



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE



Office for Standards
in Education

Inspection report

Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts

Date of inspection: 22-26 November 2004

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Basic information about the college

Name of college:	Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts
Type of college:	Drama school
Principal:	Paul Clements
Address of college:	Ralph Richardson Memorial Studios Kingfisher Place Claredon Road London, N22 6XF
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Name of reporting inspector:	Tony Davis ALI
Date of inspection:	22-26 November 2004

Part A: Summary

Information about the college

The Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts is an independent drama school based in the culturally and ethnically diverse London Borough of Haringey. It was founded in 1945, known originally as Mountview Theatre Club, to provide a cultural and recreational resource for amateur theatre enthusiasts in north London. Training provision was added soon after its foundation to enable practitioners in all disciplines to develop their skills. It became Mountview Theatre School in 1969 when it accepted its first full-time students onto a two-year acting course. The academy moved its administrative centre and much of its teaching work from the original Crouch End site to its present location in Clarendon Road in 1985. The academy's two theatres are still located at the original Crouch End site, and further rented accommodation has been acquired in Clarendon Road. The academy changed its name to Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts in 2001. It offers a three-year BA (Hons) in performance, with acting and musical theatre options, and a two-year BA (Hons) in technical theatre. It also offers one-year postgraduate courses in performance, musical theatre, directing, and technical theatre. Postgraduate students can elect to take a further unit to gain a master's degree.

The University of East Anglia validates the undergraduate and postgraduate performance courses and Middlesex University validates the undergraduate technical theatre course. All courses have been revalidated recently by the universities. Students in receipt of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) dance and drama awards study for both a degree and a professional national diploma awarded by Trinity College, London. Short and part-time courses are also offered covering a range of theatre arts and crafts in which people of all ages participate.

At the time of the inspection, there were 285 students, 90 of whom were enrolled on the three-year BA (Hons) in performance (acting), 101 on the three-year BA (Hons) in performance (musical theatre), and 37 on the two-year BA (Hons) in technical theatre. On the one-year postgraduate courses, there were 36 acting students, 16 musical theatre students, and five directing students. On the three-year acting course, 19 out of 34 in the first year, 20 out of 29 in the second year and 20 out of 27 in the third year were in receipt of DfES dance and drama awards. On the three-year musical theatre course, 21 out of 36 in the first year, 21 out of 34 in the second year, and 22 out of 31 in the third year were in receipt of the awards. Of the one-year postgraduate students, 10 of the 52 students were in receipt of awards. On the two-year technical theatre course, 14 out of 18 in the first year, and 14 out of 19 in the second year were in receipt of awards.

The academy is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. It has 15 full-time management and administrative staff, 25 full-time teaching staff and around 100 sessional teachers, freelancers and visiting industry professionals. The academy is led and managed by the principal who is accountable to the board of directors. The acting, musical theatre and

stage management disciplines are each led by a director of programmes, supported by heads of movement, voice, dance and musical presentation, and film and television. The subject heads are accountable to the directors of programmes who are in turn accountable to the principal.

How effective is the college?

Key strengths

- some outstanding students' achievements
- very good or excellent teaching
- particularly effective course design with a strong emphasis on professional theatre practice
- highly effective curriculum management
- very good use of theatre professionals
- particularly effective pastoral support
- high standard of specialist technical theatre equipment
- strong strategic leadership
- effective management of rapid change.

What should be improved

- the feedback to performance students on their progress
- assessment and moderation practice on performance courses
- the technical support for information and communication technology (ICT)
- the dispersed nature of the accommodation
- the learning environment at the Crouch Hill theatre site.

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

Students' view of the college

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

What students like about the college

- the supportive staff and their awareness of students' individual needs
- the drive and enthusiasm of the teaching staff
- the use of outside directors
- being pushed to their full potential
- the balanced structure of the courses
- the film and television provision
- the safe and creative atmosphere in which to develop
- the family atmosphere for overseas students
- the connection and interaction between the disciplines
- improvements made as a result of their feedback.

