

# Bird College

Inspection of colleges participating in the Dance and Drama Award scheme

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**Unique reference number:** 50701

**Name of lead inspector:** Joanna Beckford-Hall HMI

**Last day of inspection:** 2 May 2012

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## Information about the school

1. Bird College is a private college training students for employment in the musical theatre industry. The college runs the three-year diploma in professional musical theatre awarded by Trinity College, London. The college is accredited by the Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET).
2. The college is located in Sidcup, Kent and attracts students from across the United Kingdom and often internationally. There are currently 163 students enrolled on the three year course, of whom 128 (79%) are in receipt of dance and drama awards (DaDAs) funded by the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA).

## Summary report

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

<b>Overall effectiveness of provision</b>	<b>Grade 2</b>
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<b>Capacity to improve</b>	<b>Grade 2</b>
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## Overall effectiveness

3. Bird College is a good college and senior and middle leaders demonstrate good capacity for further sustained improvement. Most students complete their course and over the past three years 100% of the students who began the third year of the programme passed the diploma. However, retention of students and success rates have declined since the previous inspection. The college continues to produce mostly good, and some outstanding, musical theatre performers each year. Despite this, the percentage gaining employment within six months of graduating is more variable than at the time of the previous inspection. On average across three years to 2011/12, around 70% of graduates gained employment within six months. Detailed evaluation of graduate progression in the industry over time is limited because leaders have yet to produce targeted alumni tracking data and use this to evaluate the impact of the training on entry to and progression in the musical theatre industry.
4. Students enjoy their training and comment positively about the level of challenge they receive. Individual abilities are quickly identified at audition and their potential stretched in a supportive manner. Care, guidance and support are outstanding and students receive considered individual support to help them overcome barriers to their learning such as health, financial or personal issues.
5. The combination of a good curriculum, good teaching, outstanding pastoral care and good work by all leaders enables almost all students to make at least good progress in all aspects of the 'triple threat' training and a few make outstanding progress. Teaching is good and often inspiring because teachers bring their wealth of professional experience to the heart of their teaching, and are quickly

able to explain repertoire they have performed nationally and internationally. The large majority of staff have a formally recognised teaching qualification. They plan lessons that effectively combine work on technical skill, artistry and discussion of theory such as anatomy of the voice and stylistic features of choreographers and master works which shape the history of musical theatre.

6. The college is well led and managed by the senior leaders and board of directors. The principal shares her vision for the college clearly with staff. The rationale for recently revised roles and responsibilities is communicated effectively. The need to establish more accountability for planning and teaching to continually drive up standards and compete in the sector is explained thoroughly in the business plan. The restructuring of the senior leadership team with a newly appointed assistant principal in April 2012, is welcomed by staff and middle leaders who recognise that new roles give greater capacity to work together to further improve outcomes for all students.

### **Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors**

#### **What students like:**

- good and occasionally outstanding teaching and learning that stretches students' ability
- a good 'triple threat' curriculum devoted to mastering high levels of technical skills as well as artistry
- outstanding pastoral support to help students deal with personal concerns and health or financial matters affecting their training
- excellent guidance for staying safe at college
- leaders' responsiveness to ideas from students, and their willingness to listen to opinions about the quality of the musical theatre course.

#### **What students would like to see improved:**

- a few students wish for longer breaks between classes if they have to move sites, to be able to have time to rest and undertake deep stretching work after a strenuous class
- more time allocated to acting and singing classes.

### **Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors**

#### **What employers like:**

- the good attitudes of students, their very strong work ethic and their understanding of professional conduct
- highly responsive graduates who are willing to listen and learn
- high quality graduates entirely ready to join the musical theatre industry with a deep understanding of their craft.

#### **What employers would like to see improved:**

- there were no recommendations for improvement from employers.

## Main inspection report

### Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

7. Outcomes for students are good and senior and middle leaders show good capacity to lead improvements at Bird College. The redesign of the leadership structure over the past 18 months shows great insight about how the new roles can best serve the aims of the 5-year business plan. Since the previous inspection leaders have sustained a tight focus on ensuring the curriculum is responsive to industry trends and that the reputation of the college in producing good and some outstanding performers remains. Employers continue to recognise and value the college's high calibre graduates who are well trained for the industry.
8. Evaluation of teaching and learning quality and scrutiny of the impact of the curriculum on outcomes over time are at a relatively early stage under new management structures. Leaders have much improved the system of formal lesson observations with a clear grading scale to help staff know their strengths and areas for development. External training is developing the practice of lesson observations and coaching models across the college, however, it is too early to judge the impact of this work at department level.

### Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

9. Most students complete their training and achieve the diploma in professional musical theatre. Of those students who completed the diploma course in the past three years, 100% passed and achieved the qualification. After some variability across the past three years, retention is now showing an improving trend and is at 90% for the current Year 3 cohort. Leaders work hard to support students who are at risk of leaving the course because of illness or personal circumstances. Students who defer and rejoin the course receive excellent guidance to help them successfully complete their training.
10. Most students attain a good standard of performance work by the end of the course with increasing quality across each aspect of the 'triple threat'. In particular, students attain a very good dance skills, a feature of the colleges' work that remains very much part of its reputation. Recent Trinity College, London reports comment on high standards of performance work with sophisticated tap technique and highly creative choreography for contemporary and tap sequences to stretch students' abilities. Students have good physicality in convincing fight scenes for productions such as *West Side Story*. Reports comment favourably about most students' vocal ability, with convincing and credible accents, clear diction and for some students, though not all, a good vocal range. Most display good comedic skills and can sustain characterisation in productions such as *Hello Dolly* and are confident in partnering work for both song and lifting work. Ensemble work is well executed and inspectors observed teachers carefully tutoring students to use their voices appropriately in the upper register, ensuring that upper belt is not restricted by tension in the torso.

11. The percentage of Bird College graduates securing employment within six months of graduation has averaged around 70% since the previous inspection. Over three years the percentage of graduates who currently remain in employment in the musical theatre industry is between 74% and 92%. Senior leaders rightly acknowledge that a greater investment of time is needed to help students who find it difficult to secure performance work immediately after graduation. Graduate destinations show that students are employed in work ranging from mainstream dance companies such as Random Dance and performing in work by Matthew Bourne, to commercial dance work, touring companies and West End musical roles. Graduates often secure work in leading shows West End shows such as *42nd Street*, *Mama Mia* and *Dirty Dancing*. Students attain work in the commercial dance sector such as in *The X Factor* and dancing for artists such as Cheryl Cole. Some pursue careers in repertory theatre and cruise ship work.
12. Excellent guidance for hydration, nutrition and warming up and cooling down the body and voice is well integrated into the course. Students understand well the need to hydrate frequently and are diligent in layering clothing before moving between classes and teaching sites. They are well attuned to injury prevention and treatment but a few students express some concern about limitations of 15 minute intervals between classes. Leaders are acutely aware of this and are currently remodelling the teaching timetable to better structure the college day, responding to students' ideas.
13. Staff do their utmost to ensure protection of students from harm. Students feel safe at the college and are highly complimentary about excellent guidance from the local police about staying safe locally. Students are confident that staff monitor security at each teaching location.
14. Staff set high expectations of all students for attendance, punctuality and conduct. Students understand very well that the standard of professional etiquette they learn from Year 1 supports them well in preparing for professional auditions in Year 3 and upon graduation. The college provides good preparation for students' future economic well-being. The professional employment skills unit helps students understand the nuances of casting auditions and how to write appropriate letters and curriculum vitae to agents. However, the quality of written evidence in the third year work is variable. Students undertake independent research for final year projects and devise professional portfolios from lectures and workshops, frequently with key industry professionals, but some written work does not go beyond information from sessions and lacks depth of critical reflection.

## **The quality of provision**

## **Grade 2**

15. The quality of teaching is typically good. Inspectors also observed a few outstanding lessons. The upholding of, and respect for, exemplary professional conduct underpins effective student and teacher working relationships in lessons. Good teaching at Bird College is characterised by high quality technical

training with good attention paid to equipping students with core skills in singing and dancing, so they can perform with good stamina and vocal clarity. Students are adept at linking their technical knowledge and skills across disciplines, for example studying breath and control in dance classes and then transferring this to singing work.

