DQB

Designated Quality Body
in England

Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students

National Centre for Circus Arts

Review Report

January 2022

Contents

Summary of findings and reasons

Ref	Core practice	Outcome	Confidence	Summary of reasons
S1	The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications' frameworks.	Met	High	From the evidence seen, the team considers that the standards set for the provider's courses are in line with the standards defined in paragraph 342 of the OfS's regulatory framework. The assessed work and the feedback indicate that students meet the threshold standards defined by the University through the process of programme validation. The team considers that the standards described in the approved programme documentation are set at levels consistent with the FHEQ and through its internal policies NCCA ensures that standards are maintained in line with university expectations. The team considers that staff fully understand the provider's approach to maintaining these standards, evidenced by the close working relationship with the Academic Staff Liaison Officer and that the evidence seen demonstrates the commitment to implementing this approach. Therefore, based on scrutiny of the evidence provided the review team concludes that this Core practice is met.
S2	The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.	Met	High	The team, based on the evidence presented, determined that the standards set for students to achieve beyond the threshold on the provider's courses are reasonably comparable with those set by other UK providers. The combination of continuous feedback, the grading criteria provided, and the termly tutorial process all demonstrate that students have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold. The team considered that the standards described in the approved programme documentation and in the provider's academic regulations and policies also ensure that such

					standards are maintained appropriately. Therefore, the team concludes, based on the evidence described above, that students who are awarded qualifications can achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers and that this Core practice is met.
S3	Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.	Met		High	Effective arrangements are in place to ensure standards of awards are credible and secure. Partnership agreements are clear and detailed, and staff understand their responsibilities in maintaining academic standards within the overall framework and regulatory requirement of the University. NCCA has a good track record of partnership working with the University and complies with the University's regulatory and quality assurance requirements to maintain high academic standards. This is confirmed by external examiner reports, the team's consideration of the random sample of assessed student work, and the operation of assessment and marking in accordance with University Codes of Practice and Regulations to ensure standards are credible and secure. NCCA has a detailed policy for working with others, which is a broad set of principles for working with others, and it retains full responsibility for all aspects of assessment and grading. The team has confidence in the robustness and credibility of these arrangements given the annual monitoring and review activity undertaken, the positive tenor of external examiners' reports and the assessed student work seen by the team. Meetings with NCCA staff and the University of Kent Liaison Officer demonstrated clear understanding of each institution's responsibilities for ensuring that the standards of NCCA's awards are credible and secure, irrespective of where or how programmes are delivered

					or who delivers them. The team therefore concludes that this Core practice is met.
S4	The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent.	Met	High		NCCA uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent and also has clear and comprehensive regulations that describe its requirements for using external expertise in setting and maintaining academic standards. Students at NCCA report that assessment and classification processes are reliable, fair and transparent, and external examiners are used effectively in the maintenance and oversight of academic standards. Staff understand the requirements for the use of external expertise and understand the assessment and classification processes that are in use at NCCA. The University has robust and credible documents that NCCA follows ensuring reliable, fair and transparent assessment and classification processes. The team therefore concludes that this Core practice is met.
Q1	The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system.	Met	High		The team concludes, based on the analysis of evidence above, that NCCA has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system. This is because it manages the admissions process in accordance with its published admissions policies and all decisions are made in accordance with published criteria and processes that are easily accessible to applicants. Admissions records demonstrate that the provider's policies are implemented in practice, and staff involved in admissions understand their role and are highly skilled. Current students report that the admissions system is reliable, fair and inclusive, and staff demonstrated at the visit that, through using the CDD Access and Participation plan (and future NCCA iterations of this

				plan), strategies are in place to continue to make the admissions system reliable, fair and inclusive. Staff speak knowledgeably about the admissions process and how the selection process, including audition, worked in practice. Students confirmed they had access to all the information, advice, support and guidance they required during the admissions process. The team concludes that NCCA has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system and that the Core practice is met.
Q2	The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.	Met	High	The team concluded that students tend to regard their courses as being of high quality. Staff at NCCA have a clear view of what 'high quality' means in the context of the provider's unique courses. The external examiner affirms the quality and standards of the courses at the NCCA and praises the NCCA courses for their rich uniqueness and how the structure and delivery of the Circus programme empowers students towards both professional and critical practices in Circus. The team considered that approved course documentation indicates that the teaching, learning and assessment design enable students to meet and demonstrate the intended learning outcomes. Observations of teaching and learning demonstrate sound practices and an approach to teaching that is appropriate to the nature of the courses at NCCA supported by strong links with circus professionals. The resources available to the students are high quality. The team was assured of NCCAs plans for the forthcoming revalidation based on its past success and the continued close working relationship with the University of Kent through the Liaison Officer and NCCA connections to industry. Although policies and procedures, and some processes for NCCA had not been developed at the time of the review, the plans for the future development of these

					were explained to the team. The team is therefore assured that the NCCA's courses provide, and will continue to provide, a high-quality experience for its students. The team therefore considers that this Core practice is met.
Q3	The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.	Met	High		NCCA has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience. Staff recruitment is rigorous and induction processes enable new staff to work effectively. Staffing structures blend the broad needs of the Centre as a circus creation space in which it delivers higher education alongside other professional and training elements. The provider's Degree Administration Team ensures that all student feedback is processed and that issues are addressed, such as the Centre's response to student concerns about the use of cover staff. When the provider enacts its draft teaching ideology document it will support more staff to attain postgraduate teaching qualifications. CVs examined by the team indicate an appropriate mix of academic qualifications and professional experience including industry experience, and the staff benefit from university partnership events and some research activities. The quality of teaching is highly focused on student specialisms, and although the application of an appraisal system is currently restricted to the salaried staff, the oversight provided by those staff ensure that non-salaried staff work within a well-structured teaching environment. The provider has sufficient, appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience, because the staff are often teaching on an individual basis and doing so at the cutting edge of the industry. The staff are recruited in a fair and open manner and supported to develop their teaching practice and they are at the cutting edge of

					their respective disciplines. The team concludes, therefore, that this Core practice is met.
Q4	The provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.	Met	High		NCCA has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience. NCCA is responsible for providing all teaching and support services, including learning resources. While NCCA does not have a facilities strategy, the development of the physical space and its resources is responsive to the needs of the training offered and has been developed carefully. The library facilities focus on the highly specialist nature of the programme, rather than offering a broader academic environment, but this is in keeping with the assessment tasks set. Student support is highly effective and responsive to the very particular needs of students who need physical, mental, and study support to work collectively to support their learning. The facilities are of exceptional quality and wholly support student learning. The review team concludes, therefore, that this Core practice is met.
Q5	The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.	Met	High		NCCA currently uses the CDD Student Engagement Framework which aligns to the expectations of the validating institution, the University of Kent. It sets out the expectations for each of its member schools, with the aim of enhancing the student experience for all of its students. The team concludes that NCCA follows this framework and actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience. NCCA has many ways in which students are engaged in feeding back either collectively, as students representatives sitting on committees such as the SSLTC or on the Academic Board, for example, or individually through survey feedback and via the

					continuous 'open door' approach for students to feed back or discuss with staff. Although currently there is no one overarching report on student feedback, NCCA's approach to reviewing all feedback through the annual monitoring reports led the team to consider this as a credible way of evaluating student feedback. Students reported that they are fully engaged in the quality of their educational experience and could provide examples of change brought about to improve their learning experience. The team conclude that this Core practice is therefore met.
Q6	The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students.	Met	High		NCCA uses the CDD Complaints Policy and Procedure for both non-academic and academic complaints. NCCA's approach to handling academic appeals follows the University of Kent's requirements and processes as stated in University of Kent Academic Appeals procedure. Scrutiny of the evidence and consideration of the outcomes of the meetings with staff and students, the team concludes that NCCA currently has fair, transparent and accessible procedures for handling complaints and academic appeals by following these procedures. On examining the complaint viewed by the team, the team confirmed that the complaints process had followed the published procedures. On leaving CDD, NCCA has plans to adapt the current complaints processes to better fit NCCA's requirements as an independent school. The team supports the view that NCCA has credible plans for complaints and appeals processes to move forward in its preparation to become an independent institution. Students raised no concern over what approach to take, should they have a complaint or appeal to raise, and they knew who to ask and where to find the Complaints Policy should they require it. Students highlighted that should there be any

				doubt about what to do they would ask a member of staff. The team concludes, therefore, that this Core practice is met.
Q8	Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them.	Met	High	For partnership working, CDD follows the Working With Others Handbook which states that partnership agreements should be clear and comprehensive, up-to-date and reflect the provider's regulations or policies for the management of partnerships. NCCA also follows the University of Kent code of practice and can demonstrate that it follows this and therefore has in place effective arrangements to ensure that it provides a high-quality academic experience. These documents are thorough and comprehensive and staff from both NCCA and the University of Kent understand their respective responsibilities for quality and have clear and comprehensive regulations in place to ensure that the academic experience is high quality. Partnership agreements are clear and comprehensive, and future iterations of these have been drafted in preparation for a future without the CDD. NCCA therefore has robust and credible plans to ensure a high-quality academic experience for provision delivered in the partnership in the future. External examiner reports confirm that the academic experience is of high quality. Testimony from students also supports the view that the academic experience is high quality. The team therefore concludes that the Core practice is met.
Q9	The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes.	Met	High	The evidence strongly indicates that students are supported by both academic staff and non-academic staff working together closely to enable student achievement. Students tend to agree that they are supported to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes. The current policies and

| | | | | | approach to supporting students at NCCA facilitate successful academic and professional outcomes. In particular, from the outset, there are robust processes in place to instigate the support required for each student and support needs are revisited throughout their time at NCCA. NCCA's future plans underpin the intention to continue with a thorough approach to supporting students, leading the assessment team to confirm that NCCA has comprehensive, robust and credible plans for the future support of its students. The assessment team evidenced considerable comprehensive, helpful and timely verbal feedback to support the students. Given the extensive support for students, the helpful and continuous dialogue with students, the formal feedback sessions held regularly with students, together with the evidence from the external examiner reports, led the assessment team to conclude that this Core practice is met. |

About this report

This is a report detailing the outcomes of the Quality and Standards Review for providers applying to register with the Office for Students (OfS), conducted by QAA in January 2022, for the National Centre for Circus Arts.

A Quality and Standards Review (QSR) is a method of assessment QAA uses to provide the OfS with evidence about whether new providers applying to be on the OfS Register meet the Core practices of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), based on evidence reviewed by expert assessors. This report is structured to outline the assessment team's decisions about the provider's ability to meet the Core practices through detailing the key pieces of evidence scrutinised and linking that evidence to the judgements made.

The team for this assessment was:

Name: Mr. Mark Langley
Institution: Bath Spa University
Role in assessment team: Institutional and Subject Assessor

Name: Dr Aleksander Szram
Institution: Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance
Role in assessment team: Institutional and Subject Assessor

Name: Dr Deborah James
Institution: South Thames College Group
Role in assessment team: Institutional Assessor

The QAA officer for the assessment was: Kevin Kendall

The size and composition of this assessment team is in line with published guidance and, as such, is comprised of experts with significant experience and expertise across the higher education sector. The team included members with experience of a similar provider to the institution, knowledge of the academic awards offered and included academics with expertise in subject areas relevant to the provider's provision. Collectively the team had experience of the management and delivery of higher education programmes from academic and professional services perspectives, included members with regulatory and investigative experience, and had at least one member able to represent the interests of students. The team included at least one senior academic leader qualified to doctoral level. Details of team members were shared with the provider prior to the assessment to identify and resolve any possible conflicts of interest.

About the National Centre for Circus Arts

The National Centre for Circus Arts (NCCA) is a registered charity established in 1990 and is based in an old Victorian power station in Coronet Street, adjacent to Hoxton Square in London. Its mission is to promote the circus arts, and support aspiring performers of all ages and abilities. Facilities at the centre include specialist studio and flexible performance spaces, library and IT and social spaces.

Higher education programmes offered are the Foundation Degree and BA (Hons) degree top-up in Circus Arts validated by the University of Kent. Students are all full-time and the numbers on these programmes are:

Programme	Student numbers (FT)
Foundation Degree (FdA) Circus Arts	52
BA (Hons) Circus Arts (top-up)	18

NCCA also offers a progressive training programme for under 18s and professional development opportunities for aspiring and established performers. Adults and young people can take part in a range of recreational classes, and they provide corporate training and away days for the business community using circus as the catalyst.

The Conservatoire for Dance and Drama (CDD) was established in 2001 and is the registered higher education provider with the Office for Students, with the member schools delivering the higher education programmes. NCCA joined CDD in 2005 as one of the member institutions.

CDD has developed an academic framework (and produced guidance relating to this in a CDD Quality Handbook) to maintain academic standards and manage the quality of learning and teaching across its member schools. The framework is overseen by the CDD Academic Board and the Board's reporting committees and working groups which include representation from member schools. Academic standards and quality are shared through CDD's committees, policies and procedures and its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy has been designed to develop a high-quality student learning and assessment experience across its member schools. CDD has also provided networking opportunities and other activities for its member schools to support staff development to deliver high-quality education, training and scholarship. CDD is now coming to a conclusion, and the NCCA is seeking independent registration with the OfS by 1 August 2022. To that end, NCCA is working closely with CDD to ensure a smooth transition to independence and registration.

NCCA is still a member of CDD until 1 August 2022 when it becomes independent. It plans to continue its partnership with the University of Kent as the validating body for its degree programmes and is currently preparing these for revalidation. NCCA is also a member of the European Federation of professional Circus Schools (FEDEC) which provides professional links to other circus schools across Europe.

The academic structure comprises a senior management team of the Chief Executive Officer, the Chief Operating Officer, the Director of Professional Development and the Commercial Director. Reporting to the Director of Professional Development are the Head of Degree Delivery, the Head of Academic Administration and the Head of Professional Development. The Head of Degree Delivery is responsible for the Year Managers and the circus teachers. The Head of Academic Administration is responsible for admissions, the registry, student support and higher education records.

How the assessment was conducted

The assessment was conducted according to the process set out in Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers (March 2019).

When undertaking a QSR all 13 of the Core practices are considered by the assessment team. However, for this assessment it was clear that the provider does not offer a research degree programme. Therefore, the assessment team did not consider Q7 (where the

provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments).

To form its judgements about the provider's ability to meet the Core practices, the assessment team considered a range of evidence that was submitted prior to the assessment visit and evidence gathered at the assessment visit itself. [Annex 1] To ensure that the assessment team focused on the principles embedded in the Core practices, and that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments, they used Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers to construct this report and detail the key pieces of evidence seen. Annex 4 expects that assessment teams will sample certain types of key evidence using a combination of representative sampling, risk-based sampling and randomised sampling. In this assessment, the team sampled the following areas for evidence for the reasons given below:

- Using the random sampling calculator, the team selected 125 pieces of assessed student work from the total of 1,027 which were completed in the 2020-21 academic year. This was to test whether the work reflects the relevant threshold standards; that marks and awards given to students are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers; that standards of awards are credible and secure, thus confirming the effectiveness of the underpinning arrangements; and to establish whether students are given comprehensive, helpful and timely feedback.

- Using the random sampling calculator, 58 admissions records were selected from the 81 applications over the last three years. This was to assess whether reliable, fair and inclusive admissions decisions were made for the applicants sampled.

Further details of all the evidence the assessment team considered are provided in Annex 1 of this report.

Explanation of findings

S1 The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications' frameworks

1   To meet this Core practice a provider must ensure that threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications' frameworks. The threshold standards for its qualifications must be articulated clearly and must be met, or exceeded, through the delivery of the qualification and the assessment of students.

2   The sector-recognised standards that are used in relation to this Core practice are those that apply in England, as defined in paragraph 342 of the OfS regulatory framework. That is, those set out in Table 1, in paragraphs 4.10, 4.12, 4.15, 4.17, 4.18, in paragraphs 6.13-6.18 and in the Table in Annex C, in the version of The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ) published in October 2014. These sector-recognised standards represent the threshold academic standards for each level of the FHEQ and the minimum volumes of credit typically associated with qualifications at each level.

3   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

4   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with senior staff [M1]
b   Meeting with students [M2]
c   Meeting with academic staff [M3]
d   Meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5]
e   Meeting with professional support staff [M6]
f   Final meeting with senior staff [M7]
g   Assessed student work [Assess]
h   CDD briefing document [001]
i   University of Kent Credit Framework - Level descriptors [002]
j   University of Kent General Regulations for Students [004]
k   University of Kent Regulations for Taught Courses of Study [005]
l   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships [011]
m   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative

	Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships [012]
n	CDD Working with Others Handbook [014]
o	CDD Quality Assurance Handbook [018]
p	Programme specifications [019]
q	Recent external examiners' reports [021]
r	Academic Board minutes [023]
s	Undergraduate Handbook [032]
t	Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019 [037]
u	National Centre for Circus Arts Working with others policy handbook with appendices [038]
v	National Centre for Circus Arts HE Committee Structure [040]
w	PPR Critical Evaluation Document FINAL [041]
x	Response to PPR Report 2017 - National Centre for Circus Arts [042]
y	SPM Acrobatics 30th June 2021 [043]
z	SPM Aerialists 29th June 2021 [044]
aa	SPM Jugglers 30th June 2021 [045]
bb	CA102 Preparing for Circus [050]
cc	CA107 Movement [051]
dd	CA201 The Ensemble [052]
ee	CA207 Theory, Practice and Analysis of Performance [053]
ff	CA308 Negotiated Performance Task [054]
gg	CA310 Circus Discipline Level 2 [055]
hh	Transition Update Dec 21 [073]
ii	National Centre AB Terms of Reference 2021 update [077a]
jj	SSLTC Terms of Reference. [077b]

5   To test that NCCA ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications' frameworks the team considered all the evidence relevant to this Core practice.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

6   Using the random sampling calculator, the team selected 125 pieces of assessed student work from the total of 1,027 which were completed in the 2020-21 academic year. This was to test whether the work reflects the relevant threshold standards.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

7   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

8   To identify the underlying basis for how the standards of awards inform the NCCA's approach to course and assessment design and requirements for awards, the team explored the memorandum of agreement between NCCA and the University of Kent, [037] the University's General Regulations for Students, [004] Academic Regulations for Taught Courses of Study, [005] level descriptors [002] and annexes to its quality code, [011, 012] and the programme specifications, [019] NCCA's Undergraduate Handbook, [032] committee structure diagram [040] and module descriptors. [050, 051. 052, 053, 054, 055]

The team also met staff from NCCA and the University. [M5]

9   To interrogate the robustness and credibility of the plans for ensuring threshold standards the team reviewed the NCCA's Transition Update document, [073] the centre's committee structure [040] and terms of reference for the Academic Board and SSLTC to determine the responsibilities of the committees that will oversee the revision of policies and procedures. [077]

10   To test that specified threshold standards for the course are consistent with relevant national qualifications' frameworks, the team considered the programme specifications [019] and Response to PPR Report 2016-17, [042] as well as Academic Board [023] and SSLTC [022] minutes.

11   To check that external examiners or verifiers confirm that threshold standards are consistent with national qualifications' frameworks, and that credit and qualifications are awarded only where those threshold standards have been met, the team considered the memorandum of agreement between NCCA and the University of Kent, [037] external examiner reports [21] and NCCA's Academic Board minutes. [23]

12   To identify how other organisations regard threshold standards and award procedures at NCCA, the team examined third party endorsements by the CDD. [001, 014, 038, 018]

13   To test that students' assessed work reflects the relevant threshold standards, the team sampled assessed student work [Assess] and explored marking and moderation processes with staff. [M3]

14   To test that staff understand and apply the provider's approach to setting and maintaining threshold standards, the team considered the PPR Critical Evaluation Document, [041] assessments, [Assess] and notes from Student Progress Meetings. [043, 044, 045] The team also met with students [M2] and staff involved in assessment and student support. [M1, M3, M5, M6]

What the evidence shows

15   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

16   As detailed in its memorandum of agreement, [037] as a delivery partner NCCA is not responsible for setting standards, but maintains those of the University of Kent. [011, 012] Both parties agree to achieve excellence in their educative pursuits, with the University agreeing to award credit to successful candidates as per the expectations of the credit framework and the University's requirements for accreditation of prior learning (APL). [037] The University sets out its standards in its General Regulations for Students [004] and Academic Regulations for Taught Courses of Study, [005] both of which are overseen by the University's Education and Student Experience Committee on behalf of the University Senate. Both documents and their various annexes, such as the one on annual monitoring processes, are robust and detailed because they provide NCCA with a clear guide that identifies the underlying basis for standards that NCCA must maintain. The University requires modules and courses to be at only one level within the University's Credit Framework for Taught Courses of Study, [002] which uses the definitions of Level 4 to 8 set out in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ). This approach is rigorous.

17   The University requires partner institutions to operate a quality assurance system consistent with the University's requirements, as outlined in its Quality Assurance for Collaboration [012] document. Accordingly, the University's Division of Arts and Humanities

oversees the effectiveness of those processes and appoints an Academic Liaison Officer to work with NCCA. This process ensures oversight of threshold standards because it frames NCCA's accountability within university guidelines.

18   NCCA's Undergraduate Handbook [032] and Course Handbook [012] set out clear, comprehensive regulations and frameworks to support the maintenance of academic standards. They demonstrate the way in which NCCA fulfils its responsibilities as a university partner and clarify any institutional variations in the programme specifications. [019] The two documents define the distinction between the FdA and the BA programmes and provide direct links to the University regulations, ensuring clarity for students about the way the regulations inform their learning. Both handbooks also provide overarching details about curriculum, assessment schemes and regulations, timetable, staff names and contact points. In their meeting with the team, the Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer confirmed that the University assesses handbooks annually ensuring the veracity of the information NCCA provides for its students. [M5] These documents provide a robust framework because they fully comply with university requirements but in a manner wholly appropriate to NCCA's specific needs.

19   At a programme level, module descriptors [050, 051, 052, 053, 054, 055] confirm that the learning outcomes are set at the appropriate level in the FHEQ, approved by the University, provide very clear breakdowns of assessment activities, learning hours and outcomes. Outcomes are subject specific but also include generic transferable skills and a mapping grid that indicates which assessment activities assess which outcomes. The threshold standards underpinning these descriptors are consistent with the FHEQ and are well articulated because they carefully explain how learning outcomes align with the appropriate level of study. However, modules have large numbers of learning outcomes and assessment activities, as recognised by NCCA in the team's meeting with senior staff, [M7] which creates unnecessary pressure for staff and students, so at revalidation it aims to reduce the volume of learning outcomes and assessment activities.

