

Committee	Dated:
Board of Governors of the Guildhall School of Music & Drama	20 November 2017
Subject: Academic Assurances	Public
Report of: Chair of the Academic Assurance Working Group	For Decision
Report author: Academic Registrar, Guildhall School	

Summary

As part of the 2017 Annual Accountability Return, the Board of Governors will be required to make the following assurance statements to HEFCE:

- The governing body has received and discussed a report and accompanying action plan relating to the continuous improvement of the student academic experience and student outcomes. This included evidence from the provider's own periodic review processes, which fully involve students and include embedded external peer or professional review.
- The methodologies used as a basis to improve the student academic experience and student outcomes are, to the best of our knowledge, robust and appropriate.
- The governing body has received a report that confirms that the provider continues to meet the standards of Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines (2015).

For self-validated provision (ie the School's taught degree programmes and associated awards):

- The standards of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately set and maintained.

For the Doctoral programme validated by City, University of London:

- The standards of awards for which we are responsible have been appropriately maintained.

The Academic Assurance Group met on Tuesday 31 October 2017 to review, on behalf of the Board of Governors, the Academic Board annual report, and all other matters reported to the Board during the previous academic year on higher education matters, to assist the Board in coming to a view whether the academic assurances have been met sufficiently.

Recommendation

That the Board agree that the academic assurances have been met sufficiently and that the Principal be authorised to make the necessary academic assurances on its behalf.

Academic Assurance Working Group Report

The Academic Assurance Working Group comprised:

- Professor Geoffrey Crossick, co-opted member of the Board with HE experience (in the Chair)
- Lynne Williams, Principal
- Felicity Chilton, Students' Union President
- Deputy John Bennett, Chair of the Board of Governors (one further member of the Board - not staff)
- Professor Maria Delgado (co-opted HE specialist from outside the Board of Governors)

The Group met on Tuesday 31 October 2017 and all were present with the exception of Professor Delgado who submitted comments and queries by email in advance of the meeting. The meeting was supported by Katharine Lewis, Academic Registrar, with preliminary work undertaken by Tom France, Quality Assurance Officer (Programme Development).

The Working Group considered the draft Academic Board Annual Report to the Board of Governors for 2016/17, a note on issues related to academic assurance presented to the Board of Governors over the last twelve months, and a statement from the Academic Board on the ten key standards of Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines. It also had available at the meeting and selectively referred to, the most recent External Examiner reports covering the 2016 assessment cycle and available reports for the 2017 assessment cycle, and the Annual Programme Evaluation reports for 2016/17 available to date.

Methodologies for the continuous improvement of the student academic experience:

The Working Group noted that the Strategic Plan was in development and this provided an overarching mechanism for the improvement of the student academic experience. This would be accompanied by a more detailed Teaching & Learning Strategy in due course. The number of staff with approved recognition from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) was noted but it was felt that the School ought to be clear about its goal in respect of the number of HEA fellows.

An oral description of the periodic review (revalidation) process was provided covering the nature of the paperwork, the panel membership, and the format of the event. It was confirmed that the review process for each programme involved at least one external peer on the panel approved by the Academic Board (and two where the discipline required), a student member on the panel (who received training

on their responsibilities and received payment), as well as panel interviews with students on the programme.

A sample of Annual Programme Evaluations (APEs) had been considered, and the thoroughness of the evaluations was commended. The APEs included a range of actions, and the Working Group explored how these were monitored and was shown the follow-up report on the previous year's actions considered by the Academic Board in the summer term each year. The methodology was thought to be rigorous and appropriate.

It was noted that the Board had received information on the National Student Survey and the Whole School Survey at its September meeting and further information in the Academic Board Annual Report. These surveys were a good part of the School's framework for continuous improvement. Assessment and feedback remained an issue for students and it was felt that the proposed action could be strengthened.

Determination:

- That the methodologies used as a basis to improve the student academic experience and student outcomes were robust and appropriate.
- The governing body would receive the Academic Board Annual Report for 2016/17 and an accompanying action plan which relates to the continuous improvement of the student academic experience and student outcomes. This report would reference evidence from the School's own periodic review processes, a process which fully involved students and included embedded external peer or professional review.
- The governing body would receive a report from the Academic Board that confirmed that the School continues to meet the standards of Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines (2015).

Recommendations for the future:

- (i) That a goal is set in respect of HEA fellowships (either as a % of the teaching staff population or as a fixed number) so that the Board of Governors can measure progress.
- (ii) That the Academic Assurance Working Group should have ready access to a range of information for sampling, including:
 - a full set of External Examiner reports and responses
 - the Annual Programme Evaluation reports and monitoring reports
 - Notes about the process of annual and periodic review
 - Periodic review reports
- (iii) That the action in the Academic Board report on marking, moderation and feedback be strengthened with reference to benchmarking of activity in other conservatoires facing similar issues.

- (iv) That the Academic Board report should contain a fuller summary of External Examiner reports.
- (v) That generally the Academic Board report would benefit from more benchmarking with comparator institutions while recognising that the School would continue to operate on the basis of its own vision and objectives.

The standards of taught awards:

It was noted that each External Examiner had been asked to comment on the following:

“the academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions with which you are familiar.” and

“The School is maintaining the threshold standard set for its award in accordance with the frameworks for HE education qualifications and the applicable QAA subject benchmark statements?”

The External Examiner comments were generally complementary about the School’s standards with just two issues being highlighted by the Working Group:

- Gary Carpenter, External Examiner for the Guildhall Artist Masters programme, Composition pathway (2016 assessment cycle) raised a concern about the use of the full-range of marks, viz “the lower end of the scale still seems slightly generous”. The Working Group was satisfied that this had been noted by the Assistant Head of Composition in his response to the External Examiner with an assurance that action would be taken.
- David Miller, External Examiner for the BA in Technical Theatre Arts, whilst complementary about the programme’s professional standards, had not been sufficiently clear in his statement about academic standards. The Working Group asked that he be asked to clarify his judgment on this.

The Academic Board Annual Report noted (in light of a proposed “grade inflation” metric in the TEF3), that there had been an increase in the proportion of higher classifications over the last ten years. The Working Group commented that it would be expected that improvements in the delivery of a programme would be associated with an improvement in student performance. Therefore, the External Examiners’ views on setting and maintaining standards were key (see above) in determining whether this was real improvement in performance or “grade inflation”.

Determination:

That the standards of awards for which the School is responsible have been appropriately set and maintained.

Recommendations for the future:

- (vi) That the Academic Board Annual report makes more explicit reference to the standards questions in the External Examiners reports.

Standards of doctoral awards:

The School's doctoral programme is validated by City, University of London which is responsible for the setting of standards and the School is responsible for the maintenance of those standards.

The pattern of completing students with major or minor corrections and those graduating was encouraging. However, the Working Group expected to have seen rather more about the School's research culture (events, grants etc), and research ethics in the School's reporting to the Board of Governors. Also with the growing importance of knowledge exchange more explicit information on this area of activity should be provided and how both knowledge exchange and research impacts on teaching.

Determination:

That the standards of awards for which the School is responsible have been appropriately maintained.

Recommendation for the future:

- (vii) That there should be a more visible reference to Research and Research Ethics in the School's reporting to the Board of Governors. The practice of the Board of Governors seeing in full the Research Annual report to the Academic Board should be reinstated. Either in this report or the Academic Board report there should be reference to Knowledge Exchange activities and how the School engages with external organisations to create opportunities to explore new research ideas and ensuring teaching is both relevant to students' job prospects and to industry standards.

Katherine Lewis
Academic Registrar, Guildhall School