



ADULT LEARNING  
INSPECTORATE



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS  
IN EDUCATION

# BIRD COLLEGE

**Inspection of dance and drama schools in receipt of awards allocated by the  
Department for Education and Skills**

This inspection was carried out by OFSTED under section 62 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000. It was a joint inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI).

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# **BIRD COLLEGE INSPECTION REPORT**

**Inspection: June 2002**

## **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 Sidcup Kent DA14 4DE
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Name of reporting inspector:	Tim Clark HMI
Date of inspection:	June 2002

## **Contents**

	Page
<b>Part A: Summary</b>	1
<b>Part B: The professional dance (musical theatre) course</b>	3
<b>Scope of provision</b>	4
<b>Achievement and standards</b>	4
<b>Quality of education and training</b>	4
<b>Part C: Leadership and management</b>	7

## **Part A: Summary**

### **Information about the college**

Bird College is a dance-based performing arts college, founded in 1954, which is based at four sites in and around Sidcup, Kent, about 30 minutes by rail from central London. The college offers a three-year professional dance course leading to the national diploma in professional dance (music theatre) awarded by Trinity College, London, 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, there were 80 students on the three years of the diploma course.

The management team comprises the chief executive, the finance director and the programme leader. There are nine full-time teachers, nine 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.

### **How effective is the college?**

#### ***Key strengths***

- very good teaching
- well-planned provision
- disciplined and mature learners
- versatile and accomplished performances
- students' success at getting jobs
- highly effective leadership and management.

#### ***What should be improved?***

- the accommodation
- quality assurance arrangements.

**Students' views of the college**

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

***What students like about the college***

- the quality of the teaching
- the versatility of the training
- performance opportunities
- the positive and creative atmosphere
- the individual care they receive.

***What they feel could be improved***

- the changing rooms at Studio House
- the effectiveness of communications about timetabling arrangements
- the amount of singing teaching.

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## Part B: The professional dance (musical theatre) course

Inspectors judged the provision to be **outstanding (grade 1)**

They observed 17 classes, which were graded on a seven-point scale for teaching and learning.

### Summary of grades awarded to teaching and learning by inspectors

Grade	Teaching	Learning
1	5	2
2	8	7
3	3	8
4	1	0
5	0	0
6	0	0
7	0	0

*Key: The range of grades includes: excellent (grade 1), very good (2), good (3), satisfactory (4), unsatisfactory (5), poor (6) and very poor (7).*

### Strengths

- very good teaching
- well-planned curriculum and classes
- the discipline and maturity of the students
- strong ensemble work
- versatile performers who achieve high standards of work in rehearsal and performance
- high retention rates
- students' success at getting jobs.

### Weaknesses

- the dispersed nature of the accommodation
- the inadequate changing room facilities at Studio House.



**Scope of provision**

1. The three-year professional dance (musical theatre) course has ballet and jazz dance at its core, supported by tap and contemporary dance, acting and singing. There are classes in choreography, gymnastics and body conditioning, as well as contextual studies in musical theatre, music theory, dance history, and health and safety. The course aims to develop versatile and well-rounded artists for the profession.

**Achievements and standards**

2. The standard of the students' work is high in all areas of the course. Students are focused and disciplined; they have a professional attitude to classwork and performance. In one show rehearsal, for example, when the choreographer was otherwise occupied, a group of students quietly and effectively got on with refining and adjusting their collective spacing and arm positions. Jazz dance standards are high, which is fitting given the areas in which most students intend to find employment. Standards of work in ballet are also particularly high for a musical theatre course. The students' harmony work in singing is well developed by the end of the first year. In drama classes, students' willingness to take creative risks and to apply themselves to the task in hand results in much good work. Students are confident and accomplished performers. They work particularly well in ensembles. In one public performance, students performed confidently and showed a high level of spatial awareness and versatility in dealing with varied and demanding material. The college is successful in its aim of producing good company members.

3. Retention rates are very high for such a demanding course. Over four years they have risen from 72% to 85%. Students completing the course are successful in gaining the sort of employment they seek. Recent post-course destinations included musical theatre and commercial dance work on cruise ships, musical theatre tours in the United Kingdom and abroad, cabaret work and, in a few instances, direct entry to high profile West End musical productions.

**Quality of education and training**

4. Teaching across the different areas of the course is good and sometimes outstanding. Teachers set challenging objectives and demand a high level of skill in students' personal interpretations and performance. The well-planned classes allow time for individual corrections. In a jazz class, the students were intensely absorbed by the teacher's calm and apparently effortless direction. On a few occasions, teachers failed to address some students' needs effectively and relied too much on their own demonstrations. In addition to the core studies, supporting areas such as tap are well taught. In one singing class, the teacher successfully brought forward the vocal techniques of the warm-up into the harmony rehearsal that followed. Drama and voice technique are well taught and make a significant contribution to the musical theatre skills of the students.

