

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee  
Wednesday 25 September 2024  
14th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

## 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

### Introduction

**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>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 20 September 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.
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 a new written submission from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland which is 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 gave its initial response to the petition on 20 January 2023](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 325 signatures have been received on this petition.

### Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

**Clerks to the Committee**  
**September 2024**

## **Annexe A: Summary of petition**

**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**

21 November 2022

### **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 20 September 2023**

**The Convener:** The next petition is PE1982, which has been lodged by Gary McKay. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the funding that is provided to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and to help to enable more places to be made available to Scottish students who pursue ballet at that level. This is about funding from the Scottish Government—the Scottish taxpayer—for Scottish ballet.

The committee has received a response from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, which begins by challenging the petitioner's claim that there is a five-person cap on places for Scotland-domiciled dancers. The response explains that the figure 5 appears in data sets because standard rounding methodology has been used, whereby numbers have been rounded to the nearest five in order to avoid identifying individuals.

The conservatoire also challenges the petitioner's view that its process for awarding places discriminates against Scottish applicants, and states that Scottish dancers who present for audition and who meet the required standard have been offered places.

The petitioner's response highlights the subjective nature of auditions as a means of assessment and raises questions about five dancers who, he says, were rejected by the conservatoire despite having been offered places by a number of other dance schools.

I have to say that I found some of the responses that we have received quite intriguing. Do colleagues have any thoughts on the petition?

**Foyso Choudhury:** I am surprised to see that we have only five Scottish students in the years from 2009 to 2022. We should write to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland to find out the exact figure for how many Scottish students have received funding, and whether there is a cap. I know that the conservatoire is saying that there is no cap, but it is surprising that there are only five every year.

**Maurice Golden:** I am not clear about whether the rationale regarding the rounding to five or 10 is appropriate.

**The Convener:** I have to say to the Royal Conservatoire that I think that its response is disappointing. I felt almost as though it was designed on the basis that if we read it we would not take much more interest in the petition and we would be fobbed off with what, to my mind, is a very generalised and not terribly constructive response.

As I said, this is about funding—as the petitioner points out—that comes from the Scottish taxpayer and the Scottish Government. I think that the response that the RCS has given almost validates the concerns of the petitioner. It might well be that, in due course, we will take evidence on the petition if we do not get something slightly more satisfactory by way of a written response. Of course, in consequence

we will make our own recommendations to the Scottish Government in relation to Royal Conservatoire funding.

We will get back to the Royal Conservatoire, if members are content to do so. I found its argument to be odd. I presume that all the people within any aggregated number are receiving funding, so I am not quite sure what the confidentiality issue is. If everybody is getting it, who would we be naming in particular, in consequence? If that is an argument that the RCS wishes to maintain because it is bound by a protocol, at the very least it is perfectly possible for us to ask it how many Scotland-domiciled students in, say, the past five years aggregated, were offered places. That would allow sufficient anonymity for us to have a handle on the number who were involved and how many then took up the offer, in case there is variation in that respect.

**Foyso Choudhury:** We could ask how many applied for the funding as well.

**The Convener:** Yes, we could do three things: ask how many people applied, ask how many were offered places and ask how many took them up, aggregated in five-year increments. We might highlight that we were a bit disappointed with the response, that we take the petition very seriously and that it might well be that we will consider taking evidence on PE1982, before we make recommendations to the Government in relation to funding matters. Are we agreed?

**Members *indicated agreement.***

## Annexe C: Written submission

### Royal Conservatoire of Scotland submission of 6 November 2023

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

Thank you for your letter of 25 September 2023 and the opportunity to respond to the Committee.

The Committee has requested unrounded annual figures for each of the last 10 years showing how many Scottish-domiciled ballet students:

- applied to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland;
- were offered places; and
- took up the places offered

You will find this information in the annexe below.

In addition, I thought it would also be helpful to respond on a point-by-point basis to the further points raised by the Committee in its letter.