What they feel could be improved

- the consistency of assessment
- the clarity of assignment briefs and assessment criteria
- the timeliness of assessment feedback
- the level of detail in written feedback from directors
- the level of student discipline in some project work
- the provision of presentation classes for acting
- the provision of private workspace
- the quality of the theatres
- the provision of ice packs and first aid in all buildings
- the bureaucracy of the reception area
- ICT facilities and technical support.

Part B: The Professional Acting Course

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

Strengths

- very high standard of performance skills
- very good or excellent teaching
- confident, enthusiastic and self-disciplined students
- particularly effective course design
- excellent health, welfare and pastoral support
- highly effective curriculum management.

Weaknesses

- inconsistent assessment practice.

Scope of provision

1. The acting courses aim to prepare students for a career in the theatre, film and broadcasting industries. The courses provide core subjects in acting, voice and movement with supporting classes in singing, dance, improvisation, sight reading, stage combat, Alexander technique, auditions, and film and television. In their final year, students receive career-development workshops covering audition preparation, photographs, Spotlight, Equity, television and radio show reels, tax, *curriculum vitae*, and letters to agents and casting directors.
2. Three-year degree students take part in seven performance projects in their first two years, and three public shows and a showcase at a West End theatre in their final year. As well as their own two theatres, the academy uses a variety of public performance spaces including theatres at Greenwich, Chelsea and Camden. The one-year diploma students study for four terms and have the option of studying the additional 'reflection on practice' unit to gain a master's degree. They perform in one public show and a showcase for agents and representatives from the entertainment industry. All students have the opportunity to audition for the annual Carleton Hobbs Radio Award and the William Poel Festival. A number of students have gained financial support from sources such as the Lillian Baylis and John Gielgud Award funds.

Achievements and standards

3. The academy received 860 applications for 71 places on the acting courses in 2004. Retention rates are high, with 91% of students who started on the three-year course in 2001 completing their studies. Of the 31 students who completed last year, only one failed the course. All students who have started the one-year course since 2001 achieved the qualification. Recent graduates have gained employment in television, radio and theatre including productions at the Soho Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre, the Young Vic and with Hull Truck. The majority of graduates work in fringe theatre, film and television but, although most find suitable employment, the proportion of high-profile work recorded is lower than that of some other schools in the sector.

4. Students' core performance skills are of a very high standard; they are confident, enthusiastic and self-disciplined. They display impressive maturity when directing each other, and collectively discover new and effective ways to shape their work. In a voice class, students demonstrated a high level of self-assurance and physical freedom in their movement, and were able to clearly identify their strengths and areas for improvement. Very good reflective practice is evident in students' log books. Throughout their courses, students develop a responsible and independent approach to acting. Students' attendance and punctuality are very good and attendance during the week of inspection was 96%.

Quality of education and training

5. Most of the teaching is good or better and some is outstanding. Teachers provide students with a high level of individual support. Project work is challenging and varied. Students are appropriately challenged and inspired by the feedback they receive. In a dance class, students covered a varied and extensive range of styles. The teacher provided excellent instruction and guidance. In a film and television class, final-year students received skilful individual direction on a scene prior to filming. The director effectively guided the students to make simple active choices to improve their performances. In a highly focused movement class, the teacher was particularly effective in helping students connect sound with movement.

6. Teachers are very experienced. Many work as freelance practitioners in their specialist fields. Professional directors are employed to lead projects and produce shows. The large classrooms and rehearsal spaces provide students with a good learning environment. A small library has a wide range of books and sufficient computers and audio resources. The television studio has recently been re-equipped and is of a high standard.

7. There is a clear system of assessment across both courses. However, although marking criteria are very clear, they are not used consistently by directors and there is no system in place for the moderation of visiting directors' judgements. Each student receives verbal and written feedback at the end of each semester and after each project. This feedback includes an individual action plan for the development of their vocal skills. Much of the written feedback fails to provide students with a clear understanding of how they can improve.

8. Courses are well designed. Students work in small classes so that they can be given individual attention. As they progress through the academy, they are divided into smaller groups to heighten the focus on the individual needs of each student. In the second semester, all three-year students receive a weekly voice tutorial. In the second year, the original two groups are divided into three, and in the third year, students receive either pair or individual work in audition technique and film and television. Post-graduate students particularly benefit from the small-group teaching.

