



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE



Office for Standards
in Education

Inspection report
Stella Mann College

Dates of inspection: 7 - 10 March 2005

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Reference:

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Basic information about the college

Name of college:	Stella Mann College
Type of college:	Dance and Musical Theatre College
Principal:	Miss Mary Breen
Address of college:	10 Linden Road Bedford MK40 2DA
Telephone number:	01234 213331
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Name of reporting inspector:	David Hornbrook HMI
Dates of inspection:	7 - 10 March 2005

Part A: Summary

Information about the college

Founded by Stella Mann, a dancer and teacher from Vienna, the college began as a dance school in Hampstead in 1946. Mary Breen has been principal and sole owner since 1989. In 2003, the college moved to its present location in Bedford in a building previously occupied by the London College of Dance and Middlesex University.

The college has moved on from its early emphasis on dance teacher training and now offers one course, a three year, full-time, performers' course for students looking to a career in musical theatre or commercial dance, although opportunities remain for students to study for a number of dance teaching qualifications.

Stella Mann College aims to provide training that stretches and challenges students 'to acquire the skills and knowledge needed in order to survive in their chosen career'. The college also strives to produce young performers who have skill, imagination and resourcefulness.

There are 91 students enrolled on the three-year course. Some 15 students out of 39 in the first year of the course, 13 out of 30 in the second year and 11 out of 22 in the third year are in receipt of Department for Education and Skills (DfES) dance and drama awards.

All staff are employed on hourly contracts. Seven teachers, including the principal, work a full week, and there are a further seven teachers who work for two days a week or less.

Stella Mann was last inspected in October 2001 and was graded 2 for the provision and 2 for leadership and management.

How effective is the college?

Key strengths

- very good teaching
 - commitment to the best teaching practices
 - assessment of students
 - clear strategic direction
 - successful management of change
 - good use of feedback from staff, students and parents
 - strong emphasis on staff development
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- commitment to continuous improvement
- very good self-assessment.

What should be improved

- aspirations of students
- academic monitoring
- monitoring of graduate employment.

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 contribution made by guest teachers
- the quality of the individual pastoral care
- the classes on the practicalities of employment
- friendly atmosphere
- quality of the teaching
- the 'freedom to fail' given by teachers.

What they feel could be improved

- proportion of the course devoted to singing and acting
- the mirrors in the studios
- the help given to them to get jobs
- overcrowded changing rooms
- balance between training and public performance.

Part B: The Three-Year Performers' Course

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

Strengths

- most teaching good or better
- commitment to the best teaching practices
- good use made of thorough and accurate assessments
- inclusive, supportive feedback and correction for students
- good pastoral support
- good preparation for employment

Weaknesses

- the modest aspirations of some students
- underdeveloped academic monitoring

Scope of provision

1. The course prepares students to be performers in musical theatre or the commercial sector and offers them the choice of two qualifying national diplomas; in professional dance or professional musical theatre. From their first year, all students study jazz, classical ballet, contemporary dance, tap, musical theatre, singing and acting. In addition, they attend classes in health and safety, fitness, contextual subjects, professional employment skills and mat based Pilates. At the end of the second year, students select their diploma and related dance options; most choose the musical theatre diploma. In addition to the national diplomas, some students take examinations in dance teaching.

2. There are three public performances a year involving all the students. A summer production, with an external assessment element, takes place in a commercial theatre in St Albans, two other shows take place at local theatres. In addition, third year students perform a showcase in a small London venue to which agents and casting directors are invited. The college does not have its own performance space.

Achievements and standards

3. Performance standards in classes continue to be high in dance, particularly in jazz and tap. Since the last inspection they have also risen significantly in solo singing and acting.

Students approach their work with intelligence, maturity and discipline although they are sometimes unable to rise to the high expectations of their teachers. In their shows, students' performance is more variable with some strikingly good pieces counterbalanced by others which lack complexity and flair. All students are entered for the national diplomas and, in 2004, all passed. External examination success across a range of dance qualifications remains good. The retention rate is currently 75%, although this figure is slightly depressed by some minor student drop-out from the course at the time of the move to Bedford in 2003.

4. Destinations have improved since the last inspection. Students generally succeed in securing employment when they leave, although their aspirations are sometimes more modest than their potential. Typically, graduating students will work in cruise ships, girl bands, touring companies and television, film or video. For example, employment destinations of students graduating in 2002 include Disneyland Paris, 'Just Like That' in the West End, a touring production of 'Spirit of the Dance' and a number of cruise ships. Although, in the past, significant numbers of students became teachers on leaving the college, very few now do so.

Quality of Education and Training

5. The college has a serious commitment to the best teaching practices and has invested much time and energy into raising the standard of teaching in all subjects. As a consequence, most of the teaching is now good or better and inspectors observed no unsatisfactory classes. All the weaknesses in teaching identified in the last inspection have been successfully addressed. The streaming of classes based on students' standards in ballet has resulted in groups of a more manageable size and teachers challenge the students and demand high standards of work.

6. In the best classes teachers manage to maintain a strong sense of discipline and attention within a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. In a well-planned tap class, clearly located in current professional practice, the teacher insisted on very accurate footwork while demanding total upper body relaxation before performing a funny, but accurate, parody of 'Spirit of the Dance' to show the antithesis of the required style. In a mesmerising singing class, students were rapt while the teacher differentiated between different kinds of theatrical singing by carefully explaining the physical workings of the larynx and vocal chords with unexpected charm and humour. Teachers are particularly good at involving students who, having sustained injury while performing or practising earlier, attend to watch classes. In one audition class a watching student was given the role of being responsible for awarding two imaginary contracts and, with careful guidance, had to justify her reasons.

7. The curriculum is rounded and well-focused on the needs of the industry and the students. Since the last inspection the college has reorganised the course to give more emphasis to musical theatre. This has led to a more coherent and inclusive curriculum with more emphasis given to acting and singing to balance the time given to dance. A particular strength of the course is the unit devoted to the development of students' professional employment skills which covers an extensive range of practical matters such as union

membership and tax. Although the college still offers preparation for various external dance examinations, this does not take significant amounts of time from the core diploma subjects.

8. Students are clear about their level of progress and about what they need to do to improve. In classes teachers give supportive feedback and correction and ensure that no student is left out. Formal assessment remains thorough and accurate and is based on clear criteria. Twice a year, students are assessed in each of their subjects by a panel of teachers. Information gained from assessments is used effectively for teaching and other forms of guidance. Students are given helpful verbal and written feedback and produce subject action plans agreed with their teachers. They also evaluate their own performance and development needs. Students and their parents receive written reports. There is, however, no opportunity for a student's overall progress to be more regularly reviewed or for them to produce individual learning plans.

9. The audition procedures are good. Criteria for auditions are appropriate and are published on the college website. Detailed notes about each applicant and grades against the criteria are kept by members of the audition panel. Once they have enrolled, pastoral support for students is good. There is a very well produced and informative student handbook which details the college's procedures and requirements and students consider all members of staff to be helpful and approachable. Much care is taken of individual students when they need it. For example, energetic and successful efforts were made to re-house a number of students following the move from London. The principal and deputy principal act as welfare officers and the fact that students do not find this at all intimidating reflects the warm and supportive atmosphere at all levels of the college. Injuries are carefully recorded, although there is no overall monitoring of trends in injury, and there are procedures in place to support students who have problems with literacy.

10. The skill and experience of the teaching staff have been enhanced since the last inspection as a number of new teachers have been appointed who work, or have recently worked, in dance or musical theatre. These are in turn supplemented by high quality guest teachers from the industry. The accommodation has vastly improved since the last inspection and the college is now housed on a single site in a building which has been used for dance education for some years. Teaching accommodation comprises five good-sized studios, all bright and well lit with good dance floors, a suitably equipped lecture room, a singing studio and a physiotherapy room. There is a well-stocked library and a networked computer room with internet access. Students and staff have their own common rooms. All rooms and circulation areas are clean and well-decorated.

Part C: Leadership and Management

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

Strengths

- clear strategic direction
- successful management of change
- good use of feedback from staff, students and parents
- strong emphasis on staff development
- rigorous process of teaching observation
- commitment to continuous improvement
- very good self-assessment.

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped monitoring of graduate employment.

11. The college has a clear mission statement which, although it still slightly over-states the importance of dance teaching qualifications, nevertheless helps give Stella Mann a sense of purpose and strategic direction. The mission, together with a well-focused college charter, is included in a comprehensive staff handbook which also contains policies for equality of opportunity, grievances and appeals and health and safety. Teaching and assessment procedures are outlined in the handbook and guidance given on class observation and appraisal. The handbook is especially useful in giving direction to part-time teachers.

