

# Degree awarding powers (DAPs) assessment report for The Northern School of Art

## Full degree awarding powers (Full DAPs) assessment

**Provider legal name:** The Northern School of Art

**Provider trading name:** The Northern School of Art

**UKPRN:** 10001503

**Assessment conducted:** 14 September 2023 to 11 June 2024

**Reference** OfS 2024.64

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# Contents

<b>Executive summary .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction and background .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Assessment process .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Information gathering .....	8
<b>Assessment of DAPs Criterion A: Academic governance .....</b>	<b>10</b>
Criterion A1: Academic governance .....	10
<b>Assessment of DAPs Criterion B: Academic standards and quality assurance .....</b>	<b>30</b>
Criterion B1: Regulatory frameworks .....	30
<b>Assessment of DAPs Criterion B: Academic standards and quality assurance .....</b>	<b>39</b>
Criterion B2: Academic standards .....	39
<b>Assessment of DAPs Criterion B: Academic standards and quality assurance .....</b>	<b>50</b>
Criterion B3: Quality of the academic experience .....	50
<b>Assessment of DAPs Criterion C: Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of staff .</b>	<b>68</b>
Criterion C1: The role of academic and professional staff .....	68
<b>Assessment of DAPs Criterion D: Environment for supporting students.....</b>	<b>79</b>
Criterion D1: Enabling student development and achievement .....	79
<b>Assessment of DAPs Criterion E: Evaluation of performance .....</b>	<b>89</b>
Criterion E1: Evaluation of performance .....	89
<b>Assessment of overarching criterion for the authorisation for DAPs .....</b>	<b>95</b>
Advice to the OfS .....	95
Reasoning.....	95
Conclusions .....	96

## Executive summary

<b>Type of assessment:</b>	Quality and standards assessment for full degree awarding powers
<b>For:</b>	The Northern School of Art

1. This report represents the conclusions of an assessment for degree awarding powers (DAPs) at The Northern School of Art. The school is seeking authorisation for Full DAPs for all taught awards covering all subjects.
2. To carry out the assessment, the Office for Students (OfS) appointed an independent team of experts. This report contains the advice and judgement of the team following its assessment.
3. The team concluded that the school met all the criteria for a Full DAPs authorisation. This report does not, however, represent any decision of the OfS to authorise these powers.

### What are full degree awarding powers?

A provider that is registered with the Office for Students (OfS) and has a three-year track record of delivering higher education, either through an arrangement with a degree awarding body or under its own existing powers to award degrees, can apply for a full degree awarding powers (Full DAPs) authorisation.<sup>1</sup>

A Full DAPs authorisation will normally be limited to four years. At the end of the four-year period the provider will be able to apply for an authorisation to grant awards without a time limit. This is referred to as 'indefinite degree awarding powers'.

A provider may seek authorisation for Full DAPs for the following awards:

- a. foundation degrees only;
- b. awards up to, and including, bachelor degrees;
- c. all taught awards; and/or
- d. research awards (if Full DAPs for taught awards are already held or are applied for at the same time).

Providers may apply for these authorisations on a subject-specific basis or covering all subjects. When choosing which level of DAPs authorisation it wishes to apply for, the provider must:

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of different types of degree awarding powers, see [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/registering-with-the-ofs/degree-awarding-powers/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/registering-with-the-ofs/degree-awarding-powers/).

- have no fewer than three consecutive years' experience, immediately preceding the year of application, of delivering courses at a level at least equivalent to the level of DAPs authorisation for which the provider is applying
- meet the criteria set out in paragraph 249 of the OfS regulatory framework for higher education in England (the OfS's regulatory framework).<sup>2</sup>

Before making a decision about whether to award a Full DAPs authorisation, the OfS will undertake a Full DAPs assessment. The purpose of a Full DAPs assessment is to gather evidence to inform a judgement on the extent to which a provider's arrangements:

- meet the DAPs criteria, including the overarching criterion for Full DAPs
- provide, and maintain the provision of, higher education of an appropriate quality
- apply, and maintain the application of, appropriate standards to that higher education.

DAPs assessments are conducted by assessment teams with membership that includes OfS-appointed academic experts. Assessors will have experience of higher education and knowledge relevant to those areas they are responsible for assessing. The outcome of the DAPs assessment is a report, compiled by the assessment team, summarising its findings from the assessment.

The criteria for authorisation for DAPs are designed to ensure that a provider with DAPs demonstrates a firm guardianship of academic standards, a firm and systematic approach to the assurance of the quality of the higher education that it provides, and the capacity to contribute to the continued good standing of higher education in England. The DAPs criteria are the reference point for the DAPs assessment process and assessment teams will assess a provider against these criteria. The detailed requirements of the DAPs criteria are set out in Annex C of the OfS's regulatory framework.<sup>3</sup>

4. The Northern School of Art (the school) is a further education corporation providing a range of undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses in design, and creative and performing arts.
5. Since 2012, the school has worked in partnership with Arts University Bournemouth (AUB). AUB has awarded and validated the school's degrees at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Prior to this arrangement, degrees were awarded and validated by University of Teesside, an arrangement the school entered into in 1995 and that ceased in 2014 (following a transitional period) due to the current partnership with AUB coming into existence.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/securing-student-success-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/securing-student-success-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/).

<sup>3</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/securing-student-success-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/securing-student-success-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/).

6. In accordance with the OfS’s regulatory framework and the guidance on how to apply for DAPs,<sup>4</sup> the school is eligible to be considered for Full DAPs for all taught awards (up to and including Level 7) because it has been delivering higher education for more than three years at this level and meets the eligibility criteria set out in paragraph 249 of the OfS’s regulatory framework.
7. The OfS appointed an assessment team on 12 October 2023 that consisted of three academic expert assessors and a member of OfS staff in the following roles:
  - a. Professor Michael Rofe – committee chair and lead assessor
  - b. Dr Barbara Brownie – deputy committee chair and assessor
  - c. Dr Ivan Garcia Alvarez - deputy committee chair and assessor
  - d. Mr Adam Shea – committee member and assessment coordinator.
8. The team was asked to give its advice and judgements about the quality of, and standards applied to, higher education courses at the school and whether the school meets the DAPs criteria, including the overarching criteria for a Full DAPs authorisation.
9. The assessment team considered a range of information submitted by the school in support of its application for Full DAPs for all taught awards.
10. Table 1 summarises the assessment team’s findings regarding whether the school meets the DAPs criteria.

**Table 1: summary of findings against the DAPs criteria**

<b>Underpinning DAPs criteria</b>	
Criterion A: Academic governance	Met
Criterion B1: Regulatory frameworks	Met
Criterion B2: Academic standards	Met
Criterion B3: Quality of the academic experience	Met
Criterion C: Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of staff	Met
Criterion D: Environment for supporting students	Met

<sup>4</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-12-how-to-apply-for-degree-awarding-powers/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-12-how-to-apply-for-degree-awarding-powers/).

Criterion E: Evaluation of performance	Met
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Overarching Full DAPs criterion	
The provider is a self-critical, cohesive academic community with a proven commitment to the assurance of standards supported by effective quality systems	Met

11. This report does not represent any decision of the OfS in respect of whether the Full DAPs order the school is seeking should be granted.
12. This report will be considered by the OfS's Quality Assessment Committee (QAC) at its meeting of 28 June 2024. QAC has responsibility for providing advice to the OfS under section 46 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) on the quality of, and standards applied to, the higher education being provided by providers for which the OfS is considering granting, varying, or (in certain circumstances) revoking, authorisation for degree awarding powers. QAC will formulate its advice to the OfS regarding quality and standards at The Northern School of Art, having considered this report.
13. The OfS will consider this assessment report, and QAC's advice in deciding whether to grant the school's Full DAPs order on the basis requested. The OfS will also consider its own risk assessment for the provider and have regard to advice received from others where this has been sought, as well as other relevant considerations such as the OfS's general duties under section 2 of HERA.

## Introduction and background

14. The Northern School of Art is a specialist art and design further education college situated in the Tees Valley, with a history of providing specialist art and design education in the region since 1870. The school, formerly the Cleveland College of Art and Design, was formed in 1979 through the merger of the Teesside College of Art and The Hartlepool College of Art. The school was renamed The Northern School of Art in September 2018, highlighting the school's traditional 'art school' ethos and creative culture and its place in the local and regional community.
15. The school operates its provision for further education and higher education separately at two campuses in the Tees Valley region. All further education provision was centralised at the Middlesbrough campus in 2012, following an estates reorganisation. This process culminated in 2021 with the opening of a new further education campus in central Middlesbrough and further developments of the school's main higher education campus in Hartlepool. Hartlepool is now the location for all the school's higher education delivery.
16. The school offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses in design, and creative and performing arts. These are delivered under a validation agreement that has existed since 2012 with AUB.
17. Through the partnership arrangement, AUB has supported the school's organisational development while acknowledging its goal of obtaining Full DAPs for all taught awards. During this arrangement, AUB has supported the progressive devolution of responsibility for the operation of quality management processes to the school while retaining overall responsibility for all awards. This support has included regular communication between senior staff with school staff attending relevant AUB committees as well as advice and guidance from AUB to the school. The has provided the opportunity for staff at the school to undertake formal roles within quality assurance processes.
18. In the 2023 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the school was awarded Silver for student outcomes and Gold for student experience, giving an overall TEF rating of Gold. This means that, typically, the experience students have at the school and the outcomes it leads to are outstanding.
19. For the 2021-2022 academic year, based on headcount data provided by the OfS, the school had a student population of 546 higher education students. Of these, 539 were undergraduate students and seven were postgraduate students. Current student numbers are slightly higher.
20. The school currently employs 21 full-time teaching staff, 26 part-time teaching staff and 57 support, administrative and site staff.
21. On 27 May 2022, the school applied for Full Bachelor's DAPs, up to and including Level 6 awards for all subjects. In accordance with the OfS regulatory framework and the OfS's guidance on how to apply for DAPs, the OfS undertook an initial eligibility and suitability assessment of the provider. It decided that a Full DAPs assessment should be undertaken in order to gather and test evidence to inform a judgement about whether the school meets the DAPs criteria and has the ability to:

- provide, and maintain the provision of, higher education of an appropriate quality
  - apply, and maintain the application of, appropriate standards to that higher education.
22. The DAPs application was originally referred to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in its role as the Designated Quality Body (DQB) on 15 September 2022.
  23. The QAA undertook an initial Full DAPs assessment and shared a summary of its findings with the OfS on 9 December 2022. The initial assessment tests whether the provider has a sufficient level of preparedness, as demonstrated by its self-assessment, to proceed to the full scrutiny (the main element of the Full DAPs assessment). The QAA recommended that the provider was ready to proceed. The QAA's designation as the DQB was removed, effective from 31 March 2023.
  24. On 14 June 2023, the provider requested via email that the OfS treat its application as an application for Taught DAPs rather than the Bachelor DAPs for which it initially applied. This is because when the provider initially applied for Bachelor DAPs, it did not have a three-year track record of provision at Level 7, which it needed to be eligible to apply for Taught DAPs, having started its Level 7 provision in 2020. During the assessment period, the provider gained the required track record to enable it to apply for Taught DAPs (as of September 2023).
  25. The OfS took the view that this change of application should be allowed on the basis that it now met the eligibility criteria for a Taught DAPs application. As such, the OfS did not require the school to make a new application.
  26. The OfS appointed an assessment team on 12 October 2023 that consisted of three academic expert assessors and a member of OfS staff. The team was asked to give its advice and judgements about the quality of, and standards applied to, higher education courses at the school and whether the college meets the DAPs criteria, including the overarching criteria for a Full DAPs authorisation.
  27. On 17 October 2023, the OfS informed the provider of its intention to continue the Full DAPs assessment.
  28. The assessment team considered a range of information submitted by the provider in support of its application for Full DAPs authorisation.



# Assessment process

## Information gathering

29. As part of its original application, the school submitted a self-assessment document to the QAA, setting out how it considered it met the DAPs criterion for the Full Bachelor DAPs authorisation it originally applied for.
30. To support the statements made in the self-assessment document, the school also submitted a range of documentary evidence, including course documentation, information related to academic policies and processes, and governance information to the DQB. After the de-designation of the DQB, the QAA shared this evidence with the OfS during a transitional period. The OfS then re-started the assessment once it had assumed responsibility for quality assessment functions.
31. On 17 October 2023, the OfS informed the provider of its intention to re-start the assessment and held a meeting on 24 October 2023 with senior staff at the provider to outline the assessment process.
32. Due to a change in its application, the school submitted further evidence on 27 October 2023 with some updates to the original evidence that had been initially submitted to the DQB. This also included an additional set of evidence in support of the Taught DAPs element of the application. This evidence was subsequently shared with the assessment team on 1 November 2023.
33. The assessment team undertook a two-day, on-site visit at the campus in Hartlepool on 5 and 6 December 2023. During the visit, the assessment team toured the facilities relating to students' academic, personal and professional development, and met with various members of senior and teaching staff, a selection of students, and members of the school's governance team. Staff at the provider also delivered presentations to the assessment team about the school's strategy and their approach to new course development and approval.
34. Following the team's assessment of the school's initial evidence submission, the assessment team requested further evidence from the school, which was submitted on 14 December 2023.
35. Additional online meetings took place with various staff and governors at the school on 4 January 2024. This included meetings about digital and professional services at the school and a meeting with selected governors.
36. After further assessment of the evidence it had gathered, the assessment team requested some additional evidence between 19 January 2024 and 11 March 2024.
37. The assessment team remotely observed the Academic Board meeting on 14 February 2024, the Academic Committee meeting on 16 February 2024 and the Corporation Board meeting on 15 March 2024. In each case, papers for discussion were shared with the assessment team in advance of each meeting. Further discussion of the function of these boards and committee can be found in criterion A.

38. A second two-day, on-site visit to the Hartlepool campus took place on 7 and 8 March 2024. The main focus of this visit was to observe teaching and learning at the school and further understand the school's strategy, should it be awarded DAPs, and its subsequent transition away from its current validation arrangements with AUB.
39. A draft version of the report was shared with the provider on 17 May 2024 for its consideration of any factual inaccuracies as per the guidance set out in the operational guidance for providers on DAPs assessments. This was returned to the OfS on 29 May 2024 with the final version of the report being completed on 11 June 2024.

# Assessment of DAPs Criterion A: Academic governance

## Criterion A1: Academic governance

### Advice to the OfS

40. The assessment team's view is that the school meets Criterion A1: Academic governance because it meets sub-criteria A1.1, A1.2, and A1.3.
41. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows, in summary, that the school has sound academic governance and management structures that deliver effective academic governance, with clear and appropriate lines of accountability. It engages students as partners in the academic governance and management of academic standards and quality. In its approach to working with other partner organisations to deliver learning opportunities, it ensures robust and effective management of such opportunities, and an approach to partner selection that is strategic rather than opportunistic.
42. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside other relevant information.

**A1.1: An organisation granted degree awarding powers has effective academic governance, with clear and appropriate lines of accountability for its academic responsibilities.**

### Advice to the OfS

43. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion A1.1 because it has effective academic governance with clear and appropriate lines of accountability for its academic responsibilities.
44. The assessments team's view is based on its review of evidence that shows that the school has met the evidence requirements for A1.1 and any other relevant evidence requirements.

### Reasoning

45. In order to test the extent to which the school's higher education mission and strategic direction are coherent, published, understood and applied consistently, the assessment team considered the school's strategy, its sub-strategies, and how these are used to govern the school.
46. The school has a single overarching strategy, which is made publicly available on its website, both in full<sup>5</sup> and in an abbreviated form.<sup>6</sup>
47. The strategy, which runs from 2019 to 2024, is built around a vision statement that sets four strategic goals, to be achieved by 2024: '(1) attaining Degree Awarding Powers and becoming an HEI; (2) growth that outpaces demographic growth; (3) a new FE campus; and

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://northernart.ac.uk/corporation-board-reports/>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://northernart.ac.uk/governance/>.

(4) establishing the school as a leader in creative practice in the North and beyond'. This vision statement is in turn underpinned by six target outcomes, three organisational values, and five organisational behaviours.

48. In support of the organisational strategy, the school has two sub-strategies. The Academic Strategy, 2021-24, defines the core academic character of the organisation as follows:

'We are a specialist Art School, and as such we will provide an academic experience at all levels of the school that will ready and prepare our students to excel in the creative industry and society'.

49. It also sets out a vision in which artistry and technical development are underpinned both by (a) broader cognitive thinking, problem solving and ideation skills and (b) broader student development through the establishment of personal journeys, aspirations and purpose. The school also has a separate marketing strategy for 2021-24.
50. Having analysed the strategy and its sub-strategies, the assessment team found that the three documents demonstrate a high degree of coherence and consistency. For example, the academic strategy sets out 12 academic objectives that map directly to the corporate goals and outcomes. Likewise, the marketing strategy maps closely to the corporate strategy. For example, the brand value proposition and consequent voice and messaging analysis articulates the corporate values and behaviours, and the detailed messaging hierarchy for higher education draws on the language of both the corporate strategic outcomes, and the academic strategic objectives.
51. The assessment team noted the absence of a nested objective and sub-objective numbering system to link sub-strategies to the overarching corporate strategy, making the type of mappings described above somewhat opaque, but the mappings clearly exist, with no extraneous objectives within sub-strategies.
52. The assessment team found that the corporate strategy and its sub-strategies are used extensively and consistently for multiple purposes within the organisation's governance, and that, in the view of the team, this constitutes a great strength of the school. Examples of organisational strategy driving other operational processes can be seen clearly throughout the evidence. For instance, the school's annual operating plans contain submissions from the Academic Support Department and the Student Services department, both of which map departmental work programmes directly to one or several of the six outcome statements from the overarching corporate strategy. The operating plans also set out annual objectives for scholarly activity and research, which map to several objectives in the academic strategy. The marketing operating plans and associated objectives likewise map to the main corporate strategy, as do annual programme reviews, staff target-setting, the annual staff performance review.
53. The assessment team found that it is not a requirement in all of these planning documents for staff teams to report on progress against **all** academic and corporate strategic objectives, which leaves some gaps within planning and reviews on the extent to which staff are supporting the organisation to move forwards in line with its strategy. However, overall, the strategy is clearly being used as a lens to organise and drive activity, and to self-critique (see criterion E).

54. In summary, the assessment team came to the judgement that although the ways in which the strategy is used could be more systematic (through, for example clearly nested objectives, and requiring staff to report against all relevant objectives in their annual reviews and operating plans), the evidence overwhelmingly shows that the strategy, and its sub-strategies, clearly underpin and control organisational activity in a coherent and consistent way. The mission and strategic direction of the school is published, and, because of the extensiveness and consistency with which the strategy is used to govern and report on operational processes, it is clear to the assessment team that the strategy is well understood by staff.
55. In order to test the extent to which the school's policies are coherent, published, understood and applied consistently, and the extent to which its policies support its higher education mission, aims and objectives, the assessment team considered the school's policies and how these are used to govern the school.
56. Since 2012, the school has worked within a validation partnership with AUB. This relationship is governed by an annual memorandum of understanding (MOU). As would be expected from such a relationship, the MOU establishes that:
- 'All courses which lead to an award of AUB are subject to the arrangements for the assurance of standards and quality as described in AUB's Quality Assurance Handbook', and that 'Ultimate responsibility for all students registered on programmes leading to awards of the AUB rests with AUB's Academic Board'.
57. As such, the school's provision is based on AUB's Higher Education Quality Assurance Handbook and Regulatory Framework.
58. In support of these AUB policies, the school has a large body of its own policies and procedures. Key documents include the school's HE Policies and Procedures Handbook, its Health and Safety Policy and Procedures, its HR Policies and Procedures, its IT Policies and Procedures, its Student Services Policies and Procedures, and its Equality and Diversity Policy. Each of these documents contains a large array of sub-policies: for example, the HE Policies and Procedures Handbook contains 26 sub-policies covering issues such as admissions, course review, appeals and ethics, as well as extensive appendices that include a range of additional guidance and blank forms for staff and student use.
59. All of these policies are publicly available on the school's website,<sup>7</sup> and additionally available to staff and students on the virtual learning environment.
60. The assessment team's view is that the school has a comprehensive and coherent body of policies and procedures, covering all aspects of governance that would be expected of a provider of higher education, thus demonstrating an effective framework for good academic governance. The team viewed the nesting of sub-policies and procedures into larger policy documents to be a particularly coherent way of organising its large body of policies.

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://northernart.ac.uk/about-northern-school-of-art/our-policies-procedures2/>.<https://northernart.ac.uk/about-northern-school-of-art/our-policies-procedures2/>

61. The team reviewed the last two years of papers and minutes from all major governance committees within the school. The team also considered examples of the practical implementation of policies – for example, it reviewed:
- the last two years exam-board papers
  - the last two years of student complaints
  - the last two years of academic dishonesty instances
  - one recent periodic review
  - an example of how accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL)<sup>8</sup> and Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL)<sup>9</sup> is handled in the admissions process (more details of these and other examples are given in criterion B3).
62. Taken together, the team considered that this evidence demonstrated that policies and procedures had been applied consistently, and thereby appeared to be well understood by staff. Discussions with staff and students revealed that students are clear about how to find key policies when they are required, with key issues being discussed with students during induction. This consistent application of policies further reinforced the assessment team's view of the school having good academic governance.
63. Moreover, the team noted that, as described in paragraph 58, the majority of the school's policies are owned and operated by the school (as opposed to its validating partner, AUB), demonstrating a mature approach in that the school is not reliant on AUB for its ability to write and operate policy.
64. The assessment team also noted various ways in which the school's policies supported its strategy.
65. For example, a core part of the school's academic strategy is engaging with the professional creative industries. As such, the Annual Programme Review Procedure requires courses to demonstrate how they remain 'responsive to the external environment'. This is, in turn, achieved through the Industry Liaison Groups, in which intelligence is gathered from a range of employers, and fed into the Annual Programme Review documentation. Likewise, the work experience policy aligns with the school's academic strategic objective to 'ready and prepare our students to excel in the creative industry' insofar as it enables students to gain real-world experience of their discipline as part of their studies.
66. As such, the assessment team saw strong evidence of the way in which the particular requirements of the school's academic strategy were supported by its policies, further demonstrating effective academic governance.
67. Further examples were observed by the team at a more operational level. For example, the Health and Safety Handbook contains sections on hazardous substances – of importance

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<sup>8</sup> APEL is a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds and attitudes to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they already possess.

<sup>9</sup> APCL involves the recognition of prior learning at higher education level that has been formally assessed and certificated.

given the use of chemical dyes within various courses. Conversation with technicians at the school demonstrated the seriousness with which staff take health and safety issues, such as working with chemicals or machinery. All students must be inducted in the use of any dangerous equipment, and staff must keep a detailed log when students have undertaken such training.

68. In summary, the assessment team concluded that the school's higher education policies are coherent, published, understood and applied consistently, and that school's academic policies support its higher education mission, aims and objectives.
69. In order to test the extent to which there is clarity and differentiation of function and responsibility at all levels in the organisation in relation to its academic governance structures and arrangements for managing its higher education provision, and the extent to which the function and responsibility of the senior academic authority is clearly articulated and consistently applied, the assessment team reviewed the school's deliberative and management structures, considered terms of reference, analysed papers and minutes from the last two years of all major governance committees (see paragraph 77), and observed three instances of committee meetings.
70. The key governing document of the school is its Instrument and Articles of Government. This sets out the characteristics of the Corporation Board – the key governing body – including: membership; appointment to the board; the role of the chair, principal and clerk; declaration of interest; the frequency and quorate nature of meetings of the board; and the production and publication of minutes. The Instrument and Articles of Government also make clear the responsibilities held by members of the Corporation Board (i.e. Governors) versus responsibilities devolved to the principal (and by extension to the broader executive). For example, the principal is responsible for 'preparing annual estimates of income and expenditure for consideration and approval by the Corporation' and the Corporation is responsible for 'approving annual estimates of income and expenditure'.
71. The school's Instrument and Articles of Government include the establishment of a number of subcommittees of the Corporation Board; these in turn have a number of sub-subcommittees, as set out in the overall deliberative committee structure.
72. Of the subcommittees of the Corporation Board, the most important with respect to academic governance is the Academic Board, which constitutes the senior academic authority within the organisation. The Instrument and Articles of Government describe the role of the Academic Board as being to advise the corporation on:  
  
'(a.) general issues relating to the research, scholarship, teaching and programmes of study at The Northern School of Art, including criteria for the admission of students; the appointment and removal of internal and external examiners; policies and procedures for assessment and examination of the academic performance of students; the content of the curriculum; academic standard and the validation and review of programmes; the procedures for the award of qualifications and academic titles; and the procedures for the expulsion of students for academic reasons. Such responsibilities shall, where relevant, be subject to the requirements of validating and accrediting bodies; (b.) considering the development of the academic activities of The Northern School of Art and the resources needed to support them

and for advising the principal and the Corporation thereon; and (c.) advising on such matters as the Corporation or the principal may refer to the Academic Board’.

