

Stella Mann College of Performing Arts

Inspection of colleges participating in the Dance and Drama Award scheme

Unique reference number: 54611
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Information about the college

1. Stella Mann College of Performing Arts is a private college training students for employment in the musical theatre and dance industry. The college runs a three-year course in musical theatre and dance and in their third year students choose to study one of two national diplomas awarded by Trinity College, London: the national diploma in professional musical theatre or the national diploma in professional dance. The college is accredited by the National Council for Dance Education and Training.
2. The college is based in Bedford and attracts students from across the country. There are currently 111 students enrolled on the course, of whom 38 are in receipt of dance and drama awards (DaDA) funded by the Young People's Learning Agency.

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 3
Capacity to improve	Grade 3

Overall effectiveness

3. Stella Mann College of Performing Arts is a satisfactory college with satisfactory capacity for further improvement. The college enables the large majority of students to complete the course and pass the diploma, but student retention has been declining over the last three cohorts of students, ranging from 81% in 2008 to 63% in 2010. Leaders have analysed why retention has been falling over three years and raising retention for the course is a key priority for the college. The majority of students reach a satisfactory level of performance in musical theatre and dance, with a few achieving a good standard of work.
4. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. There is some good and outstanding teaching but leaders have accurately judged that there is further work to be done to secure greater consistency in the quality of teaching. Too much didactic teaching limits students' opportunity to be self-critical and evaluate each others' work. There is a strong emphasis on setting high standards of personal presentation and punctuality in all lessons. This helps students learn the industry values and helps them to approach their careers with maturity and a good awareness of professional expectations.
5. The curriculum provision is good and well balanced with classes in a range of genres and styles in both dance and singing. The acting strand warrants further development to give students the chance to work through more script-based work complemented by devised work.

6. Leadership and management are satisfactory and the college is steadily tightening quality assurance systems to drive improvement; but the impact of this work in raising standards has not moved forward sufficiently well since the last inspection. The college's self-assessment report does not provide robust evaluation of the quality of outcomes for students. Grades in the report are over-generous. The Principal and Deputy Principal undertake regular lesson observations which help provide focused feedback to staff about the quality of teaching. The evaluation of student progress is less secure and does not give staff a clear insight into how to plan learning that will improve the progress of every student.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What students like:

- good levels of care, guidance and support and the warm community spirit at the college
- the professional insight of teachers and guest artists who bring sound understanding of industry practice and of how the musical theatre and dance industries are changing in the current economic climate
- the sound advice received in year one for diet and nutrition which gives a solid foundation for their training
- the openness of leaders to listen to feedback from students and where possible accommodate requests from students to improve the teaching and course content
- the integrated professional studies programme that enables students to develop critical reflection skills in their written work, place their training in a clear contextual understanding and, as third year students, learn how to develop a professional portfolio and market themselves with agencies.

What students would like to see improved:

- greater opportunity to develop their singing skills through more one-to-one tuition
- stability in the timetable to reduce changes in the scheduling of classes, which students consider as too frequent
- more opportunity to undertake body-conditioning work such as Pilates to complement both their dance work and build upon the health-related fitness work from the first year of the course.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- the helpfulness of leaders in communicating with employers and a willingness to work with agencies to fully support students in audition preparation
- being invited regularly to watch student classes and performances
- the professional attitude of students to their training and their dedication to working hard to secure employment in the profession

- students' willingness to seek advice and guidance from experienced professionals who visit the college
- the maturity and knowledge of students in lessons when taught by guest artists.

What employers would like to see improved:

- no recommendations for improvement were received from employers.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 3

7. Since the last inspection the Principal and Deputy Principal have successfully responded to two of the three areas for improvement raised at the last inspection. A tutorial system is now in place and feedback from students helps inform the monitoring of academic progress and personal development. Leaders have enabled an increased number of staff to work towards a teaching qualification. The third area for improvement raised at the previous inspection has been partially remedied. A new learning support assistant has been appointed and is helping students to improve their written work. Staff have received effective training in helping them to work with students who have visual or hearing impairments. However, the college has not yet put in place adequate support for students with learning needs such as dyslexia.
8. The cycle of target-setting, monitoring and course review is under-developed and does not involve staff on a regular basis. Outcomes from useful quality assurance measures such as staff and student surveys, tracking of graduate destinations, progress and attainment data and outcomes from lesson observations, are not evaluated to assess trends and set improvement targets. The self-assessment report overstates grades because judgements are not rooted sufficiently well in evaluation. However, the self-assessment report clearly illustrates a sharper focus on efforts to raise the quality of teaching and learning.
9. The last inspection report indicated the need for the college to devolve aspects of course leadership to middle managers. Two staff have been appointed as heads of year to lead tutorials and meet with senior leaders to review student feedback. The majority of the leadership work in running the college, leading quality assurance and writing policy and leading staff development still rests too heavily with senior leaders. There is still insufficient accountability for standards of work of both staff and students at course team level.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 3

