End of Year 1 Report for: The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

The key purposes of this report are to:-

- provide a framework for HEIs to report on their Theme activity that has taken place over the year
- help share information across the sector on the benefits and challenges around Theme engagement.

Please report under the headings below. The report should be about 6 to 8 sides of A4 in length.

Institutional team

Identify any changes in Theme leadership, TLG and institutional team membership since details were reported in the institutional plan developed at the start of the academic year.

No changes were made to the institutional team since the year 1 plan was submitted.

Evaluation of activities/outcomes

To make evaluation processes more accessible and user friendly, we have attempted to simplify (not minimise) the evaluation reporting process into 7 key questions (see below). Prior to completing these, it would be useful to refer to the QAAS website resource: A Guide to Basic Evaluation in HE (specifically, Section 8, Summary overview on page 23, and the Evaluation Checklist – Appendix A, on pages 28-29).

Please report each activity/intervention against the following questions in the Evaluation part of the template.

N. B. You may have already realised some of your objectives and/or these might be ongoing, so please delineate each question according to whether activities or interventions have been completed already in this reporting year or are in process.

(Easiest way is to delete either/or options highlighted in red in questions below):

Evaluation

Please complete the following 7 questions for each activity or intervention (N.B. Just cut and paste the table below as many times as necessary)

Title of project/activity
We focused all our institutional activities around one project entitled 'Creative Conversations'.
1. What change is being made? (Brief description(s) of overall activity/intervention)
In year one of the theme, we focused on gaining an understanding of the work that was already being engaged in across the institution that had some particular bearing on 'resilience' and 'resilient learning communities'. An email was sent to all staff and students inviting them to propose a project and we received six project proposals. Whilst many of the projects could have been started in year one, the process took longer than expected and the institutional team made the decision to focus on one single proposal, however, we decided to use that work as a platform to explore the other proposals. The funded project involved running a series of online facilitated 'Creative Conversations' designed to explore different facets of the concept of 'Resilience' and 'Resilient Learning Communities'.   We invited the authors of the original proposals to facilitate a lunchtime conversation on their topic area, and invited additional facilitators to lead other sessions. In the end we had a programme of nine talks ready to offer in the last five weeks of term, under the following headings: - Resilience, Care Experience and Estrangement   - Resilience in a Research Community   - Resilience Coaching   **The Resilient International Artist**   - Resilience, Resistance or Reform - What's the Learning Community response to Anti-Racism?   - Resilient Artists   **Resilience and Consent: Are You Invited?**   - Resilience and Neurodiversity   - Resilience and Online Learning Environments   Two of the conversations (in bold) were facilitated by students, six were facilitated by members of RCS staff, and one was facilitated by an external guest with professional connections to RCS. We employed an external company to organise and run the technical elements of the conversations, using the Zoom platform. Each session was recorded and is currently being transcribed by researchers. The transcriptions from the nine talks will be thematically analysed, and the findings will be written up in a report due at the end of July 2021. This report will help the institutional team construct the plan for year 2 of the theme.
2. Why are we making it? (Rationale for the change)
In our early discussions around plan for the work of the theme, the steering group were unanimously agreed that we needed to interrogate our definitions of the term 'Resilient' and its meaning in the context of a learning community. We established that there were a number of lenses through which we could explore this.   1.   We were keen to establish what resilience was as a quality or attribute of an individual. We considered where we might find examples of resilience, or where resilience was more

required. Whilst each conversation explored multiple lenses, the conversations on 'Resilience, Care Experience and Estrangement' and 'Resilient Artists' focused primarily on resilience as a personal quality or skill.

2. The sessions 'The Resilient International Artist', 'Resilience in a Research Community' and 'Resilience and Online Learning Environments' maintained a focus on resilience within particular communities of learning.
3. 'Resilience and Neurodiversity', 'Resilience and Consent' and 'Resilience, Resistance or Reform' focused on rethinking our wider institutional systems and how they support or undermine resilience in relation to the Anti-Racism agenda.
4. The 'Resilience Coaching' conversation was focused on a specific way of working with individuals that can help them develop resilience.

We felt that a range of conversations would allow us to gain a deeper understanding of our own personal and institutional understanding of resilience and of what we needed to take action on.

