

The Urdang Academy

Dance and drama school



Inspection dates

21–22 October 2015

Overall effectiveness

Outstanding

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Outcomes for learners

Outstanding

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Outstanding

Summary of key findings

This is an outstanding provider

- Staff provide outstanding all-round education and training in dance and musical theatre, resulting in students who successfully achieve their qualifications and progress into high-quality jobs in the performing arts industry.
- Students work exceptionally hard, demonstrate strong commitment and espouse the professional values and best practice promoted by the staff.
- Leaders successfully widen participation, promote diversity and break down cultural barriers, in particular by attracting significant funds to provide financial support to students who otherwise would not be able to afford to train.
- Leaders and managers have maintained the outstanding quality of provision since the last inspection, while redesigning the curriculum to ensure it continues to address comprehensively the needs of students and the industry.
- Leaders and managers ensure that staff plan and teach together frequently and share best practice through regular team teaching; this creates a synergy that maximises the expertise of the teaching team and helps maintain very high standards.
- Staff encourage students to prioritise their physical and emotional health and well-being, thereby ensuring they are able to commit fully to their training.

Full report

Information about the provider

- The Urdang Academy educates and trains students for employment in dance and musical theatre. It runs a range of courses, including a three-year degree, three-year diploma and foundation course in professional dance and musical theatre. This inspection focused solely on the diploma course whose students, on completion of their programme, achieve a level 6 qualification accredited by Trinity College, London.
- The academy is based in the old Finsbury Town Hall in Islington, with a second annexe nearby. At the time of inspection there were a total of 214 students enrolled on the diploma, of whom 76 were in receipt of Dance and Drama Awards (DaDA) funding from the Education Funding Agency (EFA).

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Leaders should continue to maximise the academy's capacity to provide targeted financial assistance to any student struggling with financial hardship.
- Governors should consider carefully the longer-term succession plans of the academy to ensure they have access to the appropriate skillset, both of governors and leaders, to safeguard the high quality of leadership across the organisation.
- Implement fully and consistently the new procedures to raise attendance.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding

- Leaders and managers strongly promote the vision of the school's founder, to break down cultural barriers, encourage individuality and widen participation in the vocational training of young performers in dance and musical theatre. The school recruits students from many ethnic heritages. All students receive very high quality training, and respond very well to the exacting standards and professionalism that staff expect from them.
- Staff work very hard and ensure that the school successfully fulfils its mission of supporting and enabling students to achieve suitable work in the industry.
- Leaders provide significant autonomy to the heads of department. These managers work very closely together, maintaining and improving the quality of provision in their respective areas. For example, they have recently redesigned the curriculum into four different course pathways. This has helped improve the quality and range of the provision. It has also enabled students to specialise in those areas where they have the greatest talent, while also developing their potential in a broad cross-section of other skills and disciplines. These curriculum changes were, in part, in response to requests from students who recognise and appreciate the improved opportunities that the new model has provided for them.
- Leaders and managers maintain a keen focus on assuring the very high quality of teaching, learning and assessment. All teachers regularly team teach with other members of staff and managers to help them develop their confidence, extend their insights and expertise in teaching and spread best practice. Leaders and managers use the lesson observation process well to support, develop and encourage teachers to continue focusing on how they might improve and develop as teachers. These strategies make a major contribution to maintaining the very high quality of teaching, learning and assessment.
- All full-time teachers have substantial experience of working as professionals in performing arts. In addition, most part-time teachers continue to work as practitioners and performers. Teachers are well trained and highly qualified. This blend of experience, training and qualifications of staff helps maintain the high-quality and strongly vocational focus across the academy.
- Students demonstrate complete commitment to their training. The training is physically very demanding, as well as being intellectually and emotionally absorbing. They work extremely hard, fulfilling the very high expectations placed on them by staff, and demonstrate a professional commitment to their courses.
- Leaders are particularly adept at generating significant funds each year to help provide financial support for students who would otherwise not be able to afford to attend the academy. They carefully target these funds at the most financially disadvantaged students. This has a significant impact on widening participation and promoting opportunities for all. This approach complements the strong sense across the academy of promoting a diverse student population and encourages a strong culture of respect and tolerance between students and staff.
- **The governance of the provider**
 - The academy has highly effective governance arrangements in place.
 - Non-executive governors work closely with the executive team, providing invaluable additional expertise, holding senior leaders to account and supporting them in maintaining the financial stability and very high standards across the academy.
 - The skillset of the governors is suitable for the core duties carried out by the board. The board is clear about the key challenges facing the organisation over the next few years and is putting strategies in place to address them. Governors have a pragmatic approach, and draw in additional specialist expertise to support the senior team and advise the board when required.
- **The arrangements for safeguarding are effective**
 - Staff and students feel safe in the academy. Good security arrangements are in place in the buildings. Staff and students are clear about maintaining a safe and healthy working environment.
 - Senior leaders have addressed recent legislative developments, and staff and students understand about British values, and how to recognise and prevent radicalisation and extremism.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding

- Teachers are highly experienced and have high expectations of their students. They motivate students through inspirational teaching; students respond enthusiastically, work hard, produce work of an excellent standard and progress well.