20   In addition to the oversight of the University, NCCA is also part of CDD which provides oversight by providing a core set of common principles for the management of programmes and the oversight of its Academic Board, in addition to the Academic Boards at each institution, across 8 different specialist performing arts providers. With CDD disbanding, NCCA intends to review and refine the existing CDD policies and procedures, which it currently implements as a member of CDD, with ones that reflect NCCA's specific requirements. These changes will be refinements rather than re-writes because the Centre was active in the development of the original documents. Given that the University was the awarding body for several other CDD members, the policies also comply with its requirements. To date, the Centre has reviewed and approved two policies, namely the Attendance Policy and Working with others policy as detailed in the Transition Plan [073] and has set out a schedule for review and amendment to be completed by June 2022. [073] Within NCCA's current committee structure, [040] the NCCA's Student Staff Learning and Teaching Committee (SSLTC) reviews the documentation [077b] and presents it to the Academic Board [077a] for institutional approval. Until this process is complete, the Centre will continue to use the CDD documents [M1] and observe the University's regulations, Codes of Practice for Quality Assurance and Credit Framework conventions as noted above. The robustness and credibility of the NCCA's plans for ensuring threshold standards, are assured because they revolve around refining current processes that work for the Centre, but also meet the University's expectations.

21   NCCA adheres to the University's approval and periodic review processes, ensuring that it fully engages with the University's quality processes. The University operates a 5-year periodic review process, and NCCA's 2017 action plan [042] responded to the 10 advisable and three desirable recommendations. The action plan indicates that the report

was generally very positive, but there were issues raised around staffing, assessment and communications with students about their programme. Subsequently, the SSLTC and then the Academic Board tracked [22, 23] the actions to ensure that the Centre responded to the recommendations. NCCA must respond to the University's processes of periodic review, therefore it adheres to the University processes.

22   To ensure that specified threshold standards for the courses are consistent with relevant national qualifications' frameworks, University regulations [004] detail required approaches to programme approval, which the University oversees. Both programme specifications, that is the FdA and BA, [019] satisfy the University and the team's expectation that its programmes align with the FHEQ in terms of setting sector-recognised standards. The foundation degree [019a] was last updated in May 2016, therefore it aligned with the July 2015 version of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Dance, Drama and Performance. In addition, the foundation degree programme refers to the Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark Statement (May 2010) and section D of the programme outcomes align with the expected outcomes for a foundation degree student who should be ready to enter employment at the end of two years' study. The BA top-up specification [019b] indicates a marked increase in expectations at threshold level for Level 6 study.

23   In line with NCCA's agreement [037] with the University and the annex for External Examiners and External Advisers for Taught Courses in the University's Code of Practice, external examiners are an essential part of how the University maintains standards and identifies good practice. The University appoints the examiners and requires partner institutions to follow the procedures set out in the annex. The external examiner form template [21a, 21b] requires examiners to confirm that standards are appropriate for qualifications at that level, for the subject and in line with the FHEQ, Characteristics Statements, and Subject Benchmark Statements. This practice is consistent with the requirements of the University's external examiners' code. [006]

24   The University has responsibility for convening examination boards which include at least one external examiner, and, for NCCA, a Chair from the School of Art in the Division of Arts and Humanities at the University. The Director of Professional Development at NCCA acts as Deputy Chair. [012] The self-evaluation (000) states that the Assessment Board observes the University's framework to approve all marks, and this was confirmed by academic staff. [M3]

25   If external examiners make any recommendations, the delivery team's response should address those recommendations explicitly, as well as student representative commentary. [006] NCCA's Academic Board considers the report [23] and provides a written response to the external examiner and to the University of Kent. [M5] The University's Division of Arts and Humanities then produces an annual summary of its external examiner reports and submits this to the Quality Assurance and Compliance Office (QACO) for consideration by the University's Education and Student Experience Board. [005, 006] However, external examiner reports [21] continue to praise NCCA's approach to meeting sector-recognised standards, reflecting the high levels of professional attainment of students. External examiner processes are secure because they fully observe university requirements.

26   Although the CDD Quality Handbook [018] dates to November 2017, it was the result of a process of internal consultation across eight schools and three awarding bodies. The handbook confirms that the degree-awarding bodies have ultimate responsibility for setting academic standards. Given the dissolving of the CDD, the handbook is becoming obsolete, but until such time as NCCA produces its own version, it acts as a guide for the NCCA's quality assurance processes. The CDD processes ensure additional oversight because they cement the need for each school to maintain sector-recognised standards.

27   In addition to CDD, NCCA is also a member of the European Federation of Professional Circus Schools (FEDEC), which provides a professional circus perspective and links NCCA to other circus schools across Europe. The University recognises FEDEC benchmarks as additional external benchmarks. [M1] The engagement with FEDEC provides further assurance about NCCA's understanding of sector-recognised standards and award procedures because it links the programmes to a broader international network.

28   Module descriptors [050, 051. 052, 053, 054, 055] describe a range of assessment activities, including written work, continuous assessment of technical and creative practical work and assessment of circus performance. The samples of assessed student work [Assess] indicate that students produce a range of work that reflects the relevant sector-recognised standards because its content mirrors academic writing appropriate to the relevant levels of the FHEQ, and the marking processes are rigorous, as indicated in external examiner reports [21] and outlined by staff. [M3] The process of moderation is either replaced by second marking of all students or by sample. Assessment feedback seen by the team [Assess] indicates that Year Managers and the Head of HE delivery oversee the process of moderation and check the marking provided by the sessional staff and comments made by the teaching staff [M4] confirmed the implementation of the process. This process is thorough because at all points it demonstrates clear checks and balances to ensure that grades accurately reflect the attainment of sector-recognised standards.

29   NCCA states [041] that its staff design learning outcomes to meet the aims of the programme and prepare the next generation of circus artists for careers as performers and makers. Consequently, programme and module learning outcomes reflect the expectations of the QAA Benchmark Statements for Dance, Drama and Performance (2015) and conform to the requirements of the University's credit framework. Notes from student progress meetings [043, 044, 045] indicate a thorough and considered process of assessment, where each student meets with the relevant tutors for the review and receives advice and guidance in the meetings to focus student development. The assessed student work examined by the team [Assess] also indicates that students receive feedback for every assessment activity and students state that they value the fact that they receive feedback at the end of each term supported by the progress meetings. [M2] In meetings with staff across the Centre, [M1, M3, M5, M6] they describe the benefit of NCCA being a small institution and therefore through the Degree Administration Team can share information about student assessment if students require further explanation of their feedback or to understand their expectations for the forthcoming term. NCCA's approach to maintaining sector-recognised standards is exacting because the detailed assessment and progress meetings connect the grades awarded to detailed feedback.

Conclusions

30   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

31   From the evidence seen, the team considers that the standards set for the provider's courses are in line with the standards defined in paragraph 342 of the OfS's regulatory framework. The assessed work and the feedback indicate that students meet the threshold standards defined by the University through the process of programme validation. The team considers that the standards described in the approved programme documentation are set at levels consistent with the FHEQ and through its internal policies NCCA ensures that standards are maintained in line with university expectations. The team

considers that staff fully understand the provider's approach to maintaining these standards, evidenced by the close working relationship with the Academic Staff Liaison Officer and that the evidence seen demonstrates they are committed to implementing this approach. Therefore, based on scrutiny of the evidence provided, the review team concludes that this Core practice is met.

32   The team examined all the evidence relevant to this Core practice. The structured support provided by the University from programme design through to external examining ensures that NCCA meets sector-recognised standards for its qualifications in a manner consistent with the relevant national qualifications' frameworks. Therefore the team has a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

S2 The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers

33   This Core practice expects that the provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.

34   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

35   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with students [M2]
b   Meeting with academic staff [M3]
c   Meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5]
d   Final meeting [M7]
e   Assessed student work [Assess]
f   Demonstration of the virtual learning environment [VLE]
g   University of Kent Credit Framework - Marking conventions [003]
h   University of Kent General Regulations for Students [004]
i   University of Kent Regulations for Taught Courses of Study [005]
j   CDD Assessment Matrix [007]
k   CDD Grade and Level descriptors [008]
l   University of Kent Classification guidance [010]
m   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships [011]
n   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships [012]
o   CDD Working with Others Handbook [014]
p   NCCA Guide to Assessment [015]
q   Programme specifications [019]
r   Recent external examiners' reports [021]
s   Undergraduate Handbook [032]
t   National Centre for Circus Arts Working with others policy handbook with appendices [038]
u   SPM Acrobatics 30 June 2021 [043]

v	SPM Aerialists 29 June 2021 [044]
w	SPM Jugglers 30th June 2021 [045]
x	Methods of Marking and Moderation 2019 ST [046]
y	External Examiners' Response 2017-18 [047]
z	NCCA Responses to examiners for Kent 18-19 [048]
aa	NCCA Responses to examiners for Kent 19-20 [049]
bb	CA102 Preparing for Circus [050]
cc	CA107 Movement [051]
dd	CA201 The Ensemble [052]
ee	CA207 Theory, Practice and Analysis of Performance [053]
ff	CA308 Negotiated Performance Task [054]
gg	CA310 Circus Discipline Level 2 [055]
hh	Written assignments. [087]

36   To test that NCCA ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers, the team considered all the evidence relevant to this Core practice.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

37   Using the random sampling calculator, the team selected 125 pieces of assessed student work from the total of 1,027 which were completed in the 2020-21 academic year. This was to test that marks and awards given to students are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

38   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

39   To identify how the underlying basis for the standards of awards informs the NCCA's approach to course and assessment design, marking and moderation, and approaches to classification, the team explored the University of Kent's General Regulations for Students [004] and Academic Regulations for Taught Courses of Study, [005] as well as annexes to its quality code, [011, 012] and NCCA's Undergraduate Handbook. [032] The team also considered the University's marking conventions [003] and degree classification conventions. [010] The team also saw a demonstration of the NCCA virtual learning environment (VLE) [VLE] and met with staff. [M7]

40   To interrogate the robustness of the provider's plans for setting and maintaining comparable standards and to ensure that plans are credible and evidence-based, the team reviewed the NCCA's assessments on its VLE [VLE] and in assessment feedback and mark sheets, [Assess] as well as written assignments. [087]

41   To test that specified standards beyond the threshold for courses are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers, the team examined the NCCA's approved course documentation [019] and module descriptors, [050, 051. 052, 053, 054, 055] and met with senior staff. [M7]

42   To identify that external examiners confirm that standards beyond the threshold for courses are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers, and that credit and qualifications are awarded only where those standards are met, the team reviewed external examiner reports [21] and the NCCA's responses. [047, 048, 049]

43   To identify how other organisations regard the standards and award procedures at NCCA, the team considered the CDD's Working with Others Handbook, [014, 038] the CDD assessment matrix [007] and grade and level descriptors [008] and compared these with the University's marking conventions [003] and NCCA's Guide to Assessment. [015]

44   To test that marks and awards given to students are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers, the team considered programme specifications, [019] assessment information on the NCCA VLE, [VLE] assessed student work and feedback [Assess] and notes from student progress meetings. [043, 044, 045] The team also spoke with staff [M3, M5] and students. [M2]

45   To assess whether students understand what is required of them to reach standards beyond the threshold, the team met with students [M2] and looked at the Centre's VLE. [VLE]

46   To test that staff understand and apply the provider's approach to setting and maintaining comparable standards, the team met with staff involved [M1, M3, M5] in assessment and viewed assessment feedback [Assess] and teaching. [Teach]

What the evidence shows

47   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

48   As described in S1, NCCA is not responsible for setting standards, but is responsible for maintaining those of the University, [011, 012] set out in its General Regulations for Students [004] and Academic Regulations for Taught Courses of Study. [005] University marking conventions [003] and degree classification conventions [010] provide detailed breakdowns for each grading band and guidance on how partner institutions should apply them. These documents are detailed and comprehensive because the guidance they provide for partner institutions contextualises grading within the University's broader assessment framework. The University's documentation affords students the opportunity to achieve beyond the threshold and encourage staff to use the full range of marks. Students who met the team described these marking conventions as clear and enabling them to understand what is required to reach the standards beyond the threshold. [M2]

49   NCCA does not have a specific Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy, and the CDD version has reached the end of its intended duration. The last LTAS Action Plan 20-21 [074] responds to that CDD strategy, but in future NCCA expects to produce something specific to its own needs. [M7] Currently NCCA is in a period of transition between strategies. The lack of a strategy means that NCCA has no formally planned approach to learning, teaching and assessment, while the LTAS action plan shows little indication of the progress made on each point. However, the assessment information on the NCCA's VLE [VLE] indicates a planned and structured assessment process to measure student learning and achievement. Along with the LTAS Action Plan 20-21 [074], this indicates that there is an underlying basis that informs the NCCA's approach to assessment. The NCCA Guide to Assessment [015] outlines the process and practice of assessment. It provides clear explanations of NCCA's assessment practice and a copy of the University's marking conventions. [003] This interconnects with the NCCA Undergraduate Handbook [032] and the NCCA's attendance policy [034] aligns with the demands of highly physically demanding programmes. Together this approach is rigorous, because it is transparent in the

way it places the processes of assessment in context and pitches the programme at a high professional level of engagement. This enables students to develop their work beyond the threshold standard, in keeping with that professional focus, where the aim is training the next generation of circus performers.

50   The assessment information on the NCCA VLE [VLE] and assessment feedback sheets and mark sheets [Assess, 087] indicate that staff mark all assessments out of 100%. Even though the foundation degree (Level 4 and 5) are pass/fail years, NCCA still gives students graded assessments, [M6] this offers the benefit that if students' progress to the BA top-up year, they are already used to graded marking. University guidance encourages markers to award the appropriate mark from the scale that best fits student performance in relation to the assessment criteria [003] and notes from student progress meetings [043, 044, 045] indicate that staff use the full range of marks and relate the numerical grade to appropriate feedback. Even though the University requires staff to mark all examination scripts anonymously, the practical nature of the student work means that NCCA staff mark assessments either as a team, or independently by two tutors, or work is sample second marked and moderated, [015] but not anonymously.

51   If during moderation [046] staff cannot resolve a difference of opinion they should discuss the mark with the external examiner, [003] although NCCA has not had to ask an external examiner to resolve any differences raised by a moderation process, [M5] which as noted in S1 is a considered process that balances second marking for all practical assessment and moderation by sample for written tasks such as essays. During the 2017 Periodic Review, [013] the University commended the use of moderation and double marking in response to students' expectations of fairness and the constant open lines of communication between staff and students. NCCA's Methods of marking and moderation 2019 [046] indicates a detailed approach to marking and moderation that is clearly mapped out before the start of the academic year and evident in schedules published on the VLE. [VLE] Moderation is highly effective because it exceeds the University's expectations for moderation and assures students of the veracity of their marks by engaging all key staff.

52   Programmes [019] and assessment activities have clear learning outcomes, and the tasks increase in complexity as the programme progresses, reflecting the principles embedded in the FHEQ. [000] On the VLE channel for each module, [VLE] staff provide students with the module descriptor [e.g., 050, 051. 052, 053, 054, 055] which indicates that outcomes are appropriate to the level of study. It also details the module learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and a clear map of which tasks assess which outcomes. A link to the NCCA's Guide to Assessment allows students to view grading criteria for both written and practical tasks, although these are not level specific, meaning that the same grading criteria are applicable to all tasks at all levels of study. Separate assignment briefs provide a clear indication of what students are expected to do for each assessment activity. NCCA has tried to keep assessment documents short in response to student feedback noted on the VLE, [VLE] but this risks failing to demonstrate to students what they must do to attain any mark above the threshold level. In the meeting with the team, students describe clarity about assessment as variable and that it depends on verbal support provided by teaching staff either in class or through progress meetings. [M2]

53   External examiners' reports [021] confirm that standards beyond the threshold for courses sampled are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers, and that credit and qualifications are awarded only where those standards have been met. They also comment on the many and diverse methods of assessment and the very clear mapping of the expected learning outcomes for each assignment indicating that students not only attain the threshold standards but are aided to achieve above the threshold level. External examiners' reports indicate that feedback corresponds clearly to the grades awarded, against the assessment criteria, ensuring that learning outcomes are met across the

programme. External examiner reports attribute students' critically informed ideas to the status of the teaching staff as experts in their field with first-hand experience of the demands of the circus profession. External examiner reports confirm that standards beyond the threshold for NCCA programmes are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.

54   CDD supports NCCA to enable students to achieve standards beyond the threshold level, through its Working with Others Handbook, [014, 038] which ensures that accountabilities and processes for its relationship with the University are transparent. CDD also provides an Assessment Matrix [007] to benchmark assessment across what was, at the time of publication, eight schools. The grading criteria are for both written and practical tasks and are appropriate to different levels of study. CDD also offers a grade and level descriptors form [008] to indicate the type of assessment activities schools might use, placing them under core headings and functions like a map of assessment activities. These interconnect with the University's marking conventions. [003] Both sets of documents inform the NCCA's Guide to Assessment, [015] which provides grading rubrics for both practical and written tasks, indicating the requirements student must meet to attain different levels above the threshold level. However, these rubrics do not differentiate between levels of study, so are more generic.

55   As evidenced in programme specifications [019] and in assessment information on NCCA's VLE, [VLE] assessment design does provide a progressive diet of activities year on year, level by level, that ensures that marks and awards given to students are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers. This is also within the context of provision that supports all students to determine their discipline specialisation (for example, juggling, silks, tightrope), ensuring a very bespoke approach that helps students focus the outcome of their learning and enables them to attain above the threshold. [034] Students also attend student progress meetings [043, 044, 045] at the end of each term, which are formal meetings where staff monitor the student's progress through the course and explain to them what they need to do to improve their performance. Year Managers, discipline teachers and other regular teachers attend, and the Head of HE Delivery chairs the meeting to ensure the correct application of processes and fairness. [M3, M5]

56   Students [M2] acknowledge that the Centre places all assessment materials on its VLE and that they understand the expectation of all assessment activities and what they are required to do to meet the threshold standards. Combined with the assessment feedback students receive at the end of each term as given in the sample of assessed student work, [Assess] students state they understand what is expected of them or how they can achieve beyond the threshold. [M2] The continuous assessment activities are in effect formative assessment activities that inform the more summative assessment tasks such as performances or written tasks. [Assess] This is evident in the tutorial-style notes provided on the continuous assessment feedback sheets, whereas feedback of other tasks is sometimes more focused on the attainment of learning outcomes. While the team formed the view that assessment feedback could focus on and define summative and formative commentary more clearly, marks and awards given to students align with the FHEQ, and the breadth of feedback and verbal explanations encourage students to review their attainment to enable them to achieve beyond the threshold and plan for future developments.

57   Staff [M1, M3, M5] are very clear that the process of end-of-term reviews, assessment feedback and moderation enables them to set and maintain comparable standards with other institutions. During the tour of facilities, the team learned that NCCA's connection with FEDEC is a further subject-level benchmarking and their work with professional practitioners who teach or work at the Centre as means of ensuring that assessment retains its relevance to contemporary practice. [Tour] The team sampled a random sample of assessment feedback [Assess] and found it variable in its format and

content. Of that sample, around 50% of the feedback describes what has happened rather than providing critical summary of why students have been awarded specific grades. Attainment of learning outcomes and areas for improvement are often conflated or in some instances omitted. The best feedback - about 20% - is detailed and supportive, the less effective feedback is often cursory and fails to delineate summative and formative feedback. However, this must be seen in the context of exceptional student practice as seen in lesson observations undertaken by the team, [Teach] which demonstrates high levels of attainment and student assurance in their meeting with the team [M2] that progress meetings provide them with clear objectives for the work moving forward. NCCA staff understand and apply the provider's approach to setting and maintaining comparable standards because the framework establishes a clear process, checked by moderation and balanced by dialogue with students.

Conclusions

58   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the assessment team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

59   The team, based on the evidence presented, determined that the standards set for students to achieve beyond the threshold on the provider's courses are reasonably comparable with those set by other UK providers. The combination of continuous feedback, the grading criteria provided, and the termly tutorial process all demonstrate that students have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold. The team considered that the standards described in the approved programme documentation and in the provider's academic regulations and policies also ensure that such standards are maintained appropriately. Therefore, the team concludes that, based on the evidence described above, students who are awarded qualifications can achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers and that this Core practice is met.

60   NCCA students have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level in a way that is reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers. The team examined all the evidence relevant to this Core practice and therefore has a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

S3 Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them

61   This Core practice expects that where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.

62   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

63   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with senior staff [M1]
b   Meeting with students [M2]
c   Meeting with academic staff [M3]
d   Meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5]
e   Final meeting with senior staff [M7]
f   Provider submission statement [000]
g   Recent annual course monitoring reports' [009a-d]
h   University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships [011]
i   University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P [012]
j   Recent external examiners reports [021]
k   2017 Periodic Programme Review Report [013]
l   CDD Working with Others Handbook [014]
m   NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers [036]
n   Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019 [037]
o   National Centre for Circus Arts Working with others policy handbook with appendices [038]
p   Request to provider for additional evidence 10 December ST1 3.063 (2)
q   Liaison Officer Report (18-21) [075]
r   Assessed student work. [Assess].

64   Some of the key pieces of evidence, outlined in Annex 4, were not considered by the assessment team. These pieces of evidence and the reason why they were not considered during this assessment are outlined below:

65   No third-party endorsements from Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies or Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical end-point assessments were available as NCCA does not run programmes requiring such endorsements.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

66   Using the random sampling calculator, the team selected 125 pieces of assessed student work from the total of 1,027 which were completed in the 2020-21 academic year. The assessed work was also representative of all the programmes and modules delivered at NCCA. This was to test that standards of awards are credible and secure, thus confirming the effectiveness of the underpinning arrangements.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

67   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several sources of evidence will have been considered to allow the team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision-making and to ensure that those decisions are focused on outcomes, the team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

68   To identify how the provider ensures the standards of its awards are credible and secure where these are delivered by partners, and to assess whether the provider has credible, robust and evidence-based approaches necessary for securing standards in partnership work, the team considered University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships [011] and University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships. [012]

69   To test whether external examiners or verifiers consider that standards are credible and secure, thus confirming the effectiveness of the underpinning arrangements, the team examined external examiners' reports. [021]

70   To interrogate the basis for the maintenance of academic standards within specific partnerships, and that those arrangements are in line with the provider's regulations or policies, the team considered NCCA 2019-20 CDD Annual Programme Monitoring Report [009a] to determine whether the effective annual monitoring procedures outlined in University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships. [011] The team also considered whether regulations from the University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships [012] are carried out in practice.

71   To interrogate the basis for the maintenance of academic standards within specific partnerships, and that those arrangements are in line with the provider's regulations or policies; and to test whether verifiers consider that standards are credible and secure, thus confirming the effectiveness of the underpinning arrangements, the team considered NCCA 2020-21 Annual Programme Monitoring Report by CDD [009b] to determine whether the effective annual monitoring procedures outlined in University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships [011]

and in University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships [012] are carried out in practice.