73. In line with its terms of reference, and as shown in the deliberative structure, two subcommittees report to the Academic Board:
  - a. The Learning Teaching and Quality Committee, whose primary objective is: ‘To oversee on behalf of Academic Board all matters relating to learning, teaching and assessment activity associated with all taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, including quality assurance’.
  - b. The Curriculum Development Group, whose roles include ‘the active review of the school’s curriculum offers in accordance with its academic strategy’; overseeing ‘the development of new provision’; and making ‘recommendations regarding the continuation or amendment of the existing curriculum offer’.
74. In parallel to the Academic Board and its subcommittees is the school’s executive arm, with the Principalship as the highest authority within this vertical. As set out in the terms of reference, the Principalship has the following strategic and operational objectives:

‘To monitor the School’s environment to ensure the continuing relevance of the School’s Strategic Objectives; to ensure that the School operational plans are aligned with the school’s strategic plan; to ensure that School Managers continue to implement the school’s operational plans and therefore to implement the school’s strategic plan; to act as the School’s main risk management group, ensuring that the School’s risk register is updated on a timely basis and shared with the Corporation and members of the EPT as appropriate; to ensure that the School’s system of internal committees operates efficiently and effectively and remains fit for purpose’.
75. The Principalship has a number of subcommittees that constitute extensions of its executive responsibilities. Among others, these include the Safeguarding Committee, the Equality and Diversity Committee, and the Health and Safety Committee.
76. The assessment team reviewed the terms of reference for all governance bodies within the deliberative structure and found these to be consistent with the principles set out in the Instrument and Articles of Government.
77. The team reviewed two years of papers and minutes of the Corporation Board, Academic Board, the Learning Teaching and Quality Committee, and the Curriculum Development Group, and also observed the most recent meetings of the Corporation Board and Academic Board. From this evidence, the assessment team determined that organisational governance is clearly taking place in line with the terms of reference of the various bodies within the school – for example, in line with its terms of reference, the assessment team observed the members of the Academic Board debating and deciding on a particular policy change; the outcome of this debate was then reported to the Corporation Board.
78. Both in their terms of reference themselves, and in the practical manifestation of those terms through the papers and minutes of meetings, the assessment team observed a very clear differentiation of function between the various governance bodies within the school.



79. For example, there is a clear distinction between the Academic Board and its subcommittees – which oversee academic matters – and the Principalship and its subcommittees – which oversee strategic and operational matters. Both bodies are responsible to the Corporation Board. By having the principal as the chair of both the Academic Board and the Principalship, and by having various other members in common between these two forums, the assessment team observed how the school ensures that these two parallel bodies do not diverge in terms of objectives or strategy; rather, they provide two lenses on common issues. An example of this bifocal approach can be seen in the school’s course validation process, which, by way of approval to proceed, involves the Academic Board approving the project from an academic perspective, and the Principalship approving the project as regards business case (finances, resources, strategic alignment).
80. The assessment team likewise saw similar clarity and differentiation of function and responsibility at lower levels within the governance structure. For example, as described above, the Learning Teaching and Quality Committee is focused, broadly, on school-wide ‘business-as-usual’ and continual-improvement activity, while the Curriculum Development Group focuses on specific issues of curriculum evaluation and change. In both cases, the Academic Board functions as the senior, decision-making authority.
81. In general, and in the experience of the assessment team, the team found that the governance structure of the school largely reflects good standard practice within the sector. However, one unusual feature in the school’s governance is the inclusion of a second subcommittee of the Corporation Board dedicated to academic matters (the Academic Committee). As shown in the deliberative structure, the Academic Committee sits in parallel with the Academic Board, and indeed there is a dotted line report from Academic Board to Academic Committee.
82. The existence of an Academic Committee has the potential to undermine the Academic Board as the senior academic authority within the organisation, due to the potential for confusion between the roles and responsibilities of these bodies. However, the terms of reference for the Academic Committee are clear that its role is to ‘provide governance oversight, in matters relating to academic standards and quality, and student experience, relating to the school’s further and higher education provision’.
83. The Academic Committee consists largely of a subset of governors (i.e. members of Corporation Board) who come from an academic background. Discussion with members of the Academic Committee and Principalship revealed that the Academic Committee in practice performs several functions. First, is its formal function, as determined by the terms of reference. To this extent, it is not acting as the senior academic authority, but providing a layer of governance oversight to ensure that Academic Board is fulfilling its obligations. Second, it acts as an opportunity for a more expansive discussion on academic issues than might otherwise take place under greater time constraints in the Corporation Board – to give those governors from an academic background more opportunity to discuss academic issues. It thereby acts equivalently to the way in which the Audit Committee analyses risk prior to the full Corporation Board’s review. Third and finally, members of the Academic Committee report that it acts more informally as a forum for members of the Principalship to discuss ideas with those governors who come from an academic background. The assessment team reviewed two years of minutes from the Academic Committee (contained in the combined papers of the Corporation Board) and observed the most recent meeting of the Academic Committee.

These papers and observations reveal that the Academic Committee in practice performs all three of the above-stated roles, despite the terms of reference pointing explicitly only to the first of these (though a liberal reading of the concept of 'governance oversight' might be argued to include the second and third components). As such, there is some lack of precision in the terms of reference of Academic Committee, leading to a slight inconsistency between the terms of reference, and the actual practice of what takes place in this forum.

84. The assessment team found that the school is aware of the potential risk that the Academic Committee might undermine the Academic Board, the latter clearly intended to be – and indeed clearly functioning as – the senior academic authority within the organisation. For example, AUB's 2017 Institutional Review of the school found that 'It was likely that the academic focus of the institution would be strengthened in future by the collapse of HE Academic Committee into Academic Board with a larger number of Academic Board meetings'.
85. More recently, the September 2022 Academic Board had an agenda item explicitly considering the terms of reference of the Academic Committee, noting that 'there is scope for confusion regarding the respective roles of Academic Board and the Academic Committee'. This resulted in a number of changes to various terms of reference.
86. Having discussed the above-stated risks with both governors and senior management at the school, it is the view of the assessment team that the risk of confusion is not in practice manifest. Conversations with members of staff who sit on the Academic Board show that they do not expect the Academic Committee to 'approve' their decisions. Conversations with governors who sit on Academic Committee also show that they have never either 'approved' or 'rejected' outcomes of Academic Board. Minutes from the last two years of the Academic Committee confirm this to be the case.
87. The terms of reference of Academic Committee would, in the opinion of the assessment team, benefit from being expanded to name explicitly the three functions that the committee in reality performs, in order to ensure clarity and differentiation of function with respect to Academic Board. However, the assessment team is confident that the presence of an Academic Committee does not create any confusion within the organisational governance, or amongst the school's staff and governors. As the school matures, it may find in the future that the Academic Committee becomes unnecessary. However, for now, the body is clearly valued by the school's staff and governors, as an additional forum for the oversight of academic matters.
88. Overall, the deliberative structure of the school is extremely robust, with clear terms of reference, and clear differentiation of function between all governance bodies. In fact, such is the extensiveness of the governance landscape at the school, that an argument could be made that the deliberative structure involves too many distinct bodies, leading to the risk of ineffectiveness – there are, at present, approximately only 600 students within the school's higher education provision.
89. The risks associated with this expansiveness are (a) that staff are spending a disproportionately high amount of time servicing governance; and (b) that, because the organisation is relatively small, the same members of staff appear in multiple governance

forums, resulting in a group-think that is, in theory, the opposite of what such a robust structure seeks to deliver.

90. Again, the assessment team found that this is a risk that the senior team is aware of, and that has been raised in previous organisational reviews. In discussion, members of the Principalship and governors stated that they would rather carry – and mitigate for – the above two risks than have the inverse scenario of having too light a governance structure. Specific mitigations that have been put in place include a redistribution of staff between committees, the integration of a number of smaller bodies into one, and the downgrading of several formal committees to working groups. Staff report that these mitigations have had a positive impact with respect to the two above-stated risks.
91. As such, the assessment team see the above-stated risks as being under good control and believes the structures that are in place will serve the school well as the organisation grows, or if it chooses to diversify its current provision.
92. Finally of note, an independent review of governance that took place in November 2019 stated that:

‘The overwhelming conclusion of this exercise is that The Northern School of Art complies with the provisions of the Committee of University Chairs Higher Education Code of Governance. Additionally, I similarly confirm compliance with the Association of Colleges Code of Good Governance for English Colleges’.
93. The findings of this report correlate with the findings of the assessment team.
94. In summary, the assessment team observed that the terms of reference of the Academic Committee were slightly narrower than the actual practice. It concluded, however, that the organisation's overall governance structures and arrangements for managing its higher education provision are clear and differentiate function and responsibility at all levels. It also clearly articulates and consistently applies the function and responsibility of senior academic authority.
95. In order to test the extent to which there is appropriate depth and strength of academic leadership, the assessment team reviewed governor and staff CVs, and spoke with a range of governors and staff.
96. The assessment team found that the Corporation Board currently consists of an extremely experienced group of governors. From an academic perspective, governors include two former pro vice-chancellors, several members with professorships and doctorates, and many with a background in the arts. From a corporate leadership perspective, governors include several CEOs and business owners, and several members from a finance and/or legal background. There is also a mix of locally and nationally based governors, enabling a balance between regional expertise and connections, and sector-wide perspectives.
97. All governors sit on a number of subcommittees, with governors logically distributed according to their areas of expertise. For example, governors from an academic background sit on, and indeed chair, the Academic Committee. Likewise, the governor who sits on the Academic Board is a former pro vice-chancellor, and professor emerita in the arts.

98. The assessment team also found that appropriate strength and depth of academic leadership is likewise evident within the organisation's leadership team.
99. The Principalship constitutes the main executive group, and consists of the principal plus six vice-principals, respectively for:
- resources
  - employability and external relations
  - higher education
  - strategic projects
  - people services
  - further education.
100. Within the Principalship, the assessment team found that there is a broad and appropriate range of high-level skills and experiences. Various members of the team already hold, or are working towards, a PhD, MBA, DBA, PFHEA, and PGCE. Several are members of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, and one is a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development.
101. As a teaching-intensive organisation – and one that has grown out of its further education provision – the school's staff in general have less-developed profiles in terms of scholarly activity and research than is often the case, in the experience of the assessment team, at larger, research-intensive organisations. This was established by reviewing CVs of all senior management, academic staff and professional services and technical staff who support student learning, who are (a) permanent employees and (b) at 0.5 FTE or higher.
102. This is an issue that the assessment team found to be well-known to the school leadership. For example, AUB's 2022 Institutional Review notes that scholarly activity and research is:
- 'the main area where there appeared to be less clarity and confidence. From the discussions, the [AUB] panel was not convinced that staff members had sufficient clarity about the terminology, and they were unable to give a clear explanation of how practice could be framed as research... The panel recommended having a specific committee dealing with research and knowledge exchange. The panel understood that currently it came under the Academic Strategy Implementation Committee and support of any projects came within the general staff development budget. By creating separate systems for research and knowledge exchange it would give greater clarity across the institution which would support the development of a research culture, which in turn would help attract and retain staff'.
103. The assessment team found that much is being done to develop staff expertise in this area, including the development of a new scholarly activity and research strategy, which, among other initiatives, establishes a new Research Committee, in line with the recommendation of the above review. Moreover, a number of senior staff either have been, or are currently being, supported to undertake DBAs, PhDs and FHEAs in order to develop the depth of academic expertise around the organisation.

104. The assessment team saw relatively limited examples of scholarly activity and research among staff – or a developed understanding of practice as research. There is clear evidence of extensive expertise in professional practice and industry experience in the profiles of lecturing staff, which constitute the key features of the school's pedagogic approach. Combined with the active steps being taken by the leadership team to support staff both in the acquisition of FHEAs and doctorates, and in the development of their research, the team concluded that the knowledge and skills of the staff team are sufficient to meet the objectives of the academic strategy.
105. In summary, the assessment team concluded that there is appropriate strength and depth of academic leadership within the school.
106. In order to test the extent to which the school develops, implements and communicates its policies and procedures in collaboration with its staff, students and external stakeholders, the assessment team reviewed papers and minutes from the last two years of the Corporation Board and the Academic Board, observed the last two meetings of these boards, and spoke with staff and students.
107. As a relatively small organisation, the school has an extremely strong sense of community, with staff and students clearly aware of, and actively involved in, all aspects of governance. This involvement can be seen formally through the inclusion of staff and student representatives on all major governance committees. As an example, the school is currently drafting a new set of academic regulations and a new quality handbook for use in the event of a successful DAPs application. Staff report active engagement in this process, and the assessment team's observation of the most recent Academic Board corroborated this involvement. In the meeting, these two new documents were reviewed in draft, and multiple staff members made recommendations for changes. This led to the Academic Board decision that the policies were not yet approved and required a further round of drafting to consider and incorporate feedback given.
108. In general, this type of challenge can be seen throughout the minutes of board meetings reviewed by the assessment team, and its observations of meetings. Governors, senior management, staff and students alike can all be seen regularly challenging proposals and papers, resulting in new actions. For example, the minutes of the September 2021 Academic Board contain an example of the board debating sign off of a new animation course. Minutes show the emergence of some concerns around existing academic expertise, and subsequently, the decision to approve was deferred pending further work by the programme development team.
109. As will be described in more detail with respect to criterion A1.2, the involvement of students in all aspects of governance is particularly strong within the school. As will be described in more detail with respect to criterion E, engagement with external stakeholders – and in particular with AUB as the validating body – is also in strong evidence.
110. In regards to the implementation and communication of policy, it is a notable feature of the Academic Board that all meetings end with a common set of agenda items. These ask members to consider (in addition to whether any health and safety, safeguarding or equality, diversity and inclusion issues have emerged) if anything discussed in the meeting requires

communication to staff and/or to students. This ensures good communication channels as new policy is adopted and implemented.

111. In summary, the assessment team concluded that the school develops, implements and communicates its policies and procedures in collaboration with its staff, students and external stakeholders.
112. In order to test the extent to which the school will manage successfully the responsibilities that would be vested in it were it to be granted DAPs, the assessment team triangulated evidence of existing practice with the school's intended strategic and operating plans in the event of a successful DAPs application.
113. The most recent MOU between the school and its validating partner, AUB, sets out AUB's opinion that:

'...the school is a well-established provider of higher education, with a sound track record of delivering high quality courses. AUB has been the validating partner since 2012 and has considerable evidence that the school has a comprehensive understanding of quality management expectations in higher education. This has been demonstrated consistently through student data; the annual report on higher education awards; and institutional reviews, the most recent of which took place in May 2022'.

As such, 'AUB therefore accords the school accredited status for its undergraduate awards, with the right to design and operate quality management systems and processes to assure the standards of awards delivered, and to monitor and enhance the quality of student learning opportunities, under the oversight of AUB'.
114. The assessment team has observed that significant authority is already devolved to the school within the partnership. The MOU details various examples, including new course development, enhancement of the student experience, and the development of its own policies.
115. As such, the school already commands significant respect from, and is consequently afforded significant latitude by, its validating partner. The assessment team considers this to be good evidence of the maturity of the school.
116. As described above, the school's current strategy runs from 2019 to 2024. As such, it is currently developing its next strategy, which will take the organisation to 2027. Although still in development at the time of this assessment, the draft strategy is underpinned by the concept of 'evolution not revolution', with the key strategic aim of readying the organisation for its intended application for university title in 2027. To deliver this ambition, the draft strategy outlines a number of focus areas, including the development of its access and participation plans and the development of its scholarly activity and research. A focus on enhancing scholarly activity and research also features in the draft 2024-27 academic strategy. The new strategy, and its academic sub-strategy, is planned to go for final approval by the Corporation Board on 1 July 2024.
117. In further preparation for DAPs, the school is currently undertaking a major programme of work to develop its own academic regulations and quality handbook. This aims to:

- upgrade its student records systems
- revalidate courses
- make numerous smaller changes to terms of reference, policies, procedures and job descriptions
- put in place transition arrangements.

118. All of this will enable self-sufficiency when the validation agreement with AUB terminates.

119. In the event of a successful outcome in its application for DAPs, the school intends to adopt a phased transition, with current students being taught out on their current AUB-validated programmes, but with new students entering from September 2025 being registered on the school's programmes. As such, the school has taken the decision to base its own regulations and quality handbook largely on AUB's existing documents, in order to avoid confusion during the overlap period, which the assessment team considers a sensible approach. AUB has agreed to the school using their regulations and quality processes indefinitely in order to facilitate this transition; these adapted documents are currently in draft form, and are working their way through the deliberative structure at the time of the DAPs assessment.

120. In regards to student records systems, a new module has been procured that will enable functionality that is currently provided by AUB – a portal for students to access their marks, and the ability to produce exam-board reports and final transcripts.

121. The school has an annual policy review event, and annually reviews the terms of reference for its various committees. Post-AUB changes are intended to be considered at these events in summer 2024, leaving time for implementation by September 2025 should the school be awarded DAPs.

122. Additionally, the senior team confirmed plans to provide additional continuing professional development (CPD) across the organisation in the near future. This will ensure the organisation has the requisite support and skills to run its own quality systems on an ongoing basis. More generally, it will support the cultural transition that will take place as the school moves towards its target of achieving university title.

123. In summary, the assessment team concluded that the school will manage successfully the responsibilities that would be vested in it were it to be granted DAPs. It reached this conclusion because the school:

- a. has an existing approach to academic governance that is robust
- b. has robust plans – in many cases near completion – to ready the organisation for operation post-AUB
- c. has planned CPD for staff.

**A1.2: Academic governance, including all aspects of the control and oversight of its higher education provision, is conducted in partnership with its students.**

## Advice to the OfS

124. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion A1.2 because all aspects of its control and oversight of its higher education provision is conducted in partnership with its students.
125. The assessments team's view is based on its review of evidence. This shows that the school meets the evidence requirements for A1.2 and other relevant evidence requirements.

## Reasoning

126. In order to test the extent to which students are individually and collectively engaged in the governance and management of the organisation and its higher education provision, and the extent to which students are supported to be able to engage effectively, the assessment team reviewed policies associated with how the student voice is captured and used as part of organisational governance. The assessment team also met with students to discuss their involvement in governance, and observed several committee meetings in which students were present.
127. The ambition to involve students as partners in all aspects of the control and oversight of the school's higher education provision is a key principle that is embedded within the Instrument and Articles of Corporation, which requires 'obtaining the views of staff and students on the determination and periodic review of the educational character and mission of the institution and the oversight of its activities'.
128. The student engagement plan unpacks this further. It sets out six principles:
- '(1) All students should be made aware of opportunities to engage in decision-making processes, such as student representation, elections for Students' Union Officers and membership of validation and periodic-review panels, and have a fair opportunity to participate in these; (2) All Student Representatives, both at programme and committee level, Students' Union Officers and students engaged in validation or periodic review should receive training and support in the role; (3) Students who wish to be involved in national activities as a representative of the school or the school's students' union should be able to do so; and supported and encouraged where there is good reason to believe that their participation will be beneficial to themselves and/or the school; (4) Students should be involved, where relevant, in processes of quality assurance and enhancement, including participation in working groups established to consider specific aspects of the quality management framework; (5) Reviews of processes of programme design, delivery and assessment should secure student views; and should consider how to encourage innovative approaches to design and delivery; and (6) The student voice should be reported at least annually to the Academic Board and Principalship'.
129. In line with these principles, multiple mechanisms and channels exist to enable the student voice to be involved in organisational governance and management.
130. First, all students form part of student assemblies, which are led by student representatives. Student assemblies form the basis for establishing and capturing the collective student voice, and are run at programme level. Student assemblies are led by student representatives, a role elected by students for which training is provided, and for which a standardised approach is adopted across programmes.



131. Outputs from these assemblies are taken up by programme boards, and in turn reported to the Academic Board. Student representatives additionally sit on periodic reviews and validation events. Student committee representatives sit on the Academic Board, and student governors sit on the Corporation Board. As such, students constitute members of all major governance bodies within the organisation, including the Corporation Board.
132. In parallel to this provision is the students' union. The constitution of the school students' union sets out six aims and objectives:
- 'To advance the education of its members and students of the school as a whole; (2) To promote the interests and welfare of students at The Northern School of Art through representation, support and advice; (3) To be the recognised representative channel between the student body and The Northern School of Art and any other relevant external organisations; (4) To provide social, cultural, and recreational activities, and forums for discussions and debate for the personal development of its students; (5) The students' union shall function as an equal opportunities organisation and as far as possible will offer equality of opportunity to all students regardless of age, disability, gender and gender reassignment, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy and maternity, race, socio-economic background, sexual orientation, nationality or religion or belief; and (6) The students' union shall not affiliate to any political party or religious organisation'.
133. As such, the assessment team found that where the student assemblies, and by extension the role of the student representatives and student governors, focuses primarily on organisational and academic governance and management, the students' union offers more holistic student support. This distinction was reinforced in conversation with the current students' union president.
134. However, despite this broad distinction, student representatives and student governors also constitute members of the Students' Union Steering Committee. This creates a connection between the two parallel channels.
135. Where these two channels result in requests from students, the assessment team found that the feedback loop is closed through the school's 'You Said, We Did' initiative, in which the outcomes and actions that result from student feedback are reported back to the student body on a periodic basis.
136. The assessment team spoke with a cross-section of student representatives, student's union role-holders, and student governors. The overwhelming and unequivocal feedback from students was that they felt their voice was heard, listened to, and responded to in a timely fashion, in all aspects of governance.
137. In particular, the assessment team learned from students that meeting chairs within the various committees on which students sit would frequently pause and ask student governors or student representatives for a student perspective. This demonstrates clearly a commitment by the school to ensuring that the student voice is heard effectively during what could in theory be a daunting forum in which to speak out. This constitutes excellent practice in the view of the assessment team.
138. Students spoke extremely highly of the responsiveness of staff to issues of concern, and gave multiple examples of staff solving problems. For example, students recently requested

more support in the area of student mental health. In response, staff have put in place numerous initiatives to support student mental health, including:

- a. a 24/7 helpline
- b. mental health first aiders
- c. self-help guides online
- d. trained student advisers
- e. greater visibility (and normalisation) of student services on both sites
- f. a drop-in surgery
- g. student-led and staff-led campaigns (for example, 'Beat the Blues', and 'Wellbeing Week')
- h. an additional full-time counsellor (though at the time of the assessment, this post was still being recruited).

139. Students spoke extremely enthusiastically more generally about the support they receive from staff at the school, as will be discussed later in this report, and as is reflected in the school's outstanding National Student Survey (NSS) results. Moreover, this excellence is longstanding – AUB's 2017 institutional review likewise found that 'Students indicated their unanimous enthusiasm for the student experience'.

140. In summary, the assessment team concluded that students, individually and collectively, are engaged in the governance and management of the organisation and its higher education provision, and that they are supported so that they can engage effectively.

