Royal Academy of Music

Assessment Strategy 2014-19

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background
The Royal Academy of Music's Assessment Strategy sets out the institutional vision for the purposes, principles, conduct and enhancement of assessment and is designed to articulate more comprehensively the Academy's expectations and goals in this area of its activities. It is designed to support the enhancement of student learning and to assure academic quality and standards. It aims to facilitate the enhancement of significant good practice and to address identified risks.

1.2   Development
The strategy has been developed by the Standing Committee of Academic Board following widespread consultation with students (represented by the officers of the Student Union and by student representatives on academic committees) and staff (members of Academic Board, programme managers, heads of department, tutors, staff from the Academy Secretariat and the Registry). It draws extensively on analysis of reliable evidence from internal programme review processes, on good practice within the sector, and on key themes in relevant research literature.

1.3   Benefits/Risks
The full implementation of the strategy will provide a number of benefits for the Academy. These include benefits to the student learning experience, the assurance of academic standards, and enhancements to assessment processes and procedures. Risks are attached not only to the implementation of the strategy but also to not taking action in this area. These include the consistency of certain modes of assessment; the transparency, currency and availability of information relating to assessment; and the commitment in time and resources to necessary staff development.

1.4   Structure
The policy contains definitions and a statement of the Academy's general approach to assessment, and the principles that underpin assessment at the Academy. The strategy outlines the strategic aims of the Academy's approach to assessment and sets priorities. The action plan identifies objectives, specifies actions designed to enhance good practice and to address areas of risk, and describes the necessary change processes for achieving strategic goals. It describes how the implementation will be managed and monitored, sets timescales for individual action points, and assigns responsibilities.

Three appendices are attached to this document: the Academy's Codes of Practice relating to assessment design, marking and grading, and feedback.

POLICY

2.1   Rationale
The Royal Academy of Music takes seriously its responsibility for ensuring the quality and reliability of student assessment. It recognises that good assessment practices are an important element in the education of its students and that the outcomes of assessment may influence students' future lives and careers. This policy is designed to be a clear and concise exposition of the Academy's approach to assessment and the values and principles that underpin it. The rationale behind this policy is that:

- By debating and articulating the Academy's assessment purposes, principles and practices the institution can support students and colleagues in achieving higher standards
- It can address a range of issues that have been raised by internal programme review processes
- It can address other institutional issues such as employability, inclusivity, and the prevention of academic malpractice
- It reflects the Academy's engagement with external benchmarks and its compliance with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B6: Assessment of students and recognition of prior learning (2013).

2.2 Purpose of Assessment

The main purpose of assessment at the Academy is to facilitate learning: to enable students to develop their potential, to monitor their progress, and to demonstrate their achievement. It is also a key component in the Academy's assurance of its academic quality and standards. To this end the Academy expects that assessment will:

- Support student learning by providing appropriate feedback on assessed work
- Measure students' achievements objectively against intended learning outcomes
- Provide a reliable basis for the recommendation of grades, progression and awards
- Assist staff in evaluating the effectiveness of the delivery of the programmes of study.

The Academy takes the view that assessment processes should be context specific and multi-dimensional. It expects this to be reflected in the validity, authenticity and diversity of assessment processes in its taught programmes of study.

2.3 Forms of Assessment

The Academy places equal value on three general forms of assessment, as defined by the Quality Assurance Agency:

- **Diagnostic** assessment is used to ascertain a learner's preparedness for a module or programme; it identifies, for the learner and the teacher, any strengths and potential gaps in knowledge, understanding and skills expected at the outset, or other possible issues; identified strengths may lead to a formal consideration to accredit prior learning.
- **Formative** assessment has a developmental purpose and is designed to enable students to learn more effectively by giving them feedback on their performance, indicating how it can be improved.
- **Summative** assessment is used to ascertain and indicate the extent of a student's success in meeting the assessment criteria used to gauge the intended learning outcomes of a module or programme.

