

The Oxford School of Drama

Dance and drama school

Inspection dates

14–15 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

- Managers and tutors design a curriculum that provides significant challenge and sets very high professional standards and expectations of students, who respond positively and enthusiastically and make outstanding progress.
- Outstanding teaching, learning and assessment, delivered by a highly skilled and experienced team of tutors and theatre professionals, ensure students make excellent progress.
- Students develop exceptional performance skills; internationally renowned performing arts practitioners and theatre and casting directors recognise and acknowledge the high quality of students graduating from the school.
- On completing their training, all students successfully achieve their diplomas and most progress into high-quality sustained employment.
- School leaders closely monitor the quality of courses; they use feedback from staff and students well to identify any emerging weaknesses and tackle these quickly.
- School leaders have successfully maintained the outstanding level of provision since the last inspection.

Full report

Information about the provider

- The Oxford School of Drama is a private drama school and registered charity which trains students to progress directly into employment as actors and performers. It runs a three-year level 6 diploma course and a one-year level 5 course in professional acting, validated by Trinity College, London. The school also offers a six-month self-accredited foundation course in acting.
- The school is based in Woodstock, near Oxford, and attracts students from across the country. At the time of inspection there were 76 students enrolled at the school, of whom 42 were in receipt of Dance and Drama Awards (DaDA) funding from the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and 10 students receive 24+ advanced learning loans from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA).

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Improve the size and quality of communal spaces for students and staff.
- Expand the capacity of the board of trustees to deal with the ever-changing strategic challenges that the school faces over the longer term, and ensure that managers continue to maintain the quality of provision as these challenges arise.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding

- Leaders, managers and trustees all ensure that the school achieves its aim of providing strongly vocational training in acting and equipping students to deal with the challenges of working in the industry.
- In recruiting its students, managers select and recruit only those who demonstrate natural aptitude and the ability to cope with the rigours of a very physical, emotionally demanding and intellectually challenging course. Staff place very high expectations on the students in their approach to attendance and punctuality, level of engagement, attitude and behaviour towards their training. Students react very positively to these expectations and demonstrate exemplary behaviour towards their studies.
- The small staff team work very closely to plan and deliver an innovative and stimulating programme which challenges all students to develop and achieve the highest standards. In addition to regular formal and informal planning meetings, tutors also take part in annual 'retreats' at which they shape the curriculum and develop a common approach to high-quality teaching and assessment of the courses.
- The school's Principal leads by example, teaching a substantial number of hours and playing an active part in assessing and supporting the work of other tutors through regular team-teaching initiatives.
- In selecting and scheduling tutors, managers maintain a good blend between using highly experienced full-time tutors, all of whom have substantial industry expertise, and freelance practitioners who bring a wealth of creative ideas and insights to the teaching team.
- Managers operate highly effective quality assurance procedures, which have ensured that the quality of provision has remained consistently high since the last inspection. Staff and students play an active and constructive role in quality assurance, thereby helping to ensure that the course meets the needs and interests of learners and the expectations of the industry.
- Managers and tutors design the course carefully to provide a suitable blend of instruction and performance. In their final term, third-year students and students on the one-year programme relocate to London. This enables them to be closer to potential employment opportunities and agents, and to broaden their experience by working in London-based venues. This approach contributes to the very high progression rates of students to employment on graduating from the course.
- **The governance of the provider**
 - Trustees provide invaluable support to the smooth running of the school by taking an active role in determining its educational and artistic character.
 - Trustees also play a key role in maintaining an overview of the quality of provision across the school and act as critical friends and supporters to senior leaders.
 - Trustees are taking seriously their critical role in managing the longer-term succession planning process for the school. They have accurately identified the need to extend the range of skills of the board to help with this stage of the school's evolution.
- **The arrangements for safeguarding are effective**
 - Managers have suitable procedures in place to help ensure that students feel safe around the school.
 - Staff ensure that students appreciate and adhere to the school's commitment to preventing bullying and discrimination. Staff also promote fundamental British values and understand how to protect students from radicalisation and extremism.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding

- Tutors set very high expectations that ensure students fully commit themselves to training to become professional actors. Students understand fully what tutors expect of them and apply themselves to their studies with rigour, intelligence and much enthusiasm.
- Tutors are expert in their subjects, often charismatic and able to develop themes and ideas with spontaneity and assurance. Students admire and respond well to their tutors and make consistently good progress.
- Tutors choose texts for performance that provide excellent opportunities for students to extend their skills. For example, third-year students were able to explore the communicative effect of using eyes, bodies and voice to convey the rich verse drama of the fallen angel in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.
- Where appropriate, tutors use technology well. For example, students were taught how to perform

audition monologues to camera, which teachers could then send via the internet to casting directors in the USA.

