

June 2021

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland: Institutional Anti-Racism Plan

Quarterly Update

Covering note

Some changes to terminology will be made in the main action plan document. This covering note should be read as additional to the contextual information document that was supplied originally with the action plan when it was first published in September 2020.

The updates below are given under the rubrics in the main ARAP: accountability; curriculum; representation; staff and student training; transparency.

Reflections on 2020-21

This has been the second academic year affected by significant restrictions on account of the global Coronavirus (Covid19) pandemic. Academic year 2020-21 began with the publication of the RCS Action Plan, marking the beginning of a significant, ongoing journey that has also seen the formulation of programme-level action plans in academic departments, as well as numerous actions in professional services areas including Student Support and Human Resources, increasing opportunities for the employment of staff of diverse heritages.

Several curriculum initiatives have been launched, and we remain indebted to the courage and commitment of our students – especially Black and Global Majority students – and staff to bring about meaningful change. But we have a long way to go: commitments in plans are welcome, but there remains work to be done to ensure that daily experiences of students and staff meet with the expectations that the plans promise.

Although the ARAP initiative was driven by the conversations and action pursued by the RCS Black Union in the first instance, this end-of-academic-year update also needs to acknowledge the ongoing experiences of East and South East Asian (ESEA) students, who have endured huge increases in experiences of abuse in society since the onset of the pandemic. These are motivated by racist attitudes and cultural ignorance, and given a global platform by prominent figures who stoke outrageous opinions by making outlandish and polemical claims without foundation.

However even in the creative arts – which is known for ‘pushing the envelope’ artistically, for provoking critique through making work, and for giving an outlet of (often subversive) expression to those who are oppressed or underrepresented – some opportunities to undo racist stereotyping ingrained in custom and practice are missed. These missed opportunities to redress the ignorance or racism of previous generations include casting white actors in roles portraying Asian characters, for

example, and exacerbating this by using literal 'Yellowface': making-up an actor to appear ESEA by accentuating eye makeup, altering skin colour, or imitating particular gestures/postures (also hyper-sexualising representations of Asian women) etc. Whereas it is generally well-understood that Blackface is totally inappropriate, other racial stereotyping does not immediately provoke censure (particularly where 'it has always been' in works that emerged from the Victorian (or another) period where such casual stereotyping was invoked as a sign of 'fascination' or idealisation of Oriental tropes).

RCS, as an institution that works with the next generations of performing artists has a leadership responsibility to educate its staff and students, and to work closely with the professions to eliminate such practices. We also have a responsibility to ensure appropriate casting choices, and to have inclusive conversations with companies so as to understand and reframe cultural representations to remove the racist connotations through creative reimagining, as appropriate. Real adverse experiences that affect people today (such as abuse relating to Covid) are reinforced by ignorant practices and a lack of understanding of the harms caused by racist stereotyping. At RCS we want all of our graduates – whatever their heritage, and however they identify – to contribute towards positive change in casting practices and repertoire choices, help to support diversity throughout production teams as well as 'on stage' performers, and raise the profile of artists whose cultural experience and knowledge can support new, properly contextualised and re-imagined performance practices. We should not be afraid to have discussions about problematic works: sometimes, they are just not suitable for us; at other times, works, traditions and assumptions that are out of step with the value systems of today can be creatively rethought and presented inclusively. In order to do the latter, conversations should be had between programme teams and students at an early stage: students' should be partners in such decision-making, and need to be heard.

No document such as this will ever be able to enumerate the various oppressions visited on peoples across the world, and that would not serve the purpose of our commitment to enact positive change for everyone in their experience of RCS. RCS is not a political organisation: as a publicly-funded body, we are not in a position to state political positions, endorse or condemn political actions, even if it were possible to extrapolate an 'institutional view' from the myriad experiences and perspectives that our community embodies. Our goal is to use our most powerful forms of expression – our art forms – to provoke reflection, make change and propose new ways of preserving art's capacity to express what is essential about life, society, relationships and values.

