

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

13th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
20 September 2023

PE1982: Review funding arrangements for higher education to help ensure more funded places are available for Scottish ballet dancers at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Petitioner Gary McKay

**Petition
summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the funding provided to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and help enable more places to be made available to Scottish students pursuing ballet at this level.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1982>

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [8 February 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Royal Conservatoire.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new responses from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the Petitioner which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.

6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 325 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1982: Review funding arrangements for higher education to help ensure more funded places are available for Scottish ballet dancers at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Petitioner

Gary McKay

Date Lodged

24/10/22

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the funding provided to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and help enable more places to be made available to Scottish students pursuing ballet at this level.

Previous action

I have contacted the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley-Ann Somerville MSP, and the office of the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon MSP. In both cases, they refused to consider the situation.

Background information

There is currently a cap on funded places at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, with a maximum of 5 places available to Scottish domiciled student ballet dancers. The majority of student ballet dancers are forced to study elsewhere, and fund themselves.

Pupils of The Dance School of Scotland have been funded by the Scottish Government and Glasgow City Council for up to 6 years. During this time they have received the best tuition in ballet the country has to offer. However, at the end of this, when they then need to finish their training, there are limited opportunities for them to enter Conservatoire level training in Scotland.

In 2022 only 3 Scots were accepted onto funded places in the whole country.

Many others were accepted onto Conservatoire courses in London. However, without access to funding, they face a potential debt of £80,000 for three years training, substantially more than they would pay in Scotland.

The only conservatoire here offers 75% of its dance places to fee-paying, non-Scottish domiciled students.

In my view, Scottish domiciled student ballet dancers are being discriminated against in Scotland in favour of overseas or English students who will pay higher fees to attend our only conservatoire.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1982 on 8 February 2023

The Convener: That brings us to PE1982, which has been lodged by Gary McKay. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the funding that is provided to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland to enable more places to be made available to Scottish students pursuing ballet at that level.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing states that higher education institutions are autonomous bodies, although they receive significant funding from the Scottish Government. It notes that the Scottish Government does not direct how many funded places individual universities make available, and that it is unable to intervene in internal institutional matters. In 2021, funding was provided to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland that provided 30 places for Scotland-domiciled students studying dance. The response from the Scottish Government reiterates the technical points and notes that universities are able to offer as many places to international students as they wish.

We have received a submission from the petitioner that highlights the issue of opportunity for Scottish dancers to continue in further ballet education. He shares his view that the current set-up provides a means for increased business turnover and focus on financial interests. The petitioner raises concerns about the financial burden that is faced by students who might have no choice but to study outside Scotland as a result of limited places at the Royal Conservatoire.

Do members have any comments? I appreciate the general point that the petitioner is making about international students absorbing many available places.

Fergus Ewing: I have had a case from a constituent regarding their daughter, who was an accomplished dancer who had sought to obtain a place at the Royal Conservatoire. Their experience was very much in line with what is described by the petitioner; namely, that although she appeared to have the credentials and skill to earn a place, the places were being given mostly to candidates from elsewhere in the UK. There appeared to be, I think—it was a few years back—evidence that the Royal Conservatoire is very closely linked with one particular establishment in England, many candidates from which gain places at the Royal Conservatoire.

I am not in a position to make a judgment, other than to say that it seemed to me, from correspondence that I had with the Royal Conservatoire at the time, that there is a serious problem and that Scottish candidates are not getting into the Royal Conservatoire. I got a reply from the management of the Royal Conservatoire. I have to say that, in my recollection, it was quite dismissive of the concerns, which disappointed me.

At the end of the day, I am not sure that we have a locus to act, or how we could act. However, surely the situation is wrong in principle. Qualified young people in

Scotland, who wish to pursue a career in the specialist area of ballet, and who in every case have devoted their childhood and adolescence to spending hundreds—if not thousands—of hours trying to get into a very limited pool of places, should at least have the chance to get into the ballet school in their own country.

Because of my experience, which I admit is anecdotal, I think that we should pursue the matter with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's ballet department and ask it to provide evidence about the number of applicants from Scotland and the number who have been accepted over, say, the past 10 years, and evidence about other candidates who have been accepted and from whence they have come. There are, perhaps, a limited number of cases with only a few people involved, but I am aware that the issue caused one particular family real heartache and disappointment with the system as it operates in Scotland.

