

SMT response to the paper:

RCA Students' Experience: proposals for enhancing and monitoring College performance

Summary

The Royal College of Art Senior Management Team thanks the Students' Union co-presidents for the presentation and paper on the student experience delivered last term, and for your participation in a discussion this February. We address points raised, offer further information, clarifications and, where appropriate, proposals to enhance the experience for students at the RCA. In particular, we would be interested to investigate further the proposals around a 'student partnership framework', and have indicated a number of other areas where we think progress can be made.

Enhancement of student experience

- While it is welcomed that the SU acknowledges significant progress (described as the contract) in key areas, the RCA is working towards ensuring relevant information is provided to applicants to assist them in making an informed decision about their choice of study; while there is progress to be made, we do not accept the implication that information is deliberately withheld.
- The SU paper is factually incorrect in claiming that there has been a 'casualisation' of academic and technical contracts, and constant changes in staffing. As the SU will know from its membership of JCM, the College has moved towards more substantial permanent contracts and simplification of job descriptions for both academic and technical staff over the past 5 years. While there have been some staff changes, the turnover is not 'constant' as suggested. A variety of factors should be taken into account alongside planned organisational change, such as retirement and staff age range, and career development leading to more senior academic posts elsewhere.
- Where 'unclear amounts of time dedicated to teaching vs. research' is referred to, if anything this was the traditional model of the RCA, and work is nearing completion to specify appropriate balances of activity. We would also point out that the relationship between teaching and research is not binary, and that academics undertake many more activities than this! The research culture of the college is an essential driver of teaching at the forefront of new knowledge, and new pedagogical development.

- We think that the comparisons of student to staff ratios may not represent an accurate picture due to differences in methodology for calculating SSRs across the sector. This is something that the RCA is going to investigate further, but would also advise that the SSR is not an automatic or even necessarily informative proxy measure for the quality of teaching or the student experience, if taken in isolation from other indicators. Other indicators would include, for example, the wide variety of pedagogical formats we employ in teaching and learning.
- We note with interest the proposals in the SU paper for making information available for prospective students, and will consider this in relation to future marketing material. We have already agreed to bring forward the deadline to 15 April for submission of annual revisions to programme specifications to ensure the information provided to applicants with their offer letters is as comprehensive and up to date as possible.
- We note the suggestion to move from a threshold of 70% student satisfaction to 80% by 2019/20. While no longer term decisions have been made, the quality enhancement approach seeks continuous improvement, while also recognising that national surveys are broadly generic, with the art and design sector as a whole tending to score above the mean in some indicators, and consistently below the mean in others, due to many factors.
- We agree with setting standards in academic and technical learning, but believe that this is best served by taking an enhancement-led approach, not by introducing proxy metrics that may, in the long run, prove harmful to the overall experience by privileging (and by correlation diverting funds towards) some aspects of provision over others. We think that the description of 'teaching vs. research/administration time' shows a lack of understanding of the role and responsibilities of academic staff.
- The suggestion to integrate InfoRCA with the website is an interesting one: it is probably feasible for more information to be placed in the public domain for prospective applicants; equally, public facing websites and internal systems are separate for a reason, and any organisation will also wish to protect commercially sensitive information, and its 'blue skies' thinking about scenario planning, etc. Our new intranet has been designed to use the same technology platform as the website and will be accessed via a logon from the website.
- The proposal for the creation of a student partnership framework is interesting, and one which we would be open to exploring further.

- The SU paper suggests that Human Resources should establish policies and standards for staff support for students. While we understand the motivation for this, we believe that such issues are not binary in terms of HR policies and resulting working practices, but that 'best practice' evolves through a more evolutionary and complex route involving academic standards, feedback, reflection and discussion, as well as formal requirements. We do not see a rationale for using an 'executive order' to restrict group sizes to 6 students, when there are perfectly sound academic and creative reasons for variance above and below this figure, depending on pedagogical imperatives and disciplinary conditions.

Student Engagement

- The SU paper identifies universities where student support centres are based in the Students' Union. While this may offer an interesting model, we note that the universities cited are all large multi-faculty organisations with scale and scope significantly different to the RCA. We would take seriously, and reject, any accusation of lack of impartiality in the RCA student support team, which is unfounded and impugns the professional integrity of staff. The purpose of student support is to provide information, advice and advocacy to all students and prospective students, and it is not demonstrated that this would be improved by transferring responsibility to the SU. Consequently, we cannot support the proposal that Student Support be paid for by the RCA, but regulated by the SU; the RCA takes its responsibilities for student support seriously and has no desire to relinquish them.
- We are concerned about any narrowing of participation and opportunity. The decline of UK BME students is described in the SU report as a number, but presented as a percentage (which may not be the same thing). We need to examine whether the decline in percentage is also matched by a real-term decline in headcount numbers, or is a product of the overall increase in the percentage of international students, which would have the net effect of reducing the percentage of all UK students, BME included. Further investigation of this issue is needed and will be a priority for the Equality and Diversity Committee. London BME population is 45%; the UK average is 12% according to the 2012 census. The RCA should congratulate itself on securing and processing 85 PSS scholarships for academic year 2016/7, which was considerably higher than other much larger institutions. The PSS scheme was only available in this academic year. For future years, we need to consider the impact of the PGT loan. We also discussed on 23

February the data from UCAS which evidences that the biggest 'at risk' / underserved group within HE applications is white working-class male.

- The RCA has heretofore enjoyed a productive partnership with the Student Union. It is clear that historically much of the engagement has been on an informal footing, and in recent years the College has worked to establish more regularised engagement, including termly attendance of the co-presidents at SMT; participation in the annual Council strategy meeting; scheduled meetings between the co-presidents and the Pro-Rector; engagement with student assemblies; membership of SLTs for non-reserved business; membership of committees including Council, Senate, ASC, and co-chairing of LTC. The RCA has also encouraged the SU to engage with the induction of student reps, has assisted with the development of induction training materials, and has engaged the SU co-presidents in the strategic planning process. (See appendix A).
- Nonetheless, we are in favour of greater clarity in the relationship between the RCA and the SU: while noting the points made by the SU, the College has also been frustrated by matters of lack of communication and dissemination, representation, accuracy of information, and lack of punctuality of attendance at meetings. We are open to the idea of exploring a relationship agreement, which is cognisant of best practice including, but not necessarily limited to, the NUS/HEFCE 'Good Governance and Good Relationships' study. We do not think this requires the appointment of a Director of Student Experience to achieve shared objectives, and that the resource is better deployed towards the core business of teaching. Furthermore, it is not appropriate, in our view, to have an employee facing uncertainty in reporting to a new boss every year (or maximum two years) as the SU leadership changes.
- Similarly, we would not see that additional value has been demonstrated in the request for hiring a Student Experience Coordinator, although we welcome the spirit of greater accountability on both sides of the partnership: it is the case that the SU has far greater insight into the College's strategies, performance and finances, than the RCA does into the equivalents of the SU.
- The suggestion that the Development and Alumni Relations team, and Communications and Marketing, work together to develop an endowment fund for scholarships is noted - and is indeed in place; the suggested KPI of a £20m endowment fund would, however produce less in terms of student scholarships than currently is the case with bursaries. The team is currently tasked to produce £2m new money for scholarships in this fiscal year. We would greatly welcome

the SU involvement with Alumni Relations on a scheme to gain 100% participation in a 'class of' annual scholarship appeal.