2.4 Responsibility for assessment

Responsibility for the Academy's assessment policy, strategy, regulations and procedures lies with the Academic Board and its Standing Committee.

Responsibility for the assessment processes of individual programmes lies with the relevant Programme Boards.

Heads of Programmes, Heads of principal study departments, Specialist External Assessors, External Examiners and the Chairman of the Examination Board all have significant responsibilities for the security of assessment processes and for maintaining academic standards: these responsibilities are set out in the Academy's Academic Regulations. The day-to-day responsibility for assessment lies collectively with the programme teams.

2.5 Review

This document forms an adjunct to the institutional Strategic Plan 2014-19 and is subject to annual review by the Academic Board. It is monitored by the Standing Committee of Academic Board to ensure that it is responsive to external and internal requirements. Agreed regulatory changes are published in the Academy's Academic Regulations which are reviewed, revised and re-issued annually by the Academic Secretariat.

STRATEGY

3.   Strategic Aims
The assessment of student work in the Academy's taught programmes will be conducted within the framework of the following strategic aims. These aims draw on published guidance on the best practice in assessment in higher education (for example, the HEA series of publications, 2001ff); they reflect the UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B6: Assessment of students and recognition of prior learning (2013); they are congruent with the expectations of the University of London, as set out in the latest version of its Ordnances; most importantly, they reflect the Academy's evolving self-critical approach to assessment and the institutional values that underpin this.

3.1   Assessment will be valid
Valid assessment tasks and criteria are coherent and effectively measure student attainment of the intended learning outcomes.

3.2   Assessment will be reliable
Reliability can be placed on assessment that is accurate and repeatable. This requires clear and consistent processes for the setting, marking, grading and moderation of student work.

3.3   Assessment will be fair
Students will be given timely training and/or practice (supported by feedback) on any type of assessment that is to be used summatively. The Academy will continue to ensure that opportunities for student academic malpractice are minimal. It will continue to implement its no-tolerance policy of academic malpractice.

3.4   Assessment will be balanced
A balance will be struck between assessment of and assessment for learning. Each programme will make appropriate use of diagnostic, formative and summative assessment.

3.5   Assessment will be authentic
Authentic forms of assessment, which promote engagement with real-world skills and situations, are central to the Academy's ethos of professional musical training.

3.6   Assessment will be varied, inclusive and equitable in design and operation
The use of varied assessment tasks at each level of a programme promotes effective learning by supporting a range of approaches; it allows a range of intended learning outcomes to be addressed appropriately; it ensures that assessment methods and processes do not disadvantage any group or individual.

3.7   Assessment will be manageable
Assessment must be sufficiently frequent and rigorous to support student learning, but not so onerous as to impede effective learning and teaching by overloading students and staff.

3.8   Information about assessment will be explicit and accessible
Clear, accurate, consistent and timely information on assessment tasks and procedures will be made available to students, teachers, specialist external assessors, examiners and external examiners. It is the responsibility of the Programme Board to agree specific assessments for individual modules. It is the responsibility of the Module Leader to ensure that details of such assessments are made available to students and to provide opportunities for students to seek clarification where necessary. It is the responsibility of the Head of Programme to ensure that the programme's External Examiners receive accurate and up to date information on the assessment of the programme and its constituent parts.

3.9   Feedback will be an integral part of the assessment process
Students are entitled to clear, coherent, timely and constructive feedback on assessed tasks in support of effective learning. The nature, extent and timing of feedback for each assessment task will be made clear to students in advance of the assessment.

ASSESSMENT DESIGN: CODE OF PRACTICE

4.1 Designing good assessments and assessment processes is a creative, challenging task that demands expertise in the teaching of the subject. It requires time and care. The Academy encourages its staff to seek peer support and review in the design of assessments. In the case of all formal timed examinations, the examination paper must be approved by an external examiner at least one month before the date of the assessment.