72   To test that standards of awards are credible and secure, thus confirming the effectiveness of the underpinning arrangements, the team scrutinised assessed student work [ASSESS] and recent annual course monitoring reports. [009a-d] Further clarification was sought at a meeting with academic staff. [M3]

73   To interrogate the basis for the maintenance of academic standards within specific partnerships, and that those arrangements are in line with the provider's regulations or policies; and to test whether verifiers consider that standards are credible and secure, thus confirming the effectiveness of the underpinning arrangements, the team considered Periodic Programme Review Report Feb 2017 of NCCA by the University of Kent [013] to determine the extent to which the validating body had confidence that the NCCA is enacting policies and procedures outlined in University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships, [011] and University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships, [012] which are designed to ensure that standards of awards are credible and secure.

74   To interrogate the basis for the maintenance of academic standards within specific partnerships, and that those arrangements are in line with the provider's regulations or policies, the team considered CDD Working with Others Handbook [014] and National Centre for Circus Arts working with others policy handbook with appendices [038] in respect of NCCA's claim in the provider submission [000] that CDD Working with Others Handbook [014] 'provides a means of ensuring that accountabilities and processes are clear for [NCCA's] relationship with the University of Kent. [000, paragraph 31]

75   The team considered NCCA Responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers, [036] which was requested by the team in order to clarify which responsibilities will be held by NCCA and which will be held by the University of Kent.

76   To test whether the arrangements complied with the regulatory and policy framework governing the partnerships established, the team read Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019. [037] Further clarifications were sought in a final meeting with senior staff. [M7]

77   To test whether examiners consider that standards are credible and secure, thus confirming the effectiveness of the underpinning arrangements, the team considered Liaison Officer Report (18-21), [075] triangulating this document with further information from Meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer. [M5]

78   To test the awarding body/organisation's understanding of their responsibilities and how this is implemented and monitored in practice, the team met with the University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5] who manages the partnership agreement and relationship with NCCA.

79   The team met members of staff involved in delivering programmes leading to awards of the University to test their understanding of their responsibilities to the University, as the awarding body, and how these responsibilities are discharged and monitored in accordance with the respective Memoranda of Agreement. [M1, M3, M5, M7 and 037]

80   The team met students to assess their views about the quality of programmes

delivered in partnership. [M2]

What the evidence shows

81   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

82   The team found there is clarity in the responsibilities and working arrangements between NCCA, the University of Kent and CDD. These are demonstrated by the policies and procedures laid out in the University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O, [011] and University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P. [012] The CDD Working with Others Handbook [014] further clarifies the accountabilities and processes relating to the implementation of these arrangements. The recent annual course monitoring reports [009a-d] and the 2017 Periodic Programme Review Report [013] demonstrate that the arrangements outlined above have been effectively implemented in the last few years of programme delivery. These processes and frameworks are in line with sector practice and provide the necessary management and oversight of academic standards, including the arrangements for programme approval, management, delivery and assessment. Under these arrangements, NCCA is responsible for curriculum development, admissions and assessment, with the University retaining ultimate responsibility for academic standards and exercising operational responsibility for the conduct of assessment boards, initial approval and periodic review.

83   As a validated partner, the University undertakes direct responsibility for administering the programme approval and periodic review processes and for providing oversight of assessment boards and the classification of awards. NCCA has direct responsibility for curriculum development, programme management and delivery, and the design and operation of assessment including marking and moderation. [009a-d, 011, 012] The team found that the detailed and robust annual monitoring and periodic review processes [013] provide sound evidence of NCCA working effectively in accordance with the requirements of the University to ensure that high academic standards continue to be maintained.

84   In becoming independent from CDD, and as part of its future plans to ensure currency and its continued alignment with the University's requirements, NCCA has adapted and developed guidance such as the CDD Working with Others Handbook [014] to reflect its particular context of operation as demonstrated by the National Centre for Circus Arts Working with others policy handbook with appendices. [038] The arrangements and role of the University and NCCA are clearly set out and provide sufficient detail to ensure the standards of awards are credible and secure, irrespective of the method of delivery or who delivers them. [013]

85   Staff involved with delivery of programmes in partnership with the University [M1, M3, M5, M7] were able to talk knowledgably about their working relationships and their roles in maintaining the standards of awards. The meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5] clarified NCCA's role in retaining ownership of student assessment, the design of the curriculum and associated learning outcomes, with the University providing scrutiny of academic standards associated with these. Positive external examiner reports and the sample of assessed student work scrutinised by the team demonstrated that marking and moderation of assessment was followed in accordance with the University's requirements. [011, 012, 021, ASSESS] The team considered that these arrangements are effective and secure because staff responsible for assessing students' work are familiar with the University's and NCCA's requirements and understand their role in maintaining academic standards in working in partnership with others. [038]

86   Staff [M1, M3, M5, M7] demonstrated their understanding of their responsibilities for

maintaining standards in accordance with the University's requirements. This is enabled by the collegial and inclusive culture evident within NCCA and the commitment to enabling student achievement, underpinned by effective monitoring of programmes and feedback received, [009 a-d] the external examiners' affirmation of the effectiveness of the assessment processes, [021] and the outcomes of the 2017 Periodic Programme Review Report. [013]

Conclusions

87   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the assessment team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

88   Effective arrangements are in place to ensure standards of awards are credible and secure. Partnership agreements are clear and detailed, and staff understand their responsibilities in maintaining academic standards within the overall framework and regulatory requirement of the University. NCCA has a good track record of partnership working with the University and complies with the University's regulatory and quality assurance requirements to maintain high academic standards. This is confirmed by external examiner reports and the team's consideration of the random sample of assessed student work, and the operation of assessment and marking in accordance with University Codes of Practice and Regulations to ensure standards are credible and secure.

89   NCCA has a detailed policy for working with others, which is a broad set of principles for working with others, and it retains full responsibility for all aspects of assessment and grading. The team had confidence in the robustness and credibility of these arrangements given the annual monitoring and review activity undertaken, the positive tenor of external examiners' reports and the assessed student work seen by the team. Meetings with NCCA staff and the University of Kent Liaison Officer demonstrated clear understanding of each institution's responsibilities for ensuring that the standards of NCCA's awards are credible and secure, irrespective of where or how programmes are delivered or who delivers them. The team therefore concludes that this Core practice is met.

90   The evidence underpinning this judgement reflects all the evidence described in the QSR evidence matrix, excepting third party endorsements which were not applicable in this case. Therefore, the team has a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

S4 The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent

91   This Core practice expects that the provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent.

92   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

93   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with senior staff [M1]
b   Meeting with students [M2]
c   Meeting with academic staff [M3]
d   Meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5]
e   Provider submission statement [000]
f   University of Kent Credit Framework - Level descriptors [002]
g   University of Kent Credit Framework - Marking conventions [003]
h   University of Kent General Regulations for Students [004]
i   University of Kent Regulations for Taught Courses of Study [005]
j   University of Kent's Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses, Annex K: External Examiners and External Advisers for Taught Courses [006]
k   NCCA Guide to Assessment [015]
l   Recent external examiner reports [021]
m   NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers [036]
n   External Examiners Response 2017-18 [047]
o   NCCA Responses to examiners for Kent 18-19 [048]
p   NCCA Responses to examiners for Kent 19-20 [049]
q   Liaison Officer Report (18-21) [075]
r   Request to provider for additional evidence 10 December ST1 3.063 (2).

94   Some of the key pieces of evidence, outlined in Annex 4, were not considered by the team. These pieces of evidence and the reason why they were not considered during this assessment are outlined below:

95   No third-party endorsements from Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies or Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical end-point assessments were available as NCCA does not run programmes requiring such endorsements.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

96   No samples were used for this Core practice.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

97   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

98   To ensure that processes relating to external expertise, assessment and classification are reliable, fair and transparent, the following documents were scrutinised in combination: University of Kent Credit Framework - Level descriptors, [002] the University of Kent Credit Framework - Marking conventions, [003] and University of Kent Regulations for Taught Courses of Study. [005] These documents were scrutinised in order to identify how external experts are used in setting and maintaining academic standards, and how the provider's assessment and classification processes operate; and to assess whether the use of external expertise in setting and maintaining academic standards, and assessment and classification processes are credible, robust and evidence based. Further testing of these documents was carried out during the site visit, in meeting with senior staff, [M1] meeting with students, [M2] meeting with academic staff, [M3] and meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer. [M5] The University of Kent General Regulations for Students [004] were not used specifically as evidence in respect of this criterion, the procedures outlined within were not applicable to the training provided by the NCCA.

99   To ensure that processes relating to external expertise, assessment and classification are reliable, fair and transparent, the team examined University of Kent External Examiners Code Annex K. [006] This document was used to identify how external experts are used in setting and maintaining academic standards, and how the provider's assessment and classification processes operate; and to assess whether the use of external expertise in setting and maintaining academic standards, and assessment and classification processes are credible, robust and evidence based. The application of these processes in everyday practice was tested during the site visit at a meeting with senior staff, [M1] a meeting with students, [M2] a meeting with academic staff, [M3] a meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer, [M5] and a final meeting with senior staff. [M7]

100   To determine whether processes relating to assessment and classification were reliable, fair and transparent, the team considered the NCCA Guide to Assessment. [015]

101   To interrogate the use of external examiners and determine whether the provider considers and responds to externals' reports regarding standards appropriately and to identify externals' views about reliability, fairness and transparency of assessment and classification processes, the team considered recent external examiner reports [021] in combination with the External Examiners Response 2017-18, [047] NCCA Responses to examiners for the University of Kent 18-19 [048] and NCCA Responses to examiners for Kent 19-20. [049]

What the evidence shows

102   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

103   As demonstrated by the University's regulatory documents, [002, 003, 004, 005 and 006] assessment and classification processes are maintained as reliable, fair and

transparent through scrutiny provided by external examiners. Further transparency is demonstrated through the NCCA Guide to Assessment. [015] The NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers [036] confirms that the use of external expertise in maintaining academic standards is the responsibility of the University of Kent.

104   The University of Kent level descriptors [002] demonstrate that NCCA are appropriate level descriptors that are reliable, fair and transparent. This is because the University has adopted qualification level descriptors set out in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These descriptors were approved by the University Senate in 2001 and last revised in September 2020; this demonstrates that they are up-to-date and remain valid.

105   The University of Kent Marking Conventions [003] demonstrate that NCCA use assessment processes that are reliable, fair and transparent. At the site visit, students reported [M2] that their work had been marked fairly and transparently. Although the marking convention [003] refers to the use of anonymous scripts for timed, unseen examinations, and for candidates to be assigned random examination numbers in advance of examinations (with answer scripts identified by candidate number only), these procedures are not in place at NCCA due to the small cohort size and the immediately identifiable connection between student and work within a performing art setting.

106   As specified in the University of Kent Marking Conventions, [003] the University mandate that the NCCA must use categorical marking scales, except where it has been agreed that a module shall be assessed on a pass/fail or fail/pass/merit/distinction basis. NCCA is responsible for devising assessment criteria that map onto the respective classification bands provided by the University of Kent. Paragraph 4.1.4 in the marking convention [003] sets out the circumstances under which the categorical marking scale does not have to be followed, although the University encourages markers to avoid awarding marks that fall immediately below a class boundary; this practice provides further evidence that the provider's assessment processes can be considered as being 'fair'.

107   Section 7 of the University of Kent Marking Conventions [003] sets out the policies that relate to moderation of marks. Moderation is undertaken by a second internal examiner and involves reviewing the marking of the work of 10% of the candidates, or of at least six candidates if there are fewer than 60 candidates in total, or of all the candidates if there are fewer than six candidates in total. The moderator sees a representative sample of work that includes the highest and lowest marks. The first marker may also seek advice from the moderator where necessary on the marking of work by particular candidates. Where the moderator cannot vouch for the accuracy and consistency of marking, the matter is referred to the Chair of the Board of Examiners, who will then arrange for all the work to be double marked (usually by the moderator) but sometimes by a third party. These procedures demonstrate an appropriate level of reliability, fairness and transparency. Where differences of opinion between the first and second markers cannot be resolved, recourse is made to the external examiner, although the meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5] revealed that the external examiner has never been called upon to exercise this aspect of the role. These procedures were confirmed as current practice at the meeting with academic staff. [M3]

108   The University of Kent Marking Conventions [003] set out further procedures relating to the role of the external examiner. An external examiner has dispensation to change a mark awarded to an individual if specific conditions are met. Alternatively, an external examiner may ask that marks for all candidates for a module be systematically adjusted where they consider this to be appropriate. Where a sample of work is selected on behalf of the external examiner, a reasonable sample of assessed work should be taken

from each class band, and a reasonable sample of fails. It was confirmed at the meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5] that this procedure is carried out in practice. Furthermore, analysis of the recent external examiner reports [021] identified externals' views in relation to how procedures relating to this Core practice impact on the pedagogy of the institution, the examiner writing in the report for Academic Year 2019-20 that 'The programmes offer many and more importantly, diverse points and methods of assessment that prepare the students for real life briefs and situations. The mapping of the expected learning outcomes attached to an assignment are very clear and is reiterated in each of the feedback forms that the students receive'. This demonstrates that NCCA uses reliable, fair and transparent external expertise processes that support a diverse range of learners and that these processes are effective in maintaining academic standards on behalf of the University of Kent.

109   Section 16 of the University of Kent Marking Conventions [003] sets out the procedures by which marks are rounded and displayed. Marks are rounded to the nearest integer; aggregated but as yet unrounded overall marks for modules that fall within one mark of the boundary for a higher class band (for example a raw mark of 39, 49, 59 or 69) are rounded up to the nearest integer; where an element of assessment in a module has been failed for which a pass was compulsory, aggregated but as yet unrounded overall marks awarded are not rounded up to the nearest integer. Aggregated overall rounded marks are displayed on composite mark sheets, student transcripts and to students electronically as a whole number after confirmation at the Board of Examiners; overall weighted average marks for classification purposes are calculated and displayed to two decimal places on composite mark sheets and student transcripts. These procedures demonstrate that NCCA has clear and comprehensive regulations and policies for classification, and that these processes are reliable, fair and transparent.

110   The University of Kent Regulations for Taught Courses of Study [005] states in Section 6 Course of Study and Coursework Submission Requirements that schools require the mandatory submission of written coursework in electronic format only, and that students are required to state the total word count of written coursework submissions. These procedures ensure that word counts are calculated reliably and transparently, and that deductions for incorrect word count are made fairly. Unless stated otherwise, there is an allowance of 10% deviation in excess of the stated maximum word count. Section 7 Course of Study and Progression of University of Kent Regulations for Taught Courses of Study [005] states that students will be provided with details in writing of the course of study for which they are registered and the methods of assessment which will be used to test if they have achieved the learning outcomes required for the award for which they are registered; this demonstrates that assessment processes are communicated to students transparently, allowing those with additional needs with an early opportunity to explore options for alternative assessment models.

111   The University of Kent External Examiners Code Annex K [006] demonstrates clear and comprehensive policies relating to the use of external expertise. The procedures for nominating and appointing external examiners are clearly laid out in Section 4, with robust policies concerning potential conflicts of interest and concurrent appointments. The period of service with the University for an external examiner shall normally be four years, with an exceptional extension for a further one year in special circumstances. Candidates for the position must be experienced in the subject or specialism related to the appointment, and they must be able to demonstrate experience relating to course design and student assessment relevant to the level of the award. External examiners must be able to demonstrate competence and experience relating to the enhancement of the student learning experience.

112   External Examiners participate as full members of the Boards of Examiners of

which they are a member; they monitor and report on the standards set by the University in comparison with those of other institutions, ensuring that awards are in line with the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark statements, and confirming that standards are appropriate for qualifications at that level and in that subject as demonstrated by Recent external examiner reports [021]. The meeting with students [M2] confirmed that External Examiner reports are made available to students, thus ensuring transparency. These procedures, as evidenced by recent external examiners reports [021], show that NCCA uses external expertise in a reliable, fair and transparent manner to set and maintain academic standards.

113   The University of Kent External Examiners Code Annex K [006] demonstrates that processes relating to the use of external expertise are credible, robust and evidence based. For instance, external examiners are mandated to monitor and report on the proceedings of the Board of Examiners, and in particular on whether these ensure that students are treated fairly and consistently within institutional regulations and guidance; they are also tasked with monitoring and reporting on whether marking has been undertaken rigorously and in accordance with assessment criteria, in particular by reviewing the marking of samples of student work (including work for referrals and deferrals). External examiners also observe students in the performing arts and monitor and report on the realisation of learning outcomes through work-based learning, placement and employer links and its associated assessment. The recent external examiner reports [021] demonstrate that these processes have taken place in recent years. External examiner reports include recommendations on any steps which might be taken to enhance the experience of students, assessment policies and procedures and the proceedings of the Board of Examiners. NCCA must explicitly address these recommendations in its response to the external examiner. Where a report includes negative judgements on academic standards, NCCA is required to make a specific response to the negative judgement including, as appropriate, what action will be taken as a result. The External Examiners Response 2017-18 [047] and the NCCA Responses to examiners for Kent 18-19 [048] and 19-20 [49] demonstrate that these procedures are taking place. External examiners also have the facility to submit confidential reports to the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kent. These procedures, and evidence relating to the use of these procedures, demonstrate that external expertise is used robustly and credibly in maintaining academic standards.

114   Testimony from the site visit at the meeting with academic staff, [M3] meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer, [M5] and the final meeting with senior staff [M7] revealed that although the University regulations specify a maximum of 20% continuous assessment, NCCA has been granted dispensation by the University to go beyond this. An example of 33% continuous assessment in relation to one year group was given. [M7] As the sheer quantity of transient, practical work observed by internal staff under continuous assessment processes cannot be observed retrospectively by external expertise, the reliability of internal marking and classification procedures is scrutinised by NCCA through a combination of external examiner and university liaison officer attendance at exam boards, and meetings between the University Liaison Officer and NCCA Head of Academic Administration and Student Support, [M5] supported by external examiner and liaison officer scrutiny of a sample of videoed performances. The University Liaison Officer triangulates information from his regular meetings with the NCCA Head of Academic Administration and Student Support with information presented at exam board. In their capacity as a representative of the validating body, the University Liaison Officer reported during the meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5] that the University is satisfied that these procedures provide an effective mechanism to ensure that assessment and classification procedures are reliable. NCCA reported that the potential lack of objectivity in continuous assessment processes was explicitly recognised, and that internal moderation procedures at student progress meetings, at several points during the continuous assessment process, were an effective measure that ensured reliability of marks in advance of external scrutiny. At these meetings, staff discuss

the progress of each individual student, building a holistic view of each student's progress while simultaneously maintaining a shared understanding of benchmark standards across the team to ensure consistency. [M7]

115   The NCCA Guide to Assessment [015] is a student-facing document that is published via the NCCA webpages and disseminated through the VLE. It provides comprehensive details of assessment methods and processes at NCCA and ensures that students are able to prepare for assessment. It has a clearly set out contents page with a hyperlinked menu, with each sub-section providing transparent information relating to assessment, progression, modes of assessment, assessment procedures, grading, degree outcomes, and policies relating to the querying of marks awarded and to submitting extension requests. The information in the NCCA Guide to Assessment [015] serves as a helpful reference point for staff and students involved in the assessment process ensuring that the assessment and classification processes are transparent as there is a shared understanding between the parties involved, and fair because the processes combine staff assessment with scrutiny from external examiners to enable grades and final classifications to be awarded to reflect individual student achievement.

116   The NCCA Guide to Assessment [015] clearly explains to students the two forms of assessment used at NCCA, continuous assessment and designated assessment, and how these translate into specific assessment modes. Further explanation is provided in relation to grading, feedback and classification procedures. The roles of the student progress meeting committee, the exam board, and the external examiners is explained in a transparent manner. Students are told that the external examiner has access to all assessed work, and that the external examiner is mandated to ensure that all students are treated fairly and that standards are in line with other comparable degree courses. The section relating to assessment processes describes to students how assessment works in practice. The detail given within this section demonstrates a transparent approach towards communicating assessment processes to students and, in their meeting with the team, they [M2] confirmed that they have found assessment and classification processes to be reliable, fair and transparent. The meeting with academic staff [M3] revealed that teaching staff at NCCA understand the requirements for the use of external expertise, and the provider's assessment and classification processes.

117   The recent external examiner reports [021] confirm that NCCA provides appropriate support for external examiners to scrutinise their provision. The template for the external examiner response explicitly asks the external examiner to comment on whether academic standards are comparable with those at other institutions, and their comparability with, as well as to comment on, assessment and examination, the proceedings of the Board of Examiners and student achievement. The external examiner is also invited to identify items of good practice and to comment on the adequacy of documentation provided for scrutiny.

118   The external examiner has noted in each report [021] that standards of student performance are comparable with similar programmes and subjects in other UK institutions, commenting in the report for Academic Year 2019-20 that 'Standards of practical performance were very high, and staff and students are to be congratulated on the quality of the work'. Although the examiner was unable to attend assessment performances in person that year due to Covid-19, they were given access to written work, online video submissions, presentations and performance work, and confirmed that this sample demonstrated that 'academic processes and standards are of high quality'.

119   The external examiner reports [021] only make one recommendation, which is to consider the introduction of work-based learning in the forthcoming revalidation; as a result, the response for 2019-20 [049] is not able to demonstrate a highly detailed consideration of external scrutiny.

Conclusions

120   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the assessment team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

121   NCCA uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent and also has clear and comprehensive regulations that describe its requirements for using external expertise in setting and maintaining academic standards. Students at NCCA report that assessment and classification processes are reliable, fair and transparent, and external examiners are used effectively in the maintenance and oversight of academic standards. Staff understand the requirements for the use of external expertise and understand the assessment and classification processes that are in use at NCCA. The University has robust and credible documents that NCCA follows ensuring reliable, fair and transparent assessment and classification processes. The team concludes, therefore, that this Core practice is met.