9. The audition process is thorough. All applicants are auditioned using clear assessment criteria and judgements are appropriately recorded. Students take part in practical workshops and perform two monologues. They are given a tour of the academy and meet with several teaching staff who create a supportive atmosphere.

10. Students receive excellent pastoral care. All students receive a thorough induction into the academy, which covers its values, policies, timetable and staff. All new students are partnered with a second-year student who contacts them before they arrive to ensure that any concerns or apprehensions are addressed. Teachers are supportive and accessible and students' concerns are dealt with quickly and effectively. While there is no regular programme of tutorials in which students' progress can be systematically monitored, teachers offer tutorial support to any student who may require additional coaching. A weekly voice clinic is also open to any student who wants extra support or who has specific concerns. However, there is no systematic approach to diagnosing or supporting students with specific learning needs.

The professional musical theatre courses

Inspectors judged the provision to be outstanding (Grade 1)

Strengths

- final year students' excellent standard of acting and singing
- an impressive employment record
- much very good and some outstanding teaching
- students' self-disciplined and professional approach to class work
- very good ensemble work and peer support
- very effective use of West End directors and choreographers
- particularly effective pastoral support.

Weaknesses

- insufficient use of development feedback.

Scope of provision

11. The three-year BA (Hons.) degree in performance (musical theatre) includes core subjects in singing, dance and acting. Supporting subjects include text, movement, improvisation, voice, sight reading, speech, verse, accents and dialects, stage combat, Alexander technique, song presentation, acting for camera, microphone technique, music theory, audition preparation and television technique. The aim of the course is to prepare students for a career in musical theatre. Throughout the training, students participate in workshops and master classes given by professional directors, musical directors and choreographers. In their second year, students develop the skills to write an original musical, and in their final year they concentrate on public performances at the academy and at other London theatres. Graduating students present a West End showcase to agents and casting directors in their final term.

Achievements and standards

12. The academy received 743 applications for 52 places on the musical theatre courses in 2004. Retention rates are high with 91% of those who started in 2001 completing their course. All students who completed their course achieved their degree. The academy's graduates work in an impressive range of contexts including the West End, national and European companies, regional theatre, touring productions and film.

13. The choral and individual singing standards required by teachers, and achieved by students, are excellent. Students are confident when singing very challenging harmonies and many demonstrate beautifully controlled solo performances. Their acting is extremely sophisticated and they meet the high aspirations of their teachers. During rehearsals for *Carousel* and *The Wiz*, students demonstrated a highly self-disciplined approach, much aptitude and dedication, and a thorough understanding of the texts.

14. Although some students demonstrate an acceptable level of technical ability in jazz dance, many lack sufficient core strength and stamina to match the high standards they achieve in their singing and acting. For many, their tone and precision is not sufficiently developed.

Quality of education and training

15. Students are provided with a wide range of subjects to support their core studies. Much of the teaching is very good and some is outstanding. For example, in a stage combat class, first-year students enacted a convincing street fight based on logic, technical safety, and on illusion from the viewpoint of the spectators. In an excellent improvisation class, students were allowed to explore their vulnerability and sense of self in a safe atmosphere. This was followed by an insightful and supportive critique by their peers. In many classes, teachers promote a strong emphasis on constructive peer feedback. The students benefit greatly from extended visits by professional directors and choreographers. Second-year workshops are given energy and life by the visiting directors and musical directors. The show *Kiss Me Kate*, for instance, was given a fresh impetus by the inspired casting of a pair of wisecracking female gangsters. The strong individual character performances in *Carousel* combined well in the ensemble work and unselfishly supported a sensitively played leading lady. Rehearsals are thorough, and provide the self-disciplined students with an outstanding learning experience. Many students produce performances equal to the high standards expected of professionals in the industry.

16. The range and standard of accommodation for training are satisfactory. There is a range of studio rehearsal spaces, a television department, wardrobe department, electric piano studio and public performance spaces. Soundproofing in many studios is inadequate and causes some disturbance between adjacent classes. The dance studios do not have sprung floors. Teaching areas are not kept sufficiently clean. Some specialist equipment is of a high standard, including the television and electric piano studios. The electric piano studio consists of 16 electric pianos linked to a central teaching console and is used to provide students with a good introduction to piano skills.

