

English National Ballet School

Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

Inspection report

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Main Findings

Course:	Two-year National Certificate and three-year National Diploma in Professional Dance (classical ballet)
Overall effectiveness:	Outstanding (grade 1)
Date of inspection:	5 November 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 June 2004 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 also graded outstanding (grade 1).

Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that the standard of dance in classes and performances continues to be outstanding. The recent (2007) re-validation report judges the school to be 'an exemplary provider' of the Trinity certificate and diploma, with 'several outstanding students in every cohort'. As well as excellent attainment in classical ballet, assessors also noted that 'the standard of contemporary dance was high'. They scrutinised a 'good range of supporting studies work' and adjudged some of this work to be outstanding. After watching an assessed performance, one assessor wrote that 'the corps were beautifully rehearsed and worked very well as a team', and on another similar occasion the visiting assessor noted that 'the whole of the first year is worthy of mention' for 'mastering a strong base in their technique and displaying a beautiful, natural sense of performance'. Some individual students were picked out and commended for such qualities as 'excellent clarity of line', 'a maturity and depth of emotion in her dancing that belied her years' and 'dynamic energy and athletic style'.

Retention of students on the courses is good, averaging around 80% over the last three cohorts, although the school's commendably flexible admissions policy, whereby students occasionally join the course in the second year or half way through a year, makes annual comparisons by this measure difficult. Of those students who completed their course over the last three years, all passed their respective qualification. Most students undertake the diploma and stay for three years; a few students achieve the certificate after two years and are advised to broaden their dance skills in other styles, particularly

in contemporary or jazz dance, as their ballet technique has not developed enough to enable them to reach the standard required to join English National Ballet or a similar company by the end of their third year. Most of these students complete their professional training elsewhere. The school keeps very good records of why a few students leave prematurely. Punctuality and attendance are outstanding, and the school instils in its students a very strong sense of personal discipline and responsibility.

A large majority of students gain employment in the performing arts profession when they leave. The school has a target of 85% of graduating diploma students to gain related employment within six months of leaving; it exceeded that target for those who left in 2006 and 2007, and has already met it for those who left in 2008. Of those latter, five (out of 19 leavers) have secured contracts with the English National Ballet company, with whom the school enjoys particularly strong links. Records of the most recent graduates are good, but the school acknowledges that it needs to try and improve the longer-term tracking of graduates' destinations. Typically, and in addition to work with English National Ballet, former students find work with national and international classical ballet companies, with contemporary dance companies and occasionally in musical theatre. For example, recent graduates have worked with Scottish Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet, the Royal Ballet, the Royal Danish Ballet, Northern Ballet Theatre, Houston Ballet, Rambert Dance, and in a national tour of *West Side Story*.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are outstanding. Students respond with vigour to the very high expectations that teachers have of them, and appreciate the balance of demanding challenge and personal support they each receive. They also enjoy the fact that although they are taught regularly by a small core team of teachers who get to know them and their work very well, as the course proceeds they are exposed more to incoming guest teachers who require that they become adaptable to different physical and stylistic demands. Thus they develop artistic versatility and professional resilience on top of a well-grounded technique. The core teaching team, as well as the senior leadership of the school, has changed since the last inspection, and a new teaching ethos has evolved. The school is now successfully eliciting from its students a stronger sense of their own creative contribution to their development without compromising the highest technical standards. Students say they are encouraged to draw from their individual personalities in their dancing, and teachers say that they are able to focus on nurturing the individual artistry of fully rounded, versatile performers. Opportunities to perform and to choreograph are good and increasing further as students become more artistically confident and adventurous.

Assessment is, according to Trinity, 'clear and rigorous'. It is thorough and systematic, consistently and fairly applied and fully understood by students.

The results of assessment are collated by tutors and discussed with students in tutorials. Individual targets and goals are agreed and closely monitored. Students feel very secure with this system and have a good understanding of what they need to do to improve. As part of the changing ethos of the school, there is now a very strong emphasis upon developing in students their own capacity for self-awareness and self-criticism, together with a readiness to manage their own physical well-being through their careers.