122   The team was able to scrutinise all evidence in Annex 4, except third party endorsements which were not applicable in this case, therefore, the team has a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

Q1   The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system

123   This Core practice expects that the provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system.

124   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the [Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers](#) (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

125   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with students [M2]
b   Meeting with academic staff [M3]
c   Meeting with registry staff [M4]
d   Meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5]
e   Provider submission statement [000]
f   CDD Admissions Policy [016]
g   CDD Admissions Appeals and Complaints Policy [017]
h   NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers [036]
i   Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019 [037]
j   CDD Access & Participation Plan [090]
k   Demonstration of the virtual learning environment [VLE]
l   Admissions samples. [ADMISS]

126   Some of the key pieces of evidence, outlined in Annex 4, were not considered by the team. These pieces of evidence and the reason why they were not considered during this assessment are outlined below:

127   There are no arrangements with recruitment agents as NCCA does not use recruitment agents.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

128   Using the random sampling calculator, 58 admissions records were selected from the 81 applications over the last three years. These were also representative of both the foundation and honours degrees offered at NCCA. This was to assess whether reliable, fair and inclusive admissions decisions were made for the applicants sampled.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

129   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such,

several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

130   The team considered the provider submission statement [000] to determine how NCCA considered that Q1 was being met. The NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers [036] was considered in order to confirm the responsibilities stated by each party, with further detail provided by Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019. [037]

131   To identify institutional policy relating to: the recruitment, selection and admission of students; roles and responsibilities of staff involved in the admissions process; support for applicants; how the provider verifies applicants' entry qualifications; how the provider facilitates an inclusive admissions system; how it handles complaints and appeals; whether admissions systems are reliable, fair and inclusive; whether the information given to applicants is transparent, inclusive and fit for purpose; how the provider ensures that third parties understand and implement the provider's admissions policy and process effectively, the team considered the CDD Admissions Policy [016] and the CDD Admissions, Appeals and Complaints Policy & Procedure. [017] Additional clarifications were provided at a meeting with senior staff [M1] and a meeting with registry staff. [M4]

132   To test whether staff understand their responsibilities, are appropriately skilled and supported, and can articulate how the provider's approach to inclusivity is manifest in the admissions process, the team considered a random sample of admissions records [ADMISS] to assess whether reliable, fair and inclusive admissions decisions have been made for the applicants sampled. Information from this sample, and from the CDD documents [016, 017] was triangulated with evidence gathered from the NCCA website: https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/, meetings with admission staff [M4] and academic staff .[M3] Students' views about the admissions process were compared with other data relating to this criterion at the meeting with students. [M2] Reference was also made to the CDD Access & Participation Plan [090] and the demonstration of the VLE. [VLE]

What the evidence shows

133   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

134   The provider submission statement [000] states that NCCA will continue to use the CDD Admissions Policy [016] in the future – 'We are adopting this admissions policy, amended as necessary to refer only to NCCA, to take effect when we leave CDD'. Admissions are managed by the Admissions and Registry Manager, demonstrating that there is a structure in place with an identified key point of contact for managing the admissions system. Fair and inclusive practice is demonstrated by the opportunities provided to potential candidates on open days to get support with application forms and also to participate in audition skill workshops. The provider submission [000] states an intention to remove audition fees and to implement travel bursaries, which demonstrates an ambition to provide a continually fairer and more inclusive admissions system in the future. The provider submission [000] states that NCCA takes 'contextual information into account when making decision[s] on applicants who marginally do not meet the audition criteria but are from a widening participation (WP) background', demonstrating an inclusive approach.

135   The NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers [036] confirms that NCCA takes full responsibility for the admissions system. Schedule 1, on

pp 29-30 of Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019 [037] provides further confirmation, stating that 'The National Centre will be responsible for the recruitment, selection and admission of students'. On page 9, 6.1 confirms that it is the responsibility of NCCA 'to handle all aspects of the recruitment and selection of students and to admit only candidates for the programmes who meet the entry criteria specified in the appropriate approved programme specifications, including any IELTS score'.

136   Despite NCCA taking full responsibility for decisions relating to admissions, a level of oversight is still provided by the University of Kent. The meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5] revealed that the University Liaison Officer receives a report on NCCA admissions decisions in the autumn term, and that the rationale for exceptional admissions decisions is explicitly scrutinised in each case. This report gives the University oversight of the application of admissions procedures at NCCA. The University Liaison Officer stated at the meeting [M5] that there was an anticipation that this aspect of the role would grow in importance as NCCA seeks to improve admissions from widening participation backgrounds in the future.

137   The CDD Admissions Policy [016] articulates the approach taken by NCCA towards the admission of students. The policy [016] articulates clear guidelines relating to student profile, entry requirements, application method, application fees, audition procedures, and how audition results are communicated to applicants. Clear statements are made regarding inclusive practice and a commitment to selecting, training and supporting students regardless of ethnicity, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation or religion, demonstrating a clear set of policies that have a reliable, fair and inclusive approach. A commitment to inclusivity is underpinned by the CDD's Inclusive Cultures Strategy and associated Framework for Contextual Admissions (these documents are hyperlinked within the CDD Admissions Policy [016]). The framework sets out CDD's commitment to identify, acknowledge, and mitigate barriers and disadvantages that applicants may face not only at the time of application, but also when they are subsequently accepted for study. Applicants are encouraged to disclose any impairment or condition at the point of application so that NCCA can endeavour to make any reasonable adjustments at audition or interview, and subsequently during the course, to enable participation, but applicants can choose to disclose at a later stage if they prefer to. The Audition and Interview Fee Waiver Scheme is clearly outlined to prospective students and provides support to applicants from Widening Participation backgrounds. Further information relating to widening participation is provided by the CDD Access and Participation Plan, also hyperlinked within the document.

138   The CDD Admissions Policy [016] describes the overarching admissions policy for all schools within the CDD. At various points within the document, it refers to the website of the individual school for more specific information (a hyperlink to the school websites is included within the document). There is an apparent contradiction between the CDD document and the NCCA website: the CDD document [016] appears to indicate that students under 18 years of age are able to study subject to specific limitations, yet the NCCA website states that applicants must be 18 or over on entry. Registry staff acknowledged this issue and informed the team that they intend to clarify this anomaly once they assume full ownership of the document, confirming that students have to be 18 or over on entry. [M4] Applicants that are not offered a place can request feedback from their audition or interview by contacting NCCA directly. There is a named contact for enquiries relating to admissions provided within the CDD Admissions Policy. [016]

139   The CDD Admissions, Appeals and Complaints Policy & Procedure [017] articulates the procedures in place at NCCA in respect of appeals and complaints relating to admissions. It explains to applicants how they can make a complaint about the admissions service and how they can appeal against an admissions decision. The lead contact for the document is identified as the Deputy Academic Registrar of CDD; NCCA intend to identify a

role within the centre to take on this responsibility, and a discussion at the meeting with registry staff [M4] indicated that this would be the Head of Academic Administration and Student Support, with support from the Chief Operating Officer. Students are initially invited to resolve issues amicably via an informal query; if this is unsuccessful, a formal appeal can be initiated which currently could involve staff from the central office of CDD. In the future, NCCA will need to deal with all complaints in-house, or make provision for external support. The meeting with senior staff [M1] indicated that suitable plans for each pathway were currently in preparation. A clear set of potential outcomes to student appeals and complaints is laid out within the CDD Admissions, Appeals and Complaints Policy & Procedure, [017] and the approach articulated here is comparable to practice elsewhere within the higher education sector. Timescales are made transparent within the document to potential complainants. Section 6.6 of the policy and procedure lists types of potential complaints that will not be considered appropriate for further investigation by NCCA; the language used is clear and fit for purpose and is comparable to practice elsewhere within the sector. In the case of an unsuccessful appeal, applicants are advised that the remit of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (the ombudsman scheme for student complaints) does not include admissions, but that complaints can be taken further through the Citizens Advice Bureau or the Competition and Markets Authority.

140   Scrutiny of 58 applicant audition records from the 2019, 2020 and 2021 audition cycles demonstrates consistency in respect of the three main criteria listed on the NCCA website https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/; all applicants were 18 years old or over, all applicants demonstrated intent to pursue professional employment in circus arts, and all candidates demonstrated proficiency in written and verbal English. For the foundation programme, the website specifies a baseline threshold of 'normally GSCE English or SELT', but all applicants for the foundation in this sample exceeded this threshold. The vast majority of applicants had Level 3 qualifications, and several had undergraduate degrees in other subjects. The examination of admissions records revealed no deviations in practice and demonstrated that the process is operated with integrity.

141   Students confirmed at the meeting [M2] that admission requirements were understood prior to audition. Students reported that they felt well supported throughout the application and audition process and were able to access clarifications as needed from NCCA staff. Audition requirements were made clear, both through written documents and video resources.

142   Application forms are submitted through NCCA's website and, as confirmed in a meeting with registry staff, [M4] there are no future plans to use UCAS. After applicants submit their application form and are invited to audition, they are asked to complete a medical and health screening form to draw attention to any current injuries and to make requests, where necessary, for reasonable adjustments to the audition process. The team saw evidence of these screening forms in the admissions sample (ADMISS). Applicants are also asked to clarify what circus equipment they will need set up for their audition at the centre. YouTube clips of a typical audition process are made available to candidates invited to audition. It was explained to the team at the meetings with registry staff [M4] and with the professional and support staff [M6] that information from the application form (including the personal statement) and the medical and health screening form is used to signpost pre-audition and on-the-day support for students requiring extra assistance. This is usually provided by the Student Support Manager, who contacts applicants that have disclosed their needs in advance prior to the audition day to discuss what support would be helpful and appropriate. It is preferred that applicants audition in person on site, although auditions can be online, particularly for international applicants. Meeting with registry staff [M4] revealed that most applicants are keen to audition at the site; if a student needed a travel bursary in order to access an onsite audition, this would be provided by the centre on a case-by-case basis. The Student Support Manager often sits in on auditions and interviews involving

candidates with known support requirements.

143   Documents relating to the audition process revealed that auditions are assessed according to a five-point scale, from 1 for Poor to 5 for Excellent (admissions samples [ADMISS]). The completed scored templates did not mention threshold criteria or a use of median scoring, although an overall average is given. There is a slight variation of panel member numbers across variations, and a variation in the level of qualitative comments captured. There was no evidence to suggest that these variations impacted on the reliability, fairness or inclusivity of the audition process. Further information provided at the meeting with registry staff [M4] revealed that the number of audition panel members can vary from between four and seven members, with a typical membership of five. Following the audition, the applicant is interviewed by two panel members, with questions and potential areas of specialism and support identified during the audition and application statement providing the basis for interview discussion. Candidates are asked to undertake a brief research exercise, presented verbally at the interview. Following the interview, the interview record is initialled and signed by the panel members, and a recommendation is recorded to either offer a place for study, to place the applicant on a reserve list, or to decline the applicant. The team saw evidence of these interview records in the admissions sample (ADMISS). NCCA operates three tiers of reserve list - low, mid and high. Meeting with registry staff [M4] revealed that audition criteria are set by the teaching staff team, and that this is provided in print to the panels at each audition session. The Admissions and Registry Manager uses a spreadsheet to capture the recorded grades and comments, and once the spread of marks for a cohort of auditions is seen in its totality, the benchmark percentage score for an applicant to be accepted is determined. The meeting with academic staff [M3] indicated that a typical threshold mark for acceptance would be 60%. Audition scores at this point are compared with contextual information relating to the applicant leading to some scores below the official benchmark to allow for an offer to be made, in keeping with the overall strategy to widen participation in accordance with the CDD Access & Participation Plan. [090]

144   Applicants offered a place are sent further information relating to the programme of study by email and asked to verify their entry qualifications with scans of their certificates or results letters. Offers made in the sample of auditions seen by the team were typically unconditional. Further information includes notification of additional costs and equipment, typically £60, that students at NCCA are expected to incur in addition to their tuition fees, and further information relating to the process of circus discipline specialisation that takes place during the first two terms of study. Offer letters describe this as a 'collaborative process between the student and staff, leading to a decision about which circus discipline is suited both physically and creatively to that person, or persons in the case of group disciplines'. [ADMISS] The demonstration of the VLE [VLE] allowed the team to see a document given to incoming students - The Specialisation Process - that builds on the information sent out in offer letters. Students reported at the meeting [M2] that the process of choosing a circus discipline was confusing at first but became increasingly clear as time went on. In general, students felt that this process was reliable, fair and inclusive.

145   The sample of audition records [ADMISS] reveals that successful applicants are typically given a two-week deadline in which to accept their place. The CDD terms and conditions are attached to the offer letter. The meeting with registry staff [M4] confirmed that these terms and conditions will be retained in the future, with references to CDD changed to NCCA. The meeting also confirmed that responsibility for compliance with Competition and Markets Authority requirements currently rests with CDD, but in the future this will become the responsibility of NCCA under the auspices of the Head of Academic Administration and Student Support and the Chief Operating Officer. The demonstration of the VLE [VLE] allowed the team to see a wide range of supportive documents made available to audition panel staff on the VLE. Analysis of the audition record sample [ADMISS] also revealed several examples of email chains between auditionees and NCCA staff demonstrating an

excellent duty of care towards applicants. This shows that staff involved in admissions understand their role and are very highly skilled. The meeting with students [M2] provided further validation of this analysis.

Conclusions

146   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the assessment team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

147   The team concludes, based on the analysis of evidence above, that NCCA has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system. This is because it manages the admissions process in accordance with its published admissions policies and all decisions are made in accordance with published criteria and processes that are easily accessible to applicants. Admissions records demonstrate that the provider's policies are implemented in practice, and staff involved in admissions understand their role and are highly skilled. Current students report that the admissions system is reliable, fair and inclusive, and staff demonstrated at the visit that, through using the CDD Access and Participation plan (and future NCCA iterations of this plan), strategies are in place to continue to make the admissions system reliable, fair and inclusive.

148   Staff speak knowledgeably about the admissions process and how the selection process, including audition, worked in practice. Students confirmed they had access to all the information, advice, support and guidance they required during the admissions process. The team concludes that NCCA has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system and that the Core practice is met.

149   The team was able to see all the evidence identified in Annex 4 and therefore has a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

Q2   The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses

150   This Core practice expects that the provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.

151   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the [Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers](#) (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

152   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with senior staff [M1]
b   Meeting with students [M2]
c   Meeting with academic staff [M3]
d   Meeting with registry staff [M4]
e   Meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5]
f   Meeting with professional support staff [M6]
g   Final meeting with senior staff [M7]
h   Provider submission document [000]
i   University of Kent Credit Framework - Level descriptors [002]
j   University of Kent Regulations for Taught Courses of Study [005]
k   CDD Assessment Matrix [007]
l   CDD Grade and Level descriptors [008]
m   Recent annual course monitoring [009 a-b]
n   Annual Course Monitoring Report University of Kent [009c-d]
o   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships [011]
p   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships [012]
q   2017 Periodic Programme Review report [013]
r   CDD Working with Others Handbook [014]
s   Guide to Assessment for use by students [015]
t   CDD Admissions Policy [016]
u   CDD Admissions Appeals and Complaints Policy [017]
v   CDD Quality Handbook [018
w   Programme specifications [019a-b]
x   NCCA Prospectus [020]
y   Recent external examiners' reports [021a-b]
z   Student and Staff Learning and Teaching Committee minutes [022]
aa   Academic Board minutes [023]

bb   Employee Handbook-Recruitment [024]
cc   Induction [025]
dd   Student survey reports [027a-f]
ee   Undergraduate Handbook [032]
ff   Support Through Studies Policy [035]
gg   NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers [036]
hh   Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019 [037]
ii   National Centre for Circus Arts Working with others policy handbook with appendices [038]
jj   Staffing Structure diagram [039]
kk   PPR Critical Evaluation Document FINAL [041]
ll   CA102 Preparing for Circus [050]
mm   CA107 Movement [051]
nn   CA201 The Ensemble [050]
oo   Staff CVs [063-068]
pp   Transition Update Dec 21 [073]
qq   NCCA LTAS Action Plan for 21-22 Oct 21 [074]
rr   Liaison Officer Report (18-21) [075]
ss   Student survey reports [078a-i]
tt   5 NCCA Results NSS21 [80d]
uu   NCCA Kent data [082]
vv   FdA 1 CA102 Preparing for Circus [086a]
ww   FdA2 CA210 Action, Reaction and Creation [086b]
xx   CA310 Circus Discipline level 2 [086c]
yy   Transition Update Dec 21 [073]
zz   LTAS Action Plan 2020-21 [074]
aaa   Teachers' qualifications [089]
bbb   Admissions sample [ADMISS]
ccc   Assessed student work [ASSESS]
ddd   NCCA website https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/
eee   University of Kent website https://www.kent.ac.uk/teaching/qa/collaborative/validation/profiles/ncca.html
fff   Tour of facilities, learning resources and support services [TOUR]
ggg   Admissions sample [ADMISS]
hhh   Assessed student work [ASSESS]
iii   Lesson observations [TEACH]
jjj   Demonstration of the VLE [VLE].

153   To test whether NCCA designs and delivers high-quality courses the team considered all the evidence relevant to this Core practice.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

154   No samples were used for this Core practice.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

155   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

156   To identify the provider's approach to designing and delivering high-quality courses the team considered the relevant academic regulations as evidenced by The Provider Submission, [000] CDD Working with Others Handbook, [014] the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships, [011] the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships. [012]

157   The team considered the following evidence to assess whether the provider has credible, robust and evidence-based plans for designing high-quality courses: the Provider Submission document, [000] the University of Kent Credit Framework - Level descriptors, [002] University of Kent Regulations for Taught Courses of Study, [005] CDD Assessment Matrix, [007] CDD grade and level descriptors, [008] NCCA Prospectus, [020] recent NCCA annual course monitoring reports, [009a-d] the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships. [011] Also considered were the CDD Working with Others Handbook, [014] CDD Quality Handbook, [018] the NCCA Prospectus, [020] Programme specifications,[019a-b] External Examiner Reports, [021] Student and Staff Learning and Teaching Committee minutes, [022] Academic Board minutes, [023] the Employee Handbook: Recruitment, [024] CDD Quality Handbook, [018] programme handbook, [032] the NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers, [036] the Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019. [037] In addition the Staffing Structure Diagram, [039] PPR Critical Evaluation Document FINAL, [041] Transition Update Dec 21, [073] LTAS Action Plan 2020-21, [074] the meeting with senior staff, [M1] the meeting with students, [M2] the meeting with academic staff, [M3] the meeting with registry staff, [M4] the meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer, [M5] the meeting with professional support staff and the final meeting with senior staff. [007]

158   To test that all elements of the courses are high quality (curriculum design, content and organisation; learning, teaching and assessment approaches) and that the teaching, learning and assessment design will enable students to demonstrate the intended learning outcomes. To test this the team considered the following evidence: the Programme specifications, [019a-b] the CA102 Preparing for Circus, [050] CA107 Movement, [051] CA201 The Ensemble, [052] Assessed student work [ASSESS] and the NCCA website https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/ and the University of Kent website https://www.kent.ac.uk/teaching/qa/collaborative/validation/profiles/ncca.html

159   To identify external examiners' views about the quality of the courses the team considered the recent external examiners' reports. [021 a-b]

160   To identify students' views about the quality of the courses at NCCA, the team considered survey evidence and course evaluations: recent annual course monitoring reports, [009 a-b] and the student survey reports. [027a-f, 078a-i]

161   To assess students' views about the quality of the courses and to assess how staff ensure courses are high quality, the following evidence was considered: the Support Through Studies Policy, [035] the meeting with senior staff, [M1] the meeting with students, [M2] the meeting with academic staff, [M3] the meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5] and the meeting with professional support staff. [M6]

162   To identify other organisations' views about the quality of the courses the following

evidence was considered: the Provider Submission, [000] the recent annual course monitoring reports, [009] the Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019 [037] and the external examiner reports. [021]

163   To test whether course delivery is high quality, observations of teaching and learning were carried out: [TEACH] including FdA 1 CA102 Preparing for Circus, [086a] FdA2 CA210 Action, Reaction and Creation [086b] and CA310 Circus Discipline level 2. [086c]

What the evidence shows

164   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

165   The validating partner for the NCCA courses is the University of Kent and, as such, NCCA adheres to the University's regulations for course design and delivery. The provider submission [000] states that NCCA's FdA and BA (Hons) courses were developed and approved in line with the University of Kent's regulatory framework as set out in the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships [011] and the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships. [012] The Code of Practice Annex O [011] sets out the procedures for course approval and should NCCA wish to undertake any amendments to the course design post-validation, the Code of Practice Annex P outlines the procedure required.

166   When designing the FdA and BA (Hons), NCCA used the University of Kent Credit Framework and Level descriptors. [002] These level descriptors are consistent with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). Relevant Subject Benchmark Statements for Dance, Drama and Performance (2015) were used when developing the programme learning outcomes. [PPR Critical Evaluation Document final, 041, Provider Submission Document, 000] The documents also confirm that academic standards are aligned to the FHEQs.

167   The Critical Evaluation Document written by NCCA in preparation for the Periodic Review that took place in February 2017 informs the team that the staff at NCCA are closely connected to the industry as both consultants and as practising artists and that staff representing different areas of the programme and industry expertise were all involved collectively in drafting the new programme aims presented at the 2016 revalidation. [041] This demonstrated to the team that valid industry expertise was an integral part of course design at the time.

168   Many of the staff at NCCA work in the industry alongside their teaching practice and represent a group of highly experienced and trained circus professionals as confirmed in the provider submission, [000] the staff CVs [063-068] and the NCCA Prospectus. [020] Staff tend to be recruited from a pool of industry contacts and through the European Federation of Professional Circus Schools (FEDEC) network, ensuring that NCCA draws upon an expert field to teach at the Centre and sessional staff are also industry professionals as stated in the Recruitment Procedure. [024] This professional expertise of the staff means that at NCCA course design is undertaken by expert staff who understand the circus profession and the approaches to learning, teaching and assessment which enable high-level specialist circus arts education as confirmed in the external examiner report. [021a] In addition, course design is informed by the experiences of learners and colleagues in other institutions such as the European Federation of Professional Circus Schools (FEDEC). [000]

169   NCCA use student feedback in bringing about changes in the courses. This was evidenced in the 2017 Periodic Review Report. [013] One example of this is the incorporation of an academic investigation of Circus that students had requested. [013] Other changes to the programmes, for example to enhance the clarity of the learning outcomes for students and teachers, had been identified by the Learning and Teaching Committee. [041]

170   The 2017 Periodic Review report [013] for both the FdA and the BA (Hons) Top-up in Circus Arts concluded with confidence in the validated programmes offered by NCCA. The Panel had no concerns regarding the achievement of the learning outcomes and were satisfied that the quality and standards of the programme were being maintained. In addition, they found no concerns regarding the use of the Subject Benchmark Statements, or the alignment to the FHEQ. [013] The review panel included external members who contributed to subject-specific matters.

171   The most recent Memorandum of Agreement 2019 [037] affirms that the programmes approved to be delivered by NCCA continue to be of an appropriate standard for an academic award of the University of Kent. The Memorandum of Agreement underpins the University's responsibilities for the course approval and guidance on its regulations, policies and procedures, the Board of Examiners, award of credit and awards and the consideration of annual monitoring reports produced by NCCA.