16. Inspectors observed students working with high levels of discipline, focus and integrity, enjoying being encouraged to ask questions during lessons. In an outstanding lesson training students in falsetto and speech quality, the fast paced exchange of feedback from the teacher and students led to quick consolidation and improvement in work, so that outstanding progress was made. By contrast, in some lessons, too much teacher talk slows the learning and the momentum to push students through repetition of sequences to achieve higher quality, can stall.
17. In good lessons the pace of learning is swift and challenging. The blend of technical training, performance values and awareness of staging and understanding of casting are used effectively to train the whole performer. Teachers frequently link musical theatre repertoire to particular staging in the West End or internationally and most teachers draw out stylistic features linked to historical trends or contemporary practice. This helps students develop a comprehensive understanding of triple threat, instead of approach their studies as separate disciplines.
18. While teaching is typically good there are missed opportunities in planning to use formative assessment to adapt pace, content and level of demand to students' personal targets. Some teaching is overly reliant on didactic strategies, limiting students' ability to self-assess or peer critique the class work. The strategies to involve students who are observing lessons because of injury requires improvement so that their learning is equally challenged as those participating in practical activities. Some students exhibit good skills as reflective practitioners but others are less confident in assessing their own development. Limited marking-up of lyric sheets, scores and texts, and limited use of information, communication and technology (ICT) in lessons, prohibits opportunities for students to capture useful feedback to be reviewed after lessons.
19. The curriculum is good and the course structure successfully develops technical skills units from the first to the third year in dance, acting and singing with additional professional study of music theory, history of the musical, and fitness, health and safety. Students receive a concise course handbook that guides them through progression in learning outcomes and content. The lack of a bibliography for each unit means that students are not guided to key texts to support reading around the unit. The curriculum offers good breadth but a minority of students confirm there is a need to ensure a more equal allocation of study time for singing and acting classes. The currency of the genres and styles that students learn prepare them well for diverse expectations at casting auditions.

20. Unit outlines give a good overview of assessment with explicit weighting of examinations, performances and new criteria devoted to professional conduct, team and leadership skills, attendance and commitment to study. Staff use criterion-referenced marking well in termly assessments to test students' technique and performance quality. Students appreciate individual tutorials to receive feedback and set ambitious targets for their development. Targets are always precise and students know their strengths and areas for development in all disciplines. Students are less secure in understanding how to improve their written work.
21. Tracking of progress over time through formative assessment requires greater detail from initial baseline assessment at enrolment to judge students' potential and examine progress over three years. Teachers use students' individual targets to inform their lesson planning with variable success, and some planning does not challenge the more able students sufficiently.
22. Outstanding partnership work enriches the student experience. The inclusion of agents, casting directors and leading performers in delivering classes and mock auditions brings students into contact with significant industry talent. Students have many opportunities take part in performances as part of the college programme and enjoy the chance to be involved with fundraising events. The leadership team rightly prioritises links with the musical theatre industry, and actively seeks out well-qualified teachers and industry practitioners to teach on the course.
23. Excellent team work by college staff is the cornerstone of outstanding care and support. The college physiotherapist maintains detailed records of injury treatment and efficiently disseminates information about rehabilitation to teachers, keeping staff updated in supporting students back to full fitness. Students with vocal problems are referred to experts at vocal clinics for diagnosis and treatment with good success. Leaders have identified a need to better analyse trends in injury rates, types of injury and length of treatment and to use this information with staff in reviewing practice. The learning support for students who speak English as an additional language and those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities is better coordinated across the college than at the previous inspection. Investment in additional support and whole staff training for learning needs such as dyslexia and medical needs such as sight or hearing impairments, is raising awareness of how best to support students in lessons.

## **Leadership and management**

## **Grade 2**

24. Leadership and management are good. The principal is visionary and highly ambitious for staff and students. Since the previous inspection she has carefully guided colleagues through changes in leadership and is effectively communicating the long term vision for the college, pending substantial capital investment in better premises. Senior leaders and the board of directors have made insightful changes to develop capacity in the the senior leadership team. Emerging impact shows in a tightening up of quality assurance work for

teaching and learning, a more focused appraisal system and greater clarity about lines of accountability within the academic and welfare teams.

