

Royal Northern College of Music Student Protection Plan

Student protection plan for the period 2018-19

1. An assessment of the range of risks to the continuation of study for your students, how those risks may differ based on your students' needs, characteristics and circumstances, and the likelihood that those risks will crystallise

The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) and the Office for Students require that the College has in place a Student Protection Plan designed to protect students' interests in the case of material change to its circumstances, e.g. changes to the advertised programme, programme closure, or the closure of the College. [Note: The College is a single subject institution and as such closure of its world-renowned, long established music programme would also lead to institutional closure.] These events may be triggered by internal or external factors, the latter being outside of the College's control.

The College is in a secure financial position with demand for student places consistently high due to the highly specialist nature and quality of its provision. Its standard of teaching has been deemed excellent in the Teaching Excellence Framework (being awarded Gold in 2017) and its world-class provision is recognised through receipt of Institution-Specific Funding. The External Auditors confirm that the College continues to maintain healthy cash reserves and have identified no issues that would suggest that the College is unable to continue to operate as a going concern.

The key external risks that could impact on the College if they were to materialise are changes to student tuition fees and changes to the specialist institution-specific funding the College receives as a small and specialist institution with a focus on one-to-one and intensive small-group teaching delivered in a proto-professional environment; both of which are currently considered as medium risk in terms of crystallisation, but low risk in terms of impacting on students' continuation of study, through the steps the College would expect to be put in place to mitigate them, as described in Section 2 below. These particular risks, and the actions taken in mitigation, are reviewed regularly by senior management and the Board of Governors.

Internal risks, all of which are considered unlikely to materialise and therefore of low risk to the continuation of study for RNCM students, are detailed in the risk analysis below. They fall within the scope of the College's comprehensive risk assessment and management arrangements which are reviewed and updated on a regular basis by senior management, and monitored for effectiveness by the internal auditors; reporting to the Audit Committee of the Board of Governors. Any matters of concern are brought to the attention of the Audit Committee or the Board of Governors with recommended actions being addressed by the College in a timely fashion. Actions and procedures to mitigate risk are embedded in everyday working practices and business planning processes.

The table below summarises these risks, which are grouped into cognate areas relating to financial sustainability, teaching and academic standards, student recruitment, and estates.

Financial Sustainability

Risk

Inadequate financial management and control leading to a risk of financial unsustainability

Mitigation and evidence of effectiveness

We review the College's financial forecasts on a regular basis through the College Executive Committee and the Finance Committee of the Board of Governors. In the case of changes to Government funding, cost saving measures would be implemented by the College to safeguard the interests of students. The External Auditors assess the risk of the College with regards to financial sustainability on an annual basis with the outcomes being considered by the Audit Committee and the Board of Governors; the most recent assessment stating that the College continues to maintain healthy cash reserves and that they have identified no issues that would suggest that the College is not able to continue to operate as a going concern.

Teaching and Academic Standards

High quality provision and maintenance of consistently high academic standards are imperatives for the College, and crucial to its success in continuing to attract high quality students who will benefit from this provision. Thus, the College attracts the highest quality tutors due to its reputation as a world-class conservatoire. If key staff become unavailable leading to knowledge and skills gaps, other experienced staff would be brought on a temporary basis while recruitment takes place. Alternative tutors may also be sought via reciprocal arrangement with other HEIs, Conservatoires UK or the College's European partners. The standard of the College's provision and teaching is evidenced by its TEF Gold award in 2017, receipt of Institution-Specific Funding, the healthy ratio of applicants to places, continuation rates for students in excess of 97% and the positive degree outcomes achieved by students.

Risk

Failure to meet required academic quality and teaching standards with a threat to the College's ability to award degrees.

