

Stella Mann College

Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

Inspection report

Provider reference	54611
Published date	January 2008

Main Findings

Course:	Three-year National Diploma in Professional Music Theatre or Dance
Overall effectiveness:	Good (grade 2)
Date of inspection:	28 November 2007

This feedback contains findings from the inspection visit. It draws on the evidence available from performance data, external and internal reviews, other available documentation and interviews held on the day.

The musical theatre and dance course was previously inspected by Ofsted in March 2005 when it was graded good (grade 2) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. At the same time, the leadership and management of the school were graded outstanding (grade 1).

Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that the standard of acting, singing and dancing in classes and performances is good overall with wide individual variation from outstanding to satisfactory, and it continues to improve. The recent revalidation report notes that a 'rigorous and appropriately adapted course in classical ballet' underpins sound training across all disciplines. In performance, some students are judged by a recent Trinity assessor to give 'excellent all-round performances', whilst a few have struggled with their material and just secured a pass mark. A 2007 report by the Council for Dance Education and Training notes that the standard of singing from students 'has improved immensely'; however, although acting training is now 'well grounded in . . . credible character development', some 'technical weaknesses' remain in the acting performances of a few students. The standard of students' contextual studies work is also good, with a very small minority of students at risk of not achieving a pass. Success rates, however, are low. Over the last two years, a quarter of those students who started the national diploma in professional music theatre or dance failed to complete their course successfully.

The large majority of students secure jobs when they leave the college. Typically, former students work on cruise ships, at Disneyland, as cabaret dancers, in television, in national or international musical theatre productions or in the West End. For example, past students have recently secured roles in *Hairspray* in the West End, *We Will Rock You* on a European tour and in *Skins* for Channel 4 television. The college is particularly good at tracking where students work after they have graduated, and makes excellent use of social networking sites on the internet to stay in touch with ex-students.

The college has recently put a very strong emphasis on punctuality and attendance, and records show these have much improved. Students report, however, that on occasions not all teachers apply the new guidelines consistently.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are good. Students speak of a high degree of challenge in lessons, and their development as performers is given close individual attention by perceptive and ambitious staff. Aspirations have been raised since the last inspection. The disciplines of dance, singing and acting are well integrated. Trinity reports highlight the fact that singing, acting and the development of the voice are now given sufficient prominence on the course. Assessments are transparent, fair and effective in motivating students. Self-evaluation by students is carried out consistently, and overall appraisals invite their detailed reflection; but a minority of students do not benefit from these as well as they might because they lack the capacity to articulate and review their personal targets for development. With this in mind, the college is reviewing the current lack of a formal tutorial system whereby students' overall progress might be more effectively monitored and their self-critical abilities guided.

The curriculum is very well balanced to enable all students to develop their strengths to the maximum potential and to work hard on improving areas of acknowledged relative weakness. Classical ballet underpins all training, but jazz, contemporary and tap dance all feature prominently, as do singing, acting and musical theatre. Performance opportunities are good without disrupting the programme of training. A particular strength is the integrated professional studies lessons in which students explore all aspects of the profession they seek to enter. They become well equipped to manage their own professional careers. A few students also undertake qualifications as dance teachers, but this work is extra-curricular and causes minimal interference to their main programme.

Students are well guided and supported throughout their time at the college. The principal and deputy principal are very accessible to all students and take a strong personal interest in their welfare. Injury support is good. Students receive good training and advice in personal health management, including

nutritional guidance, and have access to physiotherapy and specialist counselling as required. First-year students in particular speak of an environment of high ambition and expectation tempered with close personal nurture. Students with particular learning needs are well looked after in personal terms, but their needs are not formally diagnosed in an educationally specific way nor is specialist learning support made available to them.

Leadership and management

The college is exceptionally well led and managed. It is given a strong identity and clear strategic direction by the principal and deputy principal. Since the last inspection, close attention has been paid to attracting a higher calibre of talent, raising the aspirations of students and monitoring graduate employment. The overall monitoring of students' progress through the course has improved but is still in need of more specific and regular focus. The college has a very good grasp of its own standards and the employment its students obtain.

Quality assurance is outstanding. Self assessment is continuous, incisive, honest and realistic, and leads to a thorough annual report and associated action plan. The college seeks the views of students on their experiences and acts directly but sensitively on what they have to say, without abandoning its duty to set the agenda for training and development in the ways it sees fit. Staff views are also obtained, but in 2007 the survey was too limited to give a fully representative set of opinions. The lesson observation scheme is perceptive and helps the college identify good teaching practice. Two or three teachers have taken up the opportunity to observe each others' lessons and share their evaluations: this mature good practice is to be extended as resources and timetables allow.

Teachers are very experienced and bring considerable professional expertise and experience to their work but few are formally qualified as teachers. The college encourages their professional development and training, but is not in a position to pay for it to any substantial extent. Resources for students are good.

The college has no formal governing body or external advisory panel, but all its administrative functions are carried out in an exemplary way and a wide range of guest teachers and visiting patrons provides good external quality assurance. At present, the principal and deputy principal carry the major responsibility for monitoring the personal, academic and vocational progress of all students. They carry out this role with sterling dedication and much skill, but the detailed attention it requires merits a more equitable devolution of responsibility amongst other staff.

Points for consideration

The college might usefully:

- undertake an initial diagnosis of any particular learning needs that students might have and provide specialist support for them
- review the teaching qualifications of regular teachers and provide them with opportunities to become suitably qualified to teach
- explore further the use of tutorials to ensure that students' overall progress is more effectively monitored and reviewed and they are helped to identify specific targets for improvement.