**A1.3: Where an organisation granted degree awarding powers works with other organisations to deliver learning opportunities, it ensures that its governance and management of such opportunities is robust and effective and that decisions to work with other organisations are the result of a strategic approach rather than opportunism.**

### **Advice to the OfS**

141. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion A1.3 because where the school works with other organisations to deliver learning opportunities, it ensures that its governance and management of such opportunities is robust and effective and that decisions to work with other organisations are the result of a strategic approach rather than opportunism.

142. The assessments team's view is based on its review of evidence. This shows that the school has met the evidence requirements for A1.3 and other relevant evidence requirements.

## Reasoning

143. The assessment team considered the school's existing partnerships and plans for future partnerships. It did this so that it could test how far:
- a. the organisation works with, or proposes to work with, other organisations to deliver learning opportunities
  - b. the arrangements are based on a strategic approach and informed by the effective assessment of risk, including carrying out due diligence
  - c. the extent to which such arrangements are defined in a written legal agreement and are subject to the same robust oversight and governance as the rest of the organisation.
144. The school's primary relationship at present as regards the co-delivery of learning opportunities is with AUB, as its validating partner. With a relationship that dates back to 2012, AUB was selected by the school partly on the basis of its willingness to support the school to achieve DAPs, thus demonstrating a strategic approach to partner selection.
145. As described above, the relationship is underpinned by an MOU and an associated financial arrangement. The school provides AUB with an annual report, and AUB in turn provides an annual response. AUB also periodically undertakes a more fulsome institutional review.
146. Having reviewed multiple institutional reviews and annual responses by AUB, it is clear that there is an extremely productive and mutually respectful relationship between the two organisations. For example, as quoted above, the most recent MOU between the school and AUB states that:
- 'AUB recognises that NSoA is a well-established provider of higher education, with a sound track record of delivering high quality courses. AUB has been the validating partner since 2012 and has considerable evidence that NSoA has a comprehensive understanding of quality management expectations in higher education. This has been demonstrated consistently through student data; the annual report on higher education awards; and institutional reviews, the most recent of which took place in May 2022.'
147. The school also has in place numerous smaller relationships for the co-delivery of learning, primarily through the vehicles of (1) work experience and (2) its Industry Liaison Groups.
148. Work experience is governed by the work experience policy, which forms part of the HE Policies and Procedures Handbook and is based on the strategic premise that 'The success of many vocational art and design programmes is based on high quality relationships between education and business in order to ensure a relevant curriculum and to provide a meaningful learning experience to students' The policy goes on to establish duties and responsibilities of the school, the student and expectations on the work experience provider. Particular significance is placed on the suitability of the work experience provider, assessment of risk, and the mechanism for approving students to undertake work experience. As such, the school has a well-controlled, and strategically meaningful approach to working in partnership with industry in order to co-deliver learning.

149. The school's Industry Liaison Groups act as a forum to gather information on industry trends that may have an impact on the programmes offered by the school. Industry Liaison Groups take the form of a pro-forma, in which industry partners report on trends in the job market, skills needed in the industry, digital advances, and challenges and/or opportunities in the sector. Programme teams then respond with any impacts they foresee on their programme or individual modules within it.
150. Industry Liaison Group outputs also form part of the Annual Programme Review, discussed in more detail with respect to criterion E. Overall, the assessment team concluded that its industry partners, via the Industry Liaison Groups, constitute a strategic approach to ensuring that courses remain current and in line with industry need, thus fulfilling a core characteristic of the school's academic strategy.
151. The school is currently exploring possibilities for introducing specialist PGCEs in the creative industries, which would involve working with a validating partner that can offer qualified teaching status (QTS). Thinking is currently at an early stage, with no fixed plans as yet. However, the assessment team found that the school was pursuing the opportunity due to clear strategic reasons, understanding that a sufficient proportion of its students have expressed interest in moving into teaching post-graduation. In conversation, the school are clearly well informed around what would be needed to deliver in this new subject area – from new staff expertise, to new partnerships with local schools and colleges, new delivery models, and potentially new validation partnerships. Given the positive and productive nature of the school's relationship with AUB, the robustness of its course development processes (to be discussed in criterion B2 and B3), and the understanding already apparent with respect to requirements, the assessment team is confident that the school has the ability to successfully move into this new domain.
152. In conversation, the school's senior management were also keen to explore opportunities to diversify its portfolio outside of CAH25<sup>10</sup> (design, and creative and performing arts) to broader creative industries subjects, such as games, or potentially even to subjects related to creative industries, such as computer science. However, no plans are currently in place, and the senior team confirmed that such diversification would likely not take place during the next three years. Likewise, the school is keen to explore potential validation relationships in the future, with the school as the validating body. Again, though, no specific plans are in place, and the intention is not to enter into any such relationships over the next three years. Having said this, the school's new quality handbook includes a set of principles for managing collaborative provision and validated partnerships, as based on AUB's current policies and procedures.
153. In regards to new subject areas, the assessment team is confident in the school's ability to diversify its portfolio. In regards to new partnerships in which the school is the validating body, there is currently no fulsome infrastructure in place to support such activity, beyond inclusion of AUB's existing policy within the school's newly drafted quality handbook. However, more generally, the organisation has demonstrated an extremely robust approach to risk management, as evidenced through the risk logs and risk-based discussions in its

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<sup>10</sup> The Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) provides a standardised hierarchical grouping of subject codes and terms. See <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/coding-manual-tools/hecoscahdata/cah> for further information.

Audit Committee, and a strong history of partnership-working in general. These precedents, combined with the above-stated robustness of new course development processes, leads the assessment team to the recommendation that no restrictions need to be placed on the DAPs order in any of these areas, despite the current lack of fulsome infrastructure. The assessment team has confidence in the school to develop such infrastructure when required, and to adopt a strategic and risk-based approach in doing so.

154. In summary, the assessment team concluded that both where the school currently works with partners, or plans to work with new partners in the future, to deliver learning opportunities, the arrangements are and will be based on a strategic approach, informed by the effective assessment of risk, including the carrying out of due diligence. The assessment team found that current partnerships are defined in a written legal agreement (for example, the MOU with AUB), are considered periodically through the deliberative structure, and are subject to the same robust oversight and governance as the rest of the organisation's provision, and we have confidence that future partnerships will follow in this way.

## Conclusions

155. Having undertaken an extensive review of the governance arrangements of the school, it is the conclusion of the assessment team that the school has effective academic governance, with clear lines of accountability for its academic responsibilities. Its higher education mission, strategic direction and associated policies are coherent. They are published, understood and applied consistently, and its academic policies support its higher education mission, aims and objectives. With the caveat that the Academic Committee has slightly limited terms of reference, there is clarity and differentiation of function and responsibility at all levels in the organisation in relation to its academic governance structures and arrangements for managing its higher education provision. The function and responsibility of the senior academic authority is also clearly articulated and consistently applied.
156. Despite the self-acknowledged need for development of scholarly activity and research within the school, there is appropriate depth and strength of academic leadership, with a high degree of debate and challenge within governance forums. It is also clear to the assessment team that the school develops, implements and communicates its policies and procedures in collaboration with its staff, students and external stakeholders. The school has clear plans in place to operate if DAPs are awarded. Taken in tandem with the existing robustness of academic governance at the school, the assessment team is confident that the school will manage successfully the responsibilities that would be vested in it were it to be granted DAPs.
157. The involvement of students in all aspects of the control and oversight of the school's academic governance is extremely strongly evidenced, and indeed a particular strength of the organisation in the view of the assessment team. Partly aided by the small size of the organisation, and the consequent feeling of community, and partly aided by the extensive mechanisms put in place by the school to ensure the student voice is heard and responded to, the assessment team found that students individually and collectively are engaged in governance and management of the organisation and its higher education provision.
158. The school currently has in place a number of partnerships for the co-delivery of learning opportunities, and it has early-stage plans to expand its network of partnerships and co-delivery models. In the context of existing provision, the assessment team has found that the

school's governance and management of such partnerships is robust and effective, and are the result of a strategic approach rather than opportunism. The assessment team has seen evidence of an effective assessment of risk, including the carrying out of due diligence. Where relevant, partnerships are defined in a written legal agreement and are subject to the same robust oversight and governance as the rest of the organisation's provision. Given the way in which current partnership-working is governed and managed, and given the robustness of academic governance more generally within the organisation, the assessment team has confidence that future partnerships will be delivered to the same high standards.

159. As such, the assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion A1.

# Assessment of DAPs Criterion B: Academic standards and quality assurance

## Criterion B1: Regulatory frameworks

### Advice to the OfS

160. The assessment team's view is that the school meets Criterion B1: Academic standards because it meets sub-criteria B1.1 and B1.2.
161. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence. This shows, in summary, that the school has in place transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how it awards academic credit and qualifications comparable to those employed by other UK degree awarding bodies. It also shows that it maintains a definitive record of each programme and qualification that it approves (and of subsequent changes to it). This record constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.
162. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside any other relevant information.

**B1.1 An organisation granted degree awarding powers has in place transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how it awards academic credit and qualifications.**

### Advice to the OfS

163. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion B1.1 because it has in place transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how it awards academic credit and qualifications.
164. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence which shows that the school has met the evidence requirements for B1.1 and other relevant evidence requirements.

### Reasoning

165. To inform the assessment team's consideration of the school's academic frameworks and regulations, the school provided evidence in the form of:
- published and draft frameworks, regulations and quality handbooks
  - examples demonstrating the application of those frameworks, including programme documents and records of specific cases of application of processes and procedures, such as validation and periodic-review documents.
166. In addition, the assessment team spoke to staff and students about their understanding of the applications of these frameworks.
167. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which the school's academic frameworks and regulations governing the school's higher education provision are appropriate to its

current status as a validated provider of undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes in arts subject areas, and that these are implemented fully and consistently. To do so it considered:

- the schools' quality handbooks, regulatory frameworks, policies and procedures
- documents recording recent implementations of these policies and procedures
- conversations held with academic staff about their approaches to implementing these frameworks, regulations, and policies and procedures.

168. The school currently adheres to AUB's Regulatory Framework and Undergraduate Assessment Regulations (Levels 4 and 5) and Regulatory Framework and Undergraduate Assessment Regulations (Level 6) 2023-2024. The school follows AUB's regulatory framework and assessment regulations for postgraduate programmes. They outline the relationship between credits and study hours, the conditions for achievement of credit on the named award on which they are enrolled, progression and award, including calculation of Award Classification (see also award of credit, paragraph 254). The school's postgraduate regulations are substantially based on the undergraduate regulations and retain some statements that are not applicable to masters' level study, including regulations related to progression between levels, references to honours and foundation degrees, and undergraduate major projects. Furthermore, they make reference to AUB's processes, indicating that these regulations will need to be reviewed in parallel with the undergraduate regulations when the school develops its own undergraduate regulations in preparation for delivering its own programmes if awarded DAPs. Substantial progress towards development of the provider's own regulations is underway and this progress is discussed in more detail in paragraphs 178-187.
169. These regulations and frameworks are supplemented with the school's own Higher Education Policies and Procedures Handbook, which includes appropriate and sufficiently detailed policies and procedures for admissions, enrolment, APEL/APCL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning, and Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning), attendance and engagement, mitigating circumstances, academic dishonesty, and appeals. Other policies and procedures are described separately in the school's own Policies and Procedures Related to Student Safeguarding, Support and Wellbeing, including the Student Complaints Policy. Further details on the implementation of these policies are discussed in criterion B3, including Accreditation of Prior Learning (APCL and APEL) in paragraph 333, complaints and appeals policies in paragraphs 368-377, and academic dishonesty in paragraphs 344-350.
170. The assessment team identified a risk arising from a combination of referral policies and procedures and the HE Academic Appeals Procedure, that any student who is awarded a referral (a failure that can be retrieved through resubmission at a later date) has no opportunity to appeal the referral grade. While the Academic Appeals Procedure states that students have the right to appeal the result of any unit, in practice this is not always the case, meaning that the Appeals Policy may not always be implemented fully and consistently.
171. The assessment team found that this risk arises because AUB assessment regulations, and the school's own draft regulations, state that 'referral will normally take place at the point of failure (i.e. the unmoderated notification of module results)'. This 'point of failure', and



subsequent retrieval of the failure, takes place prior to the Progression and Awards Board, which, as determined by AUB, takes place 'at the end of each level' (see paragraph 206). The HE Academic Appeals Procedure states that 'an appeal has to be made against finalised marks, you can only appeal following the publication of results from the relevant Progression and Awards Board'. At the point of ratification of results by the board, the student will have already completed resubmission, and will have been awarded a subsequent result. It is this subsequent result – the outcome of the second attempt – that is recorded at the board. In short, following AUB procedure, the original failure is never formally ratified at the Progression and Awards Board, and therefore a referral cannot be appealed.

172. The assessment team brought the above risk to the school's attention and, as a result, senior management reported verbally to the assessment team that the school has considered two possible solutions to the above risk:
  - a. the addition of further boards to allow more frequent ratification of grades
  - b. changes to the referral period.
173. The school deemed neither of these solutions to be appropriate because:
  - a. the addition of further boards is impractical given the current structure of AUB programmes in which modules end at a variety of points during the terms
  - b. a longer referral period would decrease opportunities for referral on feedback to inform subsequent assessments.
174. The school reported that their decision not to make these changes was reached in part through consultation with the students' union on the length of the referral period. No further solutions were considered at this time. The school reported that this is because it has taken the strategic approach to maintain consistency between AUB and the school regulations during the transition period (see paragraphs 181-183).
175. This risk therefore remains but the school and the assessment team consider the risk to be minor, as a result of the small number of students who may be affected. The assessment team is satisfied that the school recognises now this risk and will seek appropriate solutions as it transitions away from AUB regulations in the future. In the opinion of the assessment team, the risk could be resolved through amendments to the Academic Appeals Procedure.
176. The risk is further mitigated by the schools' plans to adopt its own student record system (see paragraphs 199-202). The school maintains records of the number of attempts that students have had for each assessment via ProSolution, a commercially available information management system targeted at the further education sector. Following the adoption of the student record system, HE Markbook, the school will be able to produce exam-board paperwork that records grades for both first and second attempts. Hence the school will be able to ratify the first and second attempt at boards when it begins to produce its own exam-board paperwork.
177. The assessment team identified no further risks arising from the school's academic frameworks and regulations. Therefore in general, it found that the school's academic

frameworks and regulations governing the school's higher education provision are appropriate to its current status.

178. In order to test the extent to which the school has created, in readiness, draft academic frameworks and regulations which will be appropriate for the granting of its own higher education qualifications, the assessment team considered the draft regulations that the school has begun to develop in anticipation of achieving DAPs.
179. The school currently operates AUB regulatory frameworks, and reports that it plans to continue to do so for any programmes validated by AUB. The school will continue to operate AUB's Regulatory Framework and Academic Assessment Regulations for three years alongside new school regulations for those students who remain registered on AUB programmes during the transition to the school's programmes. Both sets of regulations and associated information, including legacy AUB information, will remain available on the website for students continuing on AUB programmes, or entering via direct entry on these AUB programmes.
180. A draft of the school's new Regulatory Framework and Academic Assessment Regulations was presented to the Academic Board in February 2024. This new document includes assessment regulations for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes that, in the view of the assessment team, are appropriate and thorough. This draft regulatory framework demonstrates the school's readiness to operate outside of the framework and regulations of the validating partner.
181. The school's senior management team characterised their approach to developing their own Regulatory Framework and Academic Assessment Regulations as 'evolution not revolution', in which new regulations will largely mirror the existing AUB regulations. AUB has formally granted approval for the school to base its own policies and regulations on its own (see paragraph 119). As a result of this approach, the draft framework and regulations substantially mirror existing AUB regulations (see paragraphs 168-169).
182. The assessment team felt that the school has sufficiently justified this approach as the team is in agreement with the school that similarity between AUB and the school's own regulation, when they are in use concurrently, helps to minimise the risk of reference to, or application of, the wrong set of regulations. The school's senior management reports that it has taken the strategic decision not to make substantial changes to its regulatory framework during the three-year period of transition, to ensure that students on AUB and the school's programmes will be governed by broadly similar regulations.
183. While the school acknowledges that there is room for enhancement in existing and draft regulatory frameworks, they report that these will not be a priority for the school during the transition away from the current validation arrangement with AUB. The school intends to return to this activity at a later date, aiming to first undertake periodic-review activities independently of AUB that might inform future decision-making. In order to ensure that those future enhancements of regulatory frameworks are appropriate, the school seeks to further develop their professional staff, in the case of DAPs being awarded, with greater access to a network of higher education institution peers beyond AUB. This will ensure that, following the end of the three-year transition away from AUB-validated programmes, staff will be prepared

to develop their own frameworks, policies and procedures that are tailored to the school's provision.

184. In readiness for future development of their own regulatory frameworks, the school has named staff who have responsibility for each policy and procedure, to ensure that responsibilities are maintained during change of staff in any role.
185. Further, the self-critical approach to the school's own procedures, that is necessary for appropriate development of their own regulatory frameworks, is evidenced through internal audits. The assessment team considers that, in these internal audits, the school has demonstrated awareness that there will be a need to update some policies and procedures where AUB will no longer be involved in those processes and procedures. For example, it has identified that the current complaints policy will need to be reviewed, as currently the final stage of a complaint is considered at AUB. The school plans to update this policy for new students studying on the school's programmes.
186. In considering the appropriateness of current and draft regulatory frameworks for the granting of its own higher education qualifications, the assessment team has also considered the school's stated plans to potentially broaden its provision in the future to include subjects tangential to, or outside of, its current areas of specialism. The assessment team considers that the new draft regulatory framework provides guidance on curriculum structure and content that is appropriate for arts disciplines that are reflected in the school's current provision, and forms an appropriate framework for any arts programmes that the school may develop in the future. However, the assessment team's view is that the existing and new proposed regulatory frameworks do, in places, contain some policies and guidance that would require expanding in order to accommodate some other subject areas. For example, the assessment team considers that the school's framework for curriculum content is in line with other arts programmes across the sector, but would be less appropriate for some other subjects. The most significant example of this is in section B of the draft regulatory framework, which states that all undergraduate programmes will include a Major Project module that includes practical work accompanied by critical evaluation - elements that are standard for arts subjects across the sector, but not appropriate for all other subjects. Similarly, the regulatory frameworks also do not currently allow for all forms of delivery and assessment that take place across all subjects in the sector, for example, they do not include regulations for assessment by exam, or policies for exam invigilation, as would be necessary for many humanities and science subjects. Therefore, further flexibility and/or variety may need to be accommodated in a revised framework if the school were to validate and deliver programmes in other subjects. However, given the robustness of the school's current academic governance, regulations and policies, the assessment team has confidence in the school's ability to develop such amendments and additions if or when they are required.
187. In summary, it is the assessment team's view that the school has met criterion B1.1 because it has demonstrated that it has in place transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how it awards academic credit and qualifications. Where these frameworks belong to AUB, the school has made progress towards developing its own frameworks that will enable it to operate independently of its validating partner. The school recognises that its own frameworks will need to be further developed to achieve greater institutional specificity, as a result of its approach to programme design, that is different to AUB's. The school has made the sound decision, in the view of the assessment

team, for this development to take place slowly over the duration of the transition away from AUB, as it will be continuing to deliver AUB programmes during this three-year period.

**B1.2 A degree awarding organisation maintains a definitive record of each programme and qualification that it approves (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.**

## Advice to the OfS

188. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion B1.2 because it maintains a definitive record of each programme and qualification that it approves.

189. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence which shows that the school meets the evidence requirements for B1.2 and other relevant evidence requirements.

## Reasoning

190. The school provided detailed and wide-ranging evidence of its approaches to records and qualifications. In the assessment team's view, this range of evidence was appropriate to inform the assessment team's consideration of the school's record-keeping systems and processes: the school provided evidence of definitive records of each programme and qualification that it approves in the form of programme specifications, module descriptors, programme and module handbooks. Additionally, sample teaching materials were provided to demonstrate the consistent adherence to programme documents in delivery. In order to evidence the recording of qualifications to be awarded, the school demonstrated its student record system, showing live data, and provided screenshots demonstrating recording of specific exceptions. The school supplemented these with provided sample exam-board paperwork and minutes, from boards delivered by the school and AUB. The school also provided detailed information about the new student systems that it will be implementing should it be granted degree DAPs, which will allow it to maintain more comprehensive records independently of AUB.

191. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which:

- definitive and up-to-date records of each qualification to be awarded and each programme being offered by the organisation are being maintained
- these records are used as the basis for the delivery and assessment of each programme
- there is evidence that students and alumni are provided with records of study.

192. To this end, the team reviewed programme specifications, the student record system and the school's approach to exam boards.

193. In line with the sector, programme specifications are the definitive record of qualifications offered by the school, and lay out the award titles, aims, learning outcomes, duration, structure, credit values and levels of study for each module and qualification. In the assessment team's view, these documents are used appropriately and consistently as the

basis for programme handbooks, module handbooks, assignment briefs and assessment processes. Collectively, these documents form the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme.

194. Where there are planned changes to programme titles, the school's prospectus clearly indicates that they are subject to validation, as appropriate. This alerts potential applicants that the programme title and curriculum are not yet validated and therefore subject-to-change.
195. The school's and AUB's regulatory frameworks describe how credits are awarded and how final awards are calculated undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. These regulations further inform and are consistently adhered to in programme documentation, and are in line with sector norms in the experience of the assessment team.
196. The draft school regulations, borrowing from existing AUB regulations, state that:

'A transcript recording individual achievement will be made available by Academic Registry to the student at the end of each level of study. This will be a means by which students can monitor, build on and reflect upon their personal development and career planning'.
197. At present, the school is reliant on AUB to produce these transcripts. The school currently uses ProSolution, a commercially available information management system targeted at the further and higher education sectors, to maintain a record of students' marks for each module. This system does not, at present, record the credit value of each module, or any credit awarded for APCL/APEL, and may not be used to produce transcripts or calculate final awards. At present, marks are provided to AUB, which is responsible for calculating final awards and maintaining records of credit achieved by each student.
198. As a result of the current reliance on AUB for the production of transcripts, and due to there being no alternative mechanism at the school for sharing formal student records, there is no mechanism for students to independently check the credit that they have achieved to date. The school's registry team verbally reported that, when students request to see this information, it is copied manually from AUB systems and emailed to the student.
199. In order to be able to record and manage credit achieved, independently of AUB systems, the senior management team verbally reports that the school has recently purchased a new system, ProMonitor HE Markbook, that will enable more independent management of data, and has begun to train staff in its use. The assessment team saw evidence of this in the form of screenshots from staff training sessions.
200. In the assessment team's view, once HE Markbook is in place as the school's main student system, the school will be able to use this system for more comprehensive record-keeping. The school reports that HE Markbook will be integrated with the existing system, ProSolution, and will enable the recording of:
  - module credits and levels, including APCL/APEL credits
  - grades achieved for each module and assessment component break-down, including first and subsequent attempts.

