

The Arts Educational School, Tring

Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

Inspection report

Provider reference

117618

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Main findings

Course:	Two-year National Certificate in Professional Dance
Overall effectiveness:	Good (grade 2)
Date of inspection:	14 March 2008

This feedback contains findings from the inspection visit. It draws on the evidence available from performance data, external and internal reviews, other available documentation and interviews held on the day.

The dance course was previously inspected by Ofsted in April 2004 when it was graded good (grade 2) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training, and outstanding (grade 1) for leadership and management.

Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that the standards of dance in classes and performances have been maintained at a very high level. The recent revalidation report judges the college to be 'a very good provider' and notes that the quality of work ranges 'from good to excellent'. Assessors observed 'a high level of professional expertise' amongst students, several of whom are assessed individually as outstanding.

Retention and success rates are outstanding. Over the last three years to 2006/07, over 90% of students who started the course completed it, and all of those achieved the qualification. The college keeps very good records of why a few students leave. Punctuality and attendance are outstanding.

Too few students gain employment in the performing arts profession when they leave. In 2007, less than half of those students who completed the course had secured professional contracts within six months of leaving the school. Several graduating students went on to take degree courses at university. Around a third of those who completed the professional national certificate at the school in 2007 won places at other professional training schools such as Rambert, London Contemporary Dance and English National Ballet, mostly on one year courses, to complete their dance training. They do

this because the school has not yet developed a strong, sustainable third year of training of its own. Many previous students who have followed this pattern of training have then successfully gained employment, but the school is only partially successful in tracking the employment histories of these students over several years and it is not possible to ascribe to what they owe their eventual success. Typical jobs that ex-students have secured over the past three years include joining ballet and contemporary companies, working on cruise ships and in commercial cabaret. Recent graduates have danced with the New York City Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet, Shanghai Ballet, New Adventures, Henri Oguike, and in the pre-West End national tour of *High School Musical*.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are outstanding and the quality of training very high. Students receive very close, individually tailored attention in lessons. They are set in classes according to ability in different dance styles, and so vigorously challenged to reach their full potential as performers. Technical dance skills are very precisely honed and students take much personal responsibility for their own development.

Assessment is rigorous and well structured. Students receive good, clear feedback on their work and have ample opportunity to discuss their progress with teachers and the course director. As a result of their assessments and the more formal reviews, they are set personal targets and expected to evaluate how well they have met them. Course tutorials monitor their progress effectively, but students place little value on the more general pastoral tutorial system run by the school.

As a direct result of the curriculum's unusual blend of professional training and additional academic study, mostly (but not all) allied to their training as dancers, students' experience is rich and varied and contributes to their good all-round employability in the performing arts world. They work very long days and a lot is demanded of them, but they thrive on these high expectations. Many develop into versatile, articulate and reflective practitioners who are able to act as eloquent advocates for their art. They acquire very good contextual knowledge and understanding of dance, and some awareness of how dancers might continue to earn a living when they stop dancing. They have good opportunities to exercise their choreographic skills. The school's effective programme of outreach work enables them to encounter and generate dance in different social and cultural settings. Their personal confidence, emotional maturity and independence are nurtured well by the way their teachers treat them, but these qualities are somewhat compromised by a school climate that is over-protective of their social and personal lives.

Since almost all students are on a two year course, they are inadequately exposed to the practicalities of how to gain employment as dancers, and they

feel underprepared to seek work. The school does run audition workshops and showcases are held outside the school, but not enough time is spent preparing for auditions, showcasing talent, networking with agents and direct casting companies or giving advice and guidance on how to manage a dance career.

Students receive outstanding personal and academic support at the school and benefit from a very high level of care for their welfare. Pilates and stretching classes are available to help develop core strength and flexibility. There is good physiotherapy and injury support. Students with additional learning needs such as dyslexia are given excellent specialist support.

Leadership and management

The course is vigorously led and efficiently managed within the school. The course director has high ambitions and a clear vision for the course's future. A robust lesson observation programme is well used as part of a staff appraisal scheme to ensure that teachers are working to consistently high standards. Self assessment is thorough and evaluative and engages the full course team. It informs a continuous review of some elements of the provision, such as the balance between contemporary dance and other dance styles in the light of employment patterns. Quality assurance is generally effective, but the school has been slow to recognise the need to create a viable third year for the course in order to prepare students for direct entry to related employment without the need for further training elsewhere.

Teachers work very effectively as a team and share their ideas and approaches in an environment of mutual trust and respect for each other's specialist contributions to students' overall training. All teachers are fully trained as such as well as having professional experience as dancers and choreographers; many continue to teach at professional company level. In addition, the school offers students a wide range of visiting guest teachers and workshops. Links with professional companies and with some other professional dance training schools are good. Staff development is good and teachers have good opportunities both to further their own work as dance practitioners and to improve their work as teachers and tutors.

Students are listened to carefully and representatives have successfully discussed with teachers and the director a number of issues such as the provision of singing lessons. An exit questionnaire is used to gather the views of graduating students, but they are not asked to give their opinions in this way during the course.

Resources are adequate, but the school acknowledges that studio space and the theatre are too small for some work to be fully realised. Plans are well advanced for new studios and a new, larger theatre designed to house dance. Library and computer facilities are good.

Points for action

The school must:

- create a viable and sustainable third year to the course to obviate the need for some students to complete their training elsewhere
- increase the proportion of students who gain related employment shortly after leaving the school
- create more opportunities for performing and showcasing work, and expose students more to auditions, agents and companies in order to prepare them more fully for professional employment

Points for consideration

The school might usefully:

- consider ways of enabling students to exercise their independence and personal responsibility by increasing their social freedom
- explore further means by which the employment histories of students might be more comprehensively tracked and recorded over a longer period of time
- review the nature and impact of the school's pastoral tutorial system for students on the professional dance course