- The development of students' performance and employability skills is excellent. A very carefully planned curriculum supports individual students to achieve to their full potential and gain the full range of skills they will need for employment across a wide range of dance and musical theatre destinations.
- Students gain a wide variety of the high-level skills they require to work in musical theatre. Recent curriculum changes to the musical theatre training such as the introduction of individual singing lessons, mixed-discipline performance classes and the inclusion of text analysis within spoken voice classes is enabling students to gain higher-quality professional skills.
- High-quality performance and professional practice is a priority in all lessons. Students rise to the challenge, take ownership of their learning, take risks and enthusiastically and confidently display their newly acquired skills.
- Teachers challenge students very well, for example by using well-chosen searching questions that make students think hard and relate their theoretical and technical knowledge to the exercise or performance they are exploring. Through skilful use of peer assessment students develop essential critical analysis skills and develop their technical vocabulary and understanding. They respect each other's feedback and respond to it positively.
- Teachers identify students' initial skills at the beginning of their courses, enabling them to be placed appropriately on the most suitable programme of study. In the second and third years, students follow a more specialist pathway which ensures they are gaining the best range of skills they will need to realise their employment aspirations
- Students' acquisition of performance skills is excellent. Staff carry out well-planned and detailed assessment activities and provide detailed individual feedback to students following assessments. They support students to set and review meaningful targets which they work hard to achieve.
- Students regularly benefit from prompt, insightful feedback about their performances, both from teachers and from their peers.
- Student assignments and reflective journals are of a good standard. Teachers' feedback is detailed and clearly tells students how to improve both their written work and their technical skills. Teachers make suitable corrections to grammar and spelling mistakes. Learners value the feedback they receive and strive to develop their knowledge and skills further.
- Teachers fully support and integrate any students suffering from injury within lessons where appropriate. Students have good access to physiotherapy and medical support, which helps speed up their rehabilitation.
- The quality of studio spaces and resources around the academy is very high. The rich character of the old town hall building, and its location in the heart of Islington also adds significantly to the character and ethos of the academy and helps maintain its very close links with London's West End and theatreland.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is outstanding

- Students develop a positive attitude to learning and take pride in their performances and achievements. The academy's positive ethos and strong promotion of diversity helps students to develop the confidence and mutual respect they require to be active participants in lessons and to become high-quality performers.
- Students are articulate, self-confident and self-aware. Teachers and visiting industry professionals support and coach students to become independent learners, able to take full ownership of developing the performance and collaborative skills they will need to be successful professional actors, singers and dancers.
- Students benefit from excellent professional employment advice. Through a range of activities, they gain the knowledge and skills they require to engage successfully with agents, casting directors and a wide range of industry professionals. Students also obtain valuable practical understanding of how to manage their contracts and finances as professionals.
- Students take responsibility for their punctuality, attendance, professional dress and their own behaviour towards others. In the previous academic year attendance in a minority of lessons declined. Managers have taken action to raise expectations around attendance, and the new support and sanctions are starting to have a positive impact.
- Students have good access to appropriate pastoral care and support to help ensure their well-being throughout their programmes. Staff maintain good communication and close liaison with students through a regular tutorial programme.
- Staff teach students how to keep themselves physically and emotionally healthy; they can identify early signs of injury, which they act on swiftly and receive medical intervention, support or referral where necessary. Teachers promote students' understanding of how to maintain their vocal health well.

- Students frequently celebrate their achievements in lessons and have a positive regard for the skills, talents and opinions of others. They respect each other's views and the diverse community within which they are learning.

Outcomes for learners

are outstanding

- Students make outstanding progress in most lessons, and demonstrate substantial improvements and increased technical ability as they progress from year to year. Students acquire a very high level of skills from their courses, enabling them to perform with confidence and enthusiasm.
- At the beginning of the course, staff divide the students into different groups by ability. This helps ensure that all students make very good progress, relative to their skills on entry, and receive customised guidance that is most appropriate for their level of ability.
- Retention rates declined slightly in 2014/15, particularly for those students not in receipt of DaDA funding. Senior staff have analysed carefully the reasons for the early departure of each student who left the course prematurely. The overriding reason was that students not in receipt of funds of internal subsidy could not afford to carry on with their studies. Senior leaders continue to work hard to raise additional funds, and assist students with their financial situation, thereby helping to widen participation and raise retention rates.
- All students who complete the programme successfully achieve the diploma qualification.
- On completion of their diploma course, teachers support students well to secure an agent and progress into employment in the industry. A high proportion of students successfully acquire high-quality employment in a wide variety of different roles. The school tracks the career progress of many of its alumni, a significant majority of whom make very good progress with their careers and continue to acquire prestigious performance roles and significant contracts.

Provider details

Type of provider	Dance and drama school
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	200
Principal/CEO	Stephanie Pope
Website address	www.theurdangacademy.com

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)							44	32
	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
Number of learners aged 14–16								
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency (EFA)							

Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Peter Nelson, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Tricia Collis	Ofsted inspector
Wendy Gadian	Ofsted inspector

The above team was assisted by the college director, as nominee, and carried out the inspection at short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of students and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

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