201. HE Markbook will also be used to calculate final awards and enable the production of transcripts. The assessment team was shown screenshots of how this system will record module information and student achievement for each module and per level overall.
202. Students will also be able to view their grades and credits achieved to date via HE Markbook and the software will also enable the calculation of average module grades across a cohort, enabling monitoring of overall cohort achievement and trends.
203. In the assessment team's view, the school has well-developed plans for the transition from AUB to the school's own student records systems. The school outlined a plan for the three-year transitional period from AUB to the school's programmes, during which transcripts will be run by both AUB and the school. The school has not yet confirmed the process for producing award certificates, but are aware of the need to do so prior to September 2025 in the case of DAPs being awarded.
204. In line with the sector, the accuracy of records of student achievement is ensured through exam boards. The assessment team saw evidence that student engagement and progress is monitored and reviewed at Interim Examination Boards. Student achievement, including module marks and credit achieved, is then formally ratified at examination boards, including, at the school, Final Year Exam Board (Level 6), Non-Final Year Exam Board (Level 4 and Level 5), Resit Exam Board (Level 4 and Level 5), and Postgraduate Examination Boards (Level 7). These are followed by Progression and Awards boards at AUB. In adherence to AUB regulations, which state that each subject area will have at least one Subject Examination Board per annum, the school holds combined boards that cover multiple programmes, ensuring that each of its validated programmes is represented. Board agendas and minutes record that the process of ratification of results at these boards is sound and consistent.
205. These exam boards enable the school and external examiners to monitor the processes by which credit is achieved and qualifications are awarded, and that they are in line with the regulatory frameworks and any programme-specific regulations laid out in the programme specifications. The assessment team saw evidence that this monitoring and oversight is taking place appropriately (see paragraphs 259-262).
206. Exam-board paperwork, currently provided by AUB, is used for the ratification of results at exam boards. However, where students have passed on referral, their first sitting results are not formally ratified by the board (the risk arising from this is addressed in paragraphs 170 to 177). Exam-board reports indicate in red where a grade is exceptional, including where grades have been capped, but do not indicate the nature of the exception or reason for the cap. Only when a student has failed to pass on their second attempt are the first and second sitting results formally recorded at the exam board. Where a student has passed on referral, only their second attempt is ratified by an exam board.
207. In summary, it is the assessment team's view that the school has met criterion B1.2. It has maintained detailed and up-to-date records of the qualifications that it awards. It has also maintained and monitored the mechanisms by which credits are achieved, recorded, and awarded, and how students progress towards them. At present, the school achieves this through the use of AUB's student systems to record and monitor student achievement and the awarding of qualifications, but it has recognised the need for more comprehensive

student systems so it can maintain records independently from AUB. It is in the advanced stages of establishing these new systems.

## **Conclusions**

208. It is the assessment team's view that the school has met criterion B1 because:

- its academic frameworks and regulations are transparent and comprehensive
- it has definitive records of each programme and qualification that it approves
- it has processes in place to record and monitor the above, including individual students' achievement of credit in adherence to these frameworks.

209. While the school is currently dependent on AUB to achieve the above, it has recognised the need for more comprehensive student systems and its own regulatory frameworks. It has made substantial progress in implementing new systems and frameworks in preparation for receiving DAPs.

# Assessment of DAPs Criterion B: Academic standards and quality assurance

## Criterion B2: Academic standards

### Advice to the OfS

210. The assessment team's view is that the school meets Criterion B2: Academic standards because it meets sub-criteria B2.1 and B2.2.
211. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows, in summary, that the school has clear and consistently applied mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its higher education qualifications. Furthermore, the school has demonstrated that it is able to design and deliver courses and qualifications that meet the threshold academic standards described in the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and that the standards it sets and maintains above the threshold are reliable over time and reasonably comparable to those set and achieved by other UK degree awarding bodies.
212. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside any other relevant information.

**B2.1 An organisation granted degree awarding powers has clear and consistently applied mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its higher education qualifications.**

### Advice to the OfS

213. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion B2.1 because it has clear and consistently applied mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its higher education qualifications.
214. The assessments team's view is based on its review of evidence which shows that the school has met the evidence requirements for B2.1 and other relevant evidence requirements.

### Reasoning

215. The school provided a range of evidence to inform the assessment team's consideration of the school's mechanisms for setting and maintaining standards. These included programme specifications, programme handbooks, module descriptors, sample records from periodic reviews and validations, and related regulations and quality handbooks, assessment records, external examiner reports and correspondence, and other evidence of academic quality assurance activities such as the minutes of board and committee meetings where academic standards have been discussed.
216. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which the school has clear and consistently applied mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its higher education qualifications. To this end, it first considered:



- how the setting and maintaining of academic standards takes appropriate account of relevant external points of reference and external and independent points of expertise
- the extent to which these external and independent expertise are used to establish and maintain threshold standards and comparability of standards with other providers of equivalent-level qualifications.

217. The assessment team saw evidence that the school makes use of appropriate external and independent expertise in the development of new programmes and ongoing standards, via professional stakeholder consultation and the use of external examiners. In line with the sector, the school invites a panel to consider the quality and appropriateness of programmes proposed for validation (approval). Some members of this panel are consulted asynchronously, providing written responses to programme documentation. Other members of the panel attend a validation event, where they collectively consider the proposed programme as well as the comments provided by panel members who have provided their comments in writing.

218. The validation panel membership includes internal panel members, including the school's own academic staff and a student (present at validation event) and external advisers from higher education and industry (not present at panel event). In the assessment team's view, the presence of external panel members at panel events would provide further assurance that independent and external expertise is considered and understood, though practice varies across the sector and the current process, in which external and independent views are considered asynchronously, as determined by AUB policy, is sufficient. It is the assessment team's view that thorough consultation with external stakeholders occurs elsewhere, such as in Industry Liaison Groups (see paragraphs 219, 465 and 493). Ongoing consultation with, and direct involvement of, industry ensures that curricula are designed to deliver skills that meet the expectations of industry, and thereby prepare graduates for employment. In this way, routine ongoing involvement of external stakeholders compensates for lack of external presence at the validation event.

219. The assessment team considers that a particular strength of the school's relationship with industry is the extent to which external and independent points of expertise are regularly consulted to ensure ongoing alignment with the school's provision to the expectations of industry. The assessment team identified good practice in the school's professional stakeholder consultation during new programme development, informing the development of curriculum. Industry Liaison Groups, as well as industry stakeholder consultation during validation and periodic review, and direct collaboration with industry during delivery, ensure that curricula meet the needs of industry and appropriately equip students with vocational skills. Notes from Industrial Liaison meetings, which take place with individual professional liaisons, show that they contribute to an understanding of current industry standards and expectations, including expectations of transferable skills, practical skills and graduate attributes, and record that these conversations have informed curricula including assessment briefs and workshop content.

220. External examiners provide further external and independent expertise to ensure ongoing maintenance of academic standards through routine involvement in academic quality processes. The school currently adheres to AUB's external examiner policies and procedures, as outlined in AUB's HE Quality Assurance handbook. The Academic Board has

acknowledged the need for the school to develop its own policy for the appointment of external examiners in the event of a DAPs award being made.

221. In accordance with AUB regulations, external examiners attend Final Year Examination Boards, and the school receives external examiners' reports following these boards. External examiners' reports inform annual programme reviews. These reports are included as appendices in periodic-review documents. The assessment team saw evidence of how external examiners' reports have informed enhancement of the curriculum. For example, the school's response to the 2022-23 external examiner report for BA (Hons) Textiles and Surface Design shows that the programme has introduced natural dyeing and printing workshops following advice from the examiner, and that progress made towards meeting this examiner's recommendation has been tracked in the Annual Programme Review.
222. The currently serving external examiners are of appropriate standing, with experience that qualifies them to make judgements about academic standards in relevant disciplines. The Academic Board has recorded that the pool of eligible external examiners is currently reduced due to conflicts of interest with other AUB partners. In the case of DAPs being awarded, the school anticipates that it will be easier to recruit external examiners, when these conflicts will no longer exist. The assessment team agrees that, when AUB is no longer the validating partner, external examiners could be sought from other AUB-validated partners without conflict of interest, although would advise against this in the short term as there would be greater value in seeking expertise from institutions that are not governed by AUB, enabling the school to benefit from knowledge of a more diverse range of good practice elsewhere in the sector.
223. Some external examiners cover more than one programme, with a maximum of four programmes being served by one examiner at postgraduate level. In the view of the assessment team, this approach is logical where cohort sizes remain small, and where cross-programme delivery occurs. Should the school's postgraduate portfolio expand in the future, necessitating more division of delivery into programme-specific groups, it is the assessment team's view that there should also be division of postgraduate external examiners' responsibilities, with one examiner sought per programme.
224. Student views are also sought in the maintenance of academic standards, through mechanisms such as student assemblies. For further discussion of student voice mechanisms, see criterion A1.2 (paragraphs 129 to 139).
225. In summary, the assessment team found that in setting and maintaining academic standards, the school takes account of relevant external reference points, and external and independent points of expertise, including students. This expertise is used in establishing and maintaining threshold academic standards and comparability of standards with other providers of equivalent-level qualifications.
226. In order to assess further the extent to which the school has clear and consistently applied mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its higher education provision, the assessment team went on to consider the extent to which the school's programme approval, monitoring and review arrangements are robust and applied consistently.

227. In the assessors' view, the school operates a rigorous process for the proposal of new programmes, that presents a detailed rationale for new developments. The school operates a two-stage proposal process prior to validation, consisting of stages formally described as Stage 1 and Stage 2. Stage 1: Outline Proposals are developed by the Curriculum Development Group, using the school's own template. Stage 1 proposals are informed by critical reflection, the school's strategic plan, and stakeholder consultation, including a student focus group. If the development is approved at outline stage, a Stage 2 Proposal is developed by the Curriculum Development Group. The Stage 2 proposal makes an academic and business case to continue the development. Stage 2 Proposals are considered by the Academic Board and Principalship.
228. The school's validation process follows the procedure outlined in the AUB Quality Assurance Handbook. Currently, validations are chaired and run by the school and observed by AUB. The school feels that it is therefore prepared to operate future validations independently in the case of DAPs being awarded. It is the assessment team's view that it is indeed the case that the school has sufficient experience to conduct validations independently of AUB, as a result of their having already largely managed these independently.
229. The assessment team noted that the validation submission includes a briefing document that provides panel members with a detailed rationale for the programme's design and resourcing, aligned with listed AUB expectations. The validation pack also includes detailed programme documentation, including programme specification and module descriptors for all levels, and a programme handbook. Programme documentation presents clear lists of aims and learning outcomes at programme and module level.
230. The assessment team saw templates and records of recent validation events, showing that the agenda for these events is informed by comments from the panel, and records initial commendations and recommendations, and RAG rating across 13 criteria relating to course design and resources. In line with practice across the sector, and following AUB's processes and templates, the validation event results in commendations and recommendations. The school reports that it plans to evolve these templates with a view to increasing the emphasis on employability, in line with the school's strategy of ensuring that 'employability skills are a key feature of all programmes at the school'.
231. At present, AUB confirms final approval of new programmes. Following awarding of any degree awarding powers, it would be necessary for the school to formally take over responsibility for final approval. The school reports that it intends for its Academic Board to be the place where new programmes are signed off when AUB are no longer responsible for final approval. It is the assessment team's view that this would be appropriate, since the Academic Board is the senior academic authority within the organisation (see paragraph 72).
232. In order to ensure the ongoing maintenance of academic standards and currency of their programmes, the school's programmes undergo periodic review every five years, as required by AUB. The school follows AUB's process for periodic review, as outlined in Section D of AUB's Quality Assurance Handbook. Sample periodic-review documents show that the panel is allowed appropriate opportunity for critical evaluation of programmes under review. Periodic reviews share many AUB templates and processes in common with the validation process.

233. While it is appropriate for the school to currently adhere to AUB validation and periodic-review processes, there are programme structures in the school that mean that those AUB processes are not always sufficient to ensure maintenance of standards across all levels. The school has developed a common structure for Level 6, in which all undergraduate programmes deliver the same modules in their final year, and programme aims and outcomes are common across all undergraduate programmes. This common structure was adopted across all of the school's undergraduate programmes in 2017 and has been incorporated into all new undergraduate programmes that have been validated since. This approach to programme structure has many advantages, as noted in paragraphs 246 and 377, but differs from the approach at AUB, and for this reason, adherence to AUB periodic review and validation processes does not fully accommodate the school's programme structures.
234. As a result of the need for all programmes to collectively inform the design and development of common content, the school's periodic reviews for undergraduate programmes concentrate on programme-specific content at Levels 4 and 5. There is therefore, at present, no formal mechanism for reviewing programme aims and learning outcomes or common modules, including all of Level 6 modules. As the common Level 6 and programme aims and learning outcomes exist independently of programme-specific content, they are not considered at the point of validation or review: where the validation of a new programme adopts existing programme learning outcomes and modules, these are presented at validation but not scrutinised or developed within any individual programme review due to the impact in programmes that are not under review at the point of validation of a new programme. This common content is presented as having been previously approved at the point of validation of new programmes that incorporate the common content. The above risk is further evidenced, for example, in documents from a recent validation that show that external advisers have provided comments across Levels 4, 5 and 6, but only those comments relating to Levels 4 and 5 have been incorporated into the validation agenda for discussion. The result is that mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards are not consistent, specifically, that the school's approval, monitoring and review arrangements are not applied consistently across all FHEQ levels.
235. The school reports that, where validation and periodic-review panels identify opportunities for enhancement of Level 6 programmes, they may be considered through minor modifications processes outside of the periodic-review cycle, where those suggested changes are appropriate for all affected programmes. There is evidence of work towards enhancing these common units, in the form of discussion of the approach to dissertations at the Learning Teaching and Quality Committee, leading to recommendations for enhancement of delivery at Level 6. While these informal opportunities for consideration and enhancement of Level 6 are not fully equivalent to the formal validation and review of Level 6, they do allow for some scrutiny of Level 6. Hence, it is the assessment team's view that some limited mitigation is in place to compensate for inconsistent application of approval and review arrangements.
236. The assessment team is confident that the risk outlined above (that formal mechanisms for approval and review are not applied to Level 6, see paragraphs 233 to 235), will be resolved, as a result of the school's acknowledgement of the risk and commitment to seeking a solution. During the DAPs assessment, the school recognised the need to develop a new approach to periodic review that would enable the formal review of common content shared across programmes. It has outlined plans for quintennial review of Level 6 and common

programme aims and learning outcomes separately from programme-specific review of Levels 4 and 5. Though it has not yet been decided how and in what cycle the reviewed common content will be adopted by the programmes, the school's current working assumption is that programmes will adopt the reviewed common content at the point of the individual programme review. In presenting these plans, the school demonstrated a suitably self-critical approach to their existing processes, and an understanding of the associated risks and need to further develop its processes and procedures to better align them with the school's approaches to programme structure.

237. The school outlined plans to review all of its current AUB provision in the 2024-25 academic year, subjecting each programme to a greater or lesser degree of scrutiny and development depending on the length of time since the most recent periodic review.
238. Further opportunities for monitoring, reflection and enhancement are provided on an annual basis during Annual Programme Review. The school's HE Policies and Procedures Handbook outlines the procedure for Annual Programme Review, and the assessment team noted that the Annual Programme Review template requires rigorous reporting and reflection. The Annual Programme Review process and template invites critical consideration of internal and external contexts affecting the programme. It requires reporting of 18 quality indicators including internal and external markers of student satisfaction and standards, followed by narrative discussion in key areas linked to, with a particular focus on the continuing financial viability of the programme. The report invites critical consideration of internal and external contexts affecting the programme. The report further requires reporting on progress made against actions arising from previous reports.
239. The Annual Programme Review process results in programme-level reports that are reviewed by the Academic Board. The report is confirmed by the Academic Board before submission to the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee at AUB. The reports are given detailed consideration at the Academic Board, including self-critical identification of areas for improvement and future development. Following transition away from AUB, annual programme reviews will be considered first at the school's internal Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee, then approved at the Academic Board.
240. In summary, the assessment team found that the school's programme approval, monitoring and review arrangements are robust (or where there are risks that these risks are being mitigated in the short term, with clear plans for change in the case of DAPs approval) and applied consistently.
241. Overall, the assessment team's view is that the school's mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards are clear and consistently applied through validation, Period Review and Annual Programme Review processes, and that this is ensured through periodic and ongoing input from internal and external stakeholders. Where there is risk in the programme approval and review arrangements these risks are recognised and understood, and the assessment team has observed a commitment to introducing new procedures that will eliminate this risk. As such, the team concluded that the school meets criterion B2.1.

**B2.2 Organisations with degree awarding powers are expected to demonstrate that they are able to design and deliver courses and qualifications that meet the threshold academic standards described in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). Organisations with degree awarding powers are expected to demonstrate that the standards that they set and maintain above the threshold are reliable over time and reasonably comparable to those set and achieved by other UK degree awarding bodies.**

## Advice to the OfS

242. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion B2.2 because the provided evidence demonstrates that the school can design and deliver courses and qualifications that meet the threshold academic standards described in the FHEQ. Further, the assessment team's view is that the standards that the school set and maintain above the threshold are reliable over time and reasonably comparable to those set and achieved by other UK degree awarding bodies.
243. The assessments team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows that the school meets the evidence requirements for B2.2 and any other relevant evidence requirements.

## Reasoning

244. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which the school can demonstrate that it designs and delivers courses and qualifications that meet the threshold academic standards described in the FHEQ, and that the standards that it sets and maintains above the threshold are reliable over time and reasonably comparable to those set and achieved by other UK degree awarding bodies. To this end, it first considered the extent to which programme approval, monitoring and review arrangements explicitly address whether UK threshold academic standards are achieved, and whether the academic standards required by the school are being maintained.
245. At validation, it is ensured that programme aims and learning outcomes are informed by the FHEQ and the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Art and Design, which the school has identified as a suitable external reference point for its courses. Programme briefing documents presented at validation include explicit mapping of programme learning outcomes against the FHEQ and the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Art and Design. In this way, the assessment team considers that the validation process for new programmes effectively ensures that the credits and qualifications awarded on those programmes are aligned to the levels described in the FHEQ.
246. Within the school's common Level 6 structure, programme learning outcomes for Level 6 modules are common to all programmes within each faculty. These learning outcomes allow for sufficient localisation and flexibility to enable subject specificity in delivery, and for collaboration across programmes. Teaching observations carried out by the assessment team and sample teaching materials supplied by the school shows that there is sufficient subject specificity in delivery for students to allow subject-specific learning at Level 6. Students report that, in line with FHEQ Level 6, the common structure allows for independent and individualised learning, in which students are able to define their own areas of specialist

interest (see criterion B3). Similarly, at Level 7 modules are common to MA Arts Practice and MA Design Practice, allowing peer learning across disciplines as appropriate for Level 7.

247. On an ongoing basis, the school considers its own staff's external examining experience at other institutions an important opportunity to help internal staff to maintain awareness of standards across the sector, and therefore encourages staff to take opportunities to take on external examiner positions at other institutions. The HE quality manager maintains a database of external examining appointments that shows that seven members of staff currently hold external examiner positions at other higher education institutions, at foundation and undergraduate level. In the assessors' view this is an example of good practice, demonstrating recognition of the value of observing standards and procedures across the wider sector and ensuring that its staff are given opportunities to learn from the good practices of other institutions.
248. In summary, the assessment team found that in the school's programme approval, monitoring and review arrangements explicitly address whether UK threshold academic standards are achieved, and that the academic standards required by the school are being maintained.
249. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which:
- the school's higher education qualifications are offered at levels that correspond to the relevant levels of the FHEQ of UK Degree Awarding Bodies
  - credit and qualifications are awarded only where the achievement of relevant learning outcomes have been demonstrated through assessment
  - the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the school have been satisfied.
250. To this end, the assessment team undertook teaching observations, reviewed and assessed work samples, spoke with teaching staff, and considered the views of the school's existing validation partner (AUB) as expressed through its written communication with the school.
251. The assessment team observed high quality teaching during observations of taught sessions across a range of programmes and levels, including practical and theory classes. Students were observed engaging with ideas and activities that are appropriate to their level of study across FHEQ Levels 4, 5, 6 and 7. Observed sessions included a variety of teaching methods that the assessment team considered to be appropriate to the level of study, including technical demonstration and lectures at Levels 4 and 5, and critiques and seminars at Levels 6 and 7, in which students were provided with opportunities to learn independently and from their peers.
252. The assessment team reviewed a sample of work covering Levels 4, 5, 6 and 7, across four undergraduate and two postgraduate programmes. The sample included for each programme and level at least one example of low, middle and high grades; and at Level 7, of low pass, mid commendation and distinction for each of the sampled programmes. Additionally, samples of dissertations from three programmes, including two from each grade band, were provided to ensure that there was an appropriate spread across theory and practice within the sample. Having reviewed the sample, the assessment team was satisfied

that there is appropriate progression from level to level, and that standards are in line with equivalent provision across the sector, and with the FHEQ.

253. In line with the school's vocational focus, reports are allowed as an alternative to the dissertation, many of which take the form of business plans. While there is still some further progress to be made in ensuring these business plans demonstrate equivalent adherence to FHEQ Level 6 standards, the learning materials that contextualise these samples demonstrate that appropriate learning opportunities are being delivered.
254. Assessment samples suggest that credit is awarded appropriately, in line with learning outcomes that are in turn aligned with FHEQ levels. The school's existing and draft future regulations state that credit can only be awarded where the student has achieved a pass in all module learning outcomes, stating that 'percentage mark is not an absolute judgement of performance, but an indication of achievement of the learning outcomes'.
255. The assessment team saw evidence that proper consideration of learning outcomes occurs in all assessment activities. Learning outcomes are communicated clearly to students in programme documentation such as module handbooks, programme handbooks and programme specifications, and students report being familiar with learning outcomes and how they inform assessment (as reported in a meeting with a large, representative number of students across all programmes and levels). Performance against learning outcomes is also clearly articulated in assignment feedback.
256. One of the ways in which higher education institutions ensure that their staff are equipped to deliver research-informed teaching as appropriate for Level 7, is to ensure that staff are research-active. The school describes itself as being on a journey towards university status, which includes the upskilling of staff to ensure that they are able to deliver education at higher levels than their previous experience. Senior management are encouraging staff to develop scholarly activity with a view to, in future, having a more research-active and experienced staff body who are more engaged with the forefront of their disciplines in order to deliver courses at Levels 6 and 7. There are plans, for example, to introduce the role of Reader (an academic position with a focus on research) in the 2024-25 academic year, and to consider ways of allowing academic staff more remission for scholarly activities and research. There is a recognition that, in addition to remission, there is a need for support to ensure that the activities enabled by this remission are productive and appropriate.
257. The assessment team was further assured that the school's provision aligns with the FHEQ through reports from independent stakeholders. The assessment team was provided with documents from the school as well as independent external sources, including AUB and external examiner reports, confirming that the school provision enables students to produce work that is appropriate for their level of study as described in in the FHEQ.
258. In summary, the assessment team found that the school's higher education qualifications are offered at levels that correspond to the relevant levels of the FHEQ of UK Degree Awarding Bodies. Credit and qualifications are awarded only where the achievement of relevant learning outcomes have been demonstrated through assessment, and both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the school have been satisfied.



259. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which in establishing and then maintaining threshold academic standards and comparability of standards with other providers of equivalent-level qualifications the school makes use of appropriate external and independent expertise. To this end, the team reviewed feedback from external examiners, and the ways in which this feedback was responded to by the school.
260. External examiners, who have reviewed the work of students, confirm comparability of standards with other providers of equivalent-level qualifications. The school's internal summary of external examiner reports records that:
- all external examiners were satisfied with academic standards and the quality of student work
  - each of the school's undergraduate programmes conforms to the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements and the FHEQ.
261. External examiners are in place for all current undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. External examiners' reports from 2022-23 observe that outcomes are in line with FHEQ at Level 5 and Level 6 and Level 7. In sample documents from a recent periodic review, external panel members have, in their formal responses, confirmed alignment with FHEQ guidelines.
262. External examiners' reports from 2022-23 show that external examiners have explicitly confirmed that standards are appropriate for subject and level, and that student performance is comparable with other UK institutions. In order to ensure that these judgements are fully informed, the external examiners' report template requires them to confirm whether they have been appropriately briefed to be able to conduct their duties, and that they have, where applicable, been provided with the reports of previous examiners for continuity of oversight. External examiners' reports require written comment on the standards set for awards, including whether they 'take account of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and the National Classification Descriptors'. In external examiners' reports from 2022-23, all external examiners have responded positively in this part of their report, confirming that the standard of work on the programme that they have each examined is appropriate and correlates with FHEQ levels.
263. Specific examples of how the school has responded to feedback from external examiners can be seen in paragraphs 221 and 363-364.
264. In summary, the assessment team found that in establishing and then maintaining threshold academic standards and comparability of standards with other providers of equivalent-level qualifications the school makes use of appropriate external and independent expertise.
265. Overall, it is the assessment team's view that the school uses a variety of appropriate mechanisms for ensuring that it can design and deliver courses and qualifications that meet the threshold academic standards described in the FHEQ. It recognises that it is appropriate for an institution with DAPs to develop a research culture that supports study at Levels 6 and 7. As such, it is the assessment team's view that the school meets criterion B2.2.