17. The course is well-structured, with, mostly a suitable balance between its various elements. However, more time could usefully be given to dance. In an attempt to address weaknesses in some students' tone and precision, all musical theatre students are streamed into dance groups of similar ability.

18. Students receive formal assessments twice a year. These are supported by the continuous assessment of their voice, dance and movement skills as they work towards their

first- and second-year presentations. Contextual studies are taught effectively, making good use of students' working notebooks which are assessed separately. Much of the written feedback students receive fails to identify specific areas for improvement. Assessment moderation procedures have failed to remove these inconsistencies. Third-year students are assessed on their public performances in main-stage, studio or touring productions. These shows are supported well by the stage management, wardrobe, stage lighting, design and sound departments.

19. The selection and audition process is fair and equitable. Heads of department and leading teachers audition applicants using clear criteria for each discipline. Unsuccessful applicants are offered detailed and informative feedback on their performance.

20. Students receive very good pastoral support. Staff are readily available to help students overcome problems and a confidential professional counselling service is also available. The academy provides free ear, nose and throat, and physiotherapy consultations. It also offers additional English and speech classes for overseas students. Individual help is given to students with additional learning support needs, though this is over-reliant on self-referral by the students.

The technical theatre course

Inspectors judged the provision to be good (Grade 2).

Strengths

- high standard of students' technical and practical skills
- good teaching
- strong emphasis on professional theatre practice
- high standard of specialist technical equipment
- very well-structured two-year course
- particularly effective course management.

Weaknesses

- inadequate technical support for ICT
- dispersed accommodation
- poor learning environment at Crouch Hill theatre site.

Scope of provision

21. The course is multi-disciplined and aims to train students for a career in the professional theatre and related industries. Over the first two terms, students receive foundation training in the core areas of design, lighting, sound, stage management and construction. Students also benefit from voice classes that help them communicate effectively in a busy theatre environment. In the third term, students choose specialist pathways relevant to their chosen career. In the second year, students work on the academy's public theatre productions.

Achievements and standards

22. The academy received 38 applications for 19 places on the technical theatre course in 2004. Retention rates are good with 82% of students who started in 2001 completing their course. All students who completed their course achieved a degree. Of the students who started the course in 2003, 95% of those enrolled are still on the course. Students develop confidence in a wide range of technical, organisational and craft skills. Most students find employment after graduating. The majority of those who graduated in 2004 gained employment in the technical areas of lighting and sound. A minority of graduates each year gain employment as stage managers.

23. Students demonstrate a high standard of practical skills in classes and on productions. For example, in a practical lighting design lesson, two groups of first-year students were required to present their interpretation of light from the sun or the moon as a stage effect. Students worked well as a team to produce suitable artistic and creative effects and then analysed each other's use of light to develop a greater understanding of the lighting design process. In a class on sound, first-year students achieved a good standard of recording to minidisk from outside sources. They were confident operating technical equipment, good at working as a team and imaginative in their use of sound sources. Students' stage management production work is good. Prompt books, rehearsal notes, calls and show reports are written to a high standard.

Quality of education and training

24. Almost all teaching is good or very good. Classes are mostly planned well, with the best teaching being lively, paced well and challenging. Students enjoy their work and respond well to classes which present them with creative and technical challenge. In a class on sound, the teacher placed a strong emphasis on note-taking and the regular checking of students' learning, and provided them with a thorough analysis of their work. In a class on 'soundscapes', the teacher provided a very good comparison with landscapes to create a visual representation of sound design. For some shows, the academy employs current industry practitioners as technical teachers to co-ordinate certain aspects of production, such as lighting, sound and theatre designers, and stage managers. This opportunity to gain industry contacts and work with professionals is a significant benefit for the students.

25. The resources at the Wood Green centre and the design and construction facilities there are of a high standard. The academy has invested significantly in new lighting, sound and computer equipment, including specialist equipment for plotting and programming intelligent lighting equipment. The two theatre spaces at Crouch Hill are unsatisfactory environments for learning. The premises are too small and in a poor state of repair, and have insufficient facilities for students. At the Wood Green centre, sound insulation is unsatisfactory between some classrooms. While the range of computer facilities is good, not enough technical support is provided, adversely affecting the pace and effectiveness of some classes. The technical theatre staff are very experienced industry professionals and their continued contacts with the industry are an asset to the students.