Academic Year 2020-21

Although not over for all our students and staff, for many the learning and assessments of 2020-21 have come to a close. For many in our community, the summer may well represent the first real opportunity since the pandemic began to take stock of all that has taken place. That includes the difficult conversations that we have had, which have shone an often uncomfortable spotlight on our actions, words and decisions in the past, and continue to provoke conversation relating to our

practice in the present. We are undoubtedly a stronger institution for what we have been through (and continue to experience) individually and collectively. But no one is unbreakable. To those students and staff who have worked so hard to begin to make progress in anti-racism, as well as to maintain learning and learning support throughout the pandemic so far: thank you.

I have personally appreciated that, even when bringing the most difficult of issues to my attention, and dealing with the most emotive subjects, students have entered into honest and reasoned discussions with me (and colleagues including the Directors of Schools). I hope that we can continue this constructive working together, including when we are more regularly able to discuss important issues in person. It is our aim to support Heads of Programmes and Departments, and all staff to feel able to have the necessary conversations with students and professional contacts, and to grow the confidence for everyone to engage in these vital conversations and action.

Substantive Updates

The following updates are given against the headings in the RCS Anti-Racism Action Plan. These speak only to the institutional-level activity, and acknowledge that there is now considerable department- and service-level anti-racism activity which is developed in partnership with students and staff, and scrutinised in particular at School Management Teams. Reports are given in updates to the Academic Board, and the Board of Governors of the Conservatoire.

Accountability

The RCS **Board of Governors** has recently been joined by six new Governors, from a range of backgrounds including diverse heritages. All governors are standout professionals, artists, educators and/or business leaders in their respective specialist areas, and enrich our governing body as we transition out of Covid 'emergency' planning and into exciting Curriculum Review, 175 Anniversary and Strategic Planning initiatives.

RCS is exploring the possibility of joining the AdvanceHE Race Equality Charter, and the Deputy Principal Lois Fitch has been discussing becoming a member of a working group that will consider how SSIs (Small Specialist Institutions) can satisfy the requisite thresholds and gain membership.

We are developing training and also customising the AdvanceHE Race Literacy Glossary to be supplied to new students and staff (including visiting staff) on induction.

The SDDPF (School of Dance, Drama, Production and Film) commits to monthly meetings with representatives from the Black Student Union and the Director/key DDPF colleagues.

Strategic Artistic Planning Group will have oversight and responsibility for Anti-Racism in Action through the artistic output of the Conservatoire, supported by Departments, the CSMT and engaged with partner organisations, consultants and visiting professionals as appropriate.

Curriculum

The majority of the work contributing to anti-racist curriculum has occurred at programme and departmental level (and the School of Music's own Anti-Racism Action Plan). RCS will begin a Curriculum Review project in September 2021 in which anti-racist initiatives will be a primary requirement. The SDDPF commit to termly review of programme level Anti Racism Action Plans at a management team level.

A key pedagogical focus via *Learning to Collaborate* on Anti Racism in a Conservatoire setting is to be introduced in 2021-22 (and subject to significant development in the ensuing Curriculum Review)

Library collections have been expanded significantly, and a statement added to contextualise the contents of our collection appropriately, to assist those researching and using the materials: <https://rcs.koha-ptfs.co.uk/>

We have subscribed to the Black Lives in Music initiative for one year initially: [Black Lives in Music](#)

The SoM (School of Music) has produced a second draft of its own Anti-Racism Action Plan, following consultation with staff and students (with more to come). Targets and measures will be discussed and agreed during summer planning in August and consultation with a wider group of students and staff will take place in late September/early October. The School is also using external scrutiny to draw further comment on its planned activities in this area.

Although the following update is programme-specific, it is relevant to the institutional-level update because it recognises the position of RCS in producing future educators in Music, in Scotland. As leaders in performing arts education, RCS has a prominent role in working with partners throughout the Scottish education infrastructure to inculcate anti-racist practices and learning environments for young people. The BEd/PGDE programmes have set up a 'Diversifying and De-colonising the Curriculum Working Group' that is made up of a group of ethnically diverse students, staff, and recent Black and Global Majority alumni. This group will be taking a comprehensive look at all aspects of the Programme to identify systemic barriers that are present within the content of the Programme, issues with limiting language used to describe the programme, and barriers to diversity in recruitment. In terms of

the curriculum, there will be a particular focus on embedding Critical Literacy across the Programme.