## Conclusions

266. The assessment team formed the overall conclusion that the school meets criterion B2 because it has clear and consistently applied mechanisms for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its higher education qualifications. It has demonstrated that it can design and deliver courses and qualifications that meet the threshold academic standards described in the FHEQ. It can also demonstrate that the standards that it sets and maintains above the threshold are reliable over time and reasonably comparable to those set and achieved by other UK degree awarding bodies.
267. The school appropriately adheres to current AUB processes for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its higher education qualifications, and for ensuring that their programmes meet the threshold academic standards described in the FHEQ. The current common framework that is shared across all undergraduate programmes necessitates development of new and institution-specific approaches to validation and review. The school has recognised a way forward that will ensure all common content is subject to the same level and frequency of scrutiny as programme-specific content.
268. The school is well on their way to ensuring that an appropriate environment exists for the delivery of provision that extends to masters' level. It recognises that its journey towards university status will necessarily involve upskilling staff and support for research activities. It has also put in place initiatives to empower staff to become more research-active in ways that will enhance their delivery and increase engagement with research and practice at the forefront of fields relevant to their subject portfolio.

# Assessment of DAPs Criterion B: Academic standards and quality assurance

## Criterion B3: Quality of the academic experience

### Advice to the OfS

269. The assessment team's view is that the school meets Criterion B3: Academic Standards because it meets sub-criteria B3.1.
270. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows, in summary, that the school operates sound processes for the design and approval of programmes, high quality teaching and assessment, makes appropriate use of external examiners, and operates sound processes for academic appeals and student complaints.
271. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside any other relevant information.

**B3.1 Organisations with degree awarding powers are expected to demonstrate that they are able to design and deliver courses and qualifications that provide a high quality academic experience to all students from all backgrounds, irrespective of their location, mode of study, academic subject, protected characteristics, previous educational background or nationality. Learning opportunities are consistently and rigorously quality assured.**

### Advice to the OfS

272. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion B3.1 because the reviewed evidence demonstrates that it is able to design and deliver courses and qualifications that provide a high quality academic experience to all students from all backgrounds, irrespective of their location, mode of study, academic subject, protected characteristics, previous educational background or nationality. Learning opportunities are consistently and rigorously quality assured.
273. The assessments team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows that the school has met the evidence requirements for B3.1 and other relevant evidence requirements.
274. The assessments team viewed a range of appropriate evidence that informed the team's consideration of the quality of students' academic experience, and to seek assurance that learning opportunities are consistently and rigorously quality assured. This evidence informed conclusions related to the design and approval of programmes, learning and teaching, assessment, external examining, and academic appeals and student complaints. The assessors developed their view of the students' academic experience through documents, direct observation of teaching, and conversations with staff and students.

## Design and approval of programmes

275. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which the school operates effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes, and the extent to which relevant staff are informed of, and provided guidance and support on, these procedures and their roles and responsibilities in relation to them. To do so, the team considered the school's approach to programme development, spoke with staff, and observed a presentation by the school on its approach to developing a recent new programme.
276. As outlined in criterion B2.2, the assessment team found that the school operates thorough processes for the proposal of new programmes, and for the design, development, and approval of new programmes, and operates this process largely independently of AUB. Where new programmes incorporate shared content (as outlined in paragraphs 233), that content is not formally considered as part of the validation process (see paragraphs 234-235 for details of this risk). However, as described in paragraph 236, the school has outlined plans for a review cycle that will enable the review of common content.
277. It is the assessment team's view that the evidence shows that relevant staff are informed of and provided with guidance and support on, processes for proposal, validation and review of programmes, and their roles and responsibilities in relation to them. Staff responsibilities in relation to the development and approval of programmes is communicated primarily through templates for proposal and validation, and through Section D of the HE Quality Assurance Handbook. The HE quality manager is responsible for providing direct support and guidance to staff who are involved in validation or periodic review. In addition, faculty leaders reported to the assessment team that they provided support to staff on all matters relating to new programme development.
278. In summary, the assessment team found that the school operates effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes, and that relevant staff are informed of, and provided guidance and support on, these procedures and their roles and responsibilities in relation to them.
279. In order to test the extent to which responsibility for approving new programme proposals is clearly assigned, including the involvement of external expertise, and that subsequent action is carefully monitored, the assessment team reviewed the school's approach to programme development, and the roles and responsibilities of the various committees within the school as concerns curriculum development.
280. The assessment team found that the school clearly identifies teams responsible for the various stages of new programme approval and identifies where external expertise informs this process (see paragraph 218): Stage 1 Outline Proposals are developed by the Curriculum Development Group, and are informed by stakeholder consultation, (see paragraphs 217-219). If the development is approved at outline stage, a Stage 2 Proposal is developed by the Curriculum Development Group. Stage 2 Proposals are considered by the Academic Board and Principalship Board.
281. The roles and responsibilities for development and approval of new programmes, as outlined in AUB's validation and review policies and processes, do not always align with the deliberative structure at the school. Responsibilities assigned in practice in the school therefore necessarily diverge from stated AUB policy. For example, Stage 2 Proposals

currently make use of AUB templates that require sign off from an Academic Planning Group, though there is no such group at the school. As there is no such group at the school, Stage 2 Proposals are approved by the Academic Board and Principalship. In the assessment team's view, the school's approach to identifying responsibility for proposals and approvals is sound, but it will be necessary for the school to formally adapt the relevant Stage 2 template in the case of DAPs being awarded to bring responsibility for approval in line with the school's deliberative structure.

282. In summary, the assessment team found that responsibility for approving new programme proposals is clearly assigned, including the involvement of external expertise, and that subsequent action is carefully monitored.
283. The school does not have programmes with multiple elements or alternative pathways, but does have common elements at Level 6 and 7 which mean that they operate some process that would normally be associated with pathways (see paragraphs 284-285). In order to test the extent to which coherence of these elements, the assessment team reviewed programme handbooks, marking criteria, learning agreements, and spoke with staff and students.
284. Due to the shared programme structure at Level 6 (as described in paragraph 233) which includes common modules and learning outcomes across programmes, the scope for subject specificity at Level 6 is not explicitly represented in programme specification, module specifications or programme handbooks. This has been queried by external stakeholders, including an external examiner who commented on 'the uniform approach to the Level 6 marking criteria'. The school reports that the learning agreements at Level 6 (as discussed in paragraphs 324 to 326) permit students to determine their own specialism. In order to seek evidence of the extent to which there is programme specificity in Level 6 delivery, the assessment team reviewed sample materials including module handbooks and teaching materials from across five undergraduate programmes. These sample materials demonstrate that, while some content is common, different approaches are taken to the presentation and contextualisation of that content across programmes, as evidenced in programme-specific module handbooks and teaching materials. In the assessment team's meeting with students, students reported that Level 6 allows for individual journeys, and it is in this way that their Level 6 experience is specialised. External stakeholders also note that the common structure allows for valuable opportunities for cross-programme collaboration. The assessment team was thus satisfied with the approach taken by the school.
285. At Level 7, there are also common structures in place across MA Arts Practice and MA Design Practice. The assessment team reviewed a sample of four weeks' worth of teaching materials, and 11 submission samples of student work at various levels (four at a distinction grade, four at a merit grade and three at a pass grade) from The Practice Resolution module that is jointly delivered across both of these two programmes. It observed co-teaching taking place with cohorts across Arts Practice and Design Practice, in order to observe the extent to which these common structures are appropriate.
286. These samples of teaching materials and student work show that students are able to produce subject-specific work within these shared structures. Teaching observations show that students from these programmes are taught together in a single cohort, with break-out activities that are programme-specific. Some co-delivery across art and design is common in equivalent provision across the sector where cohorts are small and where, at Level 7,

students are operating largely individually and often in interdisciplinary ways. Subject specialism is managed by enabling access to subject tutors on undergraduate programmes, which is also common in the sector where staff often teach across undergraduate and postgraduate provision. It is therefore the assessment team's view that, at Level 7, the existing approach to co-delivery and shared structure is sound and does allow for subject specificity, as well as having the benefit of enabling students to engage with ideas across disciplinary boundaries as appropriate for Level 7. However, the external examiner for MA Design Practice and MA Arts Practice has noted a potential risk to subject specificity in this approach, saying that:

'the informal process of connecting students to subject specialists is effective but vulnerable and there is always a risk of smaller aspects of teaching being lower priority for those staff members alongside their larger undergraduate cohorts'.

287. The assessment team's experience is that this risk exists across the sector and it is not reasonably within the school's power to resolve it. Rather, it should be mindful of the risk when assigning undergraduate tutors to Level 7 teaching. As noted above, the assessment team has not observed manifestations of this risk in practice, and it will be further minimised as postgraduate provision at the school expands in the future.
288. In summary, the assessment team found that coherence of programmes with multiple elements or alternative pathways is secured and maintained, and that where risks exist, these are under good control.
289. In order to test the extent to which close links are maintained between learning support services and the organisation's programme planning and approval arrangements, the assessment team reviewed the school's programme development processes, and spoke with teaching and support staff.
290. At stage two of the proposal of new programmes, internal stakeholders – including admissions, registry, library, recruitment, IT, marketing, estates – are informed of the proposed development in order that they may inform and sufficiently prepare for the development of the new programme (the validation process is outlined in more detail in relation to criterion B2.1, paragraphs 228 to 231). In the team's view, there is sufficient rigour in the Stage 2 Proposal process to ensure that infrastructure, resources, staffing, and capital expenditure needs may be met.
291. For example, the Stage 2 Proposal for BA (Hons) Fashion:
- recognises the need for a fashion technical demonstrator
  - lists specific technical resources to which students will require access
  - identifies an appropriate space for the accommodation of the new programme based on target cohort sizes
  - lists anticipated capital expenditure required for those additional facilities.
292. Further evidence shows that the necessary resources have been put in place as a result of the programme planning and approval process, for example, the assessment team reviewed

the job description and CV of a recruited fashion technician. This example demonstrates that the relationship between learning support services and academic teams ensures that appropriate resources are provided for newly approved programmes.

293. In summary, the assessment team found that close links are maintained between learning support services and the organisation's programme planning and approval arrangements.

294. Overall, it is the assessment team's view that the design and approval processes at the school are effective at ensuring that new programmes provide students with a high quality academic experience, irrespective of background, due to the rigour of these processes and the range of stakeholder views that are considered as part of the new programme proposal and approval process.

### **Learning and teaching**

295. In order to test the extent to which the school articulates and implements a strategic approach to learning and teaching that is consistent with its stated academic objectives, the assessment team reviewed the academic strategy, teaching materials, and undertook teaching observations.

296. The school's Academic Strategy 2021-2024 lists 12 academic objectives. These are reflected in the school's support of staff research related to creative pedagogy, emphasis on personal and professional development, and what the team observed as provision of excellent facilities to enable the development of a wide variety of making skills. The assessment team saw that the academic objectives are manifested in concrete ways across the curriculum, and activities that inform curriculum, such as the school's hosting of the National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD) Workshop for Creative Educators in 2023.

297. The assessment team observed high quality teaching during observations of taught sessions across a range of programmes and levels, including practical and theory classes. In the team's view, a particular strength of the taught sessions was that they provide authentic experiences of professional environments and activities, including collaboration and co-ordination of teams in studio settings, and use of technical facilities. Academic staff were seen to be friendly and approachable, and communicated clearly during their teaching. The team observed that small class sizes enable academic staff to have good knowledge of individual students' needs and a good working relationship with individual students within a cohort.

298. It is the assessment team's view that the school has particular strengths in its vocational content, as evidenced through the sample teaching materials reviewed by the assessment team. The continued strength and relevance of vocational content and industry links is ensured by a requirement for programmes to report annually to the Academic Board in their Annual Programme Review (see paragraphs 238-239) on live projects and industry links. Each programme has an Industrial Liaison Group to support engagement with 'external partners on a range of issues to ensure that students gain a direct insight into the working of the creative sector'. Industry partners are from a broad range of relevant businesses, and each programme reports annually through its Annual Programme Review on how its Industrial Liaison Group has supported the development of the programme (see also criterion D1).

299. There is also progress towards establishing a research culture that enables Level 6 and Level 7 students to recognise the professional contexts for research, in the form of the online journal, *Perspectives in Art and Design*,<sup>11</sup> which publishes student and staff research. In the assessment team's view, the opportunity to publish in this journal benefits students both by contributing to a research culture in the school and by demonstrating the professional contexts for academic research.
300. The school's Academic Strategy 2021-2024 details academic objectives and includes the objective to cultivate 'an established culture of cross-School collaboration'. This is manifested primarily in the common structures that are shared across programmes at Level 6 and Level 7 (as discussed in more detail in paragraph 233 and 284-285).
301. In summary, the assessment team found that the school articulates and implements a strategic approach to learning and teaching that is consistent with its stated academic objectives.
302. In order to test the extent to which the school maintains physical, virtual and social learning environments that are safe, accessible, and reliable for every student, promoting dignity, courtesy and respect in their use, the assessment team undertook two site visits. These included tours and teaching observations, in which they reviewed the school's digital services, and spoke with staff and students.
303. The assessment team found that the school maintains excellent physical learning environments for all programmes, and observed that the school maintains physical, virtual and social learning environments that are safe, accessible and reliable for every student, promoting dignity, courtesy and respect in their use. The campus is spread across five buildings: No 1 Church Street, Leadbitter Building, Church Square, Municipal Building and The Scott Building. Teaching spaces, technical facilities, cafes, library, archive collection, and support services are spread across these buildings and are easily accessible, each being within short walking distance of all other buildings and local amenities.
304. There are a variety of types of teaching spaces appropriate for the different teaching types that take place in art and design subjects, including seminar spaces, performance spaces, and a 100-seat tiered lecture hall. IT suites are open access when not booked for scheduled teaching. Programmes have dedicated base rooms, many of which currently house a learning space or allocated desk per student. Buildings are open until 1900 on weekdays.
305. In the view of the team, the excellent technical facilities are appropriate to the range of arts programmes that are delivered by the school. The range of technical studios and workshops that are well-equipped to support specialist activities, include, for example, photography studios, printing labs, dark rooms, dyeing studios and television studios. Teaching within these technical spaces is delivered and supported by technical staff as well as academic staff, in order to provide specialist technical expertise that ensures that students are taught practical skills that are appropriate for their discipline.
306. A particular strength of the campus facilities is the Costume Archive, which houses a large collection of donated historical clothing and costumes. The archive is one of many examples

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.northernperspectives.co.uk/>.



of how the school has benefitted from a strong, mutually beneficial relationship with the local community. These relationships lead to opportunities for professional collaborations, commissions, and access to off-campus locations for the hosting of student exhibitions.

307. From its visit to the school, the team observed that all buildings are in a good state of repair, well-equipped, and spacious, with room to accommodate further expansion. The assessment team further observed that workshops are set-up to enable safe and environmentally sound use of technical facilities, including, for example, hanging sockets, fume cupboards, eye wash stations, and sorted dye and waste disposal. Technical facilities are available for the use of students who have undergone inductions. Students are inducted, as part of their programme, to relevant facilities, and may sign-up for further inductions on any further facility if desired. A passporting process is used to track student health and safety inductions.
308. All teaching facilities are accessible by students with physical disabilities, and there is evidence of reasonable adjustments made to suit particular needs. For example, a sink has been lowered in the textiles studio to accommodate wheelchair users. The team found evidence that records the process of ensuring that technical spaces are safe and accessible for individual students, for example, risk-assessments have been carried out to enable a visually impaired student to safely use the television production studio.
309. At present, facilities reflect the school's focus on arts subjects. The school does not plan to expand into a multi-disciplinary institution, but would consider expansion into adjacent fields related to the creative industries (e.g. subject areas in CAH11 - computing or CAH24 – media, journalism and communications). The primary focus is preparing graduates for roles in the creative industries, which may involve, for example MSc qualifications in computing for roles within creative industries. The school's senior managers report that, if in the future the school expands its provision to subjects adjacent to the disciplines in which it is already working, it would expect to go through the same process as it has previously when introducing new provision, including liaising with potential external industry partners to identify subject-specific requirements for staffing and physical facilities. For example, the school has outlined potential plans to validate a PGCE (with qualified teaching status (QTS) validated by an external partner) with a specialism in art and design education. That would therefore make use of existing facilities and expertise, but would also require the introduction of further specialist expertise in secondary education (see paragraphs 151-153, and 186).
310. In addition to physical facilities, the school makes use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Moodle. Moodle is currently used as an information repository, including module-specific teaching materials and school-wide information and booking systems. Moodle facilities include module pages arranged by programme and level, student union pages, library pages, higher education student information pages, employability and enterprise pages, financial advice and academic services pages. Some facilities, including counselling, are not bookable via Moodle and must be accessed through direct contact with a named individual or team.
311. Moodle library pages include the Heritage library catalogue, allowing searches for physical books held in the school campus library. Students may use a recommendation form for making requests for new books not currently in the library, and some inter-library loans are available. The school is not currently eligible for SCONUL (Society of College, National and University Libraries) membership because it is a further education corporation, but it has

ambitions to join SCONUL to allow students access to other institutions' library collections should it obtain university status and therefore become eligible.

312. The team observed that online library resources and electronic catalogues are arranged by subject, accompanied by helpful guides for each course, including links to resources. While this subject-specific categorisation of resources is helpful for inexperienced researchers, such as Level 4 students, in the view of the assessment team, it is less conducive to the interdisciplinary research that would be expected at Level 6 and Level 7, as there is no single search tool that covers all resources and disciplines. A variety of academic search tools, including Athens and Sage, are available, and students are made aware of these at induction. These tools mitigate the limitation to some extent in the view of the assessment team, but where search tools direct students primarily to discipline-specific resources, this makes it more difficult for them to carry out academic research appropriate to Level 6 and 7. The awarding of DAPs would support the school to resolve this issue as it would ultimately enable it to join SCONUL.
313. The school is in the process of transitioning from Moodle to Teams, as its VLE, driven by issues with file-size capacity on Moodle and perceived greater ease of use of Teams and One Drive. The student assignment submission process currently varies depending on local programme practices and VLE capacity. Assignment submissions are made either on Moodle, Teams and One Drive or the file-sending service WeTransfer. This varied practice creates the risk of confusion, and a risk that student work may be mislaid, but the assessment team notes that the adoption of Teams, as is currently underway, will enable all submissions and feedback to be submitted to One Drive, and that, in the short term, programme teams are working hard to support students to mitigate any risk of confusion.
314. In summary, the assessment team found that the school maintains physical, virtual and social learning environments that are safe, accessible, and reliable for every student. The assessment team's on-site visit allowed the team to observe students using these environments with dignity, courtesy and respect.
315. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which robust arrangements exist for ensuring that the learning opportunities provided to those of its students who may be studying at a distance from the organisation are effective. It therefore reviewed the school's current and planned activity in this area, primarily through conversation with senior management.
316. The school does not currently have any programmes validated for distance learning delivery, and has stated that it has no current plans to validate any fully online programmes. For this reason, the assessment team's investigation into the infrastructures required for distance learning were limited. The school's senior management reports that initial discussions have been held into the possible introduction of a PGCE that may involve some blended-learning delivery. It is the assessment team's view that the school's self-critical approach to distance learning delivery, as will be necessary if any future distance learning delivery were to be validated in the future, is demonstrated through the school's recent case study to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), reviewing its adaption of delivery and assessment to online environments during the pandemic. The case study was made available to the assessment team, which considered it demonstrates self-criticality in this area and identifies lessons learned that will inform any future engagements with online delivery.

317. The introduction of Microsoft Teams establishes the potential for online or blended delivery. The Learning Teaching and Quality Committee has noted that, due to the cost of living that affects the affordability of travel to campus, in addition to health issues that prevent some students from attending in person, the school should consider flexible learning. The assessment team noted that some flexible learning opportunities were already in place: during teaching observations, the assessment team observed that five students were attending an in-person class remotely via Zoom as a result of illness and other unforeseen circumstances. The introduction of Teams will further enable students, exceptionally and by agreement with tutors as a reasonable adjustment, to attend classes remotely. The school maintains that face-to-face learning should remain the 'ideal', but that this facility has enabled more inclusive practices that accommodate the needs of students who may, for short periods, be unable to attend campus.
318. The assessment team's experience of the sector is that opportunities for flexibility vary across institutions, with some providers taking a similar approach to the school, in that they allow students to attend remotely by prior arrangement when unable to attend in person. As a result of their not recruiting students on student visas, there is less urgency for the school to produce relevant guidelines on remote attendance that there is elsewhere in the sector. The school's informally agreed practice of permitting remote attendance, as elsewhere in the sector, is increasingly an expectation as a result of home-working practices that were adopted during the covid pandemic, and the school has been able to respond to this expectation through the use of tools that were established as a result of the need for remote learning during covid lockdowns. This flexibility is not yet formally embedded in the school's regulatory frameworks or governance, but this too, can be seen across the sector. It is the assessment team's view that the level of flexibility reflects student expectation, and that, across the sector, new sector norms will emerge in the coming years, enabling the school to consider the appropriateness and the ways in which they may formalise opportunities for exceptional remote attendance.
319. More generally, the assessment team has confidence in the school to implement a more formalised approach to distance learning if or when it chooses to do so. This confidence emanates from the robustness with which the school manages its existing provision, in particular its programme development processes (see paragraphs 275-282), its current digital migration to Teams (see paragraph 313 and 317) and, more generally, its approach to risk management (see paragraph 153).
320. In summary, the assessment team found limited examples of support for distance learning. Where these were in place, however, they were robust and effective, and in line with the needs of students. The team has confidence in the organisation to grow this provision effectively, if or when it chooses to do so.
321. In order to test the extent to which the school ensures that every student is enabled to monitor their progress and further their academic development, the assessment team reviewed personal development plans, learning agreements and tutorial record forms.
322. The assessment team found that students are 'entitled to a minimum of one academic guidance tutorial in each taught term' to support their development. Academic tutorial forms provide a written record of these tutorials, providing explicit identification of 'strengths' and 'areas for improvement' aligned to module learning outcomes.

323. The school's draft regulations, borrowing from existing AUB regulations, state that all students are required to develop and maintain a Personal Development Plan (PDP). Each programme is responsible for determining 'the most appropriate mechanisms through which PDP is introduced, encouraged and monitored'. A sample of three PDPs (one from an undergraduate programme and two from postgraduate programmes) reviewed by the team show a vocational focus, making use of a variety of mechanisms for reflection, including skills audits and progress reviews. The assessment team's view is that the PDPs are an example of good practice, as they encourage students to be mindful of their learning and academic progress, and the vocational focus of these plans is in line with the school's strategic plans.
324. Personal development is further supported at Levels 5, 6 and 7 by learning agreements, which ask students to identify, for each module, how they 'intend to fulfil the module aims and outcomes' while in pursuit of their 'own personal and professional goals and aspirations'; these learning agreements are produced in conversation with module tutors. The assessment team's conversations with students from all undergraduate programmes highlighted the value of these learning agreements: students report that their learning agreements support them to achieve individual and subject-specific goals where content is shared across programmes.
325. At Level 6 and 7, learning agreements form part of assessment, and support students to develop an appropriate individual project with explicit consideration of how their proposed plans align with the learning outcomes. Module handbooks show that learning agreements are introduced at the beginning of the year, developed and monitored throughout the year, and submitted alongside work for assessment, in partial fulfilment of learning outcomes. Examples of learning agreements submitted alongside assignments by Level 6 Fine Art students show evidence of the value of learning agreements. They prompt students to structure their research journey and to explicitly consider important factors contributing to the success of their projects, such as cultural and ethical issues.
326. In preparation for the five-week summer 'shut-down' period when there is no scheduled teaching, reviews of learning agreements ensure that students have an appropriate plan for accessing resources and making independent progress. It is the assessment team's view that these learning agreements play an essential role in ensuring that Level 7 students are adequately prepared for the summer period, thereby mitigating any potential risk that student progress is affected by changes in the availability of staff during this period. In this way, the learning agreement prevents concerns that exist elsewhere in the sector about the impact of postgraduate learning across the third trimester, when there is no undergraduate study taking place and hence staff and resources are less available than at other times of the year.
327. Students may monitor their credit achieved annually, as they are provided with a transcript at the end of each academic year. The provision of this transcript, should the provider achieve DAPs, will be dependent on the school purchasing systems that allow for the production of transcripts (see also B1 – the assessment team is satisfied with the school's proposed approach to transcript production in the case of a successful DAPs application).
328. In summary, the assessment team found that the school ensures every student is enabled to monitor their progress and further their academic development.