1. *The Committee reflected it was unclear as to the rationale for applying the HESA rounding methodology, expressing the view that using exact numbers 'didn't appear to carry any risk of allowing individuals to be identified'.*

As a Small Specialist Institution (SSI) the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland adheres to the HESA/JISC guidance regarding data rounding methodology. This guidance focuses on the 'Rounding Method' which applies the following processes to data or statistics relating to individuals:

- 0, 1, 2 are rounded to 0.
- All other numbers are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5.
- 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 relate to headcounts, FPE and FTE data.
- Financial data is not required to be rounded

We use the HESA Rounding Method because as an SSI with small overall numbers and, within that, small cohorts of students, there are concerns regarding their identification and aligned concerns of privacy and GDPR.

We believe these concerns hold with specific regard to this data, due to the interconnectivity of the ballet community in Scotland at this level.

- 2. The Committee felt that the application of this methodology to the table in the Conservatoire's previous submission 'made it difficult to understand how many places have been awarded to Scottish-domiciled students, compared with students from the rest of the UK (rUK) and international students'.*

On behalf of RCS, sincere apologies to the Committee for any difficulty they have had in understanding the data on awarding places on the BA Modern Ballet programme. For avoidance of doubt, Scots **do not** compete for places with either rUK or international students. Scots are viewed as an entirely separate category and audition only in a pool consisting of other Scottish applicants.

- 3. The Committee said it was 'unclear from the table whether the rounded figures apply to places on the BA Modern Ballet programme, or to dance more generally.'*

To confirm to the Committee, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland offers only **one** dance degree programme, the BA in Modern Ballet. There are no other dance degree programmes at RCS, so any and all figures presented apply **only** to the BA in Modern Ballet.

#### **Further points:**

We thought it helpful to offer the Committee the following additional points of information:

- The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland is pleased to note the increasing quality of Scottish applicants. We believe part of the reason for this is the development work undertaken by the conservatoire in partnership with Scottish Ballet. Over recent years, the focus on the development of the RCS Junior Conservatoire of Modern Ballet now allows us to offer weekly pre-vocational training in ballet for children from Primary 4 upwards in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Ayrshire. This complements the training delivered through Scottish Ballet's Associate programme. Alongside this, short intensive courses are now offered during the spring and summer holidays, to allow children to access specialist training to build the skills required for full-time training. There is good progress in the standards being achieved and recognition that this is a long-term investment in the training of young people who are aiming for a career as a professional dancer. These development pathways do not receive public funding and therefore rely on participants being able to self-fund. RCS has extremely limited bursary support available for individual students and is grateful to the Prince's Foundation which supports the delivery of an access programme in Ayrshire.
- As a result of the increasing quality of Scottish applicants, RCS has been able to make more offers to Scottish applicants
- Scottish applicants who have been declined at audition stage are declined because they have not yet reached the required standard. Declined Scottish applicants are encouraged to re-audition and some have been successful at second application. Tailored, individual support is offered to these students.

- The success of Scottish students who have graduated from the programme is wide-ranging, with graduates securing contracts with companies in the UK, Europe and beyond (including Scottish Ballet).

I hope this information is helpful to the Committee.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require further information.

**Annexe - BA Modern Ballet Applications**

Entry Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>Applications</b>										
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>186</b>
Scot	22	22	33	25	27	21	24	21	30	34
EU	19	31	23	22	34	28	36			
EUpB								18	4	4
RUK	36	85	64	66	72	67	78	92	93	103
IRpB								8	8	8
OS	15	17	12	30	32	30	27	32	32	34
<b>Offers</b>										
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>
Scot	5	2	9	9	7	6	8	9	4	9
EU	1	4	1	3	6	4	5			
EUpB										
RUK	8	10	13	8	18	17	27	29	22	21
IRpB								2		
OS	3	7	9	11	10	14	12	10	15	11
<b>Acceptances</b>										
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>28</b>
Scot	5	2	7	7	3	4	5	7	3	6
EU		3	1	3	4	3	3			
EUpB										
RUK	3	5	3	7	7	7	10	11	7	13
IRpB								2		
OS		3	5	7	6	10	8	4	11	9