
NSS	National Student Survey
OfS	Office for Students
PDR	Performance Development Reviews
PG	postgraduate
PGR	postgraduate research
PGT	postgraduate taught
PRiSM	Practice Research in Science and Music
QAC	[OfS's] Quality Assessment Committee
QR	Quality-related research funding
RAE	research assessment exercises

Abbreviation	Meaning
REF	Research Excellence Framework
RMA	Royal Musical Association
RNCM	Royal Northern College of Music
SEER	Student Experience Enhancement Record
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
StART	StART Entrepreneurship Project
SU	students' union
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
TRAC	Transparent Approach to Costing
UG	undergraduate
UKCGE	UK Council for Graduate Education
UK GDPR	UK General Data Protection Regulation
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation
UKRIO	UK Research Integrity Office
UKVI	UK Visas and Immigration
VLE	virtual learning environment



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