

# Northern Ballet School

Inspection of colleges participating in the Dance and Drama Award scheme

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**Unique reference number:** 53634  
**Name of lead inspector:** Joanna Beckford-Hall HMI  
**Last day of inspection:** 6 April 2011

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## Information about the college

1. Northern Ballet School is a private performing arts college that trains students for employment in the dance industry. The college runs a three-year course in dance leading to the national diploma in professional dance, awarded by Trinity College, London. Northern Ballet School is accredited by the Council for Dance Education and Training.
2. The college is based at the Dancehouse in Manchester and enrolls many students from across the United Kingdom and internationally, often from Japan. There are currently 105 students enrolled at the college, of whom 60 are in receipt of dance and drama awards (DaDA) funded by the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA).

## Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

<b>Overall effectiveness of provision</b>
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<b>Grade 1</b>
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<b>Capacity to improve</b>
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<b>Grade 1</b>
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## Overall effectiveness

3. Northern Ballet School is an outstanding college and the college leadership team shows outstanding capacity to develop and sustain further improvement. Outcomes for students are outstanding as a result of very sound guidance to coach students throughout three years of intensive training, outstanding teaching which stretches students' ability, and a relevant and interesting curriculum meeting the needs of students and the mission of Northern Ballet School. Leaders are careful to ensure that all students can access the curriculum, develop their literacy skills and make at least good progress during their studies.
4. Students are passionate about their training and highly ambitious for their future careers in the dance and musical theatre industries. They are realistic about their own strengths as dancers and which dance genres and styles they need to continually strive to improve. Students are kept very well informed about their progress. They receive purposeful and detailed feedback in daily classes and as part of each termly assessment. The course leader has a very secure overview of the progress of all students and diligently guides staff to plan lessons that include challenging targets for students. Students told inspectors that rigour, commitment and high expectations are set right from audition days, characterising Northern Ballet School. Students enjoy their training because teaching is outstanding, they receive much personalised support, and they feel the student voice is well heard and ideas acted upon by staff and the Principal.

5. The curriculum has been modified since the last inspection and although retaining its original name as Northern Ballet School the curriculum has much greater breadth than this implies. The Principal's forward-looking vision for the college has nurtured its development to make certain that the training of dancers for mainstream dance work and dance in musical theatre is rigorously underpinned by a set of core performance skills across dance genres. This means the curriculum gives dancers versatility and adaptability for performing careers in national and international contexts. Northern Ballet School is well led by the Principal who helps staