

Student Submission TEF 2023

1. Approach to evidence-gathering

This submission has been written by _____, RCM Students' Union President and approved by the Students' Union Committee consisting of all five officers (representing Events, Diversity, International, Welfare and Disabilities, and Marketing and Communications). The evidence used comes from the following sources:

- A focus group open to all UG students (12 attended, who were from a mix of all faculties which have UG students)
- An online form filled by all 9 reps from faculties that have UG students (brass, composition, historical performance, keyboard, percussion, strings, woodwind, vocal, BMus1 rep)
- Discussions within the SU members all of whom (including President) are or have been on the BMus course, and have a personal, first-hand experience
- Discussions with staff members (TEF working group and the Director of Programmes in particular who is the staff TEF contact)
- Committee meetings, such as Student Curriculum Forum, Staff-Student Committee and continuous feedback received by the SU

Overall, there is a good representation of student voice in this submission - all faculties (families of instruments) and years are represented, as well as disabled students or international students (EU and overseas).

There is some context to bear in mind for this submission. First of all, RCM is a very small institution, with fewer than 1000 students in total, which means the SU is proportionally smaller too. The SU President is the only full-time member of the SU and is responsible for organisation of all SU activities with support from 5 officers. Writing this submission has been quite a big task on top of usual work, not to mention the research that has to be made to make this text worthwhile. Compared to larger institutions' SU's we do not have the capacity to conduct or analyse formal whole-institution surveys, nor could we arrange large-scale research exercises specifically for this TEF submission. Moreover, due to the nature of the RCM BMus course each student's timetable is highly personalised around one to one lessons and small group teaching, therefore it is challenging to find a mutually agreeable time for a varied group of students to meet. However, the end result, is hopefully at least in some way useful for the TEF panel.

2. Student experience

SE1 (How well teaching, feedback and assessment practices support students' learning, progression, and attainment): The teaching at RCM has been rated by excellent by students on many occasions. The individual learning experience that is the Principal Study with a renowned musician is a key reason students choose RCM. The professors are usually professionally active at high levels and can be seen at major London venues (or around the world). That professional link and access to the best instrumentalists or composers in their fields is the major teaching point at the College and a preparation for future careers and networking. Moreover, each faculty organises various classes or activities relevant to their specialisations. These include repertoire classes, where students play through music they will be expected to know and play as professional musicians and masterclasses with external visiting musicians (sometimes of the highest calibre,

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such as violinist Maxim Vengerov) or others. On top of that students study a range of modules, initially a core programme in BMus 1 and 2 which gradually becomes more flexible until in year 4 each student effectively follows their own bespoke course, shaped by their musical interests and career aspirations.

Assessment for principal study consists of recital performances for instrumentalists or portfolios for composers, both of which are assessed by a specialist panel. For other modules the assessment varies. Depending on the skills gained this might be an assessed recording session, an essay, diary, or a creative project which is examined by the module leader and/or more teachers with relevant expertise.

When asked about the quality of teaching at RCM, an overwhelming majority of reps have said their students agree teaching at RCM is excellent, and so did the students who attended the focus group. Some quotes from the online form sent to faculty reps below:

"The staff are all amazing teachers and people are learning a lot from them."
"Very good teachers active in the profession"
"The professors are highly knowledgeable and adapt their teaching to cater for all students"
"Students really enjoy their instrumental lessons and classes with profs"
"Very good teachers active in the profession"

SE2 (How well course content and delivery engages students in their learning, and stretches students to develop their knowledge and skills): RCM is a highly specialised and small institution. The core of learning at all levels is Principal Study (in an instrument, voice, or composition) which means individual tuition and activities relating to that specialisation (such as orchestral concerts or composition workshops). The rest of the course is progressively more personalised, starting with some foundational modules in earlier years, developing into a fully customised programme in year 4 where it is possible to shift the credit weight between principal study and other modules. There are opportunities to pursue a variety of paths in the music industry, not just 'mainstream' forms of instrumental performance or composition. It is possible to develop skills in music recording, production, education, research and more - all depending on the choices students make. This allows the course to cater for any future career related to music a student can wish for and this level of flexibility has been always appreciated by the student body. There are also cases, when an injury (these can happen just like in sports and with similar consequences) or personal choices or circumstances force a student to alter their programme to a greater degree, affecting principal study. RCM has been flexible in such cases, allowing students to postpone final recital dates or realise their credits in another area of study which would be suitable.

The course is mostly fixed in first and second years, however there are modules which can be taken at different levels to cater for the diverse walks of life students might come from. For example a student who only had private instrumental lessons would likely take Level 4 Aural Skills class as it is an entry-level class, whereas a student from a specialist music school who has had extensive solfege (aural) training would probably take Level 5 or even 6 Aural Skills class to still develop their abilities better.