329. Overall, the assessment team found evidence of the rigorous approaches taken by the school to ensure a high quality academic experience to all students from all backgrounds, irrespective of their location or mode of study. This is manifest in the quality of the school's learning and teaching, and the environments in which those activities take place, with particular examples of good practice being their use of learning agreements and PDPs.

## Assessment

330. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which the school operates valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought. The team therefore reviewed samples of student work and related feedback produced during the assessment of those samples, from across six programmes, including Levels 4, 5, 6 and 7, and triangulated this evidence with programme and module handbooks, insights from external examiners and the school's APEL/APCL processes.

331. The assessment team saw evidence that the school's academic assessment processes are appropriate and fair. Sample programme handbooks and module handbooks show that assessment tasks are aligned to learning outcomes and appropriate for the level. Sample assessment feedback forms demonstrate that assessment is aligned with learning outcomes, and written feedback comments refer explicitly to every module learning outcomes (See also, B2). The assessment team carried out triangulation of these sample feedback forms with module handbooks to confirm that the assessment criteria considered during assessment are aligned with the published learning outcomes, and that these have been communicated transparently to students.

332. Further evidence that assessment is appropriate and fair is provided by external examiners, who are required to confirm whether 'processes for assessment, examination and the determination of awards sound and fairly conducted'. All external examiners reports for the academic year 2022-23 confirm that this is the case (see paragraph 262).

333. The process of recognising prior learning, either in the form of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL, normally acquired through professional experience), or Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL, prior study on other programmes) is described in the higher education APEL and APCL Procedure, and, in the view of the team, is appropriate and thorough. Sample APEL/APCL assessment shows that appropriate care has been taken to review students' prior learning, with clear indication of the modules, credit value and level against which APCL/APEL credit is claimed. However, in the assessment team's view a minor risk arises from the design of the form, which does not differentiate between APCL and APEL nor prompt claimants to identify whether they are claiming credit for certificated or experiential learning. The risk arising from this lack of differentiation is that staff in theory may be unable to identify the criteria for their review. However, the assessment team's review of sample APCL/APEL reviews found that this risk was not manifested, and did not prevent reviewers from making appropriate judgements. As such, the assessment team considers this to be an area for potential improvement, but that the current approach is not inhibiting the school from meeting evidence requirement B3j of the DAPs criteria.

334. In summary, the assessment team found that the school operates valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning. These enable every

student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

335. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which:
- staff and students engage in dialogue to promote a shared understanding of the basis on which academic judgements are made
  - students are provided with opportunities to develop an understanding of, and the necessary skills to demonstrate, good academic practice.
336. To this end, the team undertook teaching observations, reviewed teaching materials, and reviewed tutorial records.
337. The assessment team found that that staff and students engage in dialogue, through tutorials and 'crits' (a formative review of students' work by tutors and peers), to promote a shared understanding of the basis on which academic judgements are made.
338. During teaching observations, the assessment team observed good practice in the use of tutorial forms. Tutorial records are considered by the assessment team to provide a good example of how students and tutors engage in dialogue about the ways in which their work aligns with learning outcomes and assessment criteria. An example academic tutorial form was provided, showing how these forms record a one-to-one dialogue between student and tutor, aligned explicitly to learning outcomes and requirements of module assessments. The template used for these forms requires staff to identify strengths and weaknesses related to each learning outcomes, thereby enabling students to monitor their progress towards meeting those learning outcomes, and outlining personalised, targeted activities that support student development.
339. In PDPs and learning agreements students are required to audit and manage their skills and knowledge acquisition in alignment with negotiated priorities and learning outcomes. Sample plans provided to the assessment team show how tutors and students have engaged in dialogue and negotiation to develop a shared understanding of how academic judgements will be made in assessment (see paragraphs 323 to 326).
340. The assessment team observed teaching and saw samples of teaching materials across six programmes spanning all levels of study, in which students were provided with opportunities to develop an understanding of, and the necessary skills to demonstrate, good academic practice. For example, the team observed a Level 4 session on Graphic Design, in which students were asked to put into practice some of the theoretical concepts covered in a previous lecture. This demonstrates how the school supports students to demonstrate good academic practice, in this case by showing how theory and practical work can come together within a project.
341. Programme handbooks outline how subject-specific and transferable skills are developed across the three-year undergraduate journey and one-year postgraduate journey, through learning, teaching and assessment. The sample of teaching materials for the dissertation module shows, for example, that students are being instructed in qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection.

342. An understanding of good academic practice is further supported by online library resources and guides, for example, a guide to Harvard referencing, and also through practical and actionable feedback provided to students on their assessments.
343. In summary, the assessment team found that staff and students engage in dialogue to promote a shared understanding of the basis on which academic judgements are made, and that students are provided with opportunities to develop an understanding of, and the necessary skills to demonstrate good academic practice.
344. In order to test the extent to which the school operates processes for preventing, identifying, investigating and responding to unacceptable academic practice, the assessment team reviewed the school's Academic Dishonesty Procedure, and discussed with staff and students how this is understood and applied.
345. The assessment team considered the school's Academic Dishonesty Procedure and found this to be clear, appropriate (although with one area for potential improvement; see paragraph 349), and transparent. It contains clear definitions of three main types of academic dishonesty across types of work that may arise in design and media subjects. The policy identifies persons with responsibility for carrying out academic dishonesty procedures at the school and AUB, with the final 'Completion of Procedures' letter, which communicates to the student the outcome of the investigation, being the responsibility of AUB. The procedure is accessible by students in the school's HE Policies and Procedures on the school's website policies and procedures page. In the event of a successful DAPs application, the school has reported that it intends to update all of its policies, to bring in-house activity currently assigned to AUB; the assessment team is satisfied with the feasibility and credibility of these plans (see paragraphs 57-63 in criterion A1)
346. In the assessment team's meetings with students, they report being familiar with definitions of academic misconduct, reporting that they are sufficiently reminded of the unacceptability of academic dishonesty as a result of the requirement to sign a 'Textual and Visual Plagiarism Disclaimer' in Assessment Submission Forms alongside their work.
347. The assessment team saw email summaries of academic dishonesty cases over the academic year 2022-23. These suggest that investigations have been carried out informally, with students admitting to the offence in all cases, and penalties being imposed that are in line with section 4.3.2 of the Academic Dishonesty Procedure. Where academic dishonesty has been acknowledged in feedback, the student has been given a fail grade against one learning outcome, and capped pass mark overall.
348. Evidence from a more recent case shows that the approach to stage-one cases has been updated. Records from a 2023-24 case show that there are now more formal records being kept of dishonesty cases, including records of the initial allegation, student response, and outcomes. These new records also show a change to the way that outcomes are managed in assessment, with dishonesty no longer associated with a specific learning outcome, but with capping of the grade overall. In the team's view, this is an appropriate approach as it allows a consistent approach to academic dishonesty across programmes and modules where learning outcomes differ.

349. The school's HE Academic Dishonesty Procedure states that, where there are 'sufficient grounds for concern', an Academic Dishonesty Investigative Panel is established. Elsewhere in the sector, it is usual for referral to an Academic Dishonesty Investigative Panel to occur when a student has a record of repeat offences. In the sample provided by the school, no cases were escalated to an Academic Dishonesty Investigative Panel. There is one student who was found to have engaged in academic dishonesty twice, but neither of these allegations had been escalated to an Academic Dishonesty Investigative Panel. The school's Academic Dishonesty Procedure specifies the grounds for escalation to an Academic Dishonesty Investigative Panel, and does not include repeat offences as grounds for escalation. Hence, the treatment of this repeat offence as identical to a first offence is in line with the school's policy, but does mean that there is a risk of multiple repeat offences by a student throughout their studies without escalation of penalties. The school has recognised the need to further consider this approach: the assessment team is satisfied that discussions are underway at the school to review academic dishonesty policy, including in relation to repeat offences from the same student.
350. The team considered the records of the school's most recent meeting of an Academic Dishonesty Investigative Panel, which took place in 2019. In the team's view these records show that the process was implemented fairly, with an appropriate penalty applied. The resulting outcomes were clearly communicated to the student in writing. No cases have been escalated to an Academic Dishonesty Investigative Panel more recently.
351. In summary, the assessment team found that the school operates processes for preventing, identifying, investigating and responding to unacceptable academic practice.
352. In order to test the extent to which processes for marking assessments and for moderating marks are clearly articulated and consistently operated by those involved in the assessment process, the assessment team considered the school's assessment regulations, programme handbooks, module handbooks, and templates during the marking process.
353. As discussed in paragraphs 193 and 255, the manner in which student work is assessed is made clear in the module descriptors that are included in programme handbooks, which constitute the formally validated description of each module, and is further articulated and unpacked for students in module handbooks.
354. The draft school regulations, borrowing from existing AUB regulations, state that 'feedback should be constructive and contribute to the student's learning and development'. The assessment team saw evidence that feedback forms used during academic assessment (see paragraph 331) are conducive to constructive feedback.
355. In order to ensure that marking is fair, consistent, and in line with regulations, as is standard across the sector, the school operates a moderation procedure described as 'verification of work' in AUB assessment regulations. The regulations state that verification of work may take a number of forms depending on the level and nature of assessment, being either team marking, second marking or sampling. The circumstances under which each of these verification methods is applicable is clearly articulated. Evidence of verification is recorded in Summative Module Assessment Records. It is the assessment team's view that this variation in verification methods across different circumstances is appropriate, and in line with the



sector, as it ensures greater scrutiny and, thereby, more comprehensive quality assurance, at the level of the award.

356. The assessment team saw evidence of verification of work in samples of marksheets that record agreed cohort marks in addition to a record of internal double marking. These records provide evidence that verification of work is carried out in line with AUB assessment regulations, and further evidencing that there are internal moderation processes in place to ensure that marks are appropriate and fair.
357. In summary, the assessment team found that processes for marking assessments and for moderating marks are clearly articulated and consistently operated by those involved in the assessment process.
358. Overall, the assessment team's view was that the school's approach to assessment is effective and contributes to a high quality academic experience for students, irrespective of their background. There is a range of mechanisms in place to ensure that assessment processes are fair and consistent, as confirmed through internal moderation and reports from independent external examiners. The fairness and transparency of this process is assured through direct engagement with students throughout their learning, particularly through tutorials.

## **External examining**

359. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which the school:
- makes scrupulous use of external examiners in the moderation of assessment tasks and student-assessed work
  - gives full and serious consideration to the comments and recommendations contained in external examiners' reports
  - provides external examiners with a considered and timely response to their comments and recommendations.
360. The team therefore reviewed the ways in which the school works with external examiners, reviewed external examiners' reports and the school's responses to them.
361. 2022-23 reports from external examiners show that they are asked to confirm approval of a range of standards across the whole assessment process, including the appropriateness of the assignments and of the assessment process from marking to internal verification. They are invited to comment on the standard of student work and the assessment process. External examiners' reporting process and involvement in maintenance of academic standards is discussed in more detail in relation to criterion B2, paragraphs 220-221 and 259-263, where evidence is shown in support of the assessment team's view that external examiners' reports provide sufficient assurance of the maintenance of standards.
362. The assessment team found that external examiners receive a written response from the HE quality manager. An internal summary of external examiners' reports makes recommendations for development, including recommendations related to assessment. External examiners' reports inform annual programme reviews, and periodic reviews.

363. The assessment team noted one example of how the school is responding to feedback from external examiners to ensure that standards are aligned with the sector and FHEQs: The school supplied a response to a 2020-21 external examiner's report. This observed that 'more research methodologies to be promoted and utilised rather than heavy reliance on online research. Using the in-house archive, interviews with professionals, gallery/exhibition/show evidence, books and journals should all be evident'. The school acknowledged that, during the pandemic, students had become increasingly reliant on online sources.
364. While this response focuses on the use of online sources as opposed to the need for the promotion of more research methodologies, there is progress evident in this area. Samples of student work from the dissertation module show that students are now engaging in primary research, and appropriate secondary research, consulting academic journals, readers and monographs appropriate to their disciplines. Further, during observation of teaching, the assessment team observed that students are now making use of physical books in their learning.
365. External examiners are currently employed by AUB and reports are written on AUB templates. The school's senior management team has verbally acknowledged the need to take over recruitment of external examiners in the case of DAPs being awarded, and have expressed plans to recruit additional 'award external examiners' who will oversee the team of external examiners after transition. The proposed role of Award External Examiner, in the view of the assessment team, will be an effective way to help ensure that the school's independent approach to managing external examiners is appropriate in the event of a successful DAPs application.
366. In summary, the assessment team found that the school makes scrupulous use of external examiners in the moderation of assessment tasks and student-assessed work. The school gives full and serious consideration to the comments and recommendations contained in external examiners' reports and provides external examiners with a considered and timely response to their comments and recommendations.
367. Overall, it is the assessment team's view that the school's approach to external examining contributes to ensuring that assessment practices are rigorous, fair, appropriate and in line with the sector. The school gives due consideration to feedback from external examiners in the ongoing enhancement of their programmes and processes. This in turn contributes to the high quality academic experience provided by the school to all students from all backgrounds

### **Academic appeals and complaints**

368. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which:
- the school has effective procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of the academic experience
  - these procedures are fair, accessible, timely and enable enhancement
  - appropriate action is taken following an appeal or complaint.

369. The team therefore reviewed the school's Academic Appeals Procedure and the Student Complaints Policy, and reviewed recent examples of appeals and complaints in the last two years.
370. The circumstances under which a student may appeal are listed in AUB's Academic Appeals Procedure, and these are currently in the process of being carried over to the school's own draft regulations that it plans to adopt in the case that DAPs are awarded (see paragraphs 178-180). The similarity between the existing AUB and school's own draft appeals process is consistent with the school's stated objective to make minimal changes to their academic regulations, as outlined in paragraph 181. In the event of a successful DAPs application, the school will have the opportunity to further develop its new regulations and policies allow for students to appeal a referral without the need for significant changes to existing policies and practices.
371. Full details of the appeals process, as described in AUB's Academic Appeals Procedure, are accessible by students in the school's higher education policies and procedures on the school's website's policies and procedures page. The availability of the procedure via this publicly accessible website contributes to ensuring the transparency of the appeals process.
372. The Student Complaints Policy includes, appropriately in the view of the assessment team, steps for informal complaint (stage one) and escalation to formal complaint (stage two and stage three). The policy currently states that students can appeal to AUB if not satisfied with the resolution of complaint by the school. The Student Complaints Policy is described in the school document, 'Policies & Procedures Related to Student Safeguarding, Support and Wellbeing', which is in turn accessible on the school website's policies and procedures page. This document includes, as appendices, a flow diagram illustrating the stages of student complaints, and the form for lodging a complaint. The school has identified that the current complaints policy will need to be updated for new students studying on the school's programmes, in order for the final stage of a complaint to be reviewed independently of AUB.
373. Records of student appeal investigations show that, in the view of the assessment team, they have been handled appropriately and thoroughly. Similarly, records of student complaint investigations show that, in the view of the team, they have been handled appropriately and thoroughly.
374. The assessment team viewed records of an upheld appeal against failure for non-submission. These records show that the review of the student's appeal considered the student's evidence of their exceptional circumstances, affecting their ability to submit work for assessment, and that an appropriate decision was taken to offer the student an additional attempt at assessment.
375. Examples were also provided of cases where no action was taken in response to an appeal or complaint. In the view of the team this decision was sound, following thorough investigation of evidence, which showed that there were no grounds for appeal or complaint. These conclusions have been explained in writing to the student.
376. In summary, the assessment team found that the school has effective procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of the academic

experience, that these procedures are fair, accessible, timely and enable enhancement, and that appropriate action is taken following an appeal or complaint.

377. Overall, the assessment team concluded that policies and processes governing complaints and appeals are sound and in line with the sector. Appropriate action has been taken in response to examples of complaints and appeals, thereby ensuring that students have appropriate and transparent opportunities to challenge any decisions relating to the awarding of qualifications or the quality of their learning experience. This in turn enables the school to offer a high quality academic experience to all students by providing the opportunity for students to have a voice if they feel that issues out of their control have impacted on their abilities to succeed.

## **Conclusions**

378. From the above evidence, the assessment team concluded that the school is able to design and deliver courses and qualifications that provide a high quality academic experience to all students from all backgrounds, irrespective of their location, mode of study, academic subject, protected characteristics, previous educational background or nationality, and that their learning opportunities are consistently and rigorously quality assured.

379. In the view of the assessment team the school's facilities are excellent, and there is capacity for further growth in cohort sizes without compromising on student access to learning spaces or resources. The school's common undergraduate programme aims and learning outcomes, and common Level 6 structure, aligns with its strategy of encouraging cross-programme collaboration, and is delivered with subject specificity and allows for individual student journeys. Within this common framework, students are supported to achieve subject-specific, vocationally related and transferable skills, and to achieve credit as appropriate for demonstration of those skills.

380. The assessment team concluded that assessment processes are robust and fair, that good use is made of external examiners, and that transparent and fair processes are in place to enable and resolve appeals and complaints.

381. As such, the assessment team concluded that the school meets criterion B3.

# Assessment of DAPs Criterion C: Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of staff

## Criterion C1: The role of academic and professional staff

### Advice to the OfS

382. The assessment team's view is that the school meets Criterion C1: Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of staff because it meets sub-criteria C1.1.
383. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows, in summary, that the school has appropriate numbers of staff to teach its students, and also because everyone involved in teaching or supporting student learning, and in the assessment of student work, is appropriately qualified, supported and developed to the level(s) and subject(s) of the qualifications being awarded.
384. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside other relevant information.

**C1.1 An organisation granted powers to award degrees assures itself that it has appropriate numbers of staff to teach its students. Everyone involved in teaching or supporting student learning, and in the assessment of student work, is appropriately qualified, supported and developed to the level(s) and subject(s) of the qualifications being awarded.**

### Reasoning

385. To determine whether staff involved in teaching or supporting student learning, and in the assessment of student work have relevant learning, teaching and assessment practices that are informed by reflection, evaluation of professional practice, and subject-specific and educational scholarship, the assessment team considered the school's strategic plan and academic strategy, a sample of programme specifications, as well as programme and module handbooks, and a sample of students' assessed work. The sample comprised a total of six programme handbooks, consisting of four undergraduate and two postgraduate handbooks. From these selected programmes, the sample included one handbook for a Level 4 module, one for a Level 5 module, two for Level 6 modules, and two for Level 7 modules. Additionally, assessed student work associated with the selected modules was included in the sample, spanning the full range of grades. The constructed samples were representative because they included a comprehensive combination of levels of study and, where relevant, student grades across six different programmes offered by the school. The team also met with teaching staff and observed teaching sessions across all levels during their visit to the school.
386. The school's strategic plan 2019 to 2024 sets the achievement of 'demonstrably enhanced impact of scholarly activity on both pedagogy and curriculum development' as one of its key strategic objectives, supported by 'a well-qualified staff team with the necessary teaching, specialist and leadership skills'. The assessment team noted that the school's Academic Strategy 2021-24 serves as a guiding framework for the development of relevant learning, teaching, and assessment practices that are informed by reflection, evaluation of

professional practice, and subject-specific and educational scholarship. For example, it identifies 'scholarly activity and research-led pedagogical enhancements' as key drivers of its approach to curriculum development.

387. The team's review of a sample of programme specifications, as well as programme and module handbooks showed that students engage in collaborative activities aligned with module and programme content throughout the curriculum, supported by relevant teaching strategies such as projects, tutorials, critiques, lectures, seminars, workshops, and demonstrations. A rich variety of relevant assessment practices are also used, including written assignments, portfolio assessments, research projects, and other project-based assessments. This was additionally confirmed by the assessment team through several teaching observation sessions during their second visit to the school.
388. At their meeting with the assessment team, members of academic staff gave examples of how these practices are informed by reflection, evaluation, and subject-specific and educational scholarship, and confirmed that they have opportunities to consider developments and enhancements in teaching, learning and assessment. These included, for instance, the preparation of staff publications, participation in Industry Liaison Groups, attendance at internal and external conferences, and engagement with external partners, such as the Hartlepool Art Gallery and Museum. This meeting was attended by a representative sample of 10 (32 per cent) members of teaching staff from the school, because it involved Lecturer (Creative Practitioners), Senior Lecturers, Creative Technicians, and Senior Creative Technicians at all grades from across 11 different undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The team thus formed the view that all staff involved in teaching or supporting learning, and in the assessment of student work, have relevant learning, teaching and assessment practices that are informed by reflection, evaluation of professional practice, and subject-specific and educational scholarship.
389. The team sought to determine whether staff involved in teaching or supporting student learning, and in the assessment of student work have academic and, where applicable, professional expertise, and to identify the means by which they have active engagement with the pedagogic development of their discipline knowledge. It therefore examined:
- the school's self-assessment document
  - information provided by the school on the qualifications held by staff
  - a sample of staff CVs
  - the school's scholarship activity and research reports.
390. The sample of staff CVs reviewed by the team was representative because it included 67 current CVs for staff in senior management roles, teaching staff, and professional services or technical staff who support student learning. The sample included staff on permanent contracts at 0.5 FTE or higher at all grade levels, and staff with and without key programme management responsibilities. The team also met with teaching staff during their visit to the school.
391. The assessment team noted that, as shown by self-assessment document, the information provided by the school on the qualifications held by staff, and the staff CVs reviewed by the

team, in the view of the assessment team, have relevant academic and, where applicable, professional expertise and specialist industry experience. Among these staff, three (10 per cent) hold Level 8 qualifications, 23 (74 per cent) hold qualifications at Level 7, and 23 (74 per cent) hold teaching qualifications. All but one member of the teaching staff hold academic qualifications at a level equal to or higher than the highest level they teach. These staff are supported by seven full-time and two part-time creative technicians, all of whom have substantial industry experience, with five (56 per cent) creative technicians holding Level 7 qualifications and three (33 per cent) having a teaching qualification.

392. The assessment team also noted that a total of 19 (61 per cent) members of teaching staff have been professionally recognised as associate fellows or fellows by Advance HE and two academic managers are principal fellows. Additionally, the team observed that 12 (39 per cent) members of teaching staff are members of a subject association, learned society, or professional body, also demonstrating active engagement with the pedagogic development of their discipline knowledge. This engagement was also evident from the team's review of the school's SAR reports, which included work on the pedagogical developments of the school's subject areas, such as the use of assistive digital technology in education, the use of collaboration initiatives as an enabler of digital engagement and participation, the development of a library of natural dyes, or miniature painting.

393. Furthermore, the staff across the school hold memberships with various arts and education organisations, such as:

- The United Kingdom Arts and Design Institutions Association
- Guild HE
- Advance HE
- The Council for Higher Education in Art and Design
- The NSEAD
- the Royal Society of Arts.