26. Assessment is carried out thoroughly. Students are provided with clear guidelines in the student handbook and course guidelines. Subject teachers mark students' work which is then marked again by another technical teacher. At the regular examination boards, assessment decisions are moderated before final grades are confirmed. However, first-year students have to wait a long time before they receive constructive developmental feedback on their work.

27. The course prepares students well for professional theatre careers. All students are taught scenic construction, and there is a strong emphasis on stagecraft and safe-working practice, as demonstrated in a class on manual handling. There are, however, limited opportunities for gaining experience in scenery-flying systems. Students can practise a

variety of production roles such as the opportunity to design the sets for the academy's productions. Students develop their skills in a learning environment which accurately reproduces professional theatre practice and benefit from the academy's good links with the industry. The lighting department have strong links with a market leader in intelligent-lighting systems, giving students access to their equipment and specialist knowledge. Stage management and technical students are regularly seconded to productions in London theatres. However, placements are not available to all students.

28. Teachers provide good pastoral and academic support for students and the friendly learning environment they create encourages students' personal development. Students receive good individual guidance when planning their careers. The process of identifying and providing for additional learning support needs, however, is underdeveloped and there is no systematic initial assessment of these needs at the beginning of the programme. Teachers are over reliant on students' own self-referral to identify specific needs. The course's board of studies is effective. It includes student representatives and a link tutor from the university. The link tutor provides advice and an annual report to the academy on areas for improvement.

Part C: Leadership and management

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

Strengths

- strong strategic leadership
- effective management of rapid change
- highly effective operational management
- strong commitment to continuous improvement.

Weaknesses

- insufficiently systematic approach to the provision of additional learning support
- insufficiently developed systems for quality assurance.

29. This is the first joint inspection of the academy by the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and Ofsted. A Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) review took place in March 2000. In the period since the QAA review, the academy has addressed some of the issues raised in the report: the range of library and information technology resources has been extended and the pace and relevance of students' induction have improved. Over the last 12 months, the academy has carried out a major programme of improvements. The board of directors has been reconstituted to provide the academy with access to a range of expertise to enable it to embark upon an ambitious restructuring of its management and premises. As part of these improvements, an external consultant was commissioned to carry out a comprehensive pay review which resulted in significant salary increases for some staff at the academy.

30. The academy has strong strategic leadership from the principal and the board of directors. Following a thorough programme of consultation and review with academic and support staff, the principal set out a new strategic vision for the academy in June 2004. Central to the new mission of the academy is the pursuit of excellence in theatre related vocations and, through partnerships, to widen access to training for prospective students from all areas of its local and wider community. The three programme directors for acting, musical theatre and technical theatre and the finance director comprise the new senior management team. The successful restructuring of the management team gave responsibility for the management of all aspects of each discipline, including budget control, to the respective new programme directors. The academy is in the process of appointing a fourth programme director with responsibility for community development work. The senior management team were prepared well for their new roles. A member of the board of directors provided them with an extensive series of workshops on finance and

risk management and further staff development covered areas such as communication and organisational efficiency. Each programme director is also now supported effectively by a course administrator to allow them more time to concentrate on operational management and the artistic direction of their discipline.

31. The operational management of the academy is highly effective. While some aspects of the meetings structure are relatively new, internal communications are effective in ensuring that the students' rich educational experience is carefully controlled and co-ordinated. Courses are structured and planned well. Students appreciate the strong coherence of their programmes and the level of overall knowledge each tutor has about their skills development. The subject heads of movement, voice, dance and musical presentation, and film and television meet each week with their teaching staff to discuss operational issues and the progress of individual students. The subject heads also meet regularly as a management team with their respective programme director. Issues raised here may be taken to the senior management team or the executive team, the latter of which includes the principal. The principal also provides paid time to meet with all visiting staff at the end of each semester. The academy has a thorough system for monitoring students' attendance and does not tolerate poor punctuality. Comprehensive records are kept of each student's attendance. Many teachers have detailed job descriptions, though these often do not match their revised roles. There is currently no formal system for observing lessons or formal appraisal of teaching staff. However, a new system has been developed which will be introduced in 2005. The board of directors appraise the performance of the principal.

