

# The Urdang Academy

## Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

### Inspection report

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Provider reference	50029
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 course was previously inspected by Ofsted on 10-13 October 2005 when it was graded good (grade 2) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. The leadership and management of the college were last inspected on 17 January 2006 and were also graded good (grade 2).

### Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that the standard of work at Urdang continues to be good. Trinity assessors note that although the quality of students' performances overall is variable, it is sometimes outstanding. Reports include many positive judgements about the performances of individual students, such as, 'a clever, mature committed performance', 'acting and singing of the highest level' and 'an excellent performer'. A 2007 show report produced by the Council for Dance Education and Training paints a similar picture, describing the performance as 'well chosen... interesting ... inventive and effective most of the time...' Trinity's recent revalidation report also noted the 'exceptionally high standard' of contextual studies.

Most of those enrolling reach the end of the course and are successful in gaining a National Diploma in either Professional Musical Theatre or Dance. However, retention rates are falling. While the average over three years is about 80%, of those enrolling in 2004, nearly a quarter of students failed to complete the course in 2007.

Students are courteous and articulate and teachers report that attendance and standards of discipline have improved significantly since the last inspection.

Few Urdang students fail to get work in the industry. The academy estimates that about half of those graduating in 2007 already have contracts.

Employment records, which are much better than at the time of the last inspection, are still being compiled. They show that former students will typically find themselves in pantomime, commercial entertainment, cruise ships or national or European touring companies. Of the 2007 cohort, one student is a principal dancer in *The X Factor*, one was in *Carmen Jones* at the Royal Festival Hall and one was in the film of *Mama Mia*. The academy points out that a number of past students have principal character roles in West End productions such as *Mary Poppins*, *The Lion King* and *Hairspray*. However, the academy recognises that improving the quality of students' employment must remain a priority.

### Quality of provision

Two new heads of department and about half the teaching staff have been appointed since the last inspection. Heads of department describe a highly motivated team of specialists who are clear about their aims and objectives. A scrutiny of formal class observations and discussions with teachers confirm this view. Third year students also report much improved teaching and particularly appreciate the strong links with the industry which some teachers bring with them. The academy recognises the need to promote opportunities for continuing professional development more effectively. A number of teachers have teaching qualifications; others are keen to become qualified and would benefit from more effectively organised advice and guidance about suitable routes. Subject schemes of work are comprehensive and Trinity assessors found assessment 'clear and rigorous.' Students say they know about their level of progress in each subject and of what they need to do to improve.

Students may choose two routes towards a national diploma: musical theatre or dance. In practice the vast majority choose musical theatre and it is in recognition of this that the academy has recently integrated elements of the musical theatre curriculum to give students a more realistic appreciation of the diverse range of specialist skills they will need. For example, a new acting through song class applies established acting techniques, such as those formulated by Stanislavski, to singing. For students on both routes, additional subjects are aimed at equipping students for 'the sound self management of a professional career'.

Trinity is confident that the courses are current and meet students' needs. Both routes 'incorporate regular performance opportunities in a range of venues, thus ensuring the opportunity for the development of performance skills along with experience of work in the professional arena. Both have content and core subjects entirely appropriate for the qualifications.'

Students are overwhelmingly positive about the course and the care that is taken of them. They are confident that they can approach the principal or any other member of staff if they have particular problems. One physically disabled student spoke most warmly about the support he has been given. At the centre of the pastoral system are weekly tutorials in which students raise issues and concerns. However, while students value the formal, termly assessments and the verbal feedback and targets they receive from subject teachers, tutorials do not systematically attend to students' overall progress and there is still no formal monitoring of students' overall achievement to ensure they are doing their very best. There is a comprehensive student handbook and the wide dissemination of the dress and behaviour code has helped to improve students' professional attitudes.

The quality of injury support is outstanding. There are new, well-equipped physiotherapy rooms where well-qualified staff respond effectively both to individual conditions and also to wider trends. For example, when data showed a high incidence of lower leg bio-mechanical problems, concerted action significantly reduced the rate of injuries. An Urdang agency is planned for early 2008. Meanwhile, the academy is working hard to increase third year students' access to auditions and agents.

## Leadership and management

Leadership and management have significantly improved since the last inspection. Lines of accountability are clear in a simplified course management structure. The course leader and his three heads of department are proving a highly effective team and meetings are regular and well minuted with clear action points. Teachers say they get a clear sense of direction but also have opportunities to be flexible and creative. The administration is of a very high standard; systems and communications have improved greatly since the last inspection. Urdang has been active in a number of initiatives to widen participation, running workshops and courses for potential applicants and developing strong links with a disabled/able-bodied dance company.

The quality assurance process has been developed and refined. Departmental reviews are produced annually and destination data is regularly collected and is beginning to provide a map of students' employment

patterns. Class observations and staff appraisals have been introduced, although information from the observation of classes is not yet being collated to provide a wider picture of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning across the academy. The self-assessment report is appropriately concise and contains a number of evidence-based judgements. However, the report would benefit from less description and a more detailed focus on outcomes in the key areas of standards, employment and the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers are not yet sufficiently involved in the quality assurance process. The academy responds positively to students' concerns and makes sure they get feedback.

The course has hugely benefited from the academy's relocation in the old Finsbury Town Hall. This is a bold and imaginative step which has not only provided Urdang with a suite of sparkling new studios and other facilities but has also raised morale, rejuvenated staff and generated a sense of pride. One third year student said, 'We're so lucky that we've had a breakthrough – the New Urdang! I feel privileged to be here.'

#### Points for consideration

The college might usefully:

- explore ways of improving retention
- develop the role of the tutor so that students' overall progress can be monitored and reviewed with greater frequency
- establish links with a local teacher training provider to enable Urdang's teachers to gain suitable teaching qualifications
- collate information from lesson observations to provide a profile of teaching and learning across the academy
- focus self-assessment more closely on outcomes in the key areas of standards, employment and the quality of teaching and learning, and involve staff more in the process.

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