394. This facilitates opportunities for its staff to engage actively in the pedagogical development of arts and design education. Academic staff at the school commented positively on the uptake of such opportunities during their meeting with the assessment team. The team thus came to the view that staff have academic and (where applicable) professional expertise, as well as active engagement with the pedagogic development of their discipline knowledge.

395. To confirm that staff involved in teaching, learning and assessment have understanding of current research and advanced scholarship in their discipline and that such knowledge and understanding directly inform and enhance their teaching, the team reviewed:

- the school's academic strategy
- information provided by the school on the qualifications held by staff
- staff CVs

- the school's scholarship activity and research reports
- the Scholarly Activity and Research Operational Plan
- the school's online journal on the scholarly activity and research currently undertaken by its staff and students

16 external examiner reports from across the last three academic years, including the reports from the most recent cycle.

396. The team also met with senior staff and students and observed teaching sessions across all levels during their visit to the school. This evidence was also reviewed to confirm that such staff have active engagement with research and/or advanced scholarship to a level commensurate with the level and subject of the qualifications offered.
397. The school's Academic Strategy 2021-24 identifies the continued investment in its staff as one of its 12 academic objectives, including support for 'scholarly activity in the form of industry practice and research associated with creative pedagogical theory'. The assessment team's review of the information provided by the school on the qualifications held by staff shows that 29 (94 per cent) members of teaching staff identify their creative output and professional practice as evidence of their understanding of current research and advanced scholarship in their discipline areas. The team was able to cross-reference this evidence against staff CVs, also noting that the school's scholarship activity and research reports included examples of the current research and advanced scholarship activity by staff in the school, such as staff publications and presentations at external conferences, the curated exhibition '1960s Fashionista: The Marguerite Elliot Collection' at the Museum of Hartlepool, and 'Nightmare'24', a conference organised by the school exploring the representation of mental health in the horror genre from both cinematic and audience perspectives.
398. The information provided by the school on the qualifications held by staff also lists outputs from staff research and advanced scholarship activities, including journal articles, book chapters, and conference papers. The school has nevertheless identified the need to continue to increase the scholarship activity and research of its staff, and has credible plans in place to achieve this, for instance, through the use of a Scholarly Activity and Research Operational Plan, and the support from the school's newly formed Research Committee.
399. The school maintains an online journal on the scholarly activity and research currently undertaken by its staff and students, entitled Perspectives in Art and Design.<sup>12</sup> This journal, which covers both written and practice-based research, discusses novel approaches to current debates in arts education, interpretations on written and visual practice, debates in art and design history, and issues of creative pedagogy. The team found this journal to be an effective repository of current active engagement with research and/or advanced scholarship taking place at the school.
400. The assessment team noted that the sample of external examiner reports show that the staff's knowledge and understanding of current research and advanced scholarship in their

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<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.northernperspectives.co.uk>.



discipline areas directly informs and enhances their teaching. For example, these reports identify areas of good practice such as:

- embedding research ethics into projects
- preparing postgraduate students to undertake research projects independently
- fostering the students' ability to contextualise their research and develop it into practice
- enabling students to synthesise research methodologies and theories to produce high quality artistic outputs.

401. The students interviewed by the team provided confirmation that, in their view, the staff's knowledge and understanding of current research and advanced scholarship, as well as their industry experience and professional practice, was making a valuable contribution to the students' own learning, for instance, through the ability of teaching staff to identify and signpost them to relevant primary and secondary sources for further research. This was also confirmed by the team's observation of teaching sessions across all levels during its second visit to the provider, which included references to current research and advanced scholarship activity. The team thus concluded that, although research and advanced scholarly activity is currently more limited than would normally be the case at larger, research-intensive institutions (see paragraphs 102 to 105), all staff involved in teaching, learning and assessment have an understanding of current research and advanced scholarship in their discipline, and that such knowledge and understanding directly inform and enhance their teaching. This evidence also gave the team confidence that such staff have active engagement with research and/or advanced scholarship to a level commensurate with the level and subject of the qualifications offered.

402. To assess whether staff have opportunities to engage in reflection and evaluation of their learning, teaching and assessment practice, and development opportunities aimed at enabling them to enhance their practice and scholarship, the team looked at:

- evidence relating to responses to external examiners
- the Combined Report from the Assessment Standardisation
- recent papers from Programme Strategic Meetings
- annual programme reviews
- the staff appraisal process
- the academic strategy
- the 2022-2023 Annual Report
- the information provided by the school on the qualifications held by staff.

403. The team also met with professional services and teaching staff during their visit to the school.

404. The assessment team noted that staff at the school engage in reflection of their learning, teaching, and assessment practice through opportunities such as:

- engagement with external examiners
- the school's Annual Verification Exercise (an annual exercise which provides assurance that the marking criteria are being applied consistently across all programmes in the school, and that summative assessment feedback reliably reflects the level of achievement linked to the learning outcomes)
- Programme Strategic Meetings
- the Annual Programme Review
- staff appraisal processes.

405. For example, the Annual Programme Review process requires that all programmes of study at the school undergo review annually to ensure that standards are maintained, and that the quality of learning opportunities is monitored and improved where necessary. The team's examination of a sample of 11 Annual Programme Review reports showed that staff engage in self-critical reflection and evaluation of their own educational practices. This aims to introduce enhancements to, and share good practice across, the school's programmes, such as the creation of closer ties with industry, the introduction of year group 'Friday assemblies' to facilitate collaboration across modules, and the establishment of annual study visits and field trips.

406. This process is also supported by a series of programme strategic meetings, which complement annual programme reviews and facilitate more in-depth reflective and evaluative discussions by teaching staff on all aspects of their programmes. Furthermore, the team's review of a sample of five redacted staff appraisal forms showed that this process offers structured opportunities for teaching staff to reflect on and evaluate in a supportive setting their own learning, teaching, and assessment practice with their line manager.

407. The Academic Strategy 2021-24 makes explicit the school's commitment to support academic staff to achieve postgraduate qualifications, attend external conferences, and gain professional recognition with Advance HE. The school has identified this scheme as an appropriate way to support the professional development of its staff and, in the team's view, reflects the approach taken by other providers of higher education. All senior lecturers in the school hold external recognition with Advance HE. The information provided by the school on the qualifications held by staff lists 17 distinct instances of development opportunities aimed at enabling staff to enhance their practice and scholarship, including, for instance, through financial and workload support towards obtaining further academic qualifications and attending relevant conferences or subject networks. The assessment team was also able to confirm this at their meetings with professional services and teaching staff during the visit to the school, who pointed to their active involvement with the school's Industry Liaison Groups as another effective professional development opportunity. The team thus formed the view that staff have opportunities to engage in reflection and evaluation of their learning, teaching and assessment practice, as well as development opportunities aimed at enabling them to enhance their practice and scholarship.

408. To verify whether staff have opportunities to gain experience in curriculum development and assessment design and to engage with the activities of other higher education providers, the team considered:

- the school's records on the validation of the BA (Hons) Animation programme
- minutes of the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee
- the information provided by the school on the qualifications held by staff
- the school's academic strategy
- a sample of staff CVs.

409. The sample of staff CVs reviewed by the team was representative because it included 67 current CVs for staff in senior management roles, teaching staff, and professional services or technical staff who support student learning. The sample included staff on permanent contracts at 0.5 FTE or higher at all grade levels, and staff with and without key programme management responsibilities. The team also met with teaching staff during its visit to the school. This evidence was also reviewed to determine whether staff with key programme management responsibilities have relevant experience of curriculum development and assessment design, and relevant engagement with the activities of other providers of higher education.

410. The school actively reviews and updates its degree programmes and staff gain direct experience of curriculum and assessment design through participation in these programme approval and review processes. For instance, the school's records on the validation of the BA (Hons) Animation programme demonstrate staff involvement in the design of curricula, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment practices. Thus, for example, staff participate in curriculum development committees where they contribute ideas, academic expertise, and feedback on the structure and content of programmes. They engage in collaborative discussions to devise innovative teaching methods and learning approaches tailored to the needs of their students, also playing a pivotal role in shaping assessment practices by designing assessment tasks that align with intended learning outcomes and promote meaningful evaluation of student learning. In the case of the BA (Hons) Animation programme, this included, for instance, establishing 'successful links and engagement with industry' and ensuring that the programme 'builds on individual skills' as part of curriculum and assessment design.

411. The minutes and papers of the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee reviewed by the team also demonstrate that staff engage in discussion and development of curriculum and assessment. These included, for example:

- discussions on 'visual plagiarism'
- assessment standardisation, ensuring that marking criteria are 'being applied consistently across all programmes, and that summative assessment feedback reliably reflects the level of achievement'

- the school's approach to redefining undergraduate dissertations to better meet the evolving needs of students and graduate employers
- the appropriate use of word counts and academic referencing in student assessments
- the opportunities and challenges posed by Generative AI in higher education.

412. The team found that these discussions were effective because they were grounded in evidence and informed by relevant expertise and had clearly defined objectives leading to actionable outcomes.
413. Furthermore, the information provided by the school on the qualifications held by staff records 14 (45 per cent) members of teaching staff as having experience of curriculum development for taught programmes, and 29 (94 per cent) as having experience of assessment design or assessment delivery for taught programmes. This information also shows that all members of staff with key programme management responsibilities have that experience and expertise.
414. The Academic Strategy 2021-24 captures the school's commitment to supporting academic staff to engage with the activities of other providers of higher education. The information provided by the school on the qualifications held by staff and the staff CVs reviewed by the team show that 9 (29 per cent) members of teaching staff have engagement with the activities of other higher education organisations, for instance, as external examiners, reviewers, or members of validation panels for taught programmes. The team considered this percentage appropriate for the size of the school and comparable to that of other providers of higher education.
415. These documents also demonstrate that a significant proportion of senior lecturers and faculty leaders at the school, as members of staff with key programme management responsibilities, engage in the activities of other providers of higher education. This level of staff expertise and external engagement was also confirmed at the team's meeting with staff during their visit to the school. The team formed the view that staff, including those with key programme management responsibilities, have opportunities to gain experience in curriculum development and assessment design and to engage with the activities of other higher education providers.
416. To confirm that staff involved in assessment of student work have expertise in providing feedback on assessment, which is timely, constructive and developmental, the team reviewed the school's Regulatory Framework and Undergraduate Assessment Regulations, a sample of 79 summative assessment feedback forms, and a sample of 11 external examiner reports consisting of all the reports from the most recent assessment cycle. As noted above, the sample reviewed by the assessment team comprised a total of six programme handbooks, consisting of four undergraduate and two postgraduate handbooks. From these selected programmes, the sample included one handbook for a Level 4 module, one for a Level 5 module, two for Level 6 modules, and two for Level 7 modules. Assessed student work associated with the selected modules was included in the sample, spanning the full range of grades. The constructed samples were representative because they included a comprehensive combination of levels of study and, where relevant, student grades across six

different programmes offered by the school. The team also met with students during their on-site visit.

417. The school's Assessment Regulations require staff to provide feedback that is 'constructive' and 'timely', ensuring that it contributes to 'the student's learning and development'. The team's review of a sample of summative assessment feedback forms showed that staff comments reference performance against the learning outcomes and consistently provide effective guidance on how the students' work can continue to improve. This was additionally confirmed at the team's meeting with students, who commented positively on the quality, developmental nature, and timeliness of the academic feedback they receive.
418. A review of a sample of external examiners reports provided further confirmation to the team that staff involved in assessment of student work have expertise in providing feedback on assessment, which is timely, constructive, and developmental. Typical statements about feedback include:
- 'supportive and accurate, allowing critical reflection'
  - 'particularly good in terms of how it utilises a system of feeding forward'
  - 'even high achieving students are provided with a means of discerning how their work and practice might be improved in subsequent assessments'
  - 'the feedback was well designed, supportive, offering clear guidance on why the award was given, and feed forward to show how each level of assessment could be improved', 'feedback is supportive at all levels across the programme'
  - 'feedback is supportive and focused and provides students with clear guidance on how they can improve their work'
  - 'feedback links to the learning outcomes with supporting advice for further improvement'.
419. The team thus formed the view that staff at the school have expertise in providing feedback on assessment, which is timely, constructive, and developmental.
420. To establish how the organisation assesses the skills and expertise required to teach all students and the appropriate staff/student ratios, the team examined:
- the terms of reference of the Academic Board
  - the Academic Board Schedule of Business
  - meeting papers and minutes of the Academic Board
  - supporting documents for the staff appraisal process
  - a sample of five recent staff appraisal forms
421. The team also observed a meeting of the Academic Board and met with staff during their visit to the school.

422. The school's Academic Board assesses the skills and expertise required to teach all students and the appropriate staff/student ratios using information gathered, for example, from the school's operational plans, annual programme reviews and programme strategy meetings. The assessment team examined the Academic Board's Schedule of Business and found that it regularly reviews and monitors areas such as the scholarly activity and research, and the Annual Programme Review action plans.
423. The team further inspected a sample of meeting papers and minutes of the Academic Board which showed that the school's approach was rigorous. For instance, the team observed the discussion at the Academic Board during its consideration of the business case approval for the BA (Hons) Interior Design programme. It noted that there was careful consideration of the planning and resource information provided, including the number of staff required to deliver the programme and their skills and expertise.
424. The staff appraisal process also enables faculty leaders and HR to ensure that staff continue to have the required skills and expertise for their role. The assessment team met with senior staff at the school during their visits to the provider, who were able to articulate credible plans for continued investment in both academic and professional services staff in the future. The team concluded that the school has made a rigorous assessment of the skills and expertise required to teach all students and the appropriate staff/student ratios.
425. To confirm whether the organisation has appropriate staff recruitment practices, the team looked at evidence relating to the Staff Safer Recruitment Selection and Appointment policy, the HR Policies and Procedures Handbooks, the school's Equality and Diversity Policy, and the school's recent selection and recruitment documentation for the roles of faculty leader and creative technician.
426. The assessment team's review of the Staff Safer Recruitment Selection and Appointment policy and the HR Policies and Procedures Handbooks, showed that the organisation has appropriate staff recruitment practices. For example, these documents express a clear commitment to observing all relevant statutory requirements and guidance associated with employment legislation during the recruitment process. They also ensure that candidates are appointed based solely on their ability to meet the requirements of their posts, in alignment with the school's Equality and Diversity Policy.
427. Thus, in line with the school's policies and procedures, the team found that clear job descriptions and person specifications are prepared, outlining the title of the post as well as its duties and responsibilities. Candidates must produce documentary evidence of relevant qualifications during the interview stage. The team examined a sample of the school's selection and recruitment documentation for the roles of faculty leader and creative technician, comparing both job descriptions and job advertisements against the applications and CVs submitted by the staff appointed to these roles. It found that the expectations set by the Staff Safer Recruitment Selection and Appointment policy were met. This gave the team confidence that the school has appropriate staff recruitment practices.

## Conclusions

428. The team found that all staff involved in teaching or supporting learning and in the assessment of student work have learning, teaching and assessment practices and, where

applicable, professional expertise that are informed by reflection, evaluation of professional practice, and subject-specific and educational scholarship.

429. The school offers its staff opportunities to reflect on, evaluate and develop their practice and scholarship, and actively supports its staff to gain experience in curriculum development and assessment design and to engage with the activities of other higher education providers, including those with key programme management responsibilities. A review of the evidence also showed that the school has made a rigorous assessment, overseen by its Academic Board, of the skills and expertise required to teach all students and the appropriate staff-student ratios. It has clear and detailed policies for the recruitment of staff.
430. Therefore, the assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion C1.

# Assessment of DAPs Criterion D: Environment for supporting students

## Criterion D1: Enabling student development and achievement

### Advice to the OfS

431. The assessment team's view is that the school meets Criterion D1: Environment for supporting students because it meets sub-criteria D1.1.
432. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows, in summary, that the school has in place, monitors and evaluates arrangements and resources which enable its students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.
433. This view is based specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside other relevant information.

**D1.1: Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

### Advice to the OfS

434. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion D1.1 because it has in place, monitors and evaluates arrangements and resources which enable its students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.
435. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows that the school meets the evidence requirements for D1.1 and any other relevant evidence requirements.

### Reasoning

436. To establish whether the school takes a comprehensive strategic and operational approach to determine and evaluate how it enables student development and achievement for its diverse body of students, the team analysed:
- the school's academic strategy and strategic plan
  - the terms of reference of the Academic Board
  - the Academic Board's Schedule of Business
  - the terms of reference of the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee
  - the school's operational plans
  - meeting papers and minutes of the Academic Board
  - the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee



437. The school's approach to student development and achievement is articulated in its strategic plans, which set out a clear vision for the student experience and the means to achieve that vision. For example, the Academic Strategy 2021-24 places the 'students' personal development at the centre of their learning experience' by, for instance, seeking to provide 'opportunities for personal journey development', as well as through the 'development of employability and creative professional skills'.
438. Additionally, the school's strategic objectives include achieving 'increased externality aligned to careers development and employability skills for learners at every level of the school' through links with industry, reviewing and developing its curriculum offer 'to ensure personal development is at the centre of every student's learning experience,' and fostering 'the collaborative use of [...] learning resources, both physical and virtual,' taking advantage of new facilities and increased investment in learning technology.
439. The school's strategic plan 2019-24 also prioritises the continuous improvement of the student experience, seeking to leverage the quality of its student services to further enhance, for example, the 'general life skills' and wellbeing of its diverse body of students.
440. As the most senior academic body of the school, the Academic Board is responsible for providing academic governance in relation to both academic standards and quality, and the student experience. The assessment team examined the Academic Board's Schedule of Business and found that the board determines and evaluates how it enables student development and achievement for its diverse body of students by regularly reviewing a wide range of relevant information, such as:
- student retention and achievement rates
  - the results of the Graduate Outcomes Survey
  - summaries of student feedback from Student Assemblies and Programme Boards of Study
  - developments in learning resources.
441. The school's Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee also considers 'issues that have implications for teaching, learning and assessment across the school,' provides a forum for the consideration of 'matters relating to the provision of learning resources,' and reviews 'evidence of students' academic experience,' overseeing 'the school's initiatives to ensure its continual improvement'. For example, this committee receives regular reports on the school's implementation of the operational plans which are in place to deliver its academic strategy, making recommendations to the Academic Board as appropriate.
442. The team further assessed the school's approach by examining the school's operational plans, and meeting papers and minutes of the Academic Board and the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. The team noted that these documents offered evidence of a comprehensive approach to enabling student development and achievement as they included detailed discussions of, for instance, the allocation of resources, consideration of risk factors, and a robust analysis of quantitative and qualitative performance data to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the school's strategies. The documentation also showed that the operational plans included clear objectives, and that regular progress updates were

being sought and provided. The assessment team thus formed the view that the school takes a comprehensive strategic and operational approach to determine and evaluate how it enables student development and achievement for its diverse body of students.

443. To determine whether students are advised about, and inducted into, their study programmes in an effective way and account is taken of different students' choices and needs, the team analysed:

- the school's student charter
- the school's website and online prospectus
- recent open day presentation materials
- the school's HE Policies and Procedures Handbook
- the Admissions Policy
- the HE Admissions Procedure
- the HE Student Induction Procedure
- an Induction Week Skeleton Timetable
- the Health and Safety Handbook
- the Induction Checklist
- a set of meeting notes of the Induction Working Group
- the HE Quality Assurance Handbook, and module and programme handbooks.

444. The team also met with senior staff and students during its visit to the school.

445. The expectation that students will have access to accurate information about their programme of study, as well as relevant policies and procedures is enshrined in The Northern School of Art's Student Charter. In line with this expectation, students are advised about and inducted into their study programme in a variety of ways. For example, the school's website (<https://northernart.ac.uk/>) provides a range of information on study programmes and support services for prospective students. The school's prospectus, which is available online (<https://northernart.ac.uk/prospectus>), and open day presentations also provide useful information for prospective students about their programmes and key aspects of student life at the school, as well as a detailed guidance on the admissions process. The school uses Moodle as its VLE platform for enabling access to learning and teaching materials, programme-related information, handbooks, and student-facing policies and procedures.

446. The assessment team noted that these sources of information are accessible, detailed, accurate and current. The team also noted that the individual needs of students, for instance, in relation to additional learning support, are identified and assessed during the admissions process. Thus, for example, the school's HE Admissions Policy explicitly references 'a range

of support mechanisms to encourage applications from, and subsequent retention of, students from under-represented groups', including accommodation, pastoral, and disability support, which was additionally confirmed during the team's meeting with senior staff.

447. The assessment team noted that the school implements a comprehensive HE Student Induction Procedure designed to facilitate the students' successful transition into higher education. Faculty leaders are tasked with delivering the induction activities for their programmes in collaboration with their staff teams. The team reviewed an Induction Week Skeleton Timetable, which showed that students are given essential information about their programmes of study and are offered structured opportunities to familiarise themselves with the learning environment and resources, as well as with the support services available on campus and with relevant health and safety procedures.
448. The team also found that students are asked to complete an Induction Checklist, further enabling them to identify any additional academic or support needs. The effectiveness of the induction activities at the school is monitored by the vice-principal (higher education) and the Induction Working Group. The assessment team's review of a set of meeting minutes of the Induction Working Group showed that this group exercises effective operational oversight of the induction arrangements at the school, because they evidence a proactive approach to monitoring and evaluation, with mechanisms in place to ensure that operational plans are adaptive and aligned with the school's objectives.
449. The assessment team was able to confirm that all students receive module and programme handbooks as part of their academic induction to the school. A review of these handbooks showed that they provided accessible, detailed, accurate and current information about the students' programmes of study. They included, for example, programme and module content, learning outcomes, learning and teaching strategies, marking and assessment, key academic policies, and administrative services to support students.
450. The team met with undergraduate and postgraduate students during its visit to the school, who confirmed that the information they had received about their programmes of study was comprehensive, accurate, and took account of their personal circumstances. The students the team interviewed also expressed strong satisfaction with the arrangements for academic induction at the school. The team thus formed the view that students at the school are advised about, and inducted into, their study programmes in an effective way, and that account is taken of their different choices and needs.
451. To assess whether the effectiveness of student and staff advisory, support and counselling services is monitored, and any resource needs arising are considered, the team analysed:
- the school's self-assessment document
  - the job descriptions for the HE quality manager, student engagement manager, and academic registrar
  - the Student Representative Guide for Student Assemblies
  - recent annual programme reviews
  - recent minutes and papers of the Academic Board

- the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee.
452. The team also observed a meeting of the school's Academic Board and met with students and senior staff during their visit to the provider.
453. The school offers a comprehensive set of student support services, including the Academic Registry, HE Academic Support, Employability and Enterprise, Wellbeing and Advice, the library, IT, and Catering. The school employs staff in professional services roles to support this activity, such as a HE quality manager, an academic registrar, a student services manager, a student engagement manager, an employability and creative industry liaison manager, librarians, student advisers, and counsellors.
454. The assessment team noted that the school monitors the effectiveness of its student and staff advisory, support and counselling services through such feedback mechanisms as student assemblies, annual programme reviews, the Student Perception Survey, and the NSS, with reports being considered through the school's deliberative committee structures, including both the Academic Board and the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. The team examined this documentation and found that the school's monitoring of the effectiveness of these services is robust, it involves a regular and systematic review of their performance, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative information, and includes consideration of appropriate resourcing needs.
455. For example, the team observed a recent meeting of the Academic Board where the risk arising from the waiting list to access counselling services was highlighted. This also reflected the feedback from some students interviewed by the team during the visit, who noted that, while generally of high quality, the school's counselling services were not able to meet the current level of demand for these services. Careful consideration of this issue by the school has led to the planned increase to the counselling services staff team (with a new student counsellor set to join in June 2024), as well as investment in the Student Assistance Programme, a 24-hour helpline available to support students' mental health and wellbeing. The assessment team thus concluded that the school monitors the effectiveness of student and staff advisory, support and counselling services, and that any resource needs arising are considered.
456. To establish if the school's administrative support systems enable it to monitor student progression and performance accurately and provide timely, secure and accurate information to satisfy academic and non-academic management information needs the team analysed:
- the school's quality indicators
  - recent annual programme reviews
  - the HE Annual Quality Targets
  - the terms of reference of the school's Principalship and Extended Principalship
  - two recent annual reports to AUB and the Corporation Board
  - recent papers from the Academic Board and the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee

- the Schedule of Business of the school's Academic Board
- the job descriptions of the academic registrar and the HE quality manager
- the school's HE – Policies and Procedures Handbook
- the Consolidated Student Services Policies.