The ETCH Festival is an arts festival by and for students that seeks to elevate colleagues and alumni and serve wider communities. It aims to be an engaging, reputable, and decolonised festival showcasing the next generation of artists. Led by an enterprising BMus student, ETCH kicked off with a Chamber Music Concert in Cunnigar Loop and included a new composition *Sitting on the edge* by an RCS student (BMus).

Upcoming events include a BEd educational video series partnering with local schools, a dance showcase with choreography by dance students and original music from composition students. (The ETCH festival is funded by the Wm Grant Foundation)

Representation

Please see comments, above, relating to recruitment to the Board of Governors. The effort to increase representation at all levels on our staff, as well as our student population, is ongoing. Methods include using (where appropriate) recruitment consultants with specialisms in finding diverse candidates; including students in discussions with departments and National Companies on issues of race and representation; recognition of the need for inclusive discussions prior to decision-making on repertoire (although this is not failsafe, and more discussions need to be put in place early enough in the planning cycle to ensure all voices are heard); recruitment of academic staff requires commitment to (and experience of, especially in senior roles) anti-racist work in job descriptions.

Staff and Student Training

Our Equality Diversity and Inclusion Officers are working on evaluating and, if appropriate, customising a training resource produced jointly by Advance HE and University of Surrey. If deemed suitable, this resource would provide the basis for our internal, RCS-specific anti-racism training for staff and students. A report will be forthcoming as to suitability in mid-July and the next quarterly update will outline further steps.

We are also intending to consult on the Race Literacy Glossary that has recently been circulated by AdvanceHE to gather views on whether we could use it as a basis to develop our own internal RCS Glossary.

In addition, we are developing training specifically designed for our Board of Governors so that they have a clear understanding of their role within anti-racist practice.

Following on from the ***Racism, Race Equality and Race Allyship*** training that took place at the start of the academic year, we are planning to arrange some follow up sessions with the same facilitator who provided the original training, offering additional support and guidance to colleagues, where required.

A report is nearing finalisation around the results of the latest Dignity at the Conservatoire survey, which identified some areas of concern which included racist behaviours. The report includes recommendations for addressing these concerns, including training, **the production of anti-discriminatory protocols for externals and all visiting staff to ensure they conform to the anti-discriminatory expectations of the Conservatoire.** We recognise that the high proportion of part time and visiting staff at the Conservatoire requires that we develop means to ensure that they are subject to the same expectations as permanent staff (and students) with regards to Dignity at the Conservatoire, and specifically in matters of anti-racist conduct and action.

We are part of the CUK EDI Forum's Decolonising the Curriculum Working Group.

Our two EDI Officers have met with a representative from CRER (Coalition of Racial Equality & Rights) to discuss our ambitions for this year's Black History Month (whilst noting that we are committed to supporting Black and Global Majority performance and learning activity throughout the calendar year). We have acknowledged that any plans are subject to Covid provisions.

RCS remains an active member of the Scottish Race Equality Forum, a network of HE/FE EDI practitioners.

Transparency

We continue to publish quarterly updates on our ARAP, but as the cover note for this update demonstrates, we remain focused on self-reflection and improvement of the experience of all our community, and especially those who have experienced, or continue to experience, discrimination. We continue to hold student experience forums (which are jointly convened by the SU President and the Deputy Principal) as well as meetings with student representatives when issues arise.

Our Equality and Diversity Forum receives regular updates on the ARAP, and members are encouraged to bring reflections and experiences to the meeting for discussion. Each department-level plan is predicated on the inclusion of students in the design and actions decided on. We know that there are areas (particularly in

decision-making with regards to repertoire, and the expectations placed on students to produce work often with short turnaround time) where further consideration needs to be given to the impact of decisions, how they are communicated and whose voices are key to arriving at a decision. Many challenges we encounter revolve around issues of **communication**, and concerns that staff may have about their own lack of knowledge or experience in particular areas; likewise, power dynamics and the small size of departments can prevent students coming forward to discuss with staff members issues that affect them in the context of their learning. Overcoming communication barriers (timescales, inexperience, power imbalance) remains the single biggest challenge to achieving our goals in anti-racist practice, not helped by the restrictions imposed on us by the pandemic. As we move forward in our curriculum and strategic planning, we aim to make confidence with constructive and fruitful conversations, between staff, and between staff and students (and indeed between students) a significant area of enhancement in our experience of RCS.