25. Heads of department work well together as middle leaders, meeting often to assess students' progress and share teaching ideas. They frequently renew schemes of work, review resourcing for each discipline and ensure that teaching teams have the opportunity to make suggestions for lesson planning to keep lessons industry relevant. For example, the increased teaching of commercial jazz work has enabled several students recently to secure employment with leading choreographers for film and television. Teaching staff are well supported by heads of department. Email communication keeps everyone well informed about student and curriculum matters. Staff have great confidence in middle and senior leaders and feel that their views are valued in enhancing the provision at the college through the self-assessment process.
26. Senior leaders possess good understanding of the college's strengths and areas for development. The college graded its teaching and the impact on outcomes over time more generously than inspectors. The annual cycle of evaluation and action planning uses staff and student feedback effectively, and heads of department are involved in strategic decision making to inform annual priorities agreed with the board of directors. The self-assessment report explains the impact of partnership work both through the leadership of the local authority music service and through outreach work, but is not sufficiently robust in evaluating progress and summative assessment data nor destinations and employment trends to establish the direct impact of the training course. A lack of annual reviews by each discipline and analysis of findings from formal lesson observations limits penetrating insight in evaluation and improvement planning at discipline level.
27. Senior leaders draw on feedback from the board of directors and staff contacts in the industry to informally gather views of the quality of graduates. This gives useful insight about how the quality of training continues to improve, for example, in the calibre of singing work. The low return in the employer survey initiated last year and the lack of systems for formally capturing and evaluating feedback from employers and industry figureheads, requires improvement.
28. Senior leaders rightly identify the need to improve processes for quality assuring teaching. External training for senior leaders is having good impact in helping them examine what constitutes good and outstanding teaching. Joint lesson moderation by senior leaders and training and moderation of middle leaders is at an early stage of development. The head of further education and the assistant and deputy principal are just starting to analyse findings from lesson observations to devise a composite picture of strengths and areas requiring development. Lesson observation uses graded criteria and staff are becoming more familiar with expectations for good and outstanding teaching, but a sharper focus upon the quality of students' achievements is needed to help teachers know how to accelerate students' progress by planning lessons that stretch different levels of ability.



29. The college's safeguarding procedures are outstanding. Excellent partnership work with the local authority ensures that staff are highly knowledgeable of statutory legislation. The deputy principal is rigorous in making sure that safer recruitment training courses are attended by senior staff and board members so that the very best practice operates at the college.
30. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Students enjoy a highly inclusive college environment and discriminatory incidents are very rare. The newly developed equality and diversity forum is evaluating the impact of the college's policies for staff and students and devising an action plan to monitor and develop recruitment of students from under-represented groups. Leaders track applications and enrolment by minority ethnic groups, but the analysis of destinations data by different categories of student is not reported on.
31. Value for money is good. Senior leaders work hard to manage the challenges the college faces with different teaching sites. The business plan sets out a clear vision for improving facilities, with recognition that the college is at capacity and has to expand in order to enrol more students and offer high specification training facilities. Recent investment in information communication and technology (ICT) is encouraging more students to use the designated resource base for independent study.

### **What does Bird College need to do to improve further?**

- Enable all leaders to analyse trends in quantitative and qualitative data to underpin evaluation and action planning that is directly linked to measurable outcomes for all students.
- Fully establish systems for tracking, collating and analysing alumni data to evaluate graduate employment and progression in the industry over time.
- Develop a system for formally capturing and evaluating feedback from employers as part of self-assessment and action planning.
- Develop leaders' capacity to quality assure teaching by observing lessons and coaching all staff in moving their teaching from good to outstanding, continually stretching students and raising achievement in lessons and over time.
- Enable all leaders to work with teachers in using a range of teaching methods that encourage independent learning and self-critique, peer assessment and purposeful peer feedback among students.
- Develop teachers' ability to give frequent, high quality feedback to students about their written work, especially in the third year, so that they understand what to improve and how, and can develop their research and literacy skills throughout training.

### **Information about the inspection**

32. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector assisted by the colleges' head of further education and the deputy principal as college nominees, carried out the inspection. Inspectors took account of the college's

self-assessment report, the previous inspection report, reports by the qualification awarding body, and data on students' achievement over the period since the previous inspection.

33. Inspectors observed lessons, some of which were jointly conducted with the head of further education and deputy principal. Inspectors used group interviews with students and staff and considered feedback from employers.

Record of main findings			
<b>Provider name</b>	<b>Bird College</b>	<b>Inspection number</b>	<b>387997</b>
<b>Learning types: 16-18 learner responsive: FE full-time.</b>			

Grades <b>using the 4 point scale</b> 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	<b>Overall</b>
<b>Approximate number of enrolled learners at the time of inspection</b> Full-time learners.	163
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Capacity to improve</b>	2
<b>Outcomes for learners</b>	<b>2</b>
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	2
How well do learners progress?	2
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2
How safe do learners feel?	1
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	1
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	NA
<b>Quality of provision</b>	<b>2</b>
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2
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?	1
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	1
<b>Leadership and management</b>	<b>2</b>
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	1
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	2
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	1
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?	2
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	2
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2

\*where applicable to the type of provision

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