172   NCCA's responsibilities as a validated institution means that NCCA has received approval from the University of Kent to offer courses designed, delivered and assessed by the validated institution and is approved by the University of Kent for its credit and academic awards. Several responsibilities are therefore delegated to the NCCA to include the arrangements for admissions, teaching, assessment, learning resources and other services. Nonetheless, the University is ultimately responsible for the standards of the awards and the quality assurance of the courses approved and delivered at the validated institution [Code of Practice Annex O, 011].

173   NCCA recognises that it has significant responsibility for course design as stated in the NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers. [036] The Memorandum of Agreement [037] clarifies and expands on NCCA's responsibilities as outlined in the passage above, to include admissions and the selection of candidates according to the entry criteria as specified in the approved programme specification, all teaching and support services to include the learning resources, handbooks, complaints and appeals, annual monitoring, published information and marketing within the agreements set out by the University.

174   As stated in the CDD Working with Others Handbook, [014] each school must ensure that it follows all of the requirements of the validating universities. This document has now been updated specifically for the NCCA and its validating university. [038] However, until NCCA becomes an independently registered institution, the current internal organisation means that NCCA must adhere to the University of Kent regulations and quality assurance framework and those of the CDD as stated in the provider submission; [000] NCCA must also follow the guidance of CDD's quality assurance processes and the quality of learning and teaching across its member schools, as set out in the CDD Quality Handbook. [018] In addition to CDD, NCCA is also a member of the European Federation of Professional Circus Schools (FEDEC), which provides a professional circus perspective and guidance for NCCA to follow, and the University recognises FEDEC benchmarks as additional external benchmarks. [M1] The team found the multiple perspectives of quality and standards that NCCA has to take into account when designing its courses to be a strength.

175   Other elements of course design that support learning and teaching at CDD include

the programme handbook [032] that covers both the FdA and the BA (Hons) courses. These are available to the students on the VLE. This document for students outlines information about the courses including the module summaries, term dates, facilities and resources together with the main policies and procedures. The NCCA also has a comprehensive Guide to Assessment for use by students [015] that explains the different forms of assessment that students will undertake during their courses. Essay-writing guidelines, how to submit work via anti-plagiarism software, submission deadlines, grading, expectations for feedback, the role of the external examiner and the conferment of the grades by the Board of Examiners and how to appeal grades are set out in this guide. Expectations for assessment and feedback are also set out in the programme specifications for example the FdA Programme specification [019a] considered earlier. The team found these elements of the courses to be of high quality and together with the programme specification, curriculum design, content and organisation, learning, teaching and assessment approaches enable the students to demonstrate the intended learning outcomes.

176   To support the development of a high-quality learning and assessment experience NCCA monitors learning teaching and assessment through the use of its LTAS Action Plan 2020-21; [074] the action plan aligns to the CDD Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. The LTAS Action Plan is overseen by the Staff Student and Staff Learning and Teaching Committee (SSLTC) and the Academic Board. [074]

177   The Student and Staff Learning and Teaching Committee (SSLTC) [022] has oversight of the NCCA programmes and reports to the Academic Board, [023] which in turn reports to the Board of Trustees (Governing Board). NCCA states in the provider submission [000] that this oversight structure ensures that NCCA delivers high-quality courses. Given the responsibilities as set out in the documents evidenced above, it is clear that NCCA has a rigorous process to course design following the regulatory requirements of the University of Kent; however, the assessment team was not able to see these committees in action. The team was able to evidence that these committees took place through the scrutiny of the Committee minutes. [SSLC Minutes 022a-d; AS Board Minutes 23a-d] For example, the team was able to evidence consideration of the LTAS Action Plan in the Quality Assurance and Monitoring section of the Assessment Board Minutes. [023a]

178   NCCA compiles a comprehensive Annual Programme Monitoring Report (AMPR) each academic year. [009a-b] The AMPRs cover many aspects of the student journey from admission, learning, teaching and resources to destinations, inclusive of survey responses, external examiner reports, staff CPD and training. The AMPR is completed by the Head of Academic Administration and Student Support, with contributions from the Director of Professional Development and others involved in higher education. Actions are stated and those actions not completed are carried over to the next Board. [009a-d]

179   The Student and Staff Learning and Teaching Committee (SSLTC) comment on the draft AMPR before submission to CDD Board of Trustees. In addition to the internal AMPRs, NCCA also completes annual course monitoring for the University of Kent. [009c-d] On becoming an independent institution NCCA will not have a separate Governing Body (Board of Trustees) for higher education, but they will have a Higher Education Subcommittee. The Higher Education subcommittee will see, for example, the annual monitoring reports and will report to the full governing body. [M] After considering the evidence provided, the team is assured that NCCA has in place an approach to designing, monitoring and assuring the quality of its courses to support a high-quality experience for its students.

180   The NCCA is currently preparing for the revalidation of its FdA and BA (Hons) courses and the most recent NCCA Annual Course Monitoring Report 2020-21 [009b] notes that the revalidation of the FdA and BA (Hons) courses is to take place in 2021-22. In advance of the formal timetable for revalidation, discussions between the University of Kent

Academic Staff Liaison Officer and NCCA are taking place on a regular basis as noted in the meeting with the Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer. [M5] The plans for revalidation are led by the Head of Academic Administration and academic staff are currently in the process of contributing ideas. All information concerning the revalidation is housed on the VLE [VLE] and staff contribute and exchange ideas via this platform. [M3]

181   NCCA is considering changing the FDA and BA (Hons) top-up structure to a three-year degree and consequently reconsidering the entry requirements and their approach to contextual admissions and widening participation. The assessment load and the number of learning outcomes are also being reviewed in preparation for the revalidation in order to reduce the assessment load and reduce the number of learning outcomes. The team noted from the annual course monitoring report, [009b] and from the meeting with students, [M2] registry staff [M4] with the professional support staff [M6] that student feedback was to be taken into account when re-writing the modules.

182   NCCA is responsible for the design of its courses and up to now, as a school of CDD, NCCA has adhered to CDD policies and procedures, and its Quality Assurance framework. As evidenced by the Terms of Reference, the SSLTC and Academic Board are those of NCCA and therefore they have more ownership of these. It was unclear the extent to which NCCA have developed their own processes. The annual monitoring document, for example, maintained the CDD title, though the contents were solely for NCCA.

183   As NCCA moves towards, becoming an independent provider, NCCA plans to review its policies and procedures currently in place and replace these with a suite of policies and procedures adapted solely for NCCA. [Transition update Dec 21 [073]] As currently, most of the policies and processes supporting the courses are CCD policies, the team was unable to assess NCCA's own policies in action. The team was informed by senior staff [M1, M7] that NCCA would be adapting the CDD policies to better fit the requirements of NCCA. Moving forward, the Chief Operating Officer will take on the oversight of all the policies and procedures for higher education and will be responsible for data returns and CMA compliance as seen in the Staffing Structure diagram [039] and the Transition Update Dec 21. [073]

184   NCCA underwent a full revalidation of the BA (Hons) and FdA in 2015-16 and the assessment team was able to review some of the documentation relating to this time. Both of the programme specifications for the FdA and the BA (Hons) Top-up, revised in 2016, were submitted as evidence and are available on both the University of Kent's website and the NCCA website https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/' and the University of Kent website shttps://www.kent.ac.uk/teaching/qa/collaborative/validation/profiles/ncca.html

185   The FdA Specification [019a] gives a concise summary of the main features of the course, stating the aims of the programme and programme learning outcomes that cover, for example, the knowledge and skills that a student might be expected to achieve on graduating from the programme. Teaching and learning and assessment methods are set out to include a wide range of approaches, from teacher-led sessions to intensive workshops or collaboration with professional companies and both formative and summative assessments. The entry requirements, Course Level, Modules, Credits and Awards are explained. Extensive support mechanisms for the students are listed together with a wide range of methods for students to evaluate the teaching and learning. The programme specification for the BA (Hons) [019b] has the same format and very clearly articulates increased expectations at this level for skills and other attributes that are mapped to the Subject Benchmark Statements. The assessment team found the programme specifications to be valuable documents supporting the students in their choice and understanding of these programmes of study. Reviewing these documents suggested to the team that these

programmes are of good quality and demonstrate the alignment to the University of Kent's requirements for course design.

186   The team also reviewed the module specifications dating to the 2015-16 revalidation to include the module CA102 Preparing for Circus, [050] CA107 Movement [051] and CA201 The Ensemble. [052] These specifications set out the details of what the student can expect to cover in the module, the learning outcomes which are mapped to the learning and teaching methods for the module and how the modules will be assessed. As for the programme specifications the team found these documents to be of quality, once more demonstrating an understanding of and alignment to the University of Kent's requirements.

187   The external examiner reports [21a-b] praise the NCCA courses for their rich uniqueness noting how the structure and delivery of the Circus programmes empower students towards both professional and critical practices in Circus. The external examiner considers that the staff are 'experts in their field and have first-hand experience that they bring to their teaching and learning environments'. The standard of the practical performance is noted as very high and the staff and students are congratulated on the quality of the work.

188   The reports also comment on the quality of the work and the clarity with which assessments map to the learning outcomes. The strengths of the assessment and feedback and the expertise of the teaching staff are also noted. Tutor feedback is considered as thorough, detailed and individualised, clearly crediting good practice and supporting further learning. The reports also confirm that the learning outcomes have been met in the modules across the programme. The thoroughness of the marking and its parity with processes seen in other institutions is noted together with the extensive formative verbal feedback in studio-based/practical contexts, which was also commented on. The review team agreed that the external examiner reports confirm that the courses at NCCA are high quality.

189   As seen in Core practice Q5, students are fully engaged and encouraged to feed back on their course individually, through internal or external surveys such as the NSS, end of module feedback or collectively through memberships of SSLTCs or the Academic Boards. Open and continuous dialogue and exchange between staff and students is encouraged at NCCA. Feedback from all sources is summarised and responded to in the annual programme monitoring reports. [009 a-d]

190   Student survey reports [027a-f, 078a-i] indicated that foundation degree students' end-of-module feedback comments were generally positive about the quality of the modules and the opportunities for development these modules bring. Most students found the module content and assessments to be clear, developmental, with useful feedback and with suitable resources. Module C102 Movement was particularly well received. Second year students appreciated the quality of the modules making highly positive comments about the modules taken in their second year of studies. Due to the practical nature of the programme of study, both the first and second-year students were strongly impacted by the lockdown periods, as classes had to be delivered online during this time. Nevertheless, second year students commented on how well this situation was handled. Recent annual course monitoring reports [009 a-b] also comment on the finding from the end-of-module surveys. National Student Survey results [080d] indicated that, for example, 90% of students agreed that staff have made the subject interesting and 95% of students agreed that staff are good at explaining things 95%.

191   As evidenced in the recent annual monitoring report 2020-21, [009b] NCCA had to navigate all the constant changes in response to the impact of Covid-19 and its impacts on learning. Through online meetings with the whole school and individual year groups, NCCA was able to respond to the feedback from the students swiftly. Concerns ranged from space and access requirements and alternative group and individual assessments as stated in the

recent annual monitoring report 2020-21. [009b]

192   Students are fully engaged in feeding back on the quality of their courses as student representatives, members of high-level committees such as the Staff Student Learning and Teaching Committee or the Academic Board or the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, and confirmed that they had the opportunity to comment on external examiner reports and survey results. [M2] The team considered that students are fully engaged in all aspects of their courses and appreciate how their courses enable them to reach the required level and succeed in their professional and academic aims.

193   Senior, [M1] academic [M3] and support staff [M6] at NCCA demonstrated their understanding of what is meant by high-quality courses. Evidence for this was apparent through the ways in which staff work together in a collegiate way. All teachers take part in a teachers' week where all staff get together to exchange ideas. [M3] These weeks also support sessional staff in their understanding of what is required. [M3] Managers ensure that staff provide a high-quality learning experience by offering support, or by offering co-teaching. [M3] The team was informed there is much co-teaching and that this ensures that the level of teaching required is understood across the teaching teams. [M3, M5, M6] To support high-quality teaching, staff are encouraged to undertake higher level qualifications and teaching qualifications such as a the PGCHE. [M3, M5, M6] Academic staff are fully cognisant of the teaching and assessment required and as a small team they work together to ensure that they are working to the required standards. [M3] Staff also attend partnership meetings at the University to support the understanding of the requirements to deliver a high-quality learning experience as confirmed in the meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer. [M5]

194   NCCA is not a member of a professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB). However, due to the engagement with industry professionals NCCA ensures that its approach to Circus is informed by industry norms and expectations with views from the experts in the field informing the Centre of the quality of their courses in relation to the professional norms of the field as detailed in the provider submission. [000] These professional views, together with those of the external examiner [021] and the oversight from the University of Kent [037] and CDD [009] ensures multiple perspectives on the quality of the courses at NCCA that provide the Centre with opportunities to reflect and potentially bring about change. To this end, NCCA ensures that external expertise and employer requirements are an integral part of course design, approval and course review. More broadly, this expertise contributes to all the elements of the learning journey including staff and resources required to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

195   The team undertook lesson observations [TEACH] of practical activities relating to the modules FdA 1 CA102 Preparing for Circus, [086a] FdA2 CA210 Action, Reaction and Creation [086b] and CA310 Circus Discipline level 2. [086c] The observations were of practical-based classes. All the classes seen demonstrated an organised approach to lessons. All lessons were well-paced, with appropriate dialogue and prompting when required. The observations clearly indicated that teaching staff were appropriately skilled in their subject matter and sound teaching skills were demonstrated. Teaching was at the appropriate level and lessons were clearly relatable to the learning outcomes, as set out in the module specifications CA102 Preparing for Circus, [050] CA107 Movement [051] and CA201 The Ensemble. [052] As evidenced in a skills class where there were both Level 5 and Level 6 students, the tutor clearly differentiated delivery and expectations for the different levels, thus developing the students' ability to self-direct and learn. Students explored techniques independently seeking support when required. At all times students were fully engaged and had clearly understood what was expected of them. The teachers checked progress and learning throughout. There was a clear recap of the previous class and a check on the preparation undertaken by the students for the class in hand. The link to

the next class was also made clear, again checking that the students knew what was expected. Teaching and learning are entirely appropriate and well maintained and as evidenced through the lesson observations course delivery is of high quality.

Conclusions

196   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the assessment team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

197   The team concluded that students tend to regard their courses as being of high quality. Staff at NCCA have a clear view of what 'high quality' means in the context of the provider's unique courses. The external examiner affirms the quality and standards of the courses at the NCCA and praises the NCCA courses for their rich uniqueness and how the structure and delivery of the Circus programme empowers students towards both professional and critical practices in Circus. The team considered that approved course documentation indicates that the teaching, learning and assessment design enable students to meet and demonstrate the intended learning outcomes. Observations of teaching and learning demonstrate sound practices and an approach to teaching that is appropriate to the nature of the courses at NCCA supported by strong links with circus professionals. The resources available to the students are high quality.

198   The team was assured of NCCAs plans for the forthcoming revalidation based on its past success and the continued close working relationship with the University of Kent through the Liaison Officer and NCCA connections to industry. Although policies and procedures, and some processes, for NCCA had not been developed at the time of the review, the plans for the future development of these were explained to the team. The team is therefore assured that the NCCA's courses provide, and will continue to provide, a high-quality experience for its students. The team, therefore, considers that this Core practice is met.

199   Supported by the evidence seen for this Core practice and the meetings with staff and students, the team has a high degree of confidence in this judgement

Q3   The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience

200   This Core practice expects that the provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

201   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the [Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers](#) (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

202   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with senior staff [M1]
b   Meeting with students [M2]
c   Meeting with academic staff [M3]
d   Meeting with professional support staff [M6]
e   Final meeting [M7]
f   NCCA website https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/
g   Lesson observations [Teach]
h   Demonstration of the Virtual Learning Environment [VLE]
i   2022-23 prospectus
        https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/10/prospectus-202223.pdf
j   Recent annual course monitoring reports [009]
k   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses:
        Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative
        Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of
        Collaborative Partnerships [012]
l   2017 Periodic Programme Review report [013]
m   NCCA Prospectus [020]
n   Student and Staff Learning and Teaching Committee minutes [022]
o   Academic Board minutes [023]
p   Employee Handbook: Recruitment [024]
q   Employee Handbook: Induction [025]
r   Health and Safety Policy [026]
s   Student survey reports [027]
t   Undergraduate Handbook [032]
u   Staffing structure diagram [039]
v   SPM Acrobatics 30th June 2021 [043]
w   SPM Aerialists 29th June 2021 [044]
x   SPM Jugglers 30th June 2021 [045]
y   Director Professional Development [056]
z   Head of Higher Education Delivery [057]
aa   Course Manager JD [058]
bb   Head of Academic Administration [059]

cc	Admissions and Registry Manager [060]
dd	Student Support Manager [061]
ee	HE Records Officer [062]
ff	CV [063CV [064]
gg	CV [065]
hh	CV [066]
ii	CV [067]
jj	CV [068]
kk	Plans for Growth. [070]

203   To test whether NCCA has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience the team considered all the evidence relevant to this Core practice.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

204   No samples were used for this Core practice.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

205   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

206   To identify how the NCCA recruits and assess whether the NCCA has credible, robust and evidence-based plans for ensuring that they have sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality learning experience, the team explored the institutional plans for recruiting, selecting and developing sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff. [024, 025 026] The team also considered job descriptions. [056, 057, 058. 059. 060, 061, 062]

207   To identify the roles the provider uses to deliver a high-quality learning experience and assess whether they are sufficient, the team considered the staffing structure chart [039] and job descriptions [056, 057, 058, 059, 060, 061, 062] as well as notes from student progress meetings [043, 044, 045] and Plans for Growth. [070] The team also met with staff [M1, M3, M6] and explored the NCCA Virtual Learning Environment. [VLE]

208   To identify students' views about sufficiency, qualifications and skills of staff, the team considered the module and course evaluations [027] and SSLTC [022] and Academic Board minutes. [023] The team also traced one staffing matter through from the 2017 Periodic Review [013] to the 2020-21 Annual Monitoring Report [009b] and the current NCCA Undergraduate Handbook. [032] The team also met with students, [M2] senior staff [M1] and the professional services support staff who process student surveys. [M6, M7]

209   To assess that the staff sampled were recruited according to the provider's policies and procedures and to assess whether the staff sampled are appropriately qualified and skilled to perform their roles effectively, the team considered university requirements, [012] job descriptions, the prospectus [020] and CVs of persons holding specific posts, and the records of their recruitment. The team also read staff CVs, [063, 064, 065, 066, 067, 068] and considered staffing data. [089]

210   To test whether academic staff deliver a high-quality learning experience, the team carried out observations of teaching and learning [Teach] and met with senior staff [M1] and teaching staff. [M3]

What the evidence shows

211   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

212   When recruiting staff, NCCA carries out a rigorous recruitment and selection process that includes checking eligibility and suitability of all staff and trustees to identify the most suitable applicant for the appointment. NCCA defines all roles in job descriptions and person specifications [056, 057, 058. 059. 060, 061, 062] which demonstrate a thorough and detailed approach to recruiting staff and ensuring that the staff appointed have appropriate skills and experience and clear lines of responsibility and areas of work. Selection criteria indicate essential and desirable qualifications, skills and experience to ensure the appointment of the most suitable person. All candidates complete an application form and a minimum of two Centre representatives interview all candidates, after which NCCA requests two written employment references. NCCA has credible, robust and evidence-based plans for ensuring that they have sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality learning experience because their processes allow for the appointment of academic staff with a significant professional circus background.

213   Staff who met the team [M4] describe NCCA interview processes as fair and confidential and note that their induction processes feature elements around introduction to the spaces, to the online resources and to the team. [M3] New staff meet other members of the staff team and receive a full tour of the building and facilities as stated in the provider submission. [000] There is a Health and Safety [026] induction and induction for new staff helps them to understand their roles and responsibilities. Employees are notified of any changes or additions made to the policies and procedures. [000] NCCA's approaches to staff induction are robust because staff are fully supported with both guidance to their work at NCCA and personal induction processes.

214   The staffing structure diagram [039] sets out the NCCA's entire operation of which higher education is a part. NCCA is a centre for making circus, this can be with professional artists, with higher education students or younger performers. This creates an environment in which each part of NCCA's practice is indivisible from the rest. [Tour] The current structure follows a recent reorganisation of the staff and therefore their roles and responsibilities, so while some job descriptions refer to posts that no longer exist, the function of those posts have been absorbed into new roles. [M1] Within this structure, the Director Professional Development, [056] who reports to NCCA's Chief Executive Officer, is an active member of the Senior Management Team with responsibility for the strategic development and delivery of all parts of the higher education programme, outreach, access and inclusion. The post has overall budgetary responsibility for the higher education courses and manages the Head of Degree Delivery who is responsible for programme development and delivery, programme planning, staff management, and quality assurance management as shown in the job description. [057]

215   The Director Professional Development also manages the Head of Academic Administration [059] who takes a practical overview of the implementation and administration of all aspects of the academic programmes, including quality assurance and legislative matters. [M6] The post-holder is also NCCA's primary point of contact for PREVENT and Safeguarding as well as responsible for the direction of, and guidance on implementation of, student support. [VLE] The Head of Academic Administration also line-manages the Student Support Manager [061] who oversees aspects of academic and pastoral student support for the higher education courses at NCCA.

216   The Head of Higher Education Delivery manages the three Year Managers [058] who oversee and develop the course modules, keeping the student learning experience at the forefront of its operations. [M3] Principal responsibilities include module and programme planning, development and delivery, staff coordination and development, personal academic tutoring and quality assurance management. Year Managers in turn maintain contact with teachers and visiting lecturers, briefing them on the specific requirements of the modules under their responsibility to ensure the quality of delivery. They also oversee regular tutoring and maintain contact with all students under their responsibility, such as at student progress meetings. [043, 044, 045]

217   The staffing is sufficient given the number of specialists and individual tuition NCCA provides because NCCA has tutors for each student no matter what their chosen discipline, and given the personal tutoring at the core of the process, this is exemplary. NCCA's Plans for Growth [070] indicate the Centre aims to use a teacher support programme to enable all teachers to diversify their teaching skills across a broader range of circus skills, acknowledging that this will save NCCA staffing costs. Overall, this staffing structure is appropriate in the way it enables NCCA to deliver a high-quality learning experience because it clearly delineates reporting lines and the responsibilities of each role.

