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The Urdang Academy 

ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

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Inspection Report

Audience
Post-sixteen

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Basic information about the school

Name of school:	The Urdang Academy
Type of school:	Dance and musical theatre school
Managing Director:	Solange Goumain
Address of school:	20–22 Shelton Street Covent Garden London WC2H 9JJ
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Name of reporting inspector:	David Hornbrook HMI
Dates of inspection:	10–13 October 2005 and 17 January 2006

Part A: Summary

Information about the school

The Urdang Academy was established in 1970 by Leonie Urdang and moved to its present location in a converted warehouse in London's Covent Garden, in 1978. Originally a ballet school, the academy now aims to prepare students for a wide range of work in musical theatre and dance. In 2006, the academy plans to move to the old Finsbury Town Hall in Rosebery Avenue.

There are 192 students enrolled on the three-year performers' diploma course. Some 29 students out of 79 in the first year of the course, 32 out of 62 in the second year and 29 out of 51 in the third year are in receipt of Department for Education and Skills (DfES) dance and drama awards. All students take the national diploma in professional musical theatre.

The founder's daughter is the managing director and major shareholder and she is supported by a management team of five senior staff. Some 4 of the 20 teachers and 3 of the 6 administrators are full time. There are seven part-time musicians and accompanists.

The Urdang Academy was last inspected in September 2002 and was graded 2 for the provision and 2 for leadership and management.

Following the inspection in October 2005, the leadership and management of the college was reinspected in January 2006 to assess the progress made on a number of management issues since the original inspection. This report, therefore, reflects the quality of provision as it was when inspectors visited in 2005 and the quality of leadership and management following the reinspection in 2006.

How effective is the school?

Key strengths

- good and very good teaching
- the contextual studies programme
- teaching of singing
- success in securing new accommodation
- strong administrative support
- successful initiatives to broaden the balance of the intake.

What should be improved

- class sizes to enable better feedback to students
- the professional attitude of students
- clarity and effectiveness of senior management arrangements

Further aspects of provision requiring improvement are identified in the sections on individual subjects and courses in the full report.

Students' views of the school

Students' views of the school were taken into account and are summarised below.

What students like about the school

- the easy relationship between teachers and students
- the pastoral care
- the variety of the course
- the community spirit.

What they feel could be improved

- the quality of the accommodation
- the addition of a fourth year for male students
- the introduction of an agency for in-programme work.

Part B: The three-year performers' diploma course

Inspectors judged the provision to be good (grade 2)

Strengths

- good teaching
- teachers' professional and academic knowledge
- the contextual studies programme
- training in singing
- pastoral care.

Weaknesses

- large class sizes
- lack of professionalism among some students.

Scope of provision

1. In its mission, the academy states that it strives 'to develop the individual student's ability and talent to their full potential and to equip them with the relevant skills to meet the needs of today's entertainment industry'. The core subjects of the performers' diploma course are ballet, jazz dance, singing and acting. Supporting subjects include contemporary dance, tap, musical repertoire, body conditioning, and voice work. Contextual studies are a major element of the programme and include theatre, musical and dance history, ballet theory, anatomy and stagecraft. Third-year students have an additional programme of career studies which includes mock auditions, talks from agents and casting directors and support with the preparation of photographs and curriculum vitae. The college does not have its own performance space, but public performances for invited agents and casting directors take place in a central London theatre in the students' third year. As well as the national diploma, students may take additional classes leading to dance teaching qualifications.

Achievement and standards

2. The standard of the students' work in classes is good overall. Most are competent all rounders, happily combining the three core disciplines of dance, drama and singing. For example, in one musical theatre class, students demonstrated the ability to pick up a complex movement phrase and quickly incorporate lyrics that they had only just mastered. Students' background knowledge is good and the quality of their written work is exemplary. In one jazz dance class, where students were learning a routine from *Chicago*, they were already very familiar with the relevant dance style before beginning to learn any steps. Standards of singing are particularly good. Students have thorough technical understanding and place their voices well. In most classes, students obviously enjoy

singing, feel confident of their abilities and are able to bring artistic depth to their performance. The standard of students' dancing is satisfactory, although they are more confident with rehearsed dance movement phrases than with unrehearsed exercises that are more technically demanding. During exercises that build strength and coordination, their work sometimes lacks conviction. In ballet classes, students are attentive and very hard working. Students perform well on stage; show recordings reveal a polished delivery and young performers with a good command of a range of techniques. In many classes, students display a lack of professionalism by arriving late, not dressing appropriately or lacking focus and concentration; and in singing, because of slack posture, their voices tire easily.