The Convener: Yes. I suspect that in some ways this is the tip of the iceberg, because the current funding model, particularly for specialised disciplines, is leading to this situation. I would be quite interested to open, in as constructive a way as possible, a discussion with the Royal Conservatoire about the challenges that it thinks it faces and what its application and award of places model is. I would like to find out the extent to which it wants to be candid about allocation of places, based on the fact that some allocation creates an additional financial revenue stream, and the extent to which it accepts or acknowledges the difficulties that that might be placing on the ability of Scotland-domiciled residents to access courses at the Royal Conservatoire.

Ultimately, there is a reputational issue for the Royal Conservatoire. It enjoys a tremendous amount of public goodwill; I know that to be so. That is the case very much because it is the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and people will imagine that talented people here in Scotland have a fair and equal opportunity to access courses in the disciplines in which it specialises.

Although I accept that that argument could be made in relation to access to other further education institutions, we are considering a petition in relation to a particular matter, so it would be reasonable for us—using the official hat of the Scottish Parliament—to seek slightly more information from the conservatoire, at least.

David Torrance: Can we ask, when we contact the Royal Conservatoire—I believe from the evidence that you mentioned that there are 30 funded places—whether it is filling all 30 places for Scottish students?

The Convener: Yes—it would be interesting to have that information.

Annexe C

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland submission of 22 February 2023

PE1982/C: Review funding arrangements for higher education to help ensure more funded places are available for Scottish ballet dancers at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

The following information is requested by the Committee in respect of The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's BA Modern Ballet programme:

- data on the number of Scottish applicants and granted places over the past 10 years;
- data on awarded places over the past 10 years broken down by Scottish, rUK and international students;
- information about the challenges faced by the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in awarding places to students from Scotland; and
- how much of the Scottish Government's funding is allocated to funding Scottish places.

General comments:

Before providing the specific information requested by the Committee it feels helpful to highlight points of inaccuracy in respect of the original Petition:

1. It is inaccurate to for the petitioner to assert *'there is currently a cap on funded places at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, with a maximum of 5 places available to Scottish domiciled student ballet dancers'*.

This is not the case. Entry to the programme is by audition and Scottish-domiciled dancers who have met the entry standards for the programme have been offered places. There is not 'a cap' 'with a maximum of five places'. Where the figure of 5 appears in the

data sets this is because the HESA rounding methodology has been applied. This means numbers have been rounded to the nearest 5. This is standard practice for any data circulated outside of RCS so that individual students cannot be identified.

2. The petitioner asserts 'Scottish domiciled student ballet dancers are being discriminated against in Scotland in favour of overseas or English students'. This is also not the case. Scottish dancers presenting for audition at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and who meet the required standard have been offered places. It is also the case that not all Scottish dancers offered places at RCS choose to study here. Some Scottish dancers decline an offer of a place.

Information requested by the committee:

- data on the number of Scottish applicants and granted places over the past 10 years;
- data on awarded places over the past 10 years broken down by Scottish, rUK and international students;

	Scot	RUK	Non-UK
2009	5	5	5
2010	5	10	0
2011	5	0	5
2012	5	0	5
2013	5	5	0
2014	5	5	0
2015	0	5	0
2016	5	5	5
2017	5	5	5
2018	5	5	5

2019	5	5	5
2020	5	10	5
2021	5	10	5
2022	5	5	5

1. The challenges faced by the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in awarding places to students from Scotland:

The Modern Ballet Programme at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland is an internationally regarded training programme for dancers focused on graduating from the programme to a professional career in a modern ballet company setting. All dancers who apply for the programme undertake the same audition process. Dancers who are offered places must demonstrate a high-level combination of physical and artistic attributes. This combination is required for dancers who aim on graduation from the programme for a professional career in modern ballet and the programme itself is focused on preparing dancers to enter the profession on graduation.

RCS does not discourage dancers who are unsuccessful on their first attempt from reapplying. The ballet programme is also open to – and regularly does – recruit dancers who meet the required competencies and criteria to the second and, occasionally, third years of the programme. Dancers who are offered places on the programme come from a wide range of training backgrounds in Scotland, the UK and internationally. The Dance School of Scotland is one of a number of Scottish routes to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

2. How much of the Scottish Government’s funding is allocated to funding Scottish places.

All funded places for Scottish domiciled students to study at the Royal Conservatoire are allocated to the Conservatoire on an annual basis by the Scottish Funding Council.