10. Over the last three years only 76% of students have completed the training programme. Those who left the course did so for health, financial or personal

reasons or to pursue training for a different type of career. Several could not cope with the demands of the training. Most students achieve a satisfactory standard by the end of the three-year course and a minority achieve a high standard. Almost all students who finish the course attain the Trinity diploma in professional dance or musical theatre.

11. Reports produced by Trinity College, London show that the standard of work has varied over the last three years and reports identify very few students who have reached an outstanding level. Inspectors found that standards in lessons vary. In some lessons teachers use a good range of technical vocabulary and imagery to enable students to improve. However, in satisfactory lessons students receive insufficient guidance on how to improve the quality of their work. For example, staff provide very few suggestions to students about how to improve phrasing and dynamics in dance sequences or how to improve diction in their singing work. Students have a clear understanding of the high professional standard to which they aspire but the quality of teaching does not consistently support students in achieving such standards.
12. Most students say they enjoy the course and are stretched to achieve their best in lessons. A very large majority of students chose to study at the college because of the supportive and caring college environment which they say was immediately apparent from their audition days. They feel safe at the college and safe practice in studios is generally good. In some lessons there was a physical warm-up but no vocal warm-up. Students have a good understanding of diet and health from the core module in the first year, and students feel they can always seek additional guidance about injury recovery and health issues.
13. In 2008 all graduates gained employment in the industry within six months of graduating from the programme. In 2009 this figure dropped to 87%. At the time of the inspection 62% of graduates from 2010 had secured work since completing their course. Students enjoy a range of jobs including cruise ship work, national tours, and contemporary dance work; and a few obtain West End contracts. However, a rising percentage are securing work in modelling, film or television work, routes which are not necessarily outcomes of dance or musical theatre training.

The quality of provision

Grade 3

14. Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall; however, there is too much inconsistency in the quality and consistency of teaching across the college. Teachers bring a wealth of professional industrial experience, enthusiasm and knowledge to their teaching. The best lessons are characterised by energetic pace, good use of probing questioning and detailed feedback. These lessons provide challenging activities targeted to the ability of the individual that help to motivate students, enabling them to make good progress. In other lessons the work is often over-reliant on teacher-led learning, predominantly taught from one place in the studio. Teachers do not consistently give personalised feedback, thereby failing to stretch all students. Students do not receive sufficiently clear strategies for improvement. Teachers make little use of peer

evaluation to watch and critique each others' work. The use of information and communication technology is underdeveloped in most lessons.

15. Teachers manage student assessment well. Leaders help staff to review their assessment and marking criteria annually. The end of term and end of year assessments are jointly marked by two staff, successfully moderating the marks awarded. However, on occasions marking is too generous and leaders accept that more standardisation is needed to benchmark levels of attainment against professional standards and criteria for each assessment. The tracking of student progress is satisfactory. Students find the new tutorial system helpful in reviewing their progress with their tutors. Students like setting their own targets and are required to write short action plans to set out how they can improve their work. Students' written work shows a good level of critique through technique logs, research about the history of dance and musical theatre and through reviews of performances they have seen. Teachers make too little use of progress data from assessment to plan lessons in line with the students' personal target-setting.
16. The curriculum is inclusive and gives students good opportunity to develop performance skills in acting, singing, dance and audition preparation. This is enhanced by the thorough integrated professional studies programme. The broad range of dance genres taught helps students consolidate core skills in dance in preparation for musical theatre repertoire. Students receive clear guidance in course handbooks about the progression through each year of the programme. The curriculum is enhanced by sessions with guest agents who lead audition-style classes, providing good insight into the expectations of casting directors. On occasions rehearsals and guest lectures hamper the smooth running of the main curriculum. Whilst leaders try to minimise changes, students are acutely aware that this affects their ability to prepare for lessons.
17. The quality of care, guidance and support is good, enabling students to feel safe and very well looked after. New students settle in quickly and are supported by students from other year groups. The majority of students appreciate time devoted to pastoral tutorials which help them deal with health and welfare issues. They are confident that any kind of bullying is not tolerated and that if any incident occurs, leaders deal with it quickly. Leaders carefully record injuries and how well students are recovering so that teachers understand any limitations that affect student work in lessons.