Mitigation and evidence of effectiveness

We routinely monitor student achievement and academic standards through the Board of Examiners and the Academic Board. The Head of Undergraduate Programmes and Head of the Graduate School are responsible for addressing any areas for action. Programmes are subject to a comprehensive annual review which considered by the Academic Board. Action plans from the annual review are drawn up in collaboration with students. We have an annual appraisal process in place for full-time staff during which training and support needs are identified. An annual assurance statement on teaching quality and academic standards is considered by the Academic Board and Audit Committee.

Consistently poor responses in the National Student Survey and their impact on student recruitment.

We develop an action plan based on the outcome of the NSS annually complemented by other surveys to address areas of potential weakness. In the TEF metrics the College's NSS scores are significantly above benchmark.

Failure to recruit academic staff of sufficient quality, impacting on student recruitment.

We offer a market supplement to attract staff of a suitable calibre where required. The world-standing reputation of College draws high quality staff as evidenced by the teaching and professional profiles of our staff.

Key staff unavailable leading to knowledge and skills gaps.

As a single subject specialist institution, we can draw on a wide pool of highly qualified and experienced practitioners to provide interim cover. Student satisfaction with their teaching and academic support remains consistently high in the NSS. The world-leading reputation of College draws high quality staff as evidenced by the teaching and professional profiles of our staff.

Students withdrawing due to changes to a programme of study following re-validation

Students are invited to transfer to the new programme, or are permitted to continue through to completion on the previous programme and its regulations. Students work alongside staff in the redevelopment of the programme and changes to the curriculum are incremental with the core components being maintained. In the recent revalidation of the College's undergraduate programme all students agreed to transfer to the new programme

Student Recruitment

Applications to the College's programmes far exceed the number of available places and this is not anticipated to drop significantly in the foreseeable future due to the world-renowned reputation of the College and its provision. If the RNCM is no longer able to deliver its programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in music) or there is failure to recruit students in sufficient numbers to maintain the viability of the programme, students would be permitted to complete their studies within the College, or in extreme circumstances offered an alternative programme of study at other UK HEIs/ Conservatoire UK (CUK) institutions (see protocols below), or through the College's extensive network of European partners.

Risk

Loss of UKVI sponsor licence, impacting on international student recruitment.

Mitigation and evidence of effectiveness

The College has Highly Trusted Sponsor Status with UKVI. Internal and UKVI audit regularly monitors compliance with UKVI requirements. A quarterly report on key issues relating to Tier 4 Students is submitted to the Executive Committee. The College's recent internal UKVI audit showed a moderate level of assurance with design and operational controls.

Failure to recruit students of sufficient quality, or in sufficient numbers.

Implication of Brexit for the recruitment of EU students and failure to meet International student number targets.

The College sets clear admissions targets on an annual basis and the Executive Committee reviews progress towards achieving admission's targets monthly. There is continuous monitoring of recruitment progress and targets by Heads of School on a weekly basis. Student recruitment is considered by the Academic Board, Executive Committee and the Board of Governors. The College would adjust its overall student ecology and invest more in bursaries and scholarships if EU and International student number targets are not achieved.

The College consistently meets its overall student number targets.

Poor progression into employment/further study

We analyse and review results from the Destination of Leavers Survey and Longitudinal Educational Outcomes survey at a strategic level through the Executive Committee, Academic Board and Board of Governors. Outcomes of DLHE show 100% of the College's students in graduate level employment or further study.

Estates and Serious Disruption

In the unlikely event that the RNCM as a whole is unable to operate, full emergency and serious incident plans will be put into action through the College's Disaster Recovery Plan. Reciprocal arrangements may be drawn upon with other HEIs/ CUK for some aspects, such as instruments and teaching space. A formal RNCM Business Continuity Plan is in place with regular testing and review.

Protocols for intra-conservatoire communication and cooperation through Conservatoires UK (CUK)

In the event of a crisis, the CUK member(s) affected will lead on managing the crisis, on media relations and communications and in liaison with other CUK members for advice and assistance.