12. Strong management has served the college well at a time of substantial change. The principal and deputy principal provide clear direction to teachers, maintain high standards of education and training and are not afraid to innovate. They have achieved a successful balance between effective operational systems and the friendly, openness which characterises the college. The move from London to Bedford was managed very efficiently with the minimum possible disruption to training or to students' domestic arrangements. There is a small administrative team which meets twice termly and which carries out its responsibilities effectively. For example, records of students' progress and achievements are carefully maintained and attendance and injuries are meticulously monitored.

13. The principal consults widely before instituting changes and teachers collaborate effectively across the elements of the curriculum and within their subjects. Teams of subject teachers meet when a need is identified, although there is no formal hierarchy of subject responsibilities. Three times a year there are whole staff meetings, and teachers are invited to

contribute items to the agenda. Records are kept of meetings together with action points where appropriate. Meetings with teaching staff are the primary means by which the principal and deputy principal guide, encourage debate and instigate changes designed to improve standards of teaching, learning and student attainment. Staff work hard to develop appropriate subject programmes and to maintain high standards. There is good communication at all levels throughout the organisation, helped by regular and informative staff and student newsletters.

14. There is a strong emphasis on staff development. The college has successfully built on the initiatives in this area noted in the last inspection report. Five teachers have recently gained post-graduate certificates in post compulsory education at the Institute of Education at the University of London. The benefits of this professional development are evident in the quality of planning and the feedback given to teachers on their classes and it has inspired a number of internal projects aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers are observed on a regular basis by the principal and the deputy principal and provided with comprehensive, written feedback on their classes. In each class observed, four students are also asked to complete detailed questionnaires about the teaching. From April 2005, teaching observation will be incorporated in a formal system of staff appraisal.

15. Quality assurance is very good. Self-assessment and action planning are informed by regular monitoring which includes student and staff surveys, student assessments, recruitment and retention patterns and finance. The college also solicits the views of parents. The college's self-assessment report is extremely detailed and, where necessary, appropriately self-critical. There is wide consultation with staff before the self-assessment report is written; teachers are invited to complete their own assessments of the college's strengths and weaknesses and to comment on an early draft of the report. An action plan is drawn up in response to the self-assessment which sets out a series of goals to be achieved within a timescale. All the issues raised in the last Ofsted report have been addressed and either resolved or incorporated in the college's action plan. The college also makes very good use of a number of patrons who are experienced practitioners in the performing arts as consultants and advisers. This combination of rigorous self-evaluation and external support continues to be successful in bringing about improvement.

16. Students continue to be given fair and equal treatment. The college has an up-to-date equal opportunities policy which sets out the rights and responsibilities of all who work and study at the college. There are also satisfactory arrangements for complaints and appeals. There are only a few young people from minority ethnic communities on the course and college marketing does not target applicants from socially and culturally diverse backgrounds. For example, the sample autobiographies in the prospectus are all of white female students. However, as part of its commitment to inclusion, the college does offer financial support in the form of scholarships to a small number of students in need.

17. A statement makes clear the college's commitment to the appropriate treatment of applicants with disabilities, and the premises action plan, which satisfies the requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001, contains a number of improvements to access, many of which have already been implemented. The college

website, under construction at the time of the last inspection, has been adapted for users with disabilities and employs fonts suitable for dyslexic applicants.

18. The college makes attempts to collect information about students' destinations following graduation. However, the picture of where graduates have gone and what they are doing remains incomplete. Nearly a quarter of those who left in 2004, for example, are unaccounted for. While analysis of students' employment records has improved significantly since the last inspection, incomplete data adversely affects the college's ability to evaluate the course and to judge its success, or otherwise, in helping students into the best jobs. Information on employment is not used to inform planning. The college has established a small employment agency to help students into employment but it is in the early stages of development and it is too early to judge its impact.

19. The college manages its resources efficiently. Financial matters are monitored carefully by the college's finance officer. In preparing the yearly budget, account is taken of planned additions to staffing and resources. Accounts are audited annually. The principal holds the budget and consults with relevant staff on expenditure. The college takes steps to secure value for money when purchasing consumables and small equipment and, after bearing the costs of the move to Bedford, is beginning to re-establish reserve funds to protect it against unforeseen variations.

Notes