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Again, when asked during the focus group or through online form for faculty reps, a majority of students have agreed teaching at RCM is well-delivered and engaging, mainly thanks to the excellent teachers.

"Interesting and relevant masterclasses"

"Professors come from all walks of life and have interesting portfolio careers. This feeds into the way they teach, which is inspiring and interesting"

"For most of the classes yes, students feel engaged and leave having learnt something new."

"Amazing teachers who are involved and encouraging"

SE3 (How far research in relevant disciplines, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and/or employer engagement contribute to the student academic experience): Thanks to having active professional musicians as teacher, RCM's learning environment is by nature informed by the profession. Moreover, the Centre for Performance Science (jointly run by RCM and Imperial College London) is leading research on how we learn music and performance. Their findings help in shaping all of the courses at the RCM and it is interesting how similar learning to play an instrument at this level is to how athletes train. Moreover, there are two contemporary issues which are currently being woven into the curriculum: EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion), which has historically been neglected in the field of classical music, and sustainability, which is increasingly becoming a world-wide problem. In the context of music, EDI includes rediscovering repertoire that has been erased from the mainstream history and promoting living composers from underrepresented backgrounds. Students are encouraged to explore new repertoire for their assessed recitals and the concert programming team weaves music by underrepresented composers into public performances at the RCM. Secondly, sustainability is a relatively new field to be introduced into the music curriculum and might be tricky in such a specialised domain. However, creative ideas are emerging from students and staff and in consultation with the SU. We are hopeful sustainability can be introduced meaningfully into the curriculum, be it as a separate module or into what already exists.

When asked about the relevance of RCM teaching to their future desired career, students were again in majority optimistic in both the focus group and online form. They have appreciated the direct and many links to the industry the College has.

"I've often heard the students talk about future careers and advice and support staff have given them for this."

"The professors are so varied in background and experience, so they are able to share their experiences to develop our understanding of the industry and build the relevant skills needed."

"There are clear links between what we are learning and the real-life careers of graduates and staff at RCM, as well as others from outside the College sphere. Teachers show us these links, but we can also infer them ourselves."

"They provide experiences close to those in the professions"

SE4 (How well the university or college supports staff professional development and academic practice) has been omitted due not being a point of interest for students who have taken part in the focus group and online forms.

SE5 (How supportive the learning environment is, and how far students can access the academic support they need): The learning environment at College is supportive, and there is always extra help when needed. Each student gets assigned a Personal Advisor, with whom they can meet to discuss any issues with their workload, the course, or other concerns they might have. Personal Advisors are usually academic teachers at RCM so they might end up teaching their advisees during some classes. Apart from Personal Advisors, Student Services offer support in the form of counselling and, where needed, creating a learning agreement to cater for additional needs a student might have. There are also English classes, both conversational and academic to help those who are not fully confident with their spoken or written English. Some heads of faculties meet with all their students individually at the end of academic years and they are always open to meeting with students to help them during the year. It is also worth noting that while Principal Study hours are set, chamber ensemble coaching hours (for which ensembles need to be registered) are unlimited.

Most of student reps and half of the students in the focus group responded they agree there is a supportive learning environment at the College and they can receive extra help when needed.

"I know a few of the undergraduates have sought support from student services and have then been able to complete their assignment etc."

"Student Services is highly valued amongst the students, and many students feel that it helps to make RCM accessible to everyone."

"We are given almost an over-abundance of information both digitally and informally on support services, and our head of faculty is incredibly supportive on an individual level."

SE6 (How well physical and virtual learning resources support teaching and learning): RCM is located in South Kensington in a historical building. The campus was recently enlarged by acquiring a new building on a nearby street, with extra spaces for administration and rehearsals. There has been also a large investment into the courtyard development which resulted in an impressive new couple of spaces, museum and a cafe. There is a number of performance venues of various sizes at the College and they are all highly sought-after by students to perform or practise in. Each of them have an easy-to-use recording system which allows students to make good quality recordings by themselves. There is a booking system in place called Asimut which ensures fair distribution of practise hours and timetabling for staff and students. Learn.rcm is a virtual environment which hosts most of the academic information, assessments and so on.

The library has been always highly praised by students. It is probably one of the best music libraries around the world - if they don't have a piece of music, they will get it if it was published and is needed. There are some precious items in the collection such as handwritten autographs by Chopin or Mozart.

RCM recently opened a Museum which displays a collection of instruments in College's collection, such as the oldest discovered keyboard string instrument or the oldest known guitar. Many of the instruments there have been renovated and are in playable condition. RCM museum is probably of most interest to Historical Performance students, however it can be also a performance venue for all students.