3. The retention rate has been rising steadily over recent years and is now slightly over 90%. From the information available, the proportion getting suitable jobs in the entertainment industry has declined since the last inspection. About three students gain employment in the West End each year and five join regional or fringe companies. A small proportion work in film, television, cruise ships or cabaret. Of the students graduating in 2004 nearly half have either changed careers, are unemployed or their employment is unknown.

Quality of education and training

4. Nearly all teaching is good or better. Teachers have a supportive friendly approach towards their students. Classes are well planned. Teachers are very knowledgeable and experienced and routinely contextualise the work by giving it a suitable professional reference. Lessons are well structured and teaching is well matched to students' ability. In the best lessons, great attention is given to technical detail and the demands made on the students are rigorous. In these lessons, the students' work was noticeably more focused and they made better progress. Ballet is taught very effectively and safely; acting and voice classes are taught with enthusiasm. In singing lessons, teachers often inspire students with their own high levels of vocal performance. They also use vivid imagery to illustrate points. In one lesson, a teacher described the words in a phrase as a group of jellyfish, quickly enabling the students to realise what effect was required. Contextual studies are very well taught. Teachers are unable to give individual corrections because classes in all subjects are often very large and some students do not fully engage with their learning.

5. The curriculum is well designed and the timetable allows for suitable breaks between each lesson. Because teachers realise that large class sizes can have a negative impact on learning, some have chosen to split their classes in two, reducing students' contact time. Contextual studies are taken very seriously and the contextual studies curriculum is very well developed and an example of good practice.

6. Teachers are all very experienced and have good, up-to-date professional knowledge. Visiting professionals working in the industry provide workshops and help keep students up to date with current trends. Studios are of an appropriate

size. Since the last inspection, the school has acquired additional studio accommodation nearby for third-year students. Students have access to six dance and drama studios, four singing studios, a gymnasium and a library and lecture room. Information and communication technology resources have improved since the last inspection, and are now adequate. The library is good with additional recorded material for the video library.

7. The audition procedure is fair, robust, clearly documented and accompanied by an appropriate complaints procedure. All applicants are auditioned and judged by their potential rather than their level of skill. Applicants present a song and a modern monologue. They take part in ballet, jazz and musical theatre classes and have a full physical examination. Records are kept of each audition, although comments are sometimes brief.

8. Pastoral care is very good. There is a strong sense of community and caring within the school. The school has a list of carefully vetted hostels, for example, and students maintain a notice board that advertises other accommodation. The principal makes herself easily available for student with problems. Students have weekly 30-minute group tutorials, although individual tutorials are only available on request. There is good language support for foreign students who have difficulties with English. Students are tested for additional learning support needs when they audition. A liaison officer helps students with financial difficulties.

9. The injury treatment system is good. Since the last inspection a treatment manager, who is a qualified masseur and aroma therapist, has been appointed, and effective systems are in place to monitor students' injuries and manage their rehabilitation. The school now offers a separate treatment room with a hydraulic physiotherapy bed. A physiotherapist also visits the school once a week and subsidised massage is available three days a week.

10. The assessment process is good. Students are assessed in technique classes once a year. In contextual studies, they are assessed more regularly and also sit written examinations. Alternative procedures for examination are available for students with learning and/or language difficulties. All performances are assessed both internally and by an external moderator. Feedback is given in written and verbal form. Assessments are recorded electronically and used to help students recognise their strengths and weaknesses. At the end of the spring term, each student's progress is discussed by the staff and the principal gives each student individual feedback. However, there is no systematic process of monitoring students' progress against individual targets to help ensure all students achieve their full potential.

11. Third-year students are taught well about working in the industry. The school does not encourage students actively to seek employment until they have graduated. However, agents are invited to, and many attend, third-year productions and in 2005, over half the graduating students secured agency representation.

Part C: Leadership and management

Inspectors judged leadership and management to be good (grade 2)

Strengths

- success in securing new accommodation
- strong administrative support
- quality of staff and student surveys
- successful initiatives to broaden the balance of the intake.