218   NCCA expects students to comment on the programme at various times throughout the year, [M2] often informally in discussion with teachers, Year Managers, or other higher education staff, but also formally as set out in the Student Feedback and the NCCA Committee Structures paper. [student-feedback-and-the-national-centre-for-circus- arts-committee-structures.pdf (nationalcircus.org.uk), 032] NCCA has combined its Student Staff Learning and Teaching Committees, [009b] therefore, within the committee structure [040] the SSLTC now manages both processes [077b, 022] and has oversight of programmes and reports to the Academic Board. [023] Students raise issues about the delivery of classes through SSLTC, [022] student surveys or conversations with staff. If these issues are about staff, then following the line management process, the Head of HE delivery meets with the staff member to discuss if they have training needs or if they need to change their perspective. [M7] This approach to ensuring the sufficiency of staff skills is effective because for a small institution the informality of the process ensures a rapid response. When the team met with students, [M2] they were very clear that the quality of the teaching is exemplary and that if there are issues with some staff NCCA addresses them. When the team met with the academic staff, they were clear that if issues are raised, staff are offered further support. [M5]

219   The Degree Administration team processes all student survey results and, in their meetings, determine any issues that require attention, then addresses these with the relevant colleague, either through informal meetings or through the SSLTC and Academic Board process. They then meet with student year groups at either term briefings or if necessary, specially arranged meetings to ensure students recognise the solutions given to the feedback they have raised. [M6]

220   Student Feedback spanning 2018 to 2020 [027] indicates that most students agree or strongly agree with the quality of teaching for each module, but with 4 out of 28 respondents being neutral or disagreeing. Summer term feedback questionnaires, following the pandemic, addressed both modular and overall course issues. These asked students to explain what did and did not work with online study, and NCCA records the feedback was useful and largely positive. Students appreciated the efforts of the teaching team and the consistent communication and support made available. Students found some of the longer theory classes too long and were frustrated at not being able to use their equipment or have the space to do the classes normally. Students praised the use of technology in the delivery of classes. [009a] The process of student feedback about teaching is effective in gathering information that NCCA can use, because it blends formal and informal approaches and

responds to them quickly and effectively.

221   As part of its response to one of the university's advisable recommendations from the 2017 periodic review of the Centre, NCCA decided to write a document demonstrating to external parties and students how the staffing of the Centre, particularly discipline tutor absence and cover, could work in practice. NCCA indicated in the Periodic Programme Review Report [013] that the document would appear in the student handbook by August 2017. [042] However, in the 2020-21 Annual Monitoring Report, [009b] the document was not completed and needed to be carried forward. However, in the current NCCA Undergraduate Handbook [032] there is a statement about the use of cover teachers. Senior staff [M1] explained that the issue took a long time to resolve, partly due to the pandemic, because to reconcile the practicalities of employing top class professionals to teach while ensuring students saw their development over the entire teaching period required much discussion. The benefit for students is their ability to work with several tutors each of whom will offer them specific insights, whereas students often prefer to work with a tutor they know and with whom they feel comfortable. It is not possible therefore to make a statement about using cover staff, but rather the whole community understands the need to balance practicality, availability, and the delivery of learning outcomes over a sustained period. The outcome of this action was therefore considered and took a broader holistic view, because while it responded to student concerns it also had to take in a broader overview and develop an understanding within the learning community.

222   NCCA considers its approach to learning and teaching as distinctive, being flexible to enable a tailored focus on specific practice disciplines which match individual students' aspirations to achieve high levels of technical as well as creative competency. NCCA considers this flexibility is innovative within circus education in the UK. [M1] Teaching is intensive with a strong focus on artistic exploration and creativity, contextual studies and business planning for life as an independent artist. [000, Tour] To support teaching NCCA has set an action to determine guidance on minimum planning requirements for teachers, and methods to support teachers. A teaching ideology document, [069] which has yet to be rolled out, [009b] is the beginning of NCCA's own teaching strategy, as it moves away from CDD's oversight. The ideology indicates a professional competency framework that identifies three areas: the direct relationship to students/class participants; working together; and openness and professional development. To ensure the sufficiency, qualifications and skills of staff NCCS draws from major practitioners within the circus industry, ensuring that student achievement is at the cutting edge of that industry and the developments NCCA proposes can only secure this further.

223   The prospectus lists the key members of the core degree team, providing short biographies and photographs, and refers to 35 other part-time teachers who work with the students. [020] Staffing data [089] for both full and part time staff indicates that the highest qualification for 54% of the staff is an undergraduate degree; 16% have a postgraduate certificate; and 20% have a master's qualification. The remaining 12% do not have a higher education qualification. The CVs provided by NCCA [063, 064, 065, 066, 067, 068] are not written in a consistent format, but of the six documents seen, one is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy, [009b] three have a PGCHE from the University of Kent and two have master's degrees, one has no indication of academic qualifications and three indicate no BA qualification, but higher education diplomas or certificates. However, the University is responsible for ensuring that staff involved in the delivery and assessment of collaborative courses are competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities. The University only requires NCCA to submit the CVs of the teaching staff that sit on the final exam board. However, NCCA submits CVs of all new staff to the Academic Staff Liaison Officer on a regular basis. [M5] The University therefore takes the view that on balance the range of qualifications, balanced with the professional standing of the staff is appropriate for the delivery of the programmes. The staff are appropriately qualified because they balance

professional practice with academic abilities and the University is assured that this combination is appropriate for the programme.

224   As a validated partner, NCCA staff do not attend University staff development sessions [012, M5], but the University's Quality Assurance and Compliance Office (QACO) organises an annual Partnership Forum to provide staff from all partner institutions to disseminate information and share good practice. Five members of NCCA attended the last forum held and any information was disseminated through Academic Board meetings. The University ensures that the staff NCCA recruits comply with its own policies and procedures because it provides staff with development opportunities as partners of the University. The annual Teaching Day is an opportunity for NCCA to develop staff approaches to pedagogy and with the rollout of its teaching Ideology document [069] will give the school a clearer, circus-specific identity that it could not expect within the CDD. Together, NCCA hopes these will allow it to develop the pedagogy of its staff, beyond the current approach of co-teaching and mentoring. [M1, M7]

225   Following the 2017 periodic review, NCCA prioritised embedding a research culture and worked closely with the other CDD schools in a joint research strategy, for which one NCCA colleague received research funding. [041] NCCA works in partnership with other institutions for research activities, such as a recent project with UCL, with greater focus on knowledge transfer rather than conventional journal-based research. The Centre also links with FEDEC for various research projects ensuring that the Centre remains connected to current trends within the discipline. This kind of research reflects NCCA's artistic practice [013, M1] and exemplifies how the staff maintain the relevance of their experience in an educational setting, and their continued professional practice as set out in the CVs. [063, 064, 065, 066, 067, 068] NCCA academic staff are appropriately qualified and skilled to perform their roles effectively because the balance of professional and research-based activities ensures they have the pedagogical and professional insight into the circus industry.

226   NCCA runs an appraisal system for the four salaried teaching staff but has yet to decide how to make appraisal meaningful for the non-salaried staff. [M1, M3] Given that these tutors range in the amount of time they work at the Centre finding a way of making the appraisal process meaningful and equitable is difficult. However, where possible staff co-teach, and during various teaching observations it was clear that dialogue between tutors was happening because of the open nature of the spaces and the interaction between groups in the lessons observed by the team. [Teach] There are no scheduled teaching observations, NCCA therefore assesses teacher performance through student feedback and conversation with the year head and the Head of HE Delivery with individual members of staff. However, this process is not formally recorded. The teaching week at the start of each academic year allows NCCA to update staff with key information but also provides training in areas staff have requested or that have emerged from staff or student feedback or been identified through the Centre's committee process. While the process lacks formality, it still enables staff to deliver a high-quality learning experience.

227   In the lesson observations undertaken by the team, [Teach] teaching was exceptional in the way that the one or two students being taught were given highly tailored tuition focusing on their specialism and on the levelness of the teaching. For example, in one session a second and a third-year student were working with the same tutor at the same time, and the tutor took different approaches for each, offering detailed correction and guidance for the second-year student, while taking a more problem-based approach for the third-year student. In another session, the student and tutor were obviously building on a programme of work and developing ideas. Teaching arose from the learning outcomes for the relevant modules. In the sessions observed the model of stating the session's objectives was not always followed but given the developmental and practical nature of the sessions it was clear that staff and student had a clear understanding of what they were exploring. Staff

deliver a high-quality learning experience because students receive exceptionally focused teaching that enables their steady development as circus practitioners.

Conclusions

228   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the assessment team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

229   NCCA has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience. Staff recruitment is rigorous and induction processes enable new staff to work effectively. Staffing structures blend the broad needs of the Centre as a circus creation space in which it delivers higher education alongside other professional and training elements. The provider's Degree Administration Team ensures that all student feedback is processed and that issues are addressed, such as the Centre's response to student concerns about the use of cover staff. When the provider enacts its draft teaching ideology document it will support more staff to attain postgraduate teaching qualifications. CVs examined by the team indicate an appropriate mix of academic qualifications and professional experience including industry experience, and the staff benefit from university partnership events and some research activities.

230   The quality of teaching is highly focused on student specialisms, and although the application of an appraisal system is currently restricted to the salaried staff, the oversight provided by those staff ensure that non-salaried staff work within a well structured teaching environment. The provider has sufficient, appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience because the staff are often teaching on an individual basis and doing so at the cutting edge of the industry. The staff are recruited in a fair and open manner and supported to develop their teaching practice and they are at the forefront of their respective disciplines. The team concludes, therefore, that this Core practice is met.

231   The examination of all the evidence including student feedback, the teaching observations carried out by the team, and external examiner comments result in the team having a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

Q4 The provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience

232   This Core practice expects that the provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

233   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

234   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with senior staff [M1]
b   Meeting with students [M2]
c   Meeting with academic staff [M3]
d   Meeting with the Head of HE and the University Liaison officer
e   Meeting with professional support staff [M6]
f   Final meeting [M7]
g   Tour of facilities, learning resources and support services [Tour]
h   Assessed student work [Assess]
i   Demonstration of the virtual learning environment [VLE]
j   Student and Staff Learning and Teaching Committee minutes [022]
k   Student survey reports [027]
l   Undergraduate Handbook [032]
m   Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019 [037]
n   Director Professional Development [056]
o   Head of Higher Education Delivery [057]
p   Course Manager JD [058]
q   Head of Academic Administration [059]
r   Admissions and Registry Manager [060]
s   Student Support Manager [061]
t   HE Records Officer. [062]

235   To test whether NCCA has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support to deliver a high-quality academic experience the team considered all the evidence relevant to this Core practice.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

236   No samples were used for this Core practice.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

237   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, | the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

238   To identify how the NCCA's facilities, learning resources and student support services contribute to delivering a high-quality academic experience, the team considered the NCCA's agreement with the University, [037] its undergraduate handbook [032] and its facilities, resources, and student support services. [Tour] The team also met with senior staff, [M1] students, [M2] teaching staff [M3] and professional services staff. [M6]

239   To identify students' views about facilities, learning resources and support services, the team examined module and course evaluations, [027] SSLTC minutes, [022] and met with students. [M2]

240   To determine whether staff roles are consistent with the delivery of a high-quality learning experience, the team examined job descriptions of staff. [056, 057, 058. 059. 060, 061, 062] The team also considered the NCCA's VLE [VLE] and met with staff. [M3, M6]

241   To test whether staff are appropriately qualified and skilled and understand their roles and responsibilities and to assess students' views about facilities, learning resources and support services, the team met with staff [M3, M6] and students [M2] and looked at assessment feedback. [Assess]

242   To test that the facilities, resources and services under assessment deliver a high-quality academic experience, the team made a direct assessment of facilities, learning resources and support services. [Tour]

What the evidence shows

243   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

244   In line with its agreement with the University, [037] NCCA provides all the teaching and support services, including learning resources, which are required to enable all students who remain in good standing to complete the courses for which they have enrolled. This must meet the requirements of The Equality Act (2010). The NCCA Undergraduate Handbook [032] lists the resources and facilities students can access; its five studios, gym and changing facilities, but also the library and its digital resources. There is a link to a library and digital learning resources page on the website. [the-library-and-digital-learning-resources and http://www.openathens.net]

245   NCCA does not have a facilities strategy, but it does consider its facilities and resources through its process of annual monitoring. For instance, between September 2019 and March 2020 NCCA recorded no major enhancements to its learning resources, but it did increase its support for students with laptops and filming equipment to complete or take part in modules. [009a] Through its process of annual monitoring, NCCA considers how to ensure teaching staff have the correct resources and teaching support when working online. [009b] In part the response to this has been to introduce students to its VLE during induction week, from where students can access module information as shown in the NCCA Undergraduate Handbook. [032] The tour of facilities undertaken by the team and the

explanation of how they have evolved through successive funding bids and adaptations based on daily practice, demonstrated that the physical spaces are the product of much refinement and adaptation honed over years of work within the space but also responses to the needs of industry, driven by NCCA's work with professional practitioners either working as tutors or working in the space as creative artists. [Tour] This integration of professional practice and pedagogical delivery is exceptional [Tour] and given the simple but effective rigging of the spaces so that, for example, trapeze wires do not cross over with other equipment indicates that NCCA's approach to resources and facilities is effective because the institution is highly responsive to student needs.

246   Following the 2017 periodic review, NCCA was advised to continue to expand its library, to reduce the use of the library as a meeting room where possible; to continue to review the issue of long-term sustainability within the Centre, particularly with regards to staffing structures, the level of support offered to students and timetabling; and to begin a full review of course delivery and student support, with the intention to plan and pilot leaner working practices, by September 2017. [042] The action plan response indicates that these actions have been completed. However, the Head of Academic Administration [M5] expressed the view to the team that with the move to online teaching and the tendency for students to use their own laptops, such a change is not truly practical. During the review visits the library space was used for a theory class and proved to be an ideal space for this task. [M5] NCCA maintains a collection of around 600 texts and 500 DVDs of circus-related literature and film footage is one of the largest in the UK. [041] All of this is held in storage, with a library of 200 key texts residing in the Learning Resource Centre along with 12 computers for student use: the Centre aims to move to greater online resources. Students can also access other libraries via an Athens login currently provided by CDD, so NCCA is currently deciding how best to continue to provide access to appropriate learning resources. [000, M6] NCCA does not employ a librarian, but instead operates the library on a trust basis. The library provision is select, but it is appropriate to the Centre's needs because it supports the intensely practical nature of the study. The team was able to see about a third of the specialist circus book collection, and students that met with the team [M2] spoke about the video access they have to many circus performances.

247   NCCA supports students through a variety of mechanisms and regards the high staff-to-student ratio - with some teaching taught in a one-to-one or three-to-one environment - and daily contact with each individual student,, as key to the depth of support students receive. The benefits of this were clearly visible in the taught sessions observed by the team where two or three students are able to work exclusively with a subject specialist. [Teach] This support spans financial support, academic guidance, and disability, injury, mental health and English language support. NCCA points to its high retention and success rates as evidence of the quality of the care and individual attention afforded to each student, regardless of socioeconomic background as elucidated in the PPR Critical Evaluation Document. [041] Students benefit from highly focused teaching and guidance because they receive highly individualised teaching.

248   When meeting with the team, professional staff explained that as part of the admissions process students provide a medical report that the Strength and Conditioning Coach and Student Support Manager both use to inform any student support needs. Individual meetings with students discuss any support needs and the Student Support Manager also runs a range of diagnostic tests. [M6] This careful process of analysis has recognised that 32% of students have a specific learning disability. Therefore, disability confidence has grown among staff, and work outside the higher education part of the Centre also feeds into the way it addresses disability issues. For example, as the team was told during the tour of the facilities, work with paraplegic participants in the 2012 Paralympics informed staff approaches when working with differently abled performers. [Tour]

249   NCCA recognises that 50% of its students have mental health issues and 30% are diagnosed with specific learning differences. Therefore, when NCCA worked with CDD's support mechanism it realised that its subscription-based counselling provision was not fit for purpose. NCCA therefore increased its student support provision in the 2019-20 academic year by appointing its Student Support Manager in January 2020, adding to the existing member of staff dedicated to student support. This is a part-time role but has increased the amount of direct support students can access daily. However, the pandemic interrupted NCCA's plans to develop its robust Student Support Strategies, so professional services staff that met the team recognise that NCCA still needs to focus on providing professional counselling services for students and study skills support. [M6] In 2020/21 NCCA developed its relationship with an online therapy service. [009b] The Health and Safety Policy [026] indicates rigorous concern over health and safety matters and is exemplary. Much of the health and safety practice around the equipment is industry leading, evident in the nature of the rig in each teaching space and the constant attention of technical staff, seen by the team on the tour of facilities. The tour also included the space used by professional artists who work at NCCA. [Tour] The NCCA's approach to support and health is rigorous, because it observes best industry practice in the teaching spaces and offers focused support for students appropriate to their needs.

250   Students are very clear that they value the facilities. [M2] SSLTC minutes [022] detail several practical matters raised about the ordering of material or the use of rehearsal spaces. There was a discussion about student support and the need to focus on counselling services and a discussion about inclusivity. Student feedback spanning 2018 to 2020 [027] indicates that positive responses for learning resources in the earlier surveys dropped considerably during the pandemic. Students views are hugely positive about the spaces and recognise them as some of the best circus spaces in the country. This is also apparent to the specialist assessors on the tour of facilities. [Tour]

251   Job descriptions [056, 057, 058. 059. 060, 061, 062] indicate that staff roles are consistent with the delivery of a high-quality learning experience. Specifically, job descriptions for course managers [058] and the Student Support Manager [061] which indicate that staff with responsibility for managing or overseeing student support needs and engagement with facilities are recognised within the NCCA management structure [039] are highly appropriate. Similarly, regular meetings maintain the dialogue between teaching and professional services staff, as well as online record systems and systems to approve student support, such as bursaries. [VLE] Staff roles are consistent with the delivery of a high-quality learning experience and work effectively because key teaching and professional services staff communicate effectively to provide exemplary support.

252   Students receive assessment feedback in blocks at the end of each term and meet with academic staff to discuss their academic progress. Orbiting around this process are a range of well-being systems such as student support, counselling services, physiotherapy, and academic support skills. The Degree Administration Team ensures the maintenance of a dialogue between each element with the Student Support Manager liaising with the Strength and Conditioning Coach; Head of Academic Administration & Student Support, Admissions and Registry Manager, Heads of year and the Head of HE Delivery. Students can then select to talk to any member of staff if they require further tutorial support: they often choose to talk to a preferred member of staff, such as their specialist skills tutor or year head. Given the progress meetings with the Head of HE Delivery and relevant year head and their dialogue with the Degree Administration Team, all issues are tracked and managed. [M2, M6, Tour, Assess] Based on examination of academic staff CVs and observations of teaching, the team considers that staff are appropriately qualified and skilled and understand their roles and responsibilities because the breadth and focus of the support offered is highly focused for what is a small provider: students who met the team were very clear that they are fully supported. [M2]

253   As noted in external examiner reports [021a, 021b] and the University's 2017 periodic review report and evident in the tour of facilities, [Tour] the highly specialist facilities are rigorously focused on the training of circus performers. They have been adapted and developed carefully and refined over years of experience of using the space and through various adaptations and further development to the original space. As a national centre the specialist nature of the facilities is truly worthy of the title; they are highly tailored to student learning needs, but also provide exemplary facilities of the professional world. One of the key benefits of the physical space is that it is multifaceted and provides exceptional resources for the circus community, be that on a professional or educational basis. The way that both can, and do, integrate within the space is excellent. Beyond the specialist nature of the Centre, the offices, learning resources centre and other communal spaces enable staff and students to work in an environment that fully supports the student learning experience. [Tour, M6]

254   In its 2020-21 Annual Monitoring Report, [009b] NCCA noted that it needed to explore student requests for more lessons and more space between lessons and aims to focus on this in its course re-write. These annual and periodic review and monitoring processes indicate that NCCA does identify issues around resourcing and sets clear actions to resolve them. For example, to fit every session into the space each course has specific times of each day, and days of the week, allocated to it. [032] NCCA states in its Plans for Growth [070] that students have always had near unlimited access to training spaces, and they are typically in the building from 9.00am - 6.00pm Monday to Friday. [M1] However, student feedback [27g, M2] indicates that student perception is that access to the spaces is satisfactory to good, not the unlimited access NCCA suggests. Senior staff who met the team [M1] stated that the students understand that the hiring out of spaces generates income, which is then fed back into NCCA. However, the students who met the team [M2] stated that the loss of space or the relocation of teaching to other spaces does not reflect the cost of the education for which they pay. Regarding the deployment of the space in the wider context of the Centre's function as a place of creating circus, the benefits are clear. The team concludes that there are appropriate and sufficient facilities to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

Conclusions

255   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the assessment team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

256   NCCA has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience. NCCA is responsible for providing all teaching and support services, including learning resources. While NCCA does not have a facilities strategy, the development of the physical space and its resources is responsive to the needs of the training offered and has been developed carefully. The library facilities focus on the highly specialist nature of the programme, rather than offering a broader academic environment, but this is in keeping with the assessment tasks set. Student support is highly effective and responsive to the very particular needs of students who need physical, mental, and study support to work collectively to support their learning. The facilities are of exceptional quality and wholly support student learning. The review team concludes, therefore, that this Core practice is met.

257   The team examined all the evidence appropriate to this Core practice in Annex 4

and therefore have a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

Q5 The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience

258   This Core practice expects that the provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.

259   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

260   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with students [M2]
b   Meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5]
c   Request to provider for additional evidence 12 November [ST1 3.063 (1)]
d   Provider submission [000]
e   Recent annual course monitoring reports [009 a-d]
f   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships [012]
g   2017 Periodic Programme Review report [013]
h   CDD Working with Others Handbook [014]
i   Student and Staff Learning and Teaching Committee minutes [022 a-d]
j   Academic Board minutes [023 a-b]
k   Student survey reports [027 a-g]
l   Example student module evaluation questionnaire [028]
m   Undergraduate Handbook [032]
n   CDD Student Engagement Framework [071]
o   Transition Update Dec 21 [073]
p   National Centre AB Terms of Reference 2021 update [077a]
q   SSLTC Terms of Reference [077b]
r   Student survey reports. [078a-i]

261   To test that NCCA actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience, the team considered all the evidence relevant to this Core practice.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

262   No samples were used for this Core practice.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

263   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

264   To identify how the provider actively engages students in the quality of their educational experience, the team considered all the relevant academic regulations or policies submitted as evidence during the review period. The evidence considered includes: the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships, [012] CDD Working with Others Handbook, [014] Undergraduate Handbook, [032] the CDD Student Engagement Framework, [071] Transition Update Dec 21[073] and the [ST1 3.063 (1)] meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer. [M5]

265   To assess whether the provider has credible, robust and evidence-based plans for engaging students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience, the team considered the following evidence: the Provider Submission, [000] recent annual course monitoring reports: [009 a-d] NCCA 2019-20 AMPR; [009a] NCCA AMPR for 2020-21; [009b] NCCA Kent AMPR; [009d] University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships; [012] 2017 Periodic Programme Review report; [013] CDD Working with Others Handbook. [014] Student and Staff Learning and Teaching Committee minutes [a-d]: SSLC Minutes 5th July 2017; [022a] SSLC Minutes 31 January 2018; [022b] SSLTC Minutes 26 Feb 2020; [022c] SSLTC Minutes 21 October 2019. [022d] Academic Board minutes: [023a-b] Academic Board 16th October 2019; [023a] Academic Board 2 December 2020. [023b] Student survey reports: [027 a-g] example of module evaluation questionnaire and [028] Undergraduate Handbook. [032] Also CDD Student Engagement Framework, [071] Transition Update Dec 21, [073] National Centre AB Terms of Reference 2021 update, [077a] SSLTC Terms of Reference [077b] and student survey reports.[078a-i]

266   To illustrate the impact of the provider's approach, the team looked at examples of how the provider changed or improved provision as a result of student engagement through meeting with students, [M2] recent annual course monitoring reports [009 a-d] and NCCA 2019-20 CDD AMPR. [009a]

267   To identify students' views about student engagement in the quality of their educational experience the assessment team met with students and scrutinised the relevant evidence made available as follows: meeting with students, [M2] meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer, [M5] recent annual course monitoring reports [009 a-d] and NCCA 2020-21 CDD AMPR. [009b]

What the evidence shows

268   NCCA supports many routes to engage in dialogue openly and transparently with its students through formal and informal mechanisms. NCCA's approach follows both the CDD and the University of Kent's requirements. The team looked at evidence of how these mechanisms of engagement are enacted currently and at NCCA's plan for student

engagement as it moves forward as an independent institution.