3. What difference will hopefully occur as a result? (Tangible change made successfully or envisaged)

The report due at the end of July will provide a more in-depth analysis of the conversations, however, drawing on feedback from the facilitators, we have identified some key learning points, and priorities for development.

Many of the sessions involved in-depth conversations around the meaning of the term 'Resilience' and how it might be understood within the context of a learning community. The session on 'Resilience Coaching' introduced Carol Pemberton's criteria to define resilience, and participants felt that the statement 'That I can ask for help' resonated most with them. In the 'Resilience and Consent: Are You Invited?' session, the conversation focused on the fact that different people have different needs, and that interpretations of resilience were often very personal. Language use was an important theme in this session, and it was suggested that, as the word 'consent' has particular connotations, that 'invitation' may be a more progressive term. In the 'Resilient Artists' session, resilience was discussed as not simply being about 'surviving bad things', opening a conversation around resilience as also meaning to 'bounce forward', and 'adapt positively to change'. In this session, the conversation introduced the idea that resilience was not only emotional, but could also be seen in practical terms, as a robust problem solving process.

In the 'Resilience, Resistance or Reform - What's the Learning Community response to Anti-Racism?' session, the term 'Resilience' was directly challenged in light of the need for change. The facilitators made the case that 'Resilience' suggests a person or thing is '*capable of withstanding shock without permanent deformation or rupture*', and questioned whether we should be promoting a learning community that seeks to simply bounce back to its former state. The term was offered as better term, however 'Resistance' suggests '*opposition or to oppose*', and participants were asked whether this position might also encourage opposition to change. Taking a definition of 'Reform' as '*to amend or improve by change of form or removal of faults or abuses*' the facilitator asked whether this term better describes a community able to transform and evolve in a positive direction.

The session 'Resilience and Online Learning Environments' came in the last week of the sessions and the facilitator was able to pull together some of these definitions. Here the framing of resilience in relation to a learning journey was explored. It was agreed that 'resilience' could be used to describe '*the ability to undertake a meaningful and challenging learning journey*'. Moving resilience away from the idea of resistance to change, in this definition, what needs to remain resilient is our ability to continue to make positive change and to challenge the status quo in the pursuit of a new and better reality. This approach has a particular resonance within an arts context, where creativity and originality are highly valued.

In the session 'Resilience and Neurodiversity', concerns were expressed around the use of the umbrella term 'neurodiversity' and its more specific roots within definitions of autism. One particular tension expressed in the session related to the language implications of 'difference' and 'disability',

with participants favouring the former term, whilst acknowledging the challenges of accessing tangible support without the label of the latter.

From these conversations the question remains of how we come to a shared consensus around the use of terminology, and we expect this exploration will continue throughout the work of the theme.

In terms of practical change there were a number of potential actions we now need to consider. We are recognising that learning (and life) journeys taken by individuals are and will be different, so there can be no 'one-size-fits-all' for building resilience. By valuing individual learning journeys we can learn from the experience of others in a wide range of situations and from a diverse range of circumstances. In the session 'Resilience, Care Experience and Estrangement', we recognised that, whilst it might be expected that learners within this 'community' may have developed levels of resilience, we have no empirical evidence of this, and there were no participants present who had lived experience. Again, it was emphasised that we should avoid looking for a one-sized fits all solution, however, in a direct connection to the 'Resilience Coaching' session, the practice of coaching was cited to have been very useful with this group of learners.

Within the 'Resilience, Resistance or Reform - What's the Learning Community response to Anti-Racism?' session, parallels were made to the clear examples of good practice that were now being implemented across the RCS. Participants agreed that the 'reform' or even 'evolution' of our creative community to meet the needs and values of a diverse community should be a priority. The RCS is clearly committed to Anti-Racism but the question remains as to what evidence we can highlight to illustrate our progress. The same could be asked of resilience/reform. What evidence might we generate to demonstrate positive change?

In the session 'Resilience and Consent: Are You Invited?' suggestions were made around how we might address the topic of consent at an institutional level. There was a recognition that staff-led initiatives would be received very differently to student-led initiatives, and there was some discussion around the role of the Student Union and about the range of approaches we might take to staff and student training/information in this area. The staff-led/student-led question would appear to relate to all work around resilience.