5. The course is well designed. The timetable is weighted towards dance, in particular jazz and ballet. However, course elements are effectively integrated and students value secondary disciplines, such as contemporary dance, singing and acting. The well-designed curriculum and the consistent quality of the teaching across the course elements produce versatile performers. Students' training is further enriched by the college's productive link with Ravensbourne College, which gives the students experience of work for television and video.
6. There are good opportunities for students to undertake paid and unpaid work experience without disruption to their training. There is film-extra work and pop video work. There are also school projects at Easter; for instance, where a group of students travel to Manchester to work with disadvantaged children. In the second and third year, students can be selected for the Bird Theatre Company which, in recent years, has visited Vienna, Portugal, Singapore and New Zealand. Students regularly work with local children and produce joint performances. For all students there are at least two opportunities to perform in public each year, and to dance or show their own choreography to an in-house audience. The end-of-year show takes place in a West End theatre.
7. Auditions for entry to the course are thorough, with assessments in all major areas of the course. Candidates are given full opportunity to demonstrate their talents and there is an orthopaedic examination and a personal interview. A full and detailed record is kept of audition decisions. Over the past two years, the college has accepted between 10% and 15% of applicants. Students and parents are supplied with a list of checked and approved lodgings in the area. Induction is effective. Study skills are assessed as part of the induction programme. Sight-reading evenings have been developed to address common difficulties with reading that were identified in assessments. Other forms of additional support are available, but the college does not have a clearly defined procedure for identifying and supporting students with learning difficulties.
8. Weaknesses in guidance, monitoring and support arrangements identified during the last inspection have been addressed. The student handbook is helpful and informative. Health and safety, dietary matters and injury prevention are addressed by a comprehensive programme of studies. A part-time physiotherapist provides initial diagnosis and treatment of injuries, and monitors students' recovery. Pastoral support and personal guidance are available to students on demand from the teacher who acts as head of each year. Each student has an individual progress review twice a year with the programme leader. A record is made of the improvement targets agreed at these meetings.
9. Assessment criteria for all disciplines are rigorous and clear. Guidance following assessments has improved since the last inspection. Detailed, but informal guidance is given by subject teachers after each interim assessment. The individual guidance tutorials at the end of the year generate a written assessment, signed by student and teacher. Students are happy with the quality and nature of the guidance they receive.
10. Teachers turn their valuable and varied professional experience to good use in sustaining the standard and professional relevance of the training. Dance classes benefit from excellent musical accompaniment. Staff development opportunities are good. Many teachers are taking a further education teachers' training course, which has generated class observations, feedback and discussion. The quality of singing teaching has also benefited from staff development.
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11. Theatrical gymnastics are taught at the Bromley Valley Gymnastics Centre, with which the college enjoys a productive working relationship, and some classes are held at the Bexley Music Centre. Most classes, however, are taught at Studio House and the Birkbeck Centre. These two converted and extended Victorian houses generally provide adequate facilities, although the changing rooms at Birkbeck are inadequate for the numbers of students using them. The college does what it can to minimise the impact of working across four sites, but changing sites after strenuous exercise is less than ideal and, occasionally, there are also communication difficulties. The college has suitable information and communications technology facilities, and students make use of the Internet for their contextual work. There is a good collection of videos for viewing on site, and a diverse stock of books to support each major area of the course.

## Part C: Leadership and management

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

### Strengths

- success in realising the college's aims
- good leadership and very effective management
- strong committee structure
- highly effective team work by staff.

### Weaknesses

- incomplete arrangements for quality assurance
- no monitoring of the equal opportunities policy.

12. The course and the college are well led and well managed. 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 is successful in this aim. Managers and staff share a clear view of the nature of the training and of the college's role in preparing students for employment. They collaborate effectively to provide excellent training for students. The chief executive of the college is also the artistic director, and is, therefore, closely involved in monitoring the quality of the training. The programme leader provides leadership for the course team, monitors students' progress and directly oversees the delivery of the course. The finance director is the third member of the management team. These arrangements are well suited to a college with two distinct courses. They allow the chief executive to carry out her strategic role whilst keeping herself well informed about the students' progress. Each major area of the course, for example ballet, has a subject leader.

13. Staff communicate effectively. Arrangements for staff meetings were strengthened at the start of 2001. Planning, quality assurance, 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. Students' views are represented appropriately at meetings. 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. Staff find it difficult to sustain the regularity of meetings during preparations for shows. Nevertheless, the committee structure is well designed and works effectively.

14. The college is a company limited by guarantee and wholly owned by a charity, the Doreen Bird Foundation. There are five trustees. The founder of the college is a trustee and one of the three directors of the company. The college is seeking to appoint non-executive directors of the college to act as governors and to take responsibility for directly overseeing the college's development. The trustees receive three reports a year, including a financial report and a budget for the year ahead.

15. There are full and detailed policies for equality of opportunity and for the health and safety of students and employees. The college actively promotes equality of opportunity, but has yet to establish procedures for monitoring progress in implementing its policy. Arrangements for monitoring health and safety matters are better developed. The gender and ethnicity of applicants and students is monitored. A disability statement makes clear the college's commitment to the appropriate treatment of applicants with disabilities.

16. The college 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 are considering 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.

17. Students' views of the course are sought through annual questionnaires. There are also student representatives at managers' meetings. The college responds to concerns raised by the students. For example, it modified the timetable of third-year students in response to their criticisms. 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. Particularly since the introduction of the further education teacher-training programme, teachers observe each other's classes and provide informal feedback. There is no staff appraisal or staff review procedure.

18. Data on students' progress are readily available. For example, the reasons why a few students leave the course before completion are recorded, summarised and presented to managers. Course review and evaluation takes place, but in a piecemeal fashion. The college's approach to quality assurance is active, but unsystematic. The college is aware of this weakness and is seeking to use the programme board meetings to strengthen its quality assurance procedures. The self-assessment report sent to inspectors before the inspection was a full and informative document. Its narrative structure, however, meant that there were only a few firm, clear statements of strengths and weaknesses.

19. Managers work to an annual budget, approved by trustees. The finance manager supplies financial reports to trustees three times a year, and to senior managers more frequently. The college is aiming to move to a five-year financial plan, and has analysed the last five years under appropriate headings to help it to do so. The college manages its resources effectively and has reserve funds to protect it against unforeseen variations.