- Classrooms, studios and the theatre are designed and built to a high specification. They are highly suited to the broad range of practical creative activities that take place. The students' common room and staff rooms are adequate, although slightly cramped during breaks and lunchtimes.
- Students make very good progress and incrementally develop secure performance skills. Tutors clearly define the different expectations between first- and final-year students' attainment.
- Tutors track and assess students' development regularly, providing valuable feedback and recommendations for improvement. For example, respected guest directors have complete creative freedom with regard to interpretation and staging a production; however, they must consider and integrate into their guidance to performers the judgements of the specialist heads of acting, movement and voice, who observe individual students' progress in rehearsals.
- Students demonstrate excellent study skills. In all lessons they are rapt and attentive, noting key points as they arise. In all practical classes and rehearsals they are fully prepared and 'off book' early in the production process, having learned their parts effectively.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare are outstanding

- Students wholeheartedly reflect the high expectations of staff regarding attire, attendance, punctuality, hair and the wearing of jewellery and make-up. They fully recognise the considerable demands of the profession and the requirement to behave properly. Attitudes to learning and the pride they take in their work are exemplary.
- Students' high levels of commitment enable them to see themselves as trainee professionals, and their attitude is that of a member of a theatre company. Students are hugely respectful of each other in lessons and sensitive to the needs of fellow students. For example, in one movement lesson, male and female students were exploring physically and without embarrassment the emotional tensions within a speech from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.
- Students critique the work of their peers fairly and politely, and support each other with the utmost respect and care. For example, in a rehearsal of Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*, students uncovered invaluable dramatic and emotional insights into the play through improvisation, which required strong mutual support from tutors and fellow students for those moved by discoveries within the play's subtext.
- Tutors prepare students well for their next stage. Industry professionals are able to assess students' employment potential through a structured and timely series of high-profile 'showcase' performances.
- Tutors emphasise the use of correct spelling, punctuation and grammar in self-publicity materials and also help students to appreciate the importance of basic numeracy to self-employed practitioners.
- Students value greatly their regular tutorials. Through initial screening, tutors identify individual health needs and provide suitable advice concerning healthy eating and nutrition. At the beginning of each day, students attend a rigorous body-conditioning class which helps them prepare fully for their specialist studies.

Outcomes for learners are outstanding

- Tutors are able to be highly selective when recruiting students, with around 1,000 applicants each year for around 40 places. Consequently, successful applicants exhibit significant innate talent and potential, and staff work hard to ensure that these students realise their potential.
- During their study, students make outstanding progress and produce performance work that demonstrates a well-developed understanding of theory, as well as high-level practical skills, for example vocal, movement, improvisational and interpretive skills. Over the course of their programme, students make very good progress and continue to develop their skills to become powerful performers. By the end of their courses, students' work fully meets professional industry standards.
- Almost all students continue to the end of their course. All students who successfully complete their programme achieve their Trinity diplomas; no differences in achievement rates exist for particular groups of students when analysed by gender, ethnicity or any additional learning needs.
- Staff support and develop students exceptionally well to help maximise their chances of progressing to high-quality employment. As a core component to their course, students acquire important work-related knowledge and a broad range of skills, such as preparing for auditions, acquiring and working with

theatre agents and casting directors, networking skills and how to work as a freelancer.

- A very high proportion of graduates successfully progress into high-quality employment in the industry very soon after completing their diploma courses. Staff continue to help, support and encourage alumni, and closely track their progress. Many former students maintain a close affiliation to the school and, on occasion, visit the school to share their experiences and insights with current students.

Provider details

Type of provider	Dance and drama school
Age range of learners	18+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	76
Principal/CEO	George Peck
Website address	www.oxforddrama.ac.uk

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)								76
	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

Chris Young

Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the executive 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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