



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE



Office for Standards
in Education

Short inspection report
Bird College
Dance & Drama College

Dates of inspection: 27 and 28 May 2004

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The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspects dance and drama colleges in receipt of awards allocated by the Department for Education and Skills.

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Reference:

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Basic information about the college

Name of college:	Bird College
Type of college:	Performing arts college
Chief Executive:	Susan Passmore
Address of college:	Birkbeck Centre Birkbeck Road Kent DA14 4DE
Telephone number:	020 8300 6004
Fax number:	020 8308 1370
Name of reporting inspector:	David Hornbrook HMI
Dates of inspection:	27 and 28 May 2004

Part A: Summary

Bird College is an independent, dance-based, performing arts college, founded in 1954, which is based at four sites in and around Sidcup, Kent, around 30 minutes by rail from central London. The college is a company limited by guarantee and wholly owned by a charity, the Doreen Bird Foundation.

Bird College offers a three-year professional dance and theatre arts course leading to the national diploma in music theatre, and some of the students are in receipt of financial awards from the Department for Education and Skills. The college also offers a degree course validated by the University of Greenwich.

At the time of the inspection in May 2004, 80 students were enrolled on the three-year diploma course. Some 25 students out of 27 in the first year of the course, 25 students out of 28 in the second year and 20 out of 25 in the third year were in receipt of Department for Education and Skills dance and drama awards.

There are nine full-time teachers, 12 part-time teachers and additional guest teachers working on the diploma course, supported by two full-time and four part-time administrative staff, and a part-time physiotherapist.

The last full inspection of the Bird College took place in June 2002, when achievement and standards, and the quality of education and training in dance and theatre performance were graded outstanding, and leadership and management were graded good. The June 2002 report can be downloaded from the OfSTED website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

On the basis of the short inspection carried out in May 2004, inspectors are satisfied that the outstanding standards reported at the last inspection have been maintained.

Part B: Leadership and management

Inspectors judged leadership and management to be outstanding (**Grade 1**)

Strengths

- strong leadership with a clear strategic vision
- very effective operational management
- outstanding staff development
- many improvements since the last inspection

Weaknesses

- no monitoring of equal opportunities
- too little use of data to inform planning

1. The college aims to provide students with opportunities to develop a range of high-level performance skills, and to use these in pursuit of professional excellence; it continues to be successful in this aim. Strategic aims are very clear, and managers and staff share a clear view of the nature of the training and of the college's role in preparing students for employment.

2. The course and the college continue to be led and managed very well. The governing body has been strengthened since the last inspection; six non-executive directors now supplement the chief executive and the finance director, and there are staff and student representatives. A number of governors' sub-committees oversee aspects of the college's work. Governors share responsibility for strategic planning with the chief executive, including major plans for the relocation of the college in Chatham. A small management team takes responsibility for operational matters; this is led by the chief executive, who is also the artistic director and is closely involved in monitoring the quality of the training. There are programme leaders for both the diploma and degree courses, and each major area of work, for example, ballet, has a subject leader. The college is working towards greater clarity in the management relationship between programme and subject leaders. The diploma programme leader provides effective leadership for the course team, monitors students' progress and directly oversees the delivery of the course. Overall, management arrangements are very effective, allowing the chief executive to carry out her strategic role while, at the same time, keeping herself informed about the students' progress.

3. Staff communicate effectively. There are regular meetings of staff at all levels. Heads of subjects and programme leaders meet weekly as a group with the chief executive; the programme board (diploma team) meets every term. Planning, quality assurance, and

students' welfare and progress are agenda items for the meetings of teachers in subject areas and for the meetings of the programme board; there are also meetings each term attended by all staff. The auditions panel, the committee for appeals over financial awards and the committee for appeals against assessment outcomes are formally constituted as part of the management structure. Grounds for appeal are clearly defined and disseminated. These arrangements protect the rights of students. The committee structure is well designed and works effectively.

4. The staff handbook contains policies for equality of opportunity and for the health and safety of students and employees. The college actively promotes equality of opportunity and is involved in activities aimed at widening participation in training for the performing arts. It runs short courses in the Easter and summer holidays for a variety of students, including some with learning difficulties. Some of these students consider training in performing arts and wish to improve their skills prior to an application. Such courses also provide valuable opportunities for college students to extend their expertise and experience by helping potential applicants to improve the standard of their work. However, although the gender and ethnicity of applicants and students are monitored, the college has still to establish procedures for monitoring progress in implementing its equal opportunities policies policy. A short disability statement makes clear the college's commitment to the appropriate treatment of applicants with disabilities. A disability access audit is being carried out in preparation for the creation of an action plan in line with the requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001.

5. The college continues to respond to concerns raised by the students. Students' views of the course are sought through annual questionnaires and there are student representatives at managers' meetings. Staff discuss concerns about the quality of aspects of the course at their meetings and take action to effect improvements. They are aware of, and seek to apply, high standards in professional training. Teachers observe each other's classes and provide informal feedback; training is programmed for summer 2004 to support heads of faculty in a more formal programme of lesson observation. A staff appraisal process, which encompasses both full and part-time members of staff, has been piloted since the last inspection. There are excellent opportunities for development for all staff. By the end of 2004, 19 staff will have gained certificates of education after participating in an ongoing course run at the site by Christ Church College, Canterbury. The college has also supported teachers on voice and Pilates training.

6. Quality assurance procedures have been significantly improved since the last inspection. Quality assurance is now a standing item on programme board meetings and a wide variety of student data are now readily available. For example, the reasons why a few students leave the course before completion are recorded, summarised and presented to managers. Destination data are recorded and charted in great detail, although the use of these data to identify trends and inform planning is underdeveloped. The self-assessment report sent to inspectors before the inspection was a full and informative document with narrative well-supported by charts. Strengths and weaknesses were clearly, and often accurately, identified, although the key section on achievement and standards lacked incisiveness.

Training is programmed for summer 2004 in order to help teachers review the work of subjects and participate more fully in the college's self-assessment process.

7. Managers work to an annual budget, approved by trustees, who receive three reports a year, including a financial report and a budget for the year ahead. The college now has a five-year financial plan, and detailed relocation costings based on a comprehensive feasibility study. The college manages its resources effectively and has reserve funds to protect it against unforeseen variations.

Notes