Weaknesses

- clarity of senior management arrangements

12. The academy has addressed most of the weaknesses identified at the time of the 2002 inspection. For example, sound proofing has been fitted in some studios. However, some weaknesses remain such as the large size of some classes. The academy has made changes to the management structure since 2002 to make better use of its senior team and is presently conducting an extensive review of management with the help of external consultants. It is too early to judge the outcomes of these developments. Staff are still unclear about key leadership roles in the emerging management structure which is designed to be in place when the academy moves to its new home in September 2006. Senior staff are open and approachable and communications within the academy have improved significantly. With the help of an external consultant, new job descriptions are being prepared for all managers. The new college administrator is proving highly effective in setting up suitable structures for the academy's operational management and quality assurance.

13. A board of directors constitutes the company and receives the audited accounts. The board meets monthly and oversees all financial matters including those relating to the forthcoming relocation. In addition to the managing director, there are four additional directors: the principal, who is also a shareholder, the college director/head of dance, the artistic director and a non-executive director. The directors, together with the accounts manager and college administrator, form the senior management team. Six heads of department manage the academy's programme. They meet weekly as do the senior management team. Meetings are effectively minuted with action points made clear.

14. There is a good balance between the continuity and stability provided by full-time teachers and the professional input of part-time and guest teachers. Staffing resources are effectively deployed. Teachers are appraised annually by a small internal team, but the outcomes are not yet detailed or consistent enough to inform a systematic programme of staff development. Some staff, on their own initiative, undertake courses and the college supports some financially.

15. The information provided for staff and students is good. The academy's mission and aims and objectives are clearly laid out in the staff handbook together with clear and comprehensive management policies and procedures for health and safety, student conduct and equality of opportunity. A carefully devised section on the curriculum outlines the principles which should inform teaching and learning at the academy; this is particularly useful for part-time teachers. Both staff and student handbooks contain a short learning contract summarising what students and staff might expect of each other. The academy's student health policy is particularly comprehensive and clear. In preparation for relocation, the academy's aims are being revised and its commitment to cross-cultural work and widening participation more clearly emphasised.

16. The academy continues to encourage a wide range of applicants. In the 'On the Road' programme, teachers travel to major cities in the United Kingdom offering classes and auditions, while an access and vacation training course continues to provide specialist coaching for students aged 15 or 16 who have the potential, but not yet the level of skills, to start professional training. As part of an initiative to recruit more young male dancers, the academy supports several of its students not in receipt of DfES awards with total or partial remission of their tuition fees. The academy monitors the ethnicity and gender of staff and students efficiently. At the time of the inspection, 18% of students in the first year were from minority ethnic groups and 26% of students were males, an increase in both categories since the last inspection.

17. The academy continues to evaluate its work in a number of ways. Staff and students are consulted comprehensively in annual surveys and the academy summarises the outcomes and identifies strengths and weaknesses conscientiously. In the summer, the senior management team and heads of departments meet to evaluate the previous year and discuss possible changes to the curriculum. Performance data on a range of topics are more plentiful than at the time of the last inspection. For example, the academy collates information about applications and retention rates and this information is discussed at senior management team meetings. Heads of department are not yet using this information sufficiently to inform their self-assessment judgements.

18. The academy has greatly improved its system for establishing and maintaining information about students' employment destinations. Past students are mailed twice a year and invited to let the academy know about their employment profile. At the same time, the academy pays year representatives from each graduating year to keep in contact with their fellow students. An interactive website, soon to be launched, will be a useful additional source of intelligence.

19. Departmental annual reviews inform an institutional self-assessment report, and although the reviews are generally more descriptive than analytical, they provide a useful focus for reflection. The most recent self-assessment report covers the calendar year 2005. It was put together after extensive consultation and is a robust account of the academy's strengths and weaknesses. An effective action plan

has been derived from it and some identified weaknesses, such as students' lack of professionalism, have already been tackled. Sensible quality assurance structures are now in place with a planned schedule of meetings and review points over the year. There is a business plan for the new building and a development plan which acknowledges the wider changes now afoot.

20. The academy manages its financial affairs efficiently and takes appropriate steps to secure value for money when purchasing supplies and services. The new building in Rosebery Avenue has the potential to improve immeasurably the academy's accommodation, including disabled access, and arrangements for its purchase have been managed effectively by the board.