Leadership and management

Grade 3

18. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Leaders are ambitious in their vision for the college and communicate this regularly to staff. Teachers have a clear understanding of the outcomes of student assessment and regularly receive updates about destinations of former graduates. However, there is no annual review or action plan for each discipline to help raise standards and inform how teaching teams adjust their curriculum planning year-on-year. Discussions take place in staff meetings but decisions are not captured through a detailed annual action plan. A brief action plan for this year is in place but this

is not derived from a formal course review and is not supported by operational plans for subject departments. Leaders acknowledge the need for a strategic plan to set clear objectives underpinned by rigorous analysis of outcomes for all students. Leaders do not assess or report on the achievement of students by their ethnicity or gender, or on the achievement of students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

19. Leaders encourage staff to obtain a recognised teaching qualification and undertake professional development opportunities such as directing work. Leaders emphasise the development of all teachers as a key priority for the college.
20. The promotion of safeguarding is good and the college meets statutory requirements. Implementation of policy is managed diligently and staff receive sound training in protecting young people and how to share any concerns they have. Students feel safe and the student handbook includes good guidance about health and safety and promoting equality and diversity. The grievance procedure is clear for students, but because students feel listened to and know they can raise concerns with the Principal, it is very rare that any issue remains unresolved.
21. Equality and diversity are promoted very well through the college's work to attract students from minority ethnic groups, students from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college successfully enrolls and supports students with visual and hearing impairments; such students make progress comparable to their peers in most areas of their work. Recent equality and diversity training has helped staff understand current legislation and what it means for their work with young people.
22. Links with employers, partnerships with agencies and use of leading national practitioners are satisfactory in supporting the curriculum. However, the views and ideas of the industry are not used by leaders to evaluate the course and make changes responsive to industry need.
23. The college provides satisfactory value for money.

What does Stella Mann College of performing Arts need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that the recruitment, selection and retention of students rigorously focus upon aptitude for the course and the financial position of non-funded students prior to enrolment. Enable all staff to provide increased personalised support for students at risk of leaving the course.
- Raise the quality of teaching and learning so that all lessons are good or outstanding by sharing best practice across the college, and as a result increase the proportion of students who attain an outstanding level of work by the end of the course.

- Enable all teachers to plan lessons that consistently stretch the capabilities of all students by making better use of data about students' progress and targets.
- Increase the leadership capacity at the college by reviewing how best to devolve leadership responsibility so that middle leaders have a greater role in evaluating the college's work and driving improvement.
- Develop quality assurance processes and ensure they are used to raise standards across the college.
- Further develop partnerships with industry professionals to capture and respond to their recommendations.

Information about the inspection

24. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the school's Deputy Principal, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report, comments from the qualification awarding body, the previous inspection report, and data on students and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
25. Inspectors observed lessons, including some joint observations with both the Principal and Deputy Principal. The lead inspector met with groups of first, second and third year students to gather their views and also met with a group of staff, including a visiting agent who works with third-year students on audition preparation. Inspectors considered the views of employers and views expressed in recent student surveys.

Record of main findings			
Provider name	Stella Man Performing Arts College Ltd	Inspection number	364502
Learning types:16-18 learner responsive: FE full-time course.			

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall
Approximate number of enrolled learners at the time of inspection	
Full-time learners	111
Part-time learners	0
Overall effectiveness	3
Capacity to improve	3
Outcomes for learners	3
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	3
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	3
How well do learners progress?	3
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2
How safe do learners feel?	2
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	2
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	-
Quality of provision	3
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	3
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	3
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2
Leadership and management	3
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	3
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	-
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	3
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	3

*where applicable to the type of provision

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