Each CUK member will appoint a named first point of contact and a list of those contacts will be circulated to all CUK members with this document. In the event of a crisis, this intra-conservatoire group will be chaired by the conservatoire affected, or if more than one conservatoire is affected, by a chair appointed from within their number. The purpose of the group will be consultative and to facilitate intra-conservatoire coordination and mutual assistance, particularly where specialist expertise is required in relation to, e.g., specialist staff or facilities such as sprung dance floors, rehearsal suites, etc.

2. The measures that you have put in place to mitigate those risks that you consider to be reasonably likely to crystallise

Given that the OfS has indicated that it will continue the current HEFCE/OFFA regulatory framework until the end of the 2018-19 session, no significant changes to the College's income from student fees and direct government funding are anticipated in the immediate future. However, the College's current risk assessment in this particular regard has been raised to 'medium' to reflect a higher level of uncertainty in future funding arrangements until the OfS regulatory framework going forward is fully determined and operational. This heightened level of risk also takes account of the recently announced Government review of funding arrangements for the HE sector as a whole, which may create a different, and potentially less favourable (for the College) balance between student fee income and direct government funding. If this risk were to crystallise in a way which reduced the College's income to a level where its programmes of study in their present form ceased to be viable, creating a situation where continuation of study for its current students was under threat, the College would anticipate that the usual process in such circumstances of providing transitional funding to allow existing students to be 'taught out' would be put in place. Hence, whilst such an event would clearly present the College with some challenges in determining the nature of its ongoing provision, the risk to those existing students being unable to complete their course of study would be 'low'.

3. Information about the policy you have in place to refund tuition fees and other relevant costs to your students and to provide compensation where necessary in the event that you are no longer able to preserve continuation of study

Discounting institutional closure, the College cannot identify any circumstances that would threaten the continuity of study of its students. Being a single subject provider, if its core programmes become no longer viable, then the College would close. The circumstances in which such an event might occur have been described in section 2 above. If the College otherwise became financially unsustainable, the risk of which is extremely low as detailed in section 1 above, this would manifest itself over a number of years allowing the College to preserve continuation of study and 'teach out' students currently on the programme. Should the College find itself in the position of needing to pay compensation to any student who could not successfully complete their programme, the numbers of whom would be small, it would do so by drawing on its reserves.

The College has in place business interruption and increased cost of working insurance to ensure the continuity of its functions, including the delivery of a students' programme, should the College estate be disrupted or damaged.

The College's Tuition Fee Refund Policy provides details of refunds for students who withdraw from their programme of study or take leave of absence.

4. Information about how you will communicate with students about your student protection plan

The College will publicise its Student Protection Plan in a user-friendly format to current and future students through its website for prospective students and via the VLE (Moodle) and in the Student Information Handbook for enrolled students. Students will be made aware of the Plan during induction.

We will ensure that staff are aware of the Student Protection Plan and its implications through internal communications and that they are aware of the implications of the Plan when they propose course changes by incorporating a statement in the College's regulations for the approval of programmes of study and into the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook which details the processes involved in making changes to a programme.

The Student Protection Plan will be reviewed on an annual basis by the Executive Committee with input from the Students' Union, at which time the risk level of the areas identified above will be formally reviewed. As part of the review, students will be directly involved through their representation on the key committees at which the plan will be considered.

We will inform students if there are to be material changes to their course by email and/or forum and seek agreement. Such changes are made in the preceding year to the year in which the change would be implemented and as such, students would have a minimum of six months' notice.

Should the Plan need to be implemented we will organise a meeting to discuss this directly with students and provide a permanent notice by email. This will be followed by a series of open meetings with students and senior staff of the College. In addition, in certain circumstances we may elect to provide individual support to students, as appropriate. The College would plan at two years in advance should the risk of College closure be unavoidable.

In extreme situations, Business Continuity Plans would be brought into action and the College may implement arrangements to ensure that students have access to independent advice if required. Students would have the right to complain about the manner in which the Plan was being implemented through the College's formal Complaints Policy.