4.2 Assessment processes will be designed across programmes rather than on a module-by-module basis to ensure that there is sufficient variety of assessment types for each programme. This means that programme-wide assessment processes are owned by the relevant Programme Board.

4.3 The design of assessment processes will flow from the programme-wide and module-specific aims and intended learning outcomes, thereby building in the concept of validity. The design of assessment will take into account the academic level of the relevant module.

4.4 The design of an assessment will take into account the assessment criteria to be applied to the marking process. The consistent application of clear, detailed assessment criteria flowing from the aims and intended learning outcomes of the module will maximise reliability. Such criteria will be transparent and educationally effective in informing students of the performance and standards expected.

4.5 The educational effectiveness of assessment will also be determined by the quality of the assessment tasks. How motivating are they? How developmental and empowering are the activities they involve? How authentic are they as 'real-world' tasks?

4.6 Care will be taken that assessment design ensures equality of opportunity to students with special needs.

MARKING: CODE OF PRACTICE

The purpose of the marking process is to achieve valid and reliable academic judgement on the student's work; to provide evidence for the feedback on the assessed work; and to arrive at a reliable mark for the work, thereby informing the student's progression within the programme and the standard of the student's award at graduation.

5.1 Marks will be awarded in relation to a clear set of assessment criteria applied consistently in the context of the level of study being assessed.

5.2 The full range of marks from 0% to 100% will be used as appropriate. Only integers will be used.

5.3 Where marking criteria refer to several different elements or qualities of the assessed work the mark will be applied holistically using the marker's academic judgement, unless a marking formula has been specifically prescribed in the module description.

5.4 All summatively assessed work at level 6 or above will be blind double marked either by individual assessors or by a panel as appropriate.

5.5 Summatively assessed work at level 5 and below may be double marked or single marked and moderated. The process to be applied will be clearly stated in the module description.

5.6 Where the two markers fail to reach an agreed mark the work will be sent for moderation by an independent examiner.

5.7 All marks should be recorded on official mark sheets obtained from the Academic Secretariat pages of Air. All marks are provisional until ratified by the Examination Board.

5.8 Any marker who suspects academic malpractice should consult the relevant section of the Academy's Regulations and follow the process described there.

5.9 Confidentiality should be maintained in the marking process at all times.

5.10 The composition of assessment panels is described in the Academy's Examinations Regulations.

5.11 The Academy will provide regular training for assessors in good practice concerning marking.

FEEDBACK: CODE OF PRACTICE

Feedback is an essential part of learning, helping students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and ways they can improve their work.

6.1 The main purpose of feedback is to engage students in critical reflection on their own achievement. To this end it is important that context is carefully considered and tone carefully modulated. It is worth bearing in mind that for all but the most formal feedback, oral feedback given in an informal context might be the best way to engage the student.

6.2 Effective feedback is timely. It will be received sufficiently quickly for the work in question to still be fresh in the student's mind.

6.3 Effective feedback is constructive. It will identify strengths and will not belittle weaknesses. It will seek to identify how the student's work can be improved.

6.4 Effective feedback is detailed. It will give specific examples of strengths, weaknesses and how the work can be improved.

6.5 Effective feedback is given in the context of clear assessment criteria and in response to well-designed assessment tasks, thereby helping students understand the basis on which their work is being judged.

6.6 Effective feedback is legible and comprehensible. It will avoid unnecessary jargon and make every effort to engage with the student as an individual.

6.7 Formative feedback, especially when comments are given without marks, is helpful to students in that it clarifies expectations, identifies strengths and weaknesses, and suggests remedies without the closed judgment of a mark.

6.8 Feedback can be particularly effective when it comes from a range of sources including teachers, personal tutors and peers. Academy staff are encouraged to give frequently the type of informal face-to-face feedback that is an integral part of one-to-one and small-group teaching, and to encourage peer feedback in small-group situations.