These places are allocated to the Conservatoire as a total number which is then distributed across the two schools within the Conservatoire, the School of Music and the School of Drama, Dance, Production and Film

(DDPF). Within the overall funded numbers, RCS must factor in places for continuing students, as well as meet targets for SIMD 20 & 40 to support inclusion. In the distribution of places, the Conservatoire must also balance a range of artistic considerations in terms of ensembles and cohorts. This is particularly important in the School of Music in considering the constitution of instruments in chamber and larger orchestral groups, but also applies to the creation of optimum cohorts for learning and teaching purposes within the School of DDPF.

With regard specifically to the Modern Ballet Programme, there is no annual ascribed limit to the number of funded places for Scots. Indicative numbers at any time are based on previous experience of the number of Scots who meet the entry criteria, successfully audition, are offered and who have accepted places on the programme.

Petitioner submission of 30 March 2023

PE1982/D: Review funding arrangements for higher education to help ensure more funded places are available for Scottish ballet dancers at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

1. The respondent has claimed that my “assertion” that there is a “cap” in place, is false. However, this is contradicted by the very detail of their own records. As you can easily observe, there is not one instance in the ten-year record up to 2020 provided by them, where the number 5 has been exceeded. Also, to make matters worse, with the HESA system used, it can very well be considered that the number could be even as low as 3 students for each year intake. This, I am sad to say was indeed the numbers that I had received for year intake 2022 from unofficial sources prior to the petition.

Please see below.

HESA Services Standard Rounding Methodology:

All **numbers** are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5

Any number lower than 2.5 is rounded to 0

Halves are always rounded upwards (e.g. 2.5 is rounded to 5)

Percentages based on fewer than 22.5 individuals are suppressed

Averages based on 7 or fewer individuals are suppressed

The above requirements apply to headcounts, FPE and FTE data

Financial data is not rounded

2. The respondent then claims, as I would very well expect them to that:
“Entry to the programme is by audition and Scottish-domiciled dancers who have met the entry standards for the programme have been offered places.”

This will always be a “get-out of jail” clause for any subjective-based assessment which auditions inevitably are. In my original petition, all 5 of the previously mentioned dancers accepted to **Central School of Ballet in London**, regarded within the industry as at the very least as good a dance conservatoire, were also accepted without exception to multiple other Dance Schools. The anomaly in their success tally being R.C.S. where **not one** was accepted. Is R.C.S. then saying that only 3-5 students are up to standard of R.C.S. from the entirety of Scotland? Indeed, that **not one** of the best students that Scotland has to offer from, **The Dance School of Scotland**, the **only** government subsidised, full-time training school could not meet the entry standards for R.C.S. when 5 out of one particular year-group are currently studying at Central in London? Also, many others elsewhere at other institutions outside of Scotland at great personal cost to their families? Are we to accept this argument without question?

3. “Scottish dancers presenting for audition at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and who meet the required standard have been offered places.”

We cannot request proof of acceptances as it would infringe privacy. Therefore, we have to “accept” that the truth is being told regarding this. Again, I refer to those 5 candidates in particular, who clearly contradict this statement. To my knowledge there were no offers of acceptance and no rejections of such an offer to any of them.

I find the records of admissions supplied to you by RCS as very confusing. We can see that they claim that a total of 20 students were accepted onto the course in **only two years out of the last 10?** For all the remaining years they state that **only** between 5 and 15 students (HESA Methodology) have been accepted? With the exception of 2015 where **only 5** students in total were accepted. Then in 2011/2012 **only 10?**

As you may gather, I am not at all convinced by this response. Perhaps R.C.S. consider that any response and not a very credible one, is all that is needed to make this query go away?

I have also been supplied with the admissions figures from the last four years up to 2022 overlapping with the information you have received from RCS. It is again consistent with those supplied to the committee by R.C.S. and again displaying the **unwavering Scottish Domiciled student rate of “5”** which of course in their thinking is **“not a cap”**.

The committee including; Jackson Carlaw MSP, Fergus Ewing MSP and David Torrance MSP have stated that the Scottish Government provided funding for 30 Scottish students. With the consistency being illustrated here that a maximum of 5 Scottish Domiciled students have been accepted onto the course in any given year, we can only ascertain that something is very much amiss.