269   NCCA currently uses the CDD Student Engagement Framework. [071] This framework states that CDD aligns to the expectations of the validating institution, the University of Kent, as set out in the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships. [012] This Code of Practice states that partner institutions delivering courses of study approved by the University are responsible for obtaining and considering students' views.

270   To align with the requirements of the University of Kent and to ensure the consideration of students' views, the CDD Student Engagement Framework [071] sets out the expectations for each of its member schools, with the aim of enhancing the student experience for all of its students. The framework recognises that the implementation of the practices set out in the framework would vary to reflect the different sizes and cultures of each of its schools. The role of the student representative is outlined in the document together with the expectations for their election and training. Both informal and formal channels of representation are required as part of the collective approach to student engagement. This overarching framework [071] indicates that student handbooks should include the student-facing guide to student representation and explain how the students' views are considered within the school. The team confirmed that the NCCA Undergraduate Handbook [032] included a clear guide to student representation and through this guide, it was clear that NCCA had embedded its responsibilities for student engagement as stipulated by the CDD and by the University of Kent.

271   As specified in the Transition Update document, [073] currently there is no formal Student Engagement Policy and procedures uniquely for NCCA. The team was assured that NCCA's future policy or framework for student engagement would be largely based on the current CDD version. [071] [ST1 3.063 (1)] According to the Transition Update Dec 21,[073] the new policy document for student feedback and the related committee structures is due to be signed off by the Academic Board in March 2022.

272   The team was assured that on becoming independent from CDD, the Chief Operating Officer will take on the responsibility for all the higher education policies and ensure these are updated and current. The team found that the contents of the Student Engagement Framework [071] were sound and robust and still current in terms of the principles and activities for student engagement. This framework [071] underpins the role of students as active participants in shaping the content, delivery and organisation of their teaching and learning.

273   Students are engaged individually and collectively in the quality of their educational experience in many ways, for example representation on committees, through student representatives and through various surveys. The team assessed how NCCA collectively engages students in the quality of the student experience. In line with the CDD Student Engagement Framework [071] the NCCA Undergraduate Handbook [032] clearly sets out the election, training and expectations of its student representatives and emphasises the importance of the lead role of the student representatives on NCCA's Student Staff Learning and Teaching Committee (the SSLTC, previously the SSLC). As specified in the handbook [032] the role of the committee is to consider, and share with the student representatives, the external examiner reports, the Annual Programme Monitoring Report, the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destination of Higher Education Leavers (DHEL) (now the Graduate Outcomes Survey). [071] To verify whether these items were available to the students to examine, the team asked the students [M2] and they agreed that they were able to comment on these items tabled in the staff-student forums. [M2]

274   The SSLTCs take place each term and the minutes of these committees confirm their regular occurrence and students' contribution to the debate. [022a-d] The SSLTC Terms of Reference [077b] set out how the SSLTC minutes feed into and support the work of the Academic Board in assuring the academic quality and standards of NCCA's programmes of study. As evidenced by the Academic Board Terms of Reference 2021 update [077a] and the minutes of the Academic Board, [023a-d] there are student representatives who also sit on this higher level Board.

275   Following the meetings of the SSTLC and Academic Board, the student representatives then feed back to their peers to close the feedback loop. Student representatives confirmed at their meeting with the team [M2] that minutes from meetings, such as the SSTLC and the Academic Board, and documents such as the external examiners' reports were distributed to student representatives and also made accessible through the VLE. The NCCA Undergraduate Handbook notes that group feedback sessions also take place each term led by the student representatives. [032] The evidence of student representation on committees led the team to form the view that students are represented collectively within the committee structure as required by CDD and by the University of Kent.

276   The NCCA provider submission [000] states that students are also engaged individually through also responding to surveys including module evaluations, exit surveys, and the NSS. Students from partner institutions of the University of Kent are also invited to participate in a University of Kent annual survey on the learning experience as noted in the CDD Working with Others Handbook. [014] The team was able to evidence the NCCA survey arrangements, including the module evaluation questionnaire, [028] completed module evaluations, [027a-f] an example of a BA Exit Survey [027g] and the NSS results. [080 a-d] NCCA also states in its submission [000] that it practises an 'open door' policy for students to discuss and feed back on an individual basis as required. [073] The students [M2] confirmed the availability of staff and the 'open door' approach. The team found the provider's approach to engaging students individually in feedback and enhancement activities to be robust and credible, and complementary to the collective approach seen above.

277   The team could see evidence of student comments being responded to, for example there are evidenced responses to some of the feedback on the module evaluations forms submitted by the students. One example of this is seen on a third-year module evaluation form [027e] when some students commented on their preference for an essay rather than a presentation. The comment was responded to positively, stating that any changes suggested would be considered in the forthcoming revalidation.

278   The outcome of internal and external surveys of student satisfaction are discussed with staff, year groups and student representatives in order to gain a better understanding of the student feedback. Student feedback is also analysed and reflected upon in the NCCA's Annual Monitoring Programme Report. [009b] For example, the NSS question on assessment and feedback was improved as teachers were asked to specifically go over the grade descriptors when providing students with feedback. This helped students have a greater understanding of what they needed to work on to achieve good grades in these modules. The Annual Monitoring Programme Reports (AMPRs) [009a-d] have a section that is dedicated to the evaluation of the student experience and response to student feedback. This section in the AMPR represents the overview of all the student feedback.

279   This approach as outlined above led the team to form the view that the NCCA demonstrates a current, comprehensive, ongoing engagement with student feedback. As seen above, NCCA 's arrangements for student engagement, as set out in the CDD Student Engagement Framework [071] and the Undergraduate Handbook [032] reflect the University of Kent's requirements. NCCA has an effective approach to engaging students, individually

and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.

280   The approach to engaging students in feedback at NCCA is flexible, as evidenced when the summer term delivery was moved entirely online. [NCCA AMPR for 2019-20, 009a] During this time, NCCA implemented a process of continuous engagement to support students. Students commented positively on this change as they were then able to feed back through individual and group sessions. As an example of this process working, NCCA AMPR for 2019-20 [009a] noted that during the periods of lockdown when classes were conducted online, students were frustrated at not being able to use physical resources at this time. However, students did appreciate learning new digital skills for film or sound editing, for example. Students also commented positively on the use of the VLE that enhanced their learning experience. External examiner reports also commented on the success of the adaptations made by NCCA during the lockdown periods. [009a]

281   The team examined changes resulting from student feedback. For example, students commented that some theory classes conducted online via the VLE during the pandemic lasting three hours were too long. [NCCA 2019-20 AMPR, 009a] These classes were subsequently shortened. Another example of change brought about through student feedback was noted in the meeting with students. [M2] Students spoke of changes to the admissions process and the reduced expectation for choosing their specialisation in a circus discipline too early on the course. This mean that students would have more time to try out other disciplines or change their initial choice should this be necessary. These changes illustrate how NCCA improves the learning experience as a result of student feedback. NCCA has an open and inclusive approach to engaging students in dialogue, with many avenues that enable students to engage in the quality of their learning experience.

282   The team met with students from all year groups, [M2] including student representatives from each year group FdA year 1, and year 2 and the BA (Hons) Top-up. Student representatives confirmed that they are briefed on their role with the full understanding that they are to gather views in advance of student meetings and to feed back afterwards. These representatives informed the team that social media is used as the platform to collect views and for feeding back, thus clearly demonstrating that students are engaged collectively and individually in commenting on the quality of their experience. Supporting the documentary evidence seen by the team, students confirmed that they participate in committees including the SSLTC, Academic Board, Governors and the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Committee. Students also confirmed that they are able to comment on SSLTC and Academic Board minutes, external examiner reports and comment on surveys including end-of-module evaluations, the NSS results, the University of Kent survey and student progression and destination data.

283   Due to the continuing pandemic and consequent changes because of this, in 2020-21 most of the teaching during the lockdown periods was online. In the AMPR for the academic year 2020-21, the section on student feedback noted that online learning was seen as beneficial for some but not for others. Students also requested more space and time for training and the AMPR indicates that these aspects are going to be considered in the forthcoming revalidation of the FdA and BA in 2022. [009b] Students confirm that they are aware of the forthcoming revalidation but as of yet, they have not contributed to any great extent. [M2]

Conclusions

284   As described above, the team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the team ensured that its judgement

was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

285   NCCA currently uses the CDD Student Engagement Framework which aligns to the expectations of the validating institution, the University of Kent. It sets out the expectations for each of its member schools, with the aim of enhancing the student experience for all of its students. The team concludes that NCCA follows this framework and actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience. NCCA has many ways in which students are engaged in feeding back either collectively, as student representatives sitting on committees such as the SSLTC or on the Academic Board, for example, or individually through survey feedback and via the continuous 'open door' approach for students to feed back or discuss with staff.

286   Although currently there is no one overarching report on student feedback, NCCA's approach to reviewing all feedback through the annual monitoring reports led the team to consider this as a credible way of evaluating student feedback. Students reported that they are fully engaged in the quality of their educational experience and could provide examples of change brought about to improve their learning experience. The team concludes that this Core practice is therefore met.

287   Based on the scrutiny of evidence seen, the team has a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

Q6 The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students

288   This Core practice expects that the provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students.

289   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

290   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with senior staff [M1]
b   Meeting with students [M2]
c   Final meeting with senior staff [M7]
d   Request to provider for additional evidence 12 November [ST1 3.063 (1)]
e   The University of Kent website
       https://www.kent.ac.uk/teaching/qa/collaborative/validation/profiles/ncca.html
f   Provider submission [000]
g   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships [012]
h   2017 Periodic Programme Review report [013]
i   CDD Working with Others Handbook [014]
j   CDD Admissions Policy [016]
k   CDD Admissions Appeals and Complaints Policy [017]
l   CDD Complaints Policy and Procedure [029]
m   NCCA Draft Complaints Procedure [030]
n   University of Kent Academic Appeals procedure [031]
o   Undergraduate Handbook [032]
p   Support Through Studies Policy [035]
q   NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers [036]
r   Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019 [037]
s   NCCA complaints, appeals and outcomes 2020-2021 [072]
t   Transition Update Dec 21 [073]
u   Complaint Procedure. [091]

291   To test that NCCA has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students, the team looked at all the evidence relevant to this Core practice, including data for all the complaints and appeals for the past two years and the outcomes of the meetings with NCCA staff and students.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

292   Sampling was not necessary as the team was able to examine all complaints and appeals.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

293   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

294   To identify the provider's processes for handling complaints and appeals and to confirm that these processes are fair and transparent the review team considered NCCA's approach, as set out in the provider submission, [000] the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships, [012] the 2017 Periodic Programme Review report, [013] the CDD Working with Others Handbook, [014] the CDD Admissions Policy, [016] the CDD Admissions Appeals and Complaints Policy, [017] the CDD Complaints Policy and Procedure, [029] the University of Kent Academic Appeals procedure, [031] the NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers, [036] the Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019, [037] the NCCA complaints, appeals and outcomes 2020-2021, [072] the Complaint Procedure [091] and the request to provider for additional evidence 12 November. [ST1 3.063 (1)]

295   To assess whether NCCA has credible, robust and evidence-based plans for developing and operating fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students, the review team considered the current CDD Student Complaints Policy and Procedures, [029] the draft Student Complaint Procedure, [030] the University of Kent's appeals process, [031] the Undergraduate Handbook, Transition Update Dec 21, [073] the meeting with senior staff [M1] and the final meeting with senior staff. [M7]

296   To assess whether information for potential and actual complaints and appellants is clear and accessible the team examined the information for students and discussed this with the students. [M2]

297   To test that complaints and appeals sampled were dealt with in a fair, transparent and timely manner the assessment team examined the record of complaints made available to the team evidenced as follows: Request to provider for additional evidence 12 November, [ST1 3.063 (1)] Complaints Procedure. [091]

What the evidence shows

298   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

299   NCCA's responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers [036] states that student complaints, concerns and appeals are a shared responsibility between NCCA and the University of Kent. This shared responsibility for the various aspects of complaints and appeals is clarified in the 2019 Memorandum of Agreement. [037] As specified in the agreement, [037] all non-academic matters and academic complaints come

under the responsibility of NCCA. The University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses [012] specifies that academic complaints at the validated partner may concern, for example, teaching or the availability of teaching resources. At present, NCCA makes use of the CDD Complaints Policy and Procedure [029] and for both non-academic complaints and academic complaints, NCCA must work through the stages of its policy, as outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

300   The CDD Policy and Procedures [029] invokes a staged process. Stage One is an informal step that may lead to an informal and local resolution of the complaint. Should an informal resolution not be possible, then the formal steps involved Stages Two and Three, come into play. Stage Two is the formal investigation of the complaint and Stage Three allows the complainant to appeal Stage Two should there be dissatisfaction with the outcome of Stage Two. The policy [029] states that all Stage One informal verbal or written complaints are recorded locally for reference. For Stage Two complaints, the CDD Assistant Registrar is to log and acknowledge receipt of the complaint. In the event of a Stage Two outcome appeal, the Stage Three appeal is acknowledged and logged in the same way as a Stage Two complaint.

301   As set out in the CDD Student Complaints Policy and Procedures, [029] on exhaustion of internal procedures, the complainant may then further their concerns to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). However, for academic complaints only, as specified in the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses [012] and as set out in the CDD Policy, [029] further to exhausting the internal process the complainant may still have recourse to pursue the complaint with the University. On exhaustion of the University's procedures, the complainant may then further their concerns with the OIA.

302   All formal complaints are to be reported to the University on an annual basis as stated in the 2019 Memorandum of Agreement [039] and the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses. [012] The team formed the view that the CDD Policy and Procedures for informal and formals complaints are clearly articulated and transparent.

303   NCCA's approach to handling academic appeals follows the University of Kent's requirements and processes as stated in University of Kent Academic Appeals procedure. [031] Academic appeals against the recommendations made by the Board of Examiners are referred to the University. The academic appeal should be made within the approved timeframes as stated in the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships [012] and the University of Kent Academic Appeals procedure. [031] NCCA have not received any academic appeals, so the team was not able to examine the operation of this process. The team can confirm that NCCA has fair, transparent and accessible procedures for handling complaints and appeals.

304   The CDD Student Complaints Policy and Procedure [029] is signposted in several documents including the Support Through Studies Policy [035] and the current CDD Working with Others document [014] that makes it clear how both students and external placement providers are to raise complaints. In addition to the CDD Complaints Policy and Procedure, [029] there is a separate Admissions Appeals and Complaints Policy. [017] The Admissions Policy [016] signposts the Conservatoire's Admissions Appeals and Complaints Policy. [017] This CCD policy gives applicants the chance to appeal against, for example, a decision not to make an offer of a place. Complaints and Appeals are addressed in the Student Undergraduate Handbook [032] and both the CDD Complaints Policy and procedures [029] and the University of Kent Academic Appeals guidance are very clearly signposted in this

document.

305   In preparation for NCCA 's independent registration with the OfS, and the disbanding of CDD, NCCA confirmed that moving forward they would develop their own Student Complaints policy based on the current CDD policy as stated in the provider submission [001] and the Transition Update Dec 21, [073] and confirmed by senior staff. [M1] The team was informed that their new NCCA Student Complaint policy would include the University of Kent's academic appeal processes. [073; M7]

306   Given the current clearly articulated complaints and appeals processes and the plans to adapt the current complaints processes to better fit NCCA's requirements, the team supports the view that NCCA has credible plans for complaints and appeals processes to move forward in its preparation to become an independent institution.

307   NCCA do not have many complaints, but they do have a complaints spreadsheet to log complaints and there is also a central overarching CDD log of complaints. [M4] In recent years only one complaint had been received. This complaint was related to an NCCA programme of study and dated to the academic year 2020-21. The complaint was to do with finance and funding. In this instance, the complainant had not complained directly to the NCCA and instead contacted CDD. In this particular case, the complaint was handled by the CDD central team under the CDD Student Complaint Procedure, and this was logged centrally. [029] CDD then notified NCCA of the complaint. The complaint was resolved successfully at the informal Stage One of the CDD Student Complaint Procedure and so this did not become a formal Stage Two complaint. [072,091]

308   Students confirm that they know where to find the Complaints and the Academic Appeals Policies, [M2] indicating that it can be found on the VLE together with all the other relevant documents they may require during their time at NCCA. [M2] Should students have any queries about complaints and appeals it is set out clearly in the student handbook who they should contact. The students were quick to point out that should they be unsure of what to do, 'staff are available all the time and will advise us where to go'. [M2]

Conclusions

309   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the assessment team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

310   NCCA uses the CDD Complaints Policy and Procedure for both non-academic and academic complaints. NCCA's approach to handling academic appeals follows the University of Kent's requirements and processes as stated in the University of Kent Academic Appeals procedure. Scrutiny of the evidence and consideration of the outcomes of the meetings with staff and students leads the team to conclude that NCCA currently has fair, transparent and accessible procedures for handling complaints and academic appeals by following these procedures. On examining the complaint viewed by the team, the team confirmed that the complaints process had followed the published procedures. On leaving CDD, NCCA has plans to adapt the current complaints processes to better fit NCCA's requirements as an independent school. The team support the view that NCCA has credible plans for complaints and appeals processes to move forward in its preparation to become an independent institution. Students raised no concern over what approach to take should they have a complaint or appeal to raise, and they knew who to ask and where to find the

Complaints Policy should they require it. Students highlighted that should there be any doubt about what to do they would ask a member of staff. The team concludes, therefore, that this Core practice is met.

311   Given that the team was able to examine all the evidence relevant to this Core practice and NCCA has appropriate policies and procedures in place for complaints and appeals that have been tested to a limited extent, and students are confident in their ability to raise any complaint or appeal according to the policies and procedures, the team has a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

Q8   Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them

312   This Core practice expects that where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them.

313   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

314   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with senior staff [M1]
b   Meeting with students [M2]
c   Meeting with academic staff [M3]
d   Meeting with registry staff [M4]
e   Meeting with Head of Academic Administrationand University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5]
f   Demonstration of the virtual learning environment [VLE]
g   Provider submission statement [000]
h   University of Kent's Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses, Annex K: External Examiners and External Advisers for Taught Courses [006]
i   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships [011]
j   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships [012]
k   CDD Working With Others Handbook [014]
l   National Centre for Circus Arts Working with others policy handbook with appendices [038]
m   Recent external examiner reports [021]
n   Transition Update Dec 21. [073]

315   To test that where NCCA works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them, the team considered all the evidence relevant to this Core practice, except:

316   No third-party endorsements from Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body or Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical end-point assessments were available as NCCA does not run programmes requiring such endorsements.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

317   No sampling was necessary for this Core practice.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

318   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

319   To assess how the provider ensures that courses are high quality irrespective of where or how they are delivered or who delivers them, and to assess whether the provider has credible, robust and evidence-based plans for ensuring a high-quality academic experience in partnership work, the team considered the University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships', [011] and University of Kent Code of Practice Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships. [012]

320   To test whether staff understand and discharge effectively their responsibilities to the awarding body, the team considered evidence at the site visit provided by meeting with senior staff, [M1] academic staff, [M3] registry staff, [M4] and meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer. [M5]

321   To assess how the provider ensures courses are high quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them, and to assess whether the provider has credible, robust and evidence-based approaches to ensuring a high-quality academic experience in partnership work, the team considered the CDD Working with Others Handbook [014] in respect of NCCA's statement that this document demonstrated 'clear definitions' as to the types of activity that are defined as 'Working with Others'. This Working with Others Handbook [014] was subsequently compared with National Centre for Circus Arts Working with others policy handbook with appendices [038] to examine planned changes to practices in the near future.

322   In order to assess students' views about quality of courses delivered in partnership, the team held a meeting with students. [M2] There was no written student submission created for this review.

323   In order to test that external examiners consider courses delivered in partnership to be of high quality, thus confirming the effectiveness of the underpinning arrangements, the team examined recent external examiner reports, [021] with reference to University of Kent's Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses, Annex K: External Examiners and External Advisers for Taught Courses. [006]

What the evidence shows

324   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

325   The University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 1 Development of New Partnerships [011] and the University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships - Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships [012] demonstrate that the University has put in place effective arrangements to ensure that its partner organisations provide high-quality academic experience. These documents are thorough and comprehensive. For instance, [012] section 16.2 articulates that NCCA, as a partner institution of the University of Kent, is required 'to provide students with a Course Handbook containing details of curriculum, assessment scheme and regulations, timetable, staff names and contact point'. Students confirmed at the visit that these measures are in place [M2] and staff saw evidence of these procedures during the demonstration of the VLE. [VLE] Measures such as these ensure that students are supported in their learning at NCCA and demonstrate that effective arrangements are in place to ensure that the academic experience is high quality.

