

Bird College

Dance and drama college



Inspection dates

2–3 December 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

Good

Summary of key findings

This is an outstanding provider

- Senior leaders provide a clear and positive direction for the college that is widely shared by staff and learners.
- Learners develop a very broad range of industry-focused skills, which prepare them very well for employment. They make rapid progress from their starting points and become mature, thoughtful performers.
- Almost all learners achieve their diplomas, and most also gain additional employment-related qualifications during their time at the college.
- Senior leaders have worked very successfully to achieve a key strategic aim to relocate the college in a single campus, with excellent teaching accommodation and resources.
- Managers have been highly successful in dealing with all areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection; as a result, standards have improved and learners benefit from outstanding teaching and learning.
- Learners have excellent opportunities to contribute to the college's direction through their class representatives, frequent surveys and through representation on the college's board of directors.
- An employers' advisory panel, formed since the previous inspection, provides outstanding industry input to the college's curriculum and strategic direction, and ensures that learners are better prepared for employment.
- Managers have excellent arrangements in place to track the progression of graduates into employment and to monitor the employment status of former graduates.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Bird College is an independent college training learners for employment in the musical theatre industry. The college runs the three-year diploma in professional musical theatre awarded by Trinity College, London, for which learners can seek funding through dance and drama (DaDA) awards. The college is accredited by the Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET).
- The college is located at a new campus in Sidcup, Kent and attracts learners from across the United Kingdom and often internationally. There are currently 123 learners enrolled on the three-year course, of whom 107 are in receipt of DaDA awards, funded by the Education Funding Agency.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Increase the number of formal tutorial sessions for all learners, so that tutors can provide increased levels of feedback on academic and practical work, and monitor patterns of attendance more rigorously.
- Improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning observations by ensuring that observers focus and report more rigorously on student learning, and by ensuring that action plans resulting from observations are better focused on improvement, in addition to the sharing of good practice.
- Improve the wider benefits of the formal assessment process by giving learners access to film of assessment performances; ensure that the quality of such films is always sufficiently high for all learners to view their own performances and reflect on their skills.
- Ensure that staff receive further planned training in recognising the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism, and develop tutors' and learners' understanding of ways to explore British values through teaching and performance.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding

- Strategic leadership is excellent. Senior leaders provide clear and positive direction for the college, and are dedicated to ensuring that all learners can flourish and achieve their best. Staff are inspired by the quality of leadership and work energetically to improve their learners' skills. During the past year, senior leaders have realised a ten-year strategic aim to move the college to a single campus with very high-quality performance and academic learning resources. Staff and learners derive considerable benefit from the new campus and are enthused by the opportunities it offers.
- Staff at all levels of the college place a very strong emphasis on professional behaviour and practice. Senior staff, tutors and non-teaching staff maintain and model very high standards of behaviour for learners. Through the actions of leaders and staff, the college provides a welcoming, secure and supportive environment for learning, and learners value this highly.
- Senior leaders have worked very effectively to deal with areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection; almost all aspects of each recommendation have now been dealt with successfully. Leaders have made excellent progress in improving managers' capacity to collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative data about staff, learner and college performance. Managers now effectively analyse trends in data to underpin action planning that is directly linked to measurable outcomes for learners.
- Staff benefit from outstanding opportunities to develop their teaching and learning skills and professional expertise. Managers use the findings from their effective appraisals of the performance of individual teachers to create relevant programmes of staff development; these activities raise standards in the college and benefit both teachers and learners. Since the previous inspection, managers have successfully developed teachers' ability to give frequent, high-quality feedback to learners about their written work, so that learners can understand what to improve and how, and can develop their research and literacy skills throughout training.
- Arrangements to improve the quality of teaching and learning are effective, and teachers improve their practice as a result. However, aspects of the teaching and learning observation process require improvement to ensure maximum impact and benefit. In their commentaries on lessons, observers do not focus closely enough on students' learning, and action plans following observations do not focus on specific actions to deal with any areas for improvement, in addition to suggesting ways to share good practice.
- Leaders and managers have very successfully increased engagement with employers by creating an industry advisory group made up of agents, casting directors, choreographers and directors. The group provides a good range of constructive feedback to the artistic director/deputy principal at points throughout the year. Group members visit the college and attend performances frequently. Following discussions with the panel members, managers made changes to the curriculum that included the addition of a musical theatre technique course that helps learners develop a wider knowledge of musical theatre and a greater range of performance skills.
- **The governance of the provider**
 - The college has a board of directors and trustees, who oversee organisational finances and performance. The board members provide good levels of scrutiny, challenge and support for senior leaders.
 - In addition to their substantive posts, the principal/chief executive officer, the deputy principal/deputy CEO, and an assistant principal serve as executive directors of the college and trustees of the Doreen Bird Foundation, which is a registered charity. Two student representatives elected as board members make thoughtful and constructive contributions to business.
 - Monitoring and review meetings take place throughout the year, allowing staff and learners the opportunity to contribute to action plans and the self-assessment report.
- **The arrangements for safeguarding are effective**
 - Managers ensure all staff undergo suitable employment and vetting and barring checks before they begin teaching; staff accompany all visiting practitioners when they teach.
 - Staff, and governors, receive annual safeguarding training to ensure they understand their responsibilities under current legislation.
 - Directors receive a comprehensive safeguarding report at each meeting.
 - Suitable measures are in place to safeguard learners who are under 18 years of age
 - Managers have carried out a college risk assessment in response to 'Prevent' legislation, and have