In the session 'Resilience and Neurodiversity' the conversation also explored the potential for students to take the lead in giving permission about specific behaviours or differences. Whilst it was recognised that staff need more access to information and training in relation to supporting neurodiverse learners when they refuse learning agreements. GDPR rules restricting access to more nuanced information contained in learning agreements, can force students to self-declare to tutors. Given the impact of a limited understanding of needs, we need to question our strategies for supporting learners in both face-to-face and online learning contexts.

In the session 'Resilience in a Research Community', participants were very positive regarding their peer support networks, but felt challenged to meet the expectations of both the research community and the arts community. It was noted that this can lead to 'imposter syndrome', with participants questioning their ability to build valuable evidence bases to support their studies. This is compounded by issues of time-management and high workload, especially over the last 15 months. It was felt that finding new ways to bring this community together would help allay some of these concerns, and increase resilience at an individual and community level.

Similar issues of community building across a diverse range of learners were explored in the 'Resilience and Online Learning Environments' session. Here the relationship between learner and 'teacher' on part-time, blended learning programmes was explored. In the session the Pedagogy, Andragogy, Heutagogy continuum (Garnett, 2013) was discussed in relation to learner journeys and the types of resilience required at each stage. There are clear connections between self-determined learning approaches and the conversations around learners having ownership of their own identity and the need for support at an individual level. In practical terms the session on 'Resilience Coaching' presented an excellent model for consideration, with the *Resilience Body Map* coaching tool appearing to resonate with those present at the discussion.

One question that requires further analysis is whether we are aiming to **preserve** resilience, or to **build** resilience. In conversation, participants appeared to be in agreement that we do both. As the

RCS moves into the start of an undergraduate review, questions of how we might design opportunities for students to develop resilience need to be addressed.

4. How will we know? (How is the change measured)

Our plan for year one was to develop a better understanding of what we understood the terms 'Resilience' and 'Resilient Learning Communities' in more depth, so that we could plan our activities for year two in a more targeted and strategic manner. The conversations have allowed us to dig deeper into the topic of resilience and to connect it to priority areas such as Anti-Racism and Neurodiversity. The conversations have also provided a significant number of suggestions for practical steps that we could take within the focus areas. Our researchers are currently in the process of transcribing the conversations, and from these transcripts, using thematic analysis to draw out the key themes that should give us a clearer sense of the priorities we need to focus on in year two. The report should pull together the discussions around language from across the conversations, to help us present a working definition of 'resilience' and what we mean by a 'resilient learning community.' The report will also outline identified actions for consideration. Whilst it is possible to infer some of the key priorities at this point, we need to wait for the report to see a more holistic and objective analysis.

5. Who is involved in making any judgements? (Who decides on effectiveness)

In the first instance, the institutional team will receive the report and will have an opportunity to discuss and respond to the content. As many members of the steering group were involved in delivering, or participating in the actual conversations, we have the opportunity for some in-depth reflection on the priorities and suggested actions as we move forward. However, we intend on sharing this work more widely with staff during our staff development sessions in September. The intention here is to provide all staff with access to the report, and to make this available on a specific institutional webpage that will also contain relevant links and resources, and will provide opportunity for staff to comment and contribute.

The intention of these discussions is to help us identify opportunities to connect the work of the theme with other priority projects being undertaken within the institution. Ultimately, the steering group will make the decisions on which projects to support in year two, however our aim is to engage as many staff and students as we can.

When students return in September, we will be inviting them to engage with the online resource, and to get in involved in projects that they feel are important and meaningful to them.

6. Any lessons learned to apply already? (Applied ongoing learning)

Each conversation included opportunities for reflection and learning (as detailed above). However, prior to the dissemination of the report, it is difficult to be specific about lessons learned through the project. From an organisational perspective, setting up the conversations provided to take longer in practice than we anticipated. All conversations needed to be sufficiently defined with appropriate links made to support services prior to making an application for ethical approval. Combined with contracting processes to employ technical facilitators and researchers, we left ourselves with a short window of opportunity to run the sessions. As such, we had to offer two sessions in parallel to ensure they fitted within term time. This divided attendees between the two sessions, and numbers were low for some sessions. Whilst the parallel sessions may have negatively impacted on

attendance, it needs to be acknowledged that this has been a particularly challenging year for staff and students, and low attendance numbers may simply have been a response to high levels of fatigue, along with a rush to complete other urgent work at the end of the academic year. In year two, we will need to look at the timing of events where there is a sharing or conversation element.