Monitoring of College Performance

- We preface our comments here by stating that we are somewhat disappointed that the invitation to take part in dialogue about student engagement has somehow become translated into an issue of 'monitoring college performance', which, like its counterpart, 'monitoring SU performance', carries its own metrics and is separate from the intention to build positive communication and enhance engagement between the student body and the RCA, principally through the elected representation of the SU and student reps system. We would welcome any developments that foster trust, and benefit, as opposed to measures likely to lead to misunderstanding and 'arm's length' relations which, we believe, would not serve the interests of the student body.
- We do not propose to change the reporting structure of SLTs and ILTS, and disagree that student feedback is removed from the academic governance of the college: one SU co-president is a member of ASC, another is a co-chair of LTC; both attend Senate, the College's academic governance body. Student reps are members of SLTs, and are doubly represented through SU reporting channels, and Deans' membership of SMT. We have established an ILTS forum, and publish an ILTS newsletter, and have introduced a show guide, produced by the Show team of which the SU co-president is a member. SMT produces a monthly newsletter to staff and students.
- We are pleased to note that the SU paper acknowledges the increase in student representation in recent years. We note the comments about perceived insufficient incorporation in key governance processes, but would also regret that SU involvement in governance has increasingly become one of opposition, where a partnership towards addressing the serious challenges facing higher education institutions is urgently needed: for example, the SU both abstained from and then opposed the new Strategic Plan, despite being members of Council.
- Reference is made in the SU paper to lack of student representation on key bodies, for example the Research Committee. We discussed at SMT on 23 Feb how the main fora for considering research student issues are ASC and ABCD rather than the RKEI Strategy or Operational Committees. We also noted that the central involvement of student representation has been an essential part of the development of the matrix for PGR students; the agreement to develop a

Research Student Charter; and involvement through ASC in addressing the UK Quality Code for Research Degrees section B11. We agree it is a good idea to invite research student representatives to one ASC per year, but we do not agree that it is appropriate to have student representation on the Staff Committee, where confidential employment matters are discussed.

- The SU paper claims that budgets are 'determined and implemented independently of student feedback', but provides no evidence to justify such a claim. In fact, student feedback is a key factor in budgeting discussions, for example in the restructuring of ILTS in 2010-11 to a College-wide service, following student feedback, and in annual School budget-building.
- Having commissioned separate independent reviews of Council and Senate, which took into account the sub-committees reporting to both, we will be considering carefully the final recommendations and deciding what changes, if any, we would wish to implement to improve organisational performance and reporting. We will not, therefore, pre-empt any decisions on this with regard to the suggestion in the SU paper that ASC should have three sub-committees of learning and teaching, learning and making, and SLTs. We believe that the learning and teaching committee has been relatively effective as a sub-committee of ASC; the 'making' dimension, covering ILTS, is well served through the ILTS Forum, and through SLTs, and it also needs to be remembered that ILTS serves the RCA's Goals 2 and 3 as well as Goal 1 (i.e. research and knowledge exchange as well as teaching).
- As a consequence, we do not propose at this time to revise the governance structure of ASC to incorporate SLT and a learning and making committee, and we would point out that the suggestion that Deans' reports to ASC should be trebled in frequency, and co-signed by Heads of Programme, would draw further resource away from learning and teaching, and research, creating increased bureaucracy without demonstrable gain. We would think that, on reflection, the SU would not wish to be supporting a diversion of attention away from students towards more institutional process.
- We do not agree with the request for one student per school to sit on Senate and Council, nor for sabbatical officers to become formally part of SMT and the deans' group as observers. We understand this suggestion to be one that is clearly concerned with governance, rather than engagement, which seem to have become confused in the discussion. In the same vein, we note that the request to increase student representation in every committee of the College is not

accompanied by an analysis of benefit vs. bureaucratic overhead, and again confuses engagement with governance.

- Attention is drawn to Exeter University as a model for budgetary planning: while interesting, it is also a partial view, given that Exeter is an institution undergoing major rationalisation of long-standing departments.
- We do not, at this time, see benefit to the Director of Finance establishing a Budget Scrutiny Group, whose proposed work is more thoroughly executed by the existing Finance Committee with our external and internal auditors. As members of Council, the SU co-presidents have access to the same level of confidential information and discussion as every other member of Council, which is considerably more than non-Council members of staff who are not party to discussions around new campus land acquisition or the potential risks surrounding ISTA funding.

