

# Elmhurst School for Dance

## Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

### Inspection report

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## Main findings

Course:	Three-year National Diploma in Professional Dance
Overall effectiveness:	Outstanding (grade 1)
Date of inspection:	30 January 2008

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

### Standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that students at Elmhurst continue to achieve very high standards 'with outstanding students in every cohort'. Among other qualities, Trinity assessors note the 'remarkably high' technical standards of students, their 'excellent work' and their 'beautiful sense of style'. The 2008 re-accreditation report produced by the Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET) paints a similar picture. 'The level of student motivation and achievement is good and in some cases excellent.'

Only one cohort of students has passed through since Elmhurst moved to Birmingham so it is too early to identify trends in their rates of success. Figures provided by the school suggest that slightly over half of those enrolling in 2004 completed the course and, of these, about two thirds gained the Trinity diploma. A third of awards were returned or re-allocated between 2004 and 2007.

Students are courteous and articulate and their written work shows that they are thoughtful and reflective about what they are learning. Weekly ballet diaries suggest that the school is successful in its aim to produce 'thinking dancers'.

Few Elmhurst students fail to get work as dancers when they leave and well over half of those graduating in 2007 already have contracts. Employment records, which are much better than at the time of the last inspection, do not track students who left before 2004. However, since then the school claims an 'increase in numbers of students obtaining contracts with prestigious ballet companies'. Certainly, many more have been successful recently in this respect than in 2005. About half of those graduating in 2007 are now dancing with international ballet companies such as Ballet Ireland, Leipzig Ballet and the Vienna Festival Ballet; three recent leavers have contracts with Birmingham Royal Ballet.

## Quality of provision

Most of the teaching staff joined Elmhurst when the school moved to Birmingham. Students rate the quality of teaching highly and consider it challenging. The classes observed by CDET were 'well prepared and taught'; the CDET also praises the quality of the 'communication, feedback and discussion between teacher and student' and the small class sizes which 'were conducive to an effective learning experience for students'. Regular teachers are former professional dancers and all have teaching qualifications. They are supplemented by visiting guest teachers from around the world, among whom are choreographers of international standing. This combination of loyal regulars and well-known visiting specialists is a strength of the school, one particularly valued by students. Teachers are encouraged to undertake professional development; with the support of the school, one senior member of staff has recently completed the National Professional Qualification for Headship.

Subject schemes of work are comprehensive and assessment thorough. Students say they know about their level of progress in each subject and what they need to do to improve. They receive two reports each year and an end of year appraisal. Trinity assessors praise the internal assessment methods and in particular 'the use of a guest panel of assessors providing a wide range of professional scrutiny'. Trinity moderators found assessments to be 'accurate, consistent and in line with their own judgements'.

The course is very well-structured and carefully considered. Trinity is confident that Elmhurst focuses on 'the training relevant to a modern classical dancer of the highest possible standard' and is 'an exemplary provider of the national diploma in professional dance'. For its part, the CDET judges the course content to be 'appropriate and well structured for professional training'. While the core focus remains ballet, other styles of dance and musical theatre are also taught, giving students an excellent preparation for the wide demands that are likely to be made of them in the twenty-first century. The students appreciate the wide range of different performance opportunities. They particularly value the close relationship between Elmhurst and Birmingham Royal Ballet which enables all third year students to dance with the company.

Students are enthusiastic about the course and speak most highly of the support they receive and 'the friendly atmosphere' of the school. They believe that auditions are fair and do not favour students already at Elmhurst. They have individual tutorials twice a term and appreciate the very detailed feedback they receive from teachers and tutors. There is a comprehensive student handbook and students are clear about the discipline codes. The studios and other spaces are well-designed, warm and safe, and the medical facilities and physiotherapy services are outstanding.

A nurse is always on duty, and according to the CDET, 'the welfare arrangements for students are of the first order'. In the third year, students are prepared well for auditions and benefit greatly from the links their teachers have with a number of national and international dance companies.

## Leadership and management

Since the last inspection, the benefits of the move to bright, purpose-built premises in Birmingham and the developing relationship with the Birmingham Royal Ballet have become apparent. Students like the international profile of the school's work and say they benefit from the 'ambition and buzz'. The school makes efforts to attract students from local black and minority ethnic groups, but the outreach programme is in an early stage of development.

The school is most ably led by the principal and his senior team and the artistic director manages the dance course with impressive energy and commitment. Heads of department and other middle managers are capable and enthusiastic. All systems function well and lines of accountability are clear. The CDET is confident that 'the school and its courses are extremely well led and managed' and there is little doubt that the school will continue to improve.

Teachers are regularly appraised and the artistic director is vigilant in ensuring the high quality of teaching is maintained. Students' questionnaires are widely used to elicit feedback. However, while data, such as that about graduate employment, are collected, it is not fully exploited to illuminate the school's strengths and weaknesses, as uncertainties about student retention already noted reveal. Similarly, while the self-assessment report contains a wealth of information, it is too dependent on assertion rather than evidence-based judgements to be a useful quality assurance tool and needs 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.

## Points for action

The school must:

- improve retention
- ensure that the quality assurance process for the diploma course is based upon a rigorous and shared process of self-assessment.