We had planned a tenth session on mental health and resilience, however, the facilitator felt a little concerned about the potential for disclosure within the session, and requested that we look for another approach here involving more staff with a specific remit and expertise within this area. Mental health and wellbeing is likely to become a significant element of year two, and we need to establish how best to explore this.

In general terms, we need to consider how we continue to provide opportunities for genuine, honest conversation between staff and students around key topics of importance to us all, whilst ensuring that we offer a safe space for all participants. We believe we managed this within year one, but expect that we will moving a little deeper into these complex and challenging areas in year two. As such, we will need to include a meta-level awareness of how we do this strategically, perhaps leading to models for exploring challenging topic areas in meaningful ways, where people feel heard, and yet also feel safe to express views. We believe this is an inevitable outcome of working on an Enhancement Theme that engages people in reflecting on their own identity within their community of practice.

7. Any things you need to stop doing? (Any unsuccessful elements)

At this stage there are no actions we need to stop taking, however the report due at the end of July may identify these.

Dissemination of work

Which mechanisms have been most effective in disseminating outcomes and resources internally, and to the sector? Please provide examples.

If there are materials and resources you can share with the sector, please provide details below.

Our main channel of communication for the work of the theme has been through email and most specifically our 'internalcomms' email account. This account is managed through our marketing department and is the only route to contact all staff and students at the Conservatoire. An initial invitation to join the steering group elicited a high number of responses in comparison to previous themes. A further message attracted a number of project proposals. Over May and June, 'internalcomms' messages went out twice weekly to invite staff and students to the talks. We have introduced 'Resilient Learning Communities' as a standing item on the agenda for all Programme Committee meetings, and information on theme progress have been shared here in the three meetings each programme holds over the academic year.

We intend to build our online space, and make the report available to all staff and students by August. As mentioned already, we will be using this report and the theme of 'Resilient Learning Communities' as the basis for our staff development sessions in September.

We intend to make this report available to the sector through the QAA ET pages for RCS.

Collaboration outwith your institution

How have you collaborated with other institutions? This could be informally by growing networks or contacts, or more formally for example, through collaborative clusters or sector work. If you have been collaborating with others, briefly explain what this has involved and what have been the benefits and challenges.

As a small specialist institution focusing primarily on performing arts, our staff have had to focus considerable amounts of energy and time into ensuring equitable learning experiences both inside and outside the building. Given the practical nature of our offer, this has not allowed sufficient time for the steering group or project participants to engage outwith our institution. Having said this many staff have continued to maintain professional contacts in other institution. I personally lead our part-time, blended learning MEd and PG Cert in Learning and Teaching in the Arts, and in that role I have been able to support our participants as they have dealt with the challenges of losing access to learners, shifting to online learning environments, and dealing with high levels of anxiety across staff and students. As an institution, the RCS has worked across the staff and Student Union to both support students, but also to have difficult and necessary conversations around topics such as Anti-Racism. This has not been a wholly insular process, as we continue to collaborate and share with colleagues across the sector, however we have not formally made this a part of our QAA ET work. Once we feel we have a more robust understanding of what we need to prioritise within year two of theme, we will be looking for potential collaborations within the sector, and in particular with colleagues operating within an arts context.

Supporting staff and student engagement

How have staff and students been supported to engage in Theme activities? Please provide examples.

As already stated above, we have invited all staff and students to engage in all elements of this project work over this year. Our steering group comprises of a mix of staff and students, and the

creative conversations were also led by a mix of staff and students. Staff will engage with the outcomes of year 1 at the staff development sessions in September, and we have invited students to get involved in the work of theme through the Programme Committees.
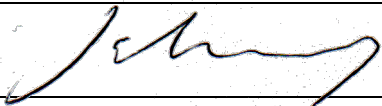
Processes

What are you learning from the processes, approaches and structures you are using to support this Theme?

How will this report be used/distributed within your institution?

Online meetings through Teams and email communications have been quite effective in engaging members of the institutional team in conversations around the work of the theme. The webpages that we are about to develop will provide a central hub for information sharing, replacing the existing 'module' page in our Moodle VLE. Establishing meetings in advance for the year, will help us ensure maximum attendance from institutional team members and will help us to stay on track with the planning of the work.

This report will be circulated to the institutional team, then to all staff via a new webpage for the work of the theme, then to all student through the Programme Committee process.

Report Author:	
Date:	**30/6/21**