The curriculum has been comprehensively reviewed and revised since the arrival of the present director in January 2006. It is highly responsive to changing professional practice and market competition. As the previous two-year course has grown into a three-year course, so opportunities for performance, work placements, choreography and outreach work have all increased to enrich students' experience and enhance their employment prospects. Contemporary dance has assumed a stronger significance in the school. Professional and support studies have become much more closely aligned with the dance repertoire by replacing the study of A level dance with a series of in-house courses such as 'dance through time' and 'dance on screen'. Singing tuition, and voice and acting workshops have been introduced to extend students' performance capabilities. A 'healthy dancer' programme was introduced to the curriculum in 2006 to improve students' core strength and stamina. The full benefits of some of these changes have still to be evaluated, but they are being implemented in a strategically coherent way by the whole teaching team.

Support and guidance are outstanding. Each year group is allocated one of the core teaching staff as their tutor, so over three years a student will have three tutors. This achieves an effective blend of familiarity and novelty. Tutors themselves achieve a very good balance of support and challenge, particularly in the third year when students are increasingly exposed to the demands of independent learning and the rigours of the profession. Additional support is extensive and much appreciated by students. Those with particular learning needs, such as dyslexia, or foreign students who need additional English lessons receive supportive teaching by specialist staff from the neighbouring further education college, and there is a fully integrated health team who serve students' needs, consisting of a nutritionist, a chiropodist, a sports masseur, a physiotherapist and a performance psychologist. A student support manager oversees all this provision. Students' body condition, core strength and general health are very good and continue to improve further. All new students are given a 'buddy' from the second or third year to help them settle into the very friendly, close-knit community of the school. An innovative international student programme was started last year to help the significant numbers of foreign students integrate more effectively into the local community. Students feel very secure and happy in a school that has their all-round welfare as its first priority.

Leadership and management

The school is extremely well led and managed. It has gone through significant change since the last inspection. The director, who took over the school in January 2006, has moved the ethos of the school from one which was hierarchical in structure and style to one which is genuinely collaborative. All core teachers are recent appointments since 2006. Both the director and the head of studies bring a strong educational dimension to the work of the school, and there is much discussion amongst teachers of how students learn most effectively. Teachers are observed teaching regularly by the director, and the results contribute to their personal annual review. Records of these observations and discussions are informal but insightful, and the school finds this approach more natural, habitual and thorough than a series of formal observations. Peer observation is about to be introduced to disseminate the best practice and further invigorate the debate about learning.

Staff and students speak highly of the close family atmosphere in the school, and general communications are excellent. Students' opinions are valued, and in addition to course reviews their concerns are addressed through a system of elected representatives who meet fortnightly. The 'buddy' system and international student programme were both developed as a result of what students said.

Teachers bring a wealth of experience from the performing arts profession to inform their work. They are well qualified in many respects, but most do not have a recognised professional teaching qualification. The school is exploring opportunities for some of them to undertake further training in an environment that is specific to the context of their teaching. The school makes excellent use of its close relationship with the English National Ballet company, and students derive significant benefit from this liaison, including through a work placement programme for third year students.

Resources are generally very good, with the school's own studios and studio theatre being augmented by regular use of professional venues to give students diverse performance experience. The colleges own library stock is augmented by the learning resources of the neighbouring further education college. They would appreciate more access to studio space to do their own work as both dancers and choreographers. The school is involved in considerable outreach work, and actively promotes its equal opportunities and diversity policy to try and attract more applicants from under-represented ethnic and class groups. For example, the school has started an associates programme for aspiring applicants from more deprived backgrounds to try and ensure they get an opportunity to develop their skills to the required level for auditioning for the diploma course.

Quality assurance and self assessment are thorough and effective. The annual self-assessment report is particularly good at identifying aspects of the provision that have improved, but it omits any evaluative commentary on the quality and characteristics of teaching and learning. The school has a bold and imaginative vision for its future development, articulated in the strategic plan.

Points for consideration

The school might usefully:

- improve the tracking of graduates' professional destinations over time
- continue to explore the opportunity for more teachers to gain teaching qualifications as part of their own professional development
- include in the self-assessment report an evaluative commentary on the quality and characteristics of teaching and learning.