457. The team also met with staff and received a presentation of the administrative systems during the visit.

458. The assessment team noted that the school has administrative support systems in place to monitor student progression and performance. For example, the HE quality manager produces an annual set of quality indicators to support the Annual Programme Review process. This comprehensive report includes information on student attendance, continuation, and academic achievement rates, as well as rates of student satisfaction in the Student Perception Survey and the NSS.

459. The school also develops a set of quality targets, which are approved annually by the school's principalship and extended principalship. Progress towards these targets is reported through the annual report to the Corporation Board and its validating partner institution, AUB. Similar reports on student progression and performance are regularly tabled for discussion at the school's senior deliberative committees, such as the Academic Board and the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. The team also examined recent papers and minutes from these committees, which included items covering both student progression and performance, and other academic and non-academic management matters.

460. This examination showed that the school's administrative support systems provide timely and accurate information because, for example, the reports on student progression and performance are delivered within the timeframes specified by the committees' schedules of business, and their production is overseen by senior members of staff at the school, such as the academic registrar and the HE quality manager. The information is secure because the school uses appropriate data collection processes and protocols, which are aligned to the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK General Data Protection Regulation. In addition, the team received confirmation during its second visit that the school has invested in the ProMonitor HE Markbook system, better enabling its Academic Registry to maintain detailed and secure student records, and to generate reports on their academic performance (see paragraphs 197 to 202 for further discussion of these systems). The team thus came to the view that the school's administrative support systems enable it to monitor student progression and performance accurately and provide timely, secure and accurate information to satisfy academic and non-academic management information needs.

461. To understand the school's approach to providing opportunities for all students to develop skills that enable their academic, personal and professional progression, as well as skills to make effective use of the learning resources provided, including the safe and effective use of specialist facilities, and the use of digital and virtual environments, the team analysed:

- the school's self-assessment document
- the academic strategy

- a sample of programme handbooks
- a sample of summative assessment feedback forms
- the Regulatory Framework and Undergraduate Assessment Regulations
- several student PDPs
- a list of recent enrichment activities
- the school's HE Work Experience Policy
- two recent reports from Industry Liaison Groups
- a Student Induction Checklist
- the school's HE Student Induction Procedure
- the school's Health and Safety Handbook 2023-24.

462. The constructed samples were representative because they included a comprehensive combination of levels of study and, where relevant, student grades across several undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered by the school. The team also took part in a comprehensive tour of the specialist facilities on the school's main campus and met with students during their visit to the school.

463. The assessment team noted that the school's curriculum is designed to provide scaffolded learning opportunities that foster academic skills and creative independence. The school's academic strategy, for example, identifies its 'transformative curriculum' as a catalyst for the development of 'creative thinking, innovation and problem solving' skills across all levels. The team's review of a sample of programme handbooks showed that theory and practice is progressively integrated across the curriculum, culminating in increased opportunities for independent learning and the development of more advanced academic skills as students move through their learning journey. The team also examined a sample of summative assessment feedback forms and found that they enabled students to evaluate their own academic progress and identify areas for improvement, as noted earlier in the report (see, for example, paragraphs 331, 416-417).

464. The assessment team noted that the school adopts a structured approach to the development of academic, personal, and professional skills. For example, personal development and planning is introduced to all undergraduate students at Level 4, as well as postgraduate students, and is a central feature of their programmes across all levels, facilitating individual reflection and goal setting for academic, personal, and professional development. This is achieved through dialogue with tutors who provide formative feedback, assisting students in identifying strengths and areas for improvement. The team examined several student PDPs and observed that they were effective in supporting learner autonomy through regular reflective practice, with generally clear and achievable academic goals tailored to the students' individual needs and career aspirations. The library also offers specialised resources and induction sessions tailored to specific subject areas, equipping students with key academic skills. Additionally, the school's HE Academic Support service

delivers targeted sessions covering academic skills, such as academic writing and referencing, note-taking, research skills, and time management, complemented by one-to-one and group tutorials offered throughout the academic year. The team noted, furthermore, that the school's student services teams offer regular opportunities designed to contribute to the students' personal development, including workshops on topics like sexual health and campaigns about finances, mental health and wellbeing, independent living, and personal safety, with relevant information shared through posters, social media, workshops, and online platforms like the school's VLE and website.

465. The school facilitates student engagement with industry and graduate employers through 'live briefs,' agency visits, and work experience opportunities, including educational trips. All programmes have active Industry Liaison Groups, which provide advice and guidance on current industry practices to inform curriculum development. The team also noted that the school's Folio Centre, an industry-facing careers and enterprise service available to all students, offers practical guidance on areas such as career and business planning, preparing professional CVs, and searching for employment, ensuring the support is personalised to meet the individual professional progression needs of students. This employability and enterprise support service, which has its own premises on the main campus, is signposted to students as part of their academic induction. The students interviewed by the team commented positively on the opportunities the school provides to develop skills that enable their professional progression. They offered examples such as work experience opportunities at the Northern Studios, local placements, and the school's 'Talent Pool' scheme. They also noted how these opportunities are actively embedded in the final year curriculum.
466. The school provides opportunities for all students to develop skills to make effective use of the learning resources through its approach to student induction. Thus, for example, two key objectives identified in the school's HE Student Induction Procedure are to 'familiarise students with school services and facilities,' and to 'ensure that students have access to and can use their school email accounts, IT facilities, VLE and library resources as soon as possible'. The team further examined the school's Induction Checklist, which all students are asked to complete, and confirmed that it explicitly covers relevant areas such as health and safety, learning resources and IT, and library services. The team's review of an Induction Week Skeleton Timetable also showed that learning resources and IT, and the library were included as part of the timetabled induction activity. Programme handbooks contain sections on working in studios and workshops, as well as health and safety, which summarise the key responsibilities of students and staff regarding the safe use of specialist facilities.
467. The assessment team took part in a comprehensive tour of the specialist facilities during its first visit to the school's main campus and were able to observe how staff supported students at all levels in the development of their skills to make effective use of the learning resources. This confirmed the verbal evidence provided by the students, who offered the team examples showing that they are satisfied with the high quality of the support they receive from technical staff at the school, as well as with the access to specialist equipment and facilities, including software licenses and other digital resources.
468. The team noted that the school ensures that the opportunities above are provided for all students because they are actively embedded in the induction process, as well as in both curricular and extracurricular activities across all levels of their programmes, with high quality advice and support from academic and student services staff teams. The team also noted

that the school uses the student induction process effectively to identify individual student needs which are then shared with the relevant programme teams. For example, the Student Induction Checklist includes a section on 'Additional Needs' where all students are encouraged to explicitly identify 'any concerns, additional or academic support needs that have not been addressed'.

469. The assessment team met with 17 undergraduate and postgraduate students from across all the school's programmes, who confirmed that the school had mechanisms to address their individual needs, including those relating to their protected characteristics, such as age, disability, and maternity. These included, for example, accessing practical advice and guidance on wellbeing, counselling, and disability and health conditions through personal tutors or via the school's Student Advice and Wellbeing Team. The team thus came to the view that the school provides opportunities for all students to develop both skills that enable their academic, personal and professional progression, and skills to make effective use of the learning resources provided.
470. To determine whether the school's approach is guided by a commitment to equity the assessment team analysed:
- the school's strategic plan
  - the Equality and Diversity Policy
  - the School's Policies and Procedures Related to Student Safeguarding, Support and Wellbeing
  - the equality statement
  - the access and participation plan
  - programme handbooks
  - the Student Induction Procedure
  - the terms of reference of the school's Equality and Diversity Committee and principalship.
471. The team also met with students during their visit to the school.
472. The school's strategic plan (2019-2024) explicitly references 'equality' and 'diversity' as guiding organisational behaviours. The school's approach to equity is outlined in and supported by a range of policies, statements, and plans, including the Equality and Diversity Policy, the School's Policies and Procedures Related to Student Safeguarding, Support and Wellbeing, the equality statement and the access and participation plan.
473. The assessment team reviewed these documents and observed that they are detailed, comprehensive in their coverage, and designed to ensure fair treatment and opportunities for all students, staff, and external partners at the school, irrespective of any of their protected characteristics. The access and participation plan, for example, describes a wide range of activities designed to broaden participation in higher education, including engagement with local schools and colleges through Saturday Morning Art Clubs, and working with the Tees



Valley Combined Authority, the Northeast Local Enterprise Partnership, Tees Valley Arts, and other relevant external organisations. The team noted, furthermore, that programme handbooks include a section which emphasises the school's commitment to equity for all its students and staff. The promotion of equity is also one of the stated aims of the school's Student Induction Procedure. The students interviewed by the team during the visit described the academic environment at the school as 'nice,' friendly' and 'inclusive'.

474. The team also noted that the school's commitment to equity is evidenced by the work of its Equality and Diversity Committee. This is tasked with:

- supporting and promoting 'equality and diversity of opportunity within the learning and working environment for all staff, students and stakeholders'
- monitoring and reviewing 'the implementation and effectiveness of School policies and practices in relation to equality and diversity,' and 'progress against actions on the Equality and Diversity Action Plan'
- raising matters with the school's principalship as required.

475. The assessment team thus formed the view that the school's approach is guided by a commitment to equity.

## **Conclusions**

476. The school's strategic approach to enabling student development and achievement is clearly articulated in its academic strategy and strategic plan, which set out a clear vision for supporting students and the operational means to achieve that vision, underpinned by a commitment to equity.

477. The school has invested in specialist support services and student services staff. This ensures that it meets the individual academic, personal and professional progression needs of all its students. It also means it has developed effective approaches to deliver, monitor and evaluate these services, both at programme level and within its deliberative committee structures, supported by well-established administrative support systems.

478. The advice the students receive about their study programmes, including through the academic induction process, is effective. All students are given opportunities to develop skills to make effective use of the specialist facilities and learning resources provided.

479. Therefore, the assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion D1.

## Assessment of DAPs Criterion E: Evaluation of performance

### Criterion E1: Evaluation of performance

#### Advice to the OfS

480. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion E1: evaluation of performance because it meets the requirements for this criterion.
481. The assessment team's view is based on its review of evidence, which shows, in summary, that it takes effective action to assess its own performance, respond to identified weaknesses and develop further its strengths.
482. This view is based on specific consideration of the evidence requirements for this criterion, alongside any other relevant information.

**Criterion E1: An organisation granted degree awarding powers takes effective action to assess its own performance, respond to identified weaknesses and develop further its strengths.**

#### Advice to the OfS

483. The assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion E1 because it takes effective action to assess its own performance, responds to identified weaknesses and develops further its strengths.
484. The assessments team's view is based on its review of evidence that shows that the school has met the evidence requirements for E1 and other relevant evidence requirements.

#### Reasoning

485. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which ideas and expertise from within and outside the organisation are drawn into the school's arrangements for programme design, approval, delivery and review, and to test the extent to which clear mechanisms exist for assigning and discharging action in relation to the scrutiny and monitoring of its academic provision. It therefore reviewed the various data sources that the school uses to monitor and evaluate performance, and the various mechanisms within which this evaluation takes place.
486. The assessment team found that data sources used regularly by the school for the purposes of self-evaluation include:
- marketing and recruitment reports
  - continuation data
  - student perception surveys
  - NSS data
  - progress against quality targets

- assessment standardisation events, in which staff undertake a systematic standardisation of their approach to assessment and levelling
- interim and final exam-board reports
- annual programme reviews
- programme strategic meetings
- staff surveys.

487. These datasets variously form part of the papers of, and form agenda items for discussion at, Academic Board meetings, as determined by the school's standardised cycle of business. Datasets in turn are included in Corporation Board papers (the senior-most governance body within the school), including within the annual report, ensuring also that governors are well informed on progress against metrics.

488. Of the above-listed data sources, the team found that the Annual Programme Review is a particularly important part of the annual cycle of self-evaluation, offering staff an opportunity to reflect on the relative strengths and weaknesses of programmes across a range of quantitative and qualitative measures. Annual programme reviews follow a standardised template, in which staff are asked to assess:

- performance against a standardised set of institution-wide quality indicators
- progress relative to actions set in the previous year's Annual Programme Review
- financial and recruitment performance
- emergent competitor risks
- evaluation of particular course features such as visiting professors or live projects
- any staff support needs, and a more general needs assessment
- and to provide new objectives, actions and targets for the coming year.

489. This review is supplemented by a more detailed evaluation of performance against organisation-wide quality indicators as set annually by the principalship (the senior management team within the school). This includes a three-year progress summary featuring targets and actuals; access and participation data; and a range of comparative reports that show the performance of the programme relative to other school programmes as regards conversion rates, continuation rates, module pass rates by level, module averages, and achievement data.

490. Taken together, these two documents form the Annual Programme Review, and constitute in the opinion of the assessment team an extremely thorough basis for appraising the performance of programmes.

491. In addition to the internal, staff-generated, data of the sort described above, the assessment team has seen evidence of the school making extensive use of both student feedback data, and external sources, to inform its approach to self-evaluation.
492. As described in detail with respect to criterion A1.2, the assessment team's view is that the school has an extremely comprehensive and well-supported approach to capturing student feedback, and involving students as active participants in the governance and management of the school. Student assemblies – which constitute the entire student body, by year group, of a particular programme – produce reports that are fed directly to programme boards, which in turn are responsible for producing annual programme reviews. This ensures that the student voice is captured as part of the school's evaluation of programme performance.
493. Each programme has an Industry Liaison Group, which constitutes a forum in which programme staff can gain feedback from industry on the relevance and quality of its content. Industry Liaison Groups result in a pro-forma in which industry contacts describe changes in the jobs market, skills needed in the industry, advances in digital tools, and challenges and opportunities in the sector. Programme teams then respond by identifying any necessary changes to their programmes. Industry Liaison Group outputs also form part of the annual programme reviews.
494. External examiner reports, which are received following the exam boards, are also used to inform the annual programme reviews, as well as any periodic review or validation events.
495. Taken together, input from Industry Liaison Groups and external examiners thus ensures that annual programme reviews are informed by external, as well as internal ideas and expertise.
496. The assessment team saw evidence of extremely clear mechanisms for the review of the data sources described above. For example, all annual programme reviews – and in particular any action plans that result from them – are taken up in the first instance for discussion in the Learning Teaching and Quality Committee, with recommendations and final reports then passed to Academic Board for approval. These reports in turn inform the annual report that is passed to the Corporation Board for approval, and, at present, to AUB as the validating partner. Likewise, there is a clear mechanism for receiving and responding to external examiner reports, with reports, and staff responses to them, forming part of the annual programme reviews, periodic reviews, and annual report provided to the Corporation Board and AUB.
497. As regards data to inform a more general understanding of organisational performance, the school has access to AUB's annual report and institutional reviews, and to the annual staff survey, both of which are taken up initially by the Academic Board.
498. Additional to the annual cycle of performance evaluation, as described above, the assessment team saw in the evidence multiple examples of the school initiating the gathering of external views to help inform evaluation of its performance. Examples include audits of subjects ranging from procurement to health and safety to penetration testing, ranging from 2019 to 2022, as well as an independent governance review, undertaken in November 2019. As with internal reporting, clear mechanisms exist for the scrutiny of these reports: audits of this sort are taken up by the Audit Committee, and in turn the Corporation Board. For example, the November 2021 Audit Committee reviewed and discussed a paper on recent

recommendations by RSM UK Audit LLP, the school's internal auditors, noting that 15 recommendations had been actioned, and that two remained in progress.

499. In summary, the assessment team found that ideas and expertise from within and outside the organisation are drawn into its arrangements for programme design, approval, delivery and review, and that clear mechanisms exist for assigning and discharging action in relation to the scrutiny and monitoring of its academic provision.
500. The assessment team sought to test the extent to which critical self-assessment is integral to the operation of the school's higher education provision, and the extent to which action is taken in response to matters raised through internal or external monitoring and review. It therefore considered whether meaningful action was being taken in response to the above-stated data sources, through the above-stated mechanisms, both to respond to identified weaknesses and to develop further its strengths.
501. The assessment team found that the school is extremely self-aware of its relative strengths and weaknesses, and extremely transparent about this. Conversations with governors, senior management, staff and students on the topic of strengths and weaknesses frequently highlighted similar issues.
502. One particular strength of the school – in the opinion of all above-stated stakeholders – is its arts-school ethos, as encoded in its academic strategy. As a small and specialist organisation with a strong emphasis on 'making' and industry, the school offers a meaningful alternative to larger universities, in part facilitated by the close community that constitutes the school.
503. In outlining its draft strategic plans for 2024 to 2027, senior management were keen to emphasise the importance of this characteristic to the school. So, for example, while growth will feature as a strategic objective over the next plan period (as indeed it does in the current strategy), the senior team is extremely sensitive to the potential of growth to impact on organisational culture, and, as such, its growth ambitions are tightly constrained.
504. Likewise, in looking to diversify its programme portfolio to include teacher training (as described in detail with respect to criterion A1.3), the school is demonstrating a good understanding of its student outcomes and pathways post-graduation; staff report that this initiative has come directly as a request from students.
505. In terms of how the school has responded to any areas of weakness, an historical issue experienced at the school was the relatively siloed nature of its programmes – resulting in a lack of collaboration and interaction between programmes – relating to both student interaction and staff interaction. This issue was rectified through a recent major restructure of the school into two faculties. Staff and students report that this restructure has given rise to much greater collaboration and interaction between programme teams and their students. The new structure, and its consequence of generating greater collaboration, was likewise positively reviewed by AUB in its 2022 Institutional Review.
506. An area of current self-identified weakness at the school is the extent of its activity in the area of scholarly activity and research. Governors, senior management and staff all acknowledged that the organisation was at the beginning of its journey in this regard. Likewise, AUB's 2022 Institutional Review noted that more could be done in this area.

507. In the experience of the assessment team, this weakness is not uncommon for a teaching-intensive organisation, particularly one that is making a transition from further education to higher education. But much is being done currently by the school to enable the development of scholarly activity and research: for example, this is the first objective in the new draft Academic Strategy, 2024-27. Recent and planned initiatives include the development of a scholarly activity and research operating plan, with SMART actions and targets, the instigation of a new annual staff research conference, and the planned initiation of a new Research Committee to oversee scholarly activity and research across the organisation. It is the view of the assessment team that all these initiatives will support the organisation to move forwards towards its ambition of university title.
508. A second area of relative weakness, as described with respect to criteria B1 and B2, is the extent to which the school's ambitions regarding course design are inevitably constrained and controlled by AUB regulations and requirements. As described in paragraphs 170-176 and paragraphs 233-237, examples include the way in which the school's shared Level 6 and Level 7 provision is periodically reviewed, and the phasing of the school's exam-board cycle and how this intersects with the appeals process. Again, senior members of the school are aware of these constraints and consequences, and as such are looking at ways of modifying academic regulations and quality processes as part of the school's move towards DAPs.
509. The above-stated examples demonstrate, in the view of the assessment team, a high degree of overall self-awareness, and a clear willingness and ability to take action in relation to overarching areas of strength and weakness.
510. Further examples can also be seen at a more granular level regarding the discharging of action in relation to the scrutiny and monitoring of its higher education provision. The team found multiple examples in the evidence of interventions in response to the collection of data from both external and internal sources. Instances include (but are in no way limited to):
- debate in the Learning Teaching and Quality Committee on the various priorities emerging from annual programme reviews
  - debate and approval of the Learning Teaching and Quality Committee's consideration of action plans arising from the annual programme reviews at the Academic Board
  - a range of new actions being put in place as a consequence of feedback from the staff survey, with a requirement to report progress on actions to the Corporation Board
  - the recruitment of an additional mental health counsellor in response to student feedback
  - a self-initiated consultation with Aardman Animations as part of the school's development of a new Animation programme, to ensure alignment with current industry practice.
511. More generally, as described in more detail with respect to criterion A1.1, it is clear from minutes of committee meetings, and observations of committees by the assessment team, that a high degree of challenge and debate exists within the various committees of the deliberative structure. In reflection of this culture of self-criticality, one recently appointed

governor reports to have been told during induction by the principal that 'I want you to challenge and push me and us'.

512. In summary, the assessment team found overwhelming evidence to show that critical self-assessment is integral to the operation of the school's higher education provision, and that action is taken in response to matters raised through internal or external monitoring or review.

## **Conclusion**

513. Having undertaken an extensive review of documented evidence, and having spoken with governors, senior management, staff and students, the assessment team has concluded that the school's approach to the evaluation of performance is extremely robust.
514. Ideas and expertise from within and outside the organisation are drawn into its arrangements for programme design, approval, delivery and review, and clear mechanisms exist for assigning and discharging action in relation to the scrutiny and monitoring of its academic provision. More generally, critical self-assessment is clearly integral to the operation of the school's higher education provision, with action taken in response to matters raised through internal and external monitoring and review.
515. As such, the assessment team's view is that the school meets criterion E1.

## Assessment of overarching criterion for the authorisation for DAPs

**Full DAPs: A self-critical, cohesive academic community with a proven commitment to the assurance of standards supported by effective quality systems**

### Advice to the OfS

516. The assessment team's view is that the school meets the overarching criterion for Full DAPs because it meets all the underpinning criteria.
517. The assessment team's view is based on its review of the evidence, which shows in summary that the school develops and encourages a self-critical and cohesive academic community. It has clear commitment to the assurance of standards, supported by effective and robust quality systems.
518. This view is based on consideration of the evidence requirements for the DAPs criteria alongside any other relevant information.

### Reasoning

519. The assessment team found that **self-criticality** is demonstrated through the school's regular review of a large and diverse range of data within the various committees of the deliberative structure. Annual programme reviews in particular act as a domain in which to pull together perspectives from staff, students, external examiners, and external industry partners, in order to generate a coherent view of areas of strength and weakness at the programme level.
520. At an organisation level, the assessment team has seen extensive evidence that demonstrates how staff, students and governors are involved actively in debating organisational performance. Through the setting and reviewing of targets and operating plans with associated actions, the school has demonstrated robust vehicles in place to monitor its performance, and through its evidence has demonstrated many examples of responding to identified weaknesses.
521. The assessment team found the school to constitute a highly **cohesive academic community**, in part aided by its small size, and in part by its strong and pervasive arts-school ethos. The cohesion of the community is also driven by the inclusion of staff and student voices in all aspects of organisational governance and management, ensuring strengths, weakness and new ideas are well understood.
522. The school has a **proven committed to the assurance of standards**, as demonstrated through its comprehensive body of policies, and the consistency with which its policies are applied in practice. While some of the policies used by the school are in fact those of AUB (as would be expected of a validating partner), the majority of the school's policies are already its own, and the school has clear plans in place to transition all policies and procedures under its ownership if DAPs are granted. Through this process of policy review,



the school has identified a number of areas that it wishes to enhance, demonstrating not only its self-criticality, but its commitment to the assurance of standards.

523. The assessment team considers the **effectiveness of the school's quality systems** is apparent through the extremely positive feedback manifest in AUB's organisational reviews, through the quality of student work as evidenced in samples provided to the assessment team, through the quality of teaching as observed by the assessment team, through student satisfaction as communicated to the assessment team by students, and through the school's extremely good NSS and TEF results.

## **Conclusions**

524. The assessment team therefore concluded that the school meets the overarching criterion as the evidence demonstrates that the school has a self-critical, cohesive academic community with a proven commitment to the assurance of standards as supported by effective quality systems.



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