drawn up a policy on protecting learners from the risks of radicalisation and extremism, which is currently awaiting board approval. Tutors have discussed ways to promote British values, but staff and learners have not yet received formal training in this area.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding

- The quality of teaching and learning is excellent; teachers' expectations of, and ambitions for, learners are very high. Learners' training prepares them well for the demands of the course and for working in the industry. For example, the technical language with which learners described their learning in a technical singing class showed very strong levels of anatomical and artistic understanding. This understanding then supported the learners in the class to produce a credible and safe belt sound. In a musical theatre workshop for first years, the teacher challenged learners with very difficult rhythms; they rose to the challenge by creating their own work within a selected style and framework.
- Learners make clear progress during lessons, and they reflect well on the skills they develop each day. Tutors drive and support progress and are adept at recognising the improvements in learners' skills and technique during individual classes, and over each of the three years of training.
- Staff have a very good range of relevant qualifications and expert and extensive subject knowledge. During inspection, tutors managed high-quality, detailed, technical teaching and learning in dance, singing and acting classes. Learners value highly the fact that many staff are still working in the industry. Teachers make frequent relevant and helpful references to industry requirements during their teaching, and help secure learners' understanding of the challenges before them.
- Learners are strongly encouraged to question staff in order to deepen their understanding of technique and commercial expectations. In an acting class, for example, learners were enthusiastically questioning their teacher about what would happen in a casting for a commercial; the tutor showed detailed knowledge and advanced learners' understanding by relating examples based on first-hand experience. Managers maintain a policy of work sharing and an open-door policy allowing staff to peer observe frequently and benefit by witnessing work in disciplines outside their own. As a result, teachers make very effective use of cross-disciplinary references to aid students' learning and ability to develop a wide-ranging understanding of the industry.
- Assessment is timely and informative and feedback is extensive. Teachers complete feedback forms in a very detailed manner, and usually outline clear targets for improvement. They give assessment feedback promptly so that learners may reflect on the improvements needed in time for their next lesson or project. Teachers' comments are constructive and clear; learners comment very positively on the levels of detail and challenge in their feedback from tutors. However, in a small minority of classes, teachers do not always challenge the learning of the most-able students adequately in feedback and assessment.
- The filming of assessments requires improvement to ensure that learners and staff derive maximum benefit from the process. Staff do not routinely give learners a chance to review and analyse their performances on film while reading their tutors' feedback on performance. In addition, the variable quality of filming means that not all learners are visible throughout all assessment footage. Second-year acting assessment films, for example, did not give a useful reflection of all learners' performances because sound was poor and the learners' acting skills poorly captured. However, in acting for camera classes learners receive very good tuition in working with and for the camera.
- Learners and tutors use formal tutorials very effectively to discuss their feedback, and learners are also encouraged to see heads of department should they need more clarification on where they need to progress to next to further their careers. Learners currently receive a great deal of useful informal tutorial support, but do not receive a sufficient number of formal tutorials during which they can review targets and plan next steps in learning.
- Excellent new accommodation enhances the student experience and provides very high-quality learning environments. Dance and drama studios provide industry-standard teaching and rehearsal spaces. The new accommodation is clean and airy and studios are a good size. The addition of an outside area adjacent to studios provides opportunity to work in a more challenging environment; learners have expressed a wish to have performances outside, expanding their experience in performance spaces. Teaching and learning resources are substantial and very effectively support students' learning. The library has a very good stock of industry-relevant books and journals, and the learners have access to music scores online. The college also has good links to other institutions' resource centres; for example the Laban Centre, Roehampton University and the Royal Academy of Dance.
- Staff are fully aware of individual learners' needs, plan well, and make suitable adjustments to their courses to ensure each learner can flourish. Learners benefit from additional classes in subject areas of their choice to allow them to focus on the elements of performance that interest them most, or in which

they need most support. Specific learning needs are acknowledged well; for example, in a singing class handouts were prepared in different coloured paper so that all learners could choose their preferred learning colour. In a repertory class, the tutor showed great sensitivity about finding individual ways for the learners to release the tension in the abdomen that comes with being a dancer.