32. The academy has a strong commitment to continuously improving the provision. Early in the 2003/04 academic year, the principal and the chair of the board of directors worked with staff to identify many areas for improvement. Improvements made as a result include: the restructuring of the academy's management; standardising and centralising the procedures for timetabling; the appointment of a head of movement studies to co-ordinate improvements in what was judged to be a weaker area of provision. A well-established and particularly effective system for gathering the views of students has resulted in many improvements. Two representatives from each year group of acting students work effectively to gather the views of their colleagues in advance of a termly meeting with the programme director for musical theatre. Reciprocal arrangements are made for musical theatre students. Technical theatre students' views are presented at the meeting of their board of studies. Minutes of the meetings are distributed to staff. These systems for collecting students' views are effective and have resulted in improvements to the provision. Improvements include: alterations to the content and structure of the courses to enable students to meet their intended learning outcomes more efficiently and effectively; alterations to resources to improve the learning environment and the health and safety of the students; the streaming of musical theatre dance students into similar ability groups. The speed of some of these developments has improved since the devolution of budgets to the new programme directors.

33. The academy does not have a sufficiently systematic approach to the provision of additional learning support. There is no systematic screening of students to assess specific learning needs or difficulties. Teachers have not received sufficient training to enable them

to develop an appropriate system for identification and support for all students with additional support needs.

34. In March 2004, the principal prepared a self-assessment report for the revalidation of the BA (Hons.) in performance, covering the acting and musical theatre provision only. The report is overly descriptive and insufficiently evaluative and did not result in the production of a development plan. Agendas for improvement mainly arise from problems encountered during the course of staff and students' work. There is no overall strategy or set of procedures for the systematic scrutiny of all aspects of the academy's work. The principal has recognised this issue and has recently prepared a draft of a new quality assurance system to be introduced early in 2005. The need for structural changes to the content of the degree courses, however, is effectively identified and is considered formally at the annual meeting of each validating university's joint board of study.

35. The academy has satisfactory policies and codes of practice for health and safety, equal opportunities, discipline and complaints, however, the health and safety policy is only reproduced in the technical theatre students' handbook. The equal opportunities policy has only recently been agreed by the principal and the board of directors. Student handbooks do not contain the equal opportunities policy, an extract of the policy, or the academy's statement of commitment. However, there is a brief reference to this on the application form. Students feel that staff deal with students' complaints sensitively and resolve them to everyone's satisfaction. The academy has produced a draft statement in response to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act. While it has yet to produce an implementation plan, alterations have been made to provide wheelchair access to the ground floor of the main academy building and appropriate toilet facilities. Much of the academy's premises have poor or no access for wheelchair users. The major redevelopment plans which are underway, however, aim to remove any barriers to access.

36. As part of the academy's new strategic vision, it is funding the appointment of a new director of community development. The director will work extensively in partnership with a neighbouring community arts development organisation to create an ambitious new drama school in the centre of the local Haringey regeneration area and Wood Green cultural quarter. This new work aims to inspire and motivate people from all cultures and social sectors to participate in the arts. In 2003/04, 28% of the acting and musical theatre students progressed from the academy's short course or foundation provision. Only two per cent of students recruited in September 2004 are from minority ethnic backgrounds.

37. The academy has recently appointed a new finance director and devolved budgets to the three new directors of acting, musical theatre and technical theatre. Financial systems are clear and enable programme directors to manage their budgets effectively. Financial matters are monitored regularly against pre-determined monthly profiles for income and expenditure. Monthly reports are prepared for the principal and the chair of the board of directors' audit committee. Quarterly finance reports are prepared for the board of directors. Budgets are set through discussion between the principal and each programme director and the overall budget is signed off by the board of directors. The academy has an operating surplus and a contingency fund for repairs and renewals. The accounts are

audited annually. The external auditors also produce the annual accounts which are presented to the board of directors. The academy seeks to secure value for money when purchasing equipment.

Notes