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There are two composition suites and a couple of individual studios for composers to work at, which are equipped with software such as Logic, Max MSP and Sibelius.

While physical resources and those closely related to practical to music-making are overwhelmingly rated as excellent by students, virtual ones are less so, maybe coming from the number of various systems. However, overall the TEF score for resources is still very high, most likely because it is those physical resources that matter to music students most.

"Our building is historic but well adapted to cater for the needs of a modern musician. Our facilities are second to none, the library is a goldmine, Performance spaces are excellent"

"We are all in awe of the library and features like Panopto. Having our works played in such well-designed halls is exciting!"

"The resources and facilities in particular are excellent"

"There are too many systems and it's very confusing. It doesn't feel like there is a coordinated approach to IT systems at RCM."

SE7 (How well the university or college engages with its students, leading to improvements to the experiences and outcomes of its students):

Student voice is most closely related to the Student Union's activities, as the SU is involved within the College structures on all levels with the aim to deliver student feedback. The SU President sits on the RCM Council, the governing body, as well as Senate and a number of other committees and chairs the Student Curriculum Forum. The SU consists of full-time President and five officers (International, Events, Marketing and Communications, Diversity and Welfare&Disability. Each faculty has a representative, who attends faculty meetings, Staff-Student Committee and Student Curriculum Forum.

Despite this, RCM's score for student voice has been low. It might be due to a few factors, on which the SU and staff are working. It has not always been clear to students how the College has responded to feedback, which might cause a general feeling of putting in effort in vain. To improve that the Director of Programmes has created a spreadsheet with feedback and the results/responses to the feedback, which should hopefully build a sense of purpose in students who wish to come forward. Moreover, the SU has been restructured recently, to be more effective. In the past the only two paid posts on the SU were President (full time salary) and Vice-President (2.5k annual salary). However, as historically the VPs were not as useful because of a blurry definition of their responsibilities, that post has been removed. Instead (with an extra investment from RCM), each of the 5 officers on the SU will be paid 1k annually for their work which made this year's SU more motivated and energetic. It has made all the officers feel more appreciated and ready to work - we hope to see a change to this year's NSS results thanks to that.

While most faculty reps say that feedback and student experiences shape the course, the focus group was split equally between yes/no/maybe, which shows that those who engage with SU believe there are changes being made in responses to feedback, but maybe they are not communicated to the whole student body well enough. It might also be caused by such an individual course of study of each student and their focus on individual experience rather than improving the course overall and various routes for doing that.

"Our head of faculty is often asking for feedback and is accommodating and reasonable when it is offered."

"Rep gives info to faculty and they respond quickly and find solutions"

"The student voice is very much heard and listened to at RCM, and the faculty reps/SU are very good at communicating the students' views"

"Lots of positive changes are made based on people's feedback"

"I think most do, but the speed with which some things are addressed is sometimes flagging"

"Because things generally change too slowly to make a difference to students that provide the feedback"

"Most feedback given there's not much change seen in the faculty"

3. Student Outcomes

SO1, SO2, SO3 (Positive outcomes): The rigorous and in-person audition process at RCM means that vast majority of students are suitable for the course and there are very few dropouts during the 4 years. Students who study at RCM are genuinely passionate about music. It is usual for most of music UG graduates to move into a masters degree at RCM or another conservatoire. Those who do not either do so because they can already establish themselves as professional musicians, freelancers, teachers or (in the very few cases) decide to pursue a career unrelated to music. The flexible nature of BMus course allows students to go into a range of careers in music and it is probably impossible to pinpoint one 'default' career choice even within music that RCM graduates end up with. There is, however, support from the RCM Creative Careers Centre for up to five years after graduation, which enables to continue professional development and contact with RCM even after graduating.

Quotes from SE3 apply here as well

SO4, SO5, SO6 (educational gains): As mentioned above, RCM does not have one 'ideal' musician profile that students pursue. Instead, there is a range of career options defined by the choices students make during their studies. The Creative Careers centre supports us in this and placements in RCM Sparks or other educational institutions develop teaching skills which prove useful for developing a private teaching service. RCM students are taught to be independent, entrepreneurial, professional, and creative across all years of study. RCM Accelerate grant is the culmination of this mindset - it is a programme for which final year students can apply and receive funding for a professional, potentially longstanding project. These projects come in various shapes and sizes - sometimes it's recording an album or curating a concert, in other cases establishing an ensemble or teaching/workshop service. These initiatives are meant to be a springboard into a professional portfolio career and are selected in a pitch contest to a panel of experts. Overall, independence and creativity in forging one's own professional path are what is being taught at RCM.