- Teachers reinforce the use of technical language as a central part of their teaching, preparing learners well for work with directors, agents and choreographers in the industry. In health and fitness sessions, learners use anatomical terms well and show clear understanding of their application.
- Injured learners are very effectively included in the learning process and given meaningful tasks supporting the learning of their peers. Teachers maintain a clear expectation that any injured learners will feed back to other learners on their progress and performance in aspects of classes, and make clear notes on the work that is being explored in that class. One learner spoke of having been included on the panel of a mock audition when injured and confirmed how helpful that had been.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

is outstanding

- Learners are confident and self-assured in their work. They also take on very high levels of responsibility for their own learning. All learners pay close attention to not only the standards of their own work but also those of their peers. Injured learners know that teachers expect them to feed back in class on what they are witnessing; this is helpful to other learners, as well as keeping them actively engaged with the learning process.
- Teachers encourage well-managed and supportive discussion of areas of strength and difficulty for learners. For example, in acting classes, learners acknowledged openly the difficulty of performing in front of their peers but also analysed the value of this, in terms of confidence-building and dealing with pressure.
- Learners are professional in their behaviour and appearance both in and out of the classroom. When moving between buildings, they conduct themselves in a mature manner and are courteous and helpful to one another, as well as visitors and staff. They are punctual in their attendance to classes and dress appropriately, though individually, for the activity they are undertaking.
- Learners benefit from extensive opportunities for external work experience and gain from this a clear understanding of the expectations of the industry. Learners appreciate very highly the performance opportunities outside the school for which they can audition. In the third year, learners receive very good support in preparing for professional auditions; they reflect well on how useful the experience is in highlighting what skills and techniques they still need to refine.
- Learners receive excellent tuition in techniques to develop and maintain their health and fitness. They benefit from clear and useful classes in anatomy and understanding injury, and carry out projects on nutrition and food planning. The gymnasium is well equipped and learners benefit from the support of one full-time and one part-time physiotherapist. Staff maintain clear and effective tracking systems for learners who have sustained injuries and are undergoing physio or other therapies. Therapy staff communicate on a daily basis with all staff, providing detailed information about individual learners' recovery progress.
- Learners feel safe and encouraged to raise concerns with staff both formally and informally. Arrangements to encourage and gather learner views are highly effective, with good representation of learner views at both class and board level. Managers have made constructive changes to the curriculum in response to learners' comments and requests. Learners feel that staff genuinely care about their problems and are not just 'going through the motions' of listening; they feel very well supported in both personal and course-related matters. In addition to gymnasium and physiotherapy facilities, a college 'well-being block' also houses a confidential professional counselling service, and learners are clearly directed to seek help when required.
- Learners exhibit a caring attitude toward their peers and tutors, and have an appreciation of the care shown to them by staff. During inspection, learners commented on the closeness of the student body across the whole college and expressed an appreciation of each other's support.

Outcomes for learners

are outstanding

- Learners make outstanding progress relative to their starting points on the programme. They receive excellent support from staff to rapidly develop positive professional behaviour, a good work ethic and strong vocational ambitions. Learners have an excellent understanding of the industry, and of the work they need to complete to pursue successful careers.
- Pass rates for the diploma programme are outstanding. Since well before the previous inspection, achievement rates for those who stay on the programme have been at or very close to 100%. Learners are given very high levels of support to achieve at the highest level possible, with ambitious learner targets for diploma achievement set each year based on initial assessment of learners' skills.
- The proportion of learners gaining high-quality sustainable employment in theatre or related industries has increased considerably since the previous inspection, and is now outstanding. The vast majority of graduates have been successful in finding employment in the industry within three months of graduation; only a small number are still auditioning or unable to gain employment in their chosen field after this time, and these few are then employed in other fields. A very high proportion of learners have been successful in gaining external agency representation. All graduates from the college benefit from free access to classes in the years after they leave, so that they can maintain and further hone their skills and technique.
- Since the previous inspection, managers have made very significant improvements to the ways in which they gather information about the progression of learners into employment; these arrangements are now outstanding. Senior managers now have detailed and reliable data about the progression and employment status of graduates at six-, 12-, 24- and 36-month points beyond graduation. Managers use this information well to monitor curriculum effectiveness and to enhance the employability of current learners.
- Retention rates for current third- and second-year learners are very good, with a very high proportion of learners completing their programmes. Retention of first-year learners is excellent. Retention of third-year learners declined during 2014/15; managers carefully monitored and investigated the reasons for withdrawals, which were mainly because of illness or financial difficulties. A good range of measures is in place to monitor and secure improved retention for current learners.
- During their courses, learners develop very valuable industry-relevant skills, and excellent personal and social skills. They behave very well around the college and in the immediate neighbourhood, and project the college's values of respect, professionalism and courtesy. A very high proportion of learners achieve additional industry-relevant qualifications that increase their employability and ability to sustain self-employment as dance, fitness or drama teachers.

Provider details

Type of provider	Dance and drama college
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	129
Principal/CEO	Shirley Coen
Website address	http://bird-college.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)								123
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	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

Richard Beynon, lead inspector

Tracy Collier

Her Majesty's Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the assistant principal, 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 learners 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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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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