326   The University of Kent Code of Practice [011] as referred to above also clarifies that NCCA is responsible for delivering the high-quality academic training that leads to its awards. For instance, paragraph 6.6 states that partner organisations must possess 'the administrative capacity to implement a quality assurance system consistent with the requirements of the University's Code of Practice for Quality Assurance'. Paragraph 7.2 specifies a robust process of approval involving risk assessment, due diligence checks and multi-committee scrutiny; more detail concerning this process is provided by the extensive table of documents listed in paragraph 9.5 required of partner institutions. The meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer [M5] confirmed that this scrutiny takes place, with the Liaison Officer submitting an annual report to the Quality Assurance department at the University of Kent. This demonstrates that NCCA follows the clear and comprehensive regulations for the management of academic quality in courses delivered by partnerships that are validated by the University.

327   The meeting with senior staff [M1] revealed that NCCA had historically run their own internal quality systems, mapped onto CDD structures. Senior staff [M1] expressed the ambition to make future annual monitoring processes more specific to NCCA requirements, as current templates are provided by the CDD and need to be relevant for all schools within the framework.

328   The meeting with academic staff [M3] allowed the team to see evidence of a tightly knit, team-working environment where staff support each other to deliver a high-quality academic experience. Year Managers take responsibility for teachers within their team, disseminating information from the Head of HE Delivery and the Head of Academic Administration and Student Support. There is a lot of co-teaching at NCCA, which provides regular opportunities for staff to learn from each other and ensure that delivery is of a consistently high quality. The staff team have developed effective procedures to ensure that the quality of delivery is not disrupted when an external hire of the NCCA building moves academic delivery off-site; where necessary, staff adjust teaching methods and re-calibrate student workload, ensuring that the most appropriate content takes place in the most appropriate place. Teaching staff [M4] confirmed that feedback from the external examiner is disseminated by the Head of HE Delivery to the teaching team at team meetings. Feedback from the University Liaison Officer is disseminated to the team by the Head of Academic Administration and Student Support. The teams are satisfied that these arrangements ensure that NCCA staff understand and discharge effectively their responsibilities to the

University as the awarding body.

329   The University Liaison Officer confirmed at the meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University Liaison Officer [M5] that the maintenance of high-level academic quality is assured through the oversight provided by the Quality Assurance (QA) Office at the University of Kent, which has three staff that are available to support NCCA. The Liaison Officer report is received by the QA Office at the University, which is mandated to take action if it perceives that the quality of the academic experience is under threat. The next significant milestone in ensuring a future high-quality academic experience will be the forthcoming revalidation of the programme, which will be administered by the QA Office at the University. In respect of the provider's statement in the provider submission document [000] that 'In many cases the evidence of how we work is in the actions itself rather than in an overarching policy document', the Liaison Officer commented that the tracking and scrutiny of these actions formed the basis of his regular one-to-one meetings with the Head of Academic Administration and Student Support. These meetings allow the Liaison Officer to ask what pressures are being exerted on the ability of NCCA to provide a high-quality academic experience, and to offer solutions to the provider. These 'rich and detailed conversations' are cross-referenced with the tracking of actions through committees and feedback gathered from students in order to scrutinise, in a holistic sense, whether the learning and teaching environment at the provider is discharging its responsibilities effectively to the awarding body. The Liaison Officer stated categorically [M5] that on behalf of the University he was satisfied that actions taking place at NCCA in response to feedback from staff, students and external examiners are ensuring the continuation of a high-quality academic experience.

330   As stated in S3, the CDD Working With Others Handbook [014] is consistent with the UK Quality Code. The document explains what NCCA as a current member of CDD defines as the type of work that falls under each sub-category of 'working with others', for example, partnerships and work-based learning. The CDD Working With Others Handbook [014] shows that partnership agreements are clear and comprehensive, up-to-date and reflect the provider's regulations or policies for the management of partnerships. This will soon be replaced by the National Centre for Circus Arts Working with others policy handbook with appendices, [038] which demonstrates an effective, future-facing adaptation of current procedure. This document has clarified and been appropriately updated in respect of the QAA Quality Code. New appended material adds further detail that underpins NCCA policies and procedures. Currently, several key functions relating to quality are carried out by members of the CDD team. Sections 1.5 and 1.6, which signposted NCCA employees to senior staff at CDD have been updated to communicate clear points of reference to NCCA that will be in place under the new structure. The functions currently exercised by the Academic Registrar at CDD will be taken over by the NCCA Chief Operating Officer. The meeting with senior staff [M1] confirmed that NCCA has yet to finalise these arrangements.

331   Testimony recorded at the meeting with students [M2] revealed that students perceived their courses to provide a high-quality academic experience, especially in relation to the quality of the physical resources provided on site and the quality of the teaching. The biggest impact on the academic experience was created by external hires of the teaching space, which students felt was disruptive. However, students from later years who had experienced curricular delivery before Covid, felt that the level of disruption in the last three months was not typical and reflected pressures created by the return to in-person work since the last lockdown. Students commented that the pressures of Covid had put significant strain on the higher education team, but despite this they felt that the quality of their courses had been very good. In hearing testimony from the current year 1 students, year 3 representatives commented that it was clear to them that NCCA staff had listened to their feedback and made changes to delivery for subsequent cohorts. The team concluded from this meeting that the student body felt that their academic experience at NCCA was of high

quality.

332   The external examiner reports from 2019-20 and 2020-21 [021] both support the contention that NCCA provides high-quality courses delivered in partnership with the University. In the 2019-20 report, the external examiner states that the structure and delivery of the programme empowers students towards both professional and critical practices in circus. It goes on to say that the courses at NCCA are longstanding and continue to attract quality students who are led by highly skilled and dedicated staff. In the 2020-21 report, the external comments that 'I am confident that all academic processes and standards are of quality and that NCCA is offering world-class learning opportunities'. This testimony demonstrates that external examiners consider courses at the provider, delivered in partnership, to be of high quality, thus confirming the effectiveness of the underpinning arrangements.

Conclusions

333   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the assessment team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

334   For partnership working, CDD follows the Working With Others Handbook which states that partnership agreements should be clear and comprehensive, up-to-date and reflect the provider's regulations or policies for the management of partnerships. NCCA also follows the University of Kent Code of Practice and can demonstrate that it follows this and therefore has in place effective arrangements to ensure that it provides a high-quality academic experience. These documents are thorough and comprehensive and staff from both NCCA and the University of Kent understand their respective responsibilities for quality and have clear and comprehensive regulations in place to ensure that the academic experience is high quality. Partnership agreements are clear and comprehensive, and future iterations of these have been drafted in preparation for a future without the CDD. NCCA therefore has robust and credible plans to ensure a high-quality academic experience for provision delivered in the partnership in the future. External examiner reports confirm that the academic experience is of high quality. Testimony from students also supports the view that the academic experience is high quality. The team therefore concludes that the Core practice is met.

335   The team was able to scrutinise and consider a wide range of evidence relevant to this Core practice. Therefore, the team has a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

Q9   The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes

336   This Core practice expects that the provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes.

337   The QAA assessment team completed an assessment of this Core practice in line with the principles and outcomes that are detailed in the Quality and Standards Review for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students: Guidance for Providers (March 2019).

The evidence the team considered

338   The QAA team assessed the evidence presented, both prior to and at the visit, to determine if the provider could meet this Core practice at a threshold level. The Quality and Standards Review Guidance for Providers Applying to Register with the Office for Students includes a matrix (Annex 4) which identifies key pieces of evidence that a provider may present and which the team should consider when making a judgement against this Core practice to ensure that the relevant outcomes are being delivered. The assessment team used that matrix to ensure that the evidence considered was assessed in a way that is clear and consistent with all other assessments and focused on relevant outcomes. A list of the key pieces of evidence seen by the team is below:

a   Meeting with students [M2]
b   Meeting with professional support staff [M6]
c   Final meeting [M7]
d   Tour of facilities, learning resources and support services [TOUR]
e   Assessed student work [ASSESS]
f   Demonstration of the virtual learning environment [VLE]
g   Website https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/ [NCCA]
h   Provider submission [000]
i   CDD Assessment Matrix [007]
j   Recent annual course monitoring reports [009a-b]
k   NCCA Guide to Assessment [015]
l   Programme specifications [19a, 19b]
m   Recent external examiners' reports [021]
n   Undergraduate Handbook [032]
o   Guide to Student Support [033]
p   Attendance Policy [034]
q   Support Through Studies Policy [035]
r   NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers [036]
s   Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019 [037]
t   Transition Update Dec 21 [073]
u   Academic Writing Guide [076]
v   Student surveys [079, 080]
w   Academic Style Guide NCCA 2020. [096]

339   To test that NCCA supports all students to achieve successful professional and academic outcomes the team considered all the evidence relevant to this Core practice.

How any samples of evidence were constructed

340   Using the random sampling calculator, the team selected 125 pieces of assessed student work from the total of 1,027 which were completed in the 2020-21 academic year. This was to test whether students are given comprehensive, helpful and timely feedback.

Why and how the team considered this evidence

341   As highlighted, all of the evidence submitted by the provider [Annex 1] was considered by the assessment team either prior to the visit, or at the visit itself. As such, several pieces of evidence will have been considered to allow the assessment team to make its judgement regarding the provider's ability to meet this Core practice. To ensure consistency in decision making and to ensure that those decisions focused on outcomes, the assessment team considered the key pieces of evidence outlined in Annex 4 of the Guidance for Providers. These key pieces of evidence and the reason for scrutinising them are outlined below:

342   To identify the provider's approach to student support including how it identifies and monitors the needs of individual students, the team considered the relevant academic regulations and institutional policies for this as follows: the provider submission, [000] the recent annual course monitoring reports, [009a-b] the recent external examiners' reports, [021] the Undergraduate Handbook, [032] the Guide to Student Support, [033] the Attendance Policy, [034] the Support Through Studies Policy, [035] the NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers, [036] the Memorandum of Agreement National Centre Final 2019, [037] the Tour of facilities, learning resources and support services, [TOUR] the Transition Update Dec 21, [073] the Academic Writing Guide, [076] the Academic Style Guide NCCA 2020, [096] the website https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/ [NCCA] and met with professional support staff. [M6]

343   The team scrutinised the evidence provided to see how the NCCA plans to support students in achieving academic and professional outcomes. That is, to assess whether NCCA has credible, robust and evidence-based plans for ensuring that all students are supported to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes. The following evidence was included: the meeting with professional support staff, [M6] the provider submission, [000] programme specifications, [19a, 19b] the recent NCCA annual course monitoring reports, [009a-b] the recent external examiners' reports [021] and the Transition Update Dec 21. [073]

344   The team assessed students' views through the internal and external surveys and module and course evaluations to identify students' views about student support mechanisms. [079, 080]

345   The team examined assessed student work [Assess] to test whether students are given comprehensive, helpful and timely feedback, recent annual course monitoring reports, [a-d] [009] the NCCA Guide to Assessment, [015] recent external examiners' reports, [021] student survey, [080d] Demonstration of the virtual learning environment, [VLE] and met with students, [M2] professional support staff [M6] and senior staff. [M7]

346   The team also had meetings with students [M2] and staff involved in providing academic and non-academic support [M6] to test whether staff understand their responsibilities and are appropriately skilled and supported and to assess students' views about student support mechanisms and whether students who have made particular use of student support services regard those services as accessible and effective.

What the evidence shows

347   The assessment team's analysis of the evidence led to the following observations.

348   As stated in the Memorandum of Agreement [037] NCCA is responsible for all support services, including learning resources, assessment and feedback. NCCA recognises these responsibilities as set out in the NCCA responsibilities checklist for providers without degree awarding powers. [036]

349   The CDD Support through Studies Policy and Procedures [035] details the holistic and inclusive approach to supporting students in all of the CDD schools. The policy currently still applies to the NCCA as a school of the CDD. The NCCA has fully embedded this supportive approach, and this is reflected in the NCCA Guide to Student Support [033] and the NCCA Undergraduate Handbook. [032] As outlined in these documents and as evidenced further in the following paragraphs, NCCA has a strong tradition of providing individualised and specialised support for its students undertaking the intensive training required for Circus. NCCA aims to support its students in achieving successful and professional outcomes. The Undergraduate Handbook [032] and the Equal Opportunities Statement [https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/, NCCA] underpin NCCA's commitment to promoting quality and diversity at the heart of its values to ensure that all of its students, and its staff, achieve their full potential.

350   The CDD Support Through Studies Policy [035] refers to a student's ability to engage positively with their course and with the support available to them. This policy covers many aspects of a student's health and wellbeing, disabilities and Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) support, counselling, academic support and student finance. The application of the procedures is staged, commencing with an informal Stage 1 encompassing, for example, learning agreements and reasonable adjustments, followed by more formal stages, as the degree of risk to health or well-being concerns that may be detrimental to studies increases.

351   In the provider submission, [000] NCCA states that all students who enrol are automatically placed on Stage 1. In practice, this means that early on in the course, all students are screened for Specific Learning Differences (SpLD) such as dyslexia and dyspraxia using an online questionnaire designed to identify such SpLDs. The meeting with the professional support team [M6] confirms this practice and indicates that other verbal tests are used to support the online testing. As recorded in the Annual Course Monitoring Report 2019-20, [009a] NCCA had a relatively high number of students with support needs. For example, in 2019-20, 50% of students were recorded as presenting mental health issues and 30% were diagnosed with SpLD. Professional staff [M6] stated that all students requiring DSA are fully supported in their application and this support is also evidenced in the Annual Course Monitoring Report 2019-20. [009a]

352   The Undergraduate Handbook [032] sets out how, at the start of the academic year, the Head of Academic Administration and the Student Support Manager meet with every student individually to discuss mental health, learning needs, accommodation, transport and other issues as raised by the students. At these meetings, students having been identified as requiring specific support needs set out and agree on a Learning Support Agreement (LSA). The team was informed by professional support staff [M6] that students' needs are recorded and updated via a secure and confidential system on the VLE and that an overview of cases is regularly reported to the Staff Student Learning and Teaching Committee (SSLTC) and the Academic Board. As specified in the Undergraduate Handbook, [032] with the student's permission, copies of the student's learning agreements are circulated to relevant staff. These plans are reviewed each term. The Student Support Manager then has regular meetings with academic staff to liaise over student support matters. [M6]

353   Students also have to complete a medical and injury form before the initial audition for the course and any physical factors that impact on performance are also assessed regularly, modifying training according to needs. [M6] Support follow-ups are ongoing and sometimes support needs may come to light in physical activity or through medical or injury needs that appear later on in the course. [M6]

354   Students are fully aware of all the support systems in place for both academic and non-academic support. Students report that they receive extensive support for dyslexia,

attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia or for mental health from a range of people, especially the Student Support Officer. [M2] Students informed the team that there is substantial support from the HE Team and consider that they are very approachable for academic matters. Students know where to find support directly or online via the VLE, where all the information can be found, or they might attend workshops on structuring essays.

355   All of the support facilities are outlined in the Undergraduate Handbook [032] including counselling, hardship funding, scholarships and bursaries, housing, nutrition, DSA, learning support agreements, mental health and wellbeing issues. The team found NCCA highly supportive of its students in all aspects of support for this specialised professional field of practice.

356   As confirmed in the meeting with professional support staff, [M6] a new full-time support manager was appointed in 2020. The Student Support Manager is also responsible for academic support and provides support for online learning. During the pandemic lockdowns support for students moved online. To provide additional support during this time, two members of staff were available via the VLE to provide support to students whenever it was needed as seen in the Annual Course Monitoring report 2019. [009a]

357   The Student Support Manager also has the responsibility for supporting students in academic skills and with language skills for any overseas students requiring this. NCCA has a guide to academic writing [076] and the Support Manager has recently updated a shorter guide to writing in an Academic Style Guide NCCA 2020. [096] The team considered that the guides, together with the availability of the Support Manager and all other staff, were helpful in supporting the students to achieve successful academic outcomes.

358   As indicated in the provider submission, [000] NCCA is a close-knit community and students in any difficulty are likely to be quickly identified, enabling rapid interventions to support the student. This friendly, open and supportive approach was witnessed by the team in the tour of facilities, learning resources and support services, [TOUR] in the lesson observations, [Teach] and the meetings with professional support staff. [M6] Students confirmed that they found all the staff to be very approachable for all support matters, for learning needs and academic matters, as discussed further below. [MM2]

359   Those involved in supporting students at NCCA are aware of the challenges and a growing need for counselling. Currently, NCCA works with an online counselling service that provides counsellors who work with individual students. Students can be referred for up to 10 sessions. Any further support is usually sourced through the NHS; however, given the pandemic this extra support for students had been difficult to put in place. NCCA also has good relationships with many charities who may provide support for students, for example, for grief counselling. [M6] Due to the nature of the studies considerable support is in place for injury management, and to facilitate this there is a room set aside for physiotherapy treatment when required and this is highlighted in the Guide to Student Support [033] and was seen by the team on the tour of facilities, learning resources and support services. [TOUR]

360   Students access their assessment plans through the VLE so they are fully aware of submission deadlines and how work should be submitted. [M2] The team examined the assessment plans in the demonstration of the VLE. [VLE] Rather than formal feedback given at a set number of weeks following the submission of work, students receive written feedback every half term and a full report on progress every term. Students report that they also receive constant verbal feedback from tutors. The team found this to be a thorough system and one appreciated by the students. [M2]

361   Recent external examiner reports [021] comment on the comprehensive written feedback to students and personalised feedback that spoke to the different students'

strengths and indicated areas for further learning. The 2021-21 NCCA Annual Course Monitoring Report [009b] made note of a commentary made by the external examiner who was present at a recent exam board reiterating the strength of feedback at NCCA. However, on scrutinising samples of assessed work and feedback sheets [ASSESS]some concerns were raised by the assessment team. These concerns do not challenge the standards of the work or the grades awarded. In particular, the amount of supportive verbal feedback and the individualised and extensive support given to students was recognised by the assessment team. Nevertheless, scrutiny of the feedback sheets challenged the clarity and rigour of the feedback given for assessed student work. [ASSESS] The feedback sheets [ASSESS] demonstrated that some feedback did not always relate to the assessment criteria, so it was not always evident which learning outcomes had been met. In addition, although extensive and continuous verbal feedback was evidenced by the team for practical assessments, there was little evidence on the written work of any marking or commentaries that may support the student for future development. Students commented that feedback and grading were not always clear [M2] and this was reiterated in the student surveys. [80d] However, the team is of the view that this is mitigated by the tutor support and feedback on progress, with a full report given to students on a termly basis; this was also confirmed by students. [M2] The team noted NCCA 's intention to review [M7] the clarity of feedback and assessment practices through the forthcoming revalidation process. [M7] Given the extent of verbal support and the continual feedback for these practice and performance-oriented programmes, the team found this approach appropriate to supporting the success of the students at NCCA.

362   Students confirmed in the meeting with the team [M2] that they appreciate how their courses support their future careers and for them this became clearer as they progressed year on year, and they felt confident about being ready for work having completed the integrated Business Module in the third year of the programme. Students are also supported in their professional career choices. At the end of the year leading practitioners in the field are invited to deliver lectures and seminars to the final year students of the FdA and BA (Hons) courses on topics such as a presentation on social media or digital approaches to circus and performance-related workshops as evidenced in the NCCA Annual Course Monitoring Reports. [009b] Students also have opportunities to work with others and this embeds professional skills into the curriculum as evident in the programme specifications. [19a, 19b] For example, in 2019-20 BA and FdA students collaborated with private drama events and performed at the Royal Albert Hall for the Annual Young World Summit. [009a] Due to the nature of the facilities, there are also numerous opportunities for the students to practise and train alongside professionals in the field. [TOUR]

363   As evidenced in the meetings with the professional support staff [M6] and from the meeting with students [M2] it was clear to the team that staff understand their responsibilities and are appropriately skilled and knowledgeable about the support systems in place for all the students at NCCA and that the students are clear about and feel supported by the systems in place.

Conclusions

364   As described above, the assessment team considered all of the evidence submitted [Annex 1] to form a judgement as to whether the provider meets this Core practice. In making this judgement the team followed the process set out in Guidance for Providers and took account of the key statements outlined in Annex 5. In so doing the assessment team ensured that its judgement was consistent with all other assessments and remained outcomes focused. The team's conclusions, based on the evidence considered, are detailed below.

365   The evidence strongly indicates that students are supported by both academic staff

and non-academic staff working together closely to enable student achievement. Students tend to agree that they are supported to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes. The current policies and approach to supporting students at NCCA facilitate successful academic and professional outcomes. In particular, from the outset, there are robust processes in place to instigate the support required for each student and support needs are revisited throughout their time at NCCA. NCCA's future plans underpin the intention to continue with a thorough approach to supporting students, leading the assessment team to confirm that NCCA has comprehensive, robust and credible plans for the future support of its students.

366   The assessment team evidenced considerable comprehensive, helpful and timely verbal feedback to support the students. Given the extensive support for students, the helpful and continuous dialogue with students, the formal feedback sessions held regularly with students, together with the evidence from the external examiner reports, led the assessment team to conclude that this Core practice is met.

367   Given all the evidence seen by the team, in particular the thorough, individual and continuous support given to all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes, the team has a high degree of confidence in this judgement.

Annex 1

Evidence list

M1   Meeting with senior staff.
M2   Meeting with students.
M3   Meeting with academic staff.
M4   Meeting with registry staff.
M5   Meeting with Head of Academic Administration and University of Kent Liaison Officer.
M6   Meeting with professional support staff.
M7   Final meeting with senior staff.

NCCA website https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/
Kent website   https://www.kent.ac.uk/teaching/qa/collaborative/validation/profiles/ncca.html
TOUR   Tour of facilities, learning resources and support services.
ADMISS   Admissions samples.
ASSESS   Assessed student work.
TEACH   Lesson observations.
VLE   Demonstration of the Virtual Learning Environment.

2022-23 prospectus https://www.nationalcircus.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/10/prospectus-202223.pdf

ST1 3.063 (1) Request to provider for additional evidence 12 November
ST1 3.063 (2) Request to provider for additional evidence 10 December

000   Provider Submission
001   CDD briefing document
002   University of Kent Credit Framework – Level descriptors
003   University of Kent Credit Framework – Marking conventions
004   University of Kent General Regulations for Students
005   University of Kent Regulations for Taught Courses of Study
006   University of Kent's Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses, Annex K: External Examiners and External Advisers for Taught Courses
007   CDD Assessment Matrix
008   CDD Grade and Level descriptors
009   Recent annual course monitoring reports
010   University of Kent Classification guidance
011   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex O: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships – Part 1 Development of New Partnerships
012   University of Kent Code of Practice for Quality Assurance of Taught Courses: Annex P: Approval and Quality Assurance Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships – Part 2 Quality Assurance and Operational Management of Collaborative Partnerships
013   2017 Periodic Programme Review report
014   CDD Working with Others Handbook
015   NCCA Guide to Assessment
016   CDD Admissions Policy
017   CDD Admissions Appeals and Complaints Policy
018   CDD Quality Assurance Handbook
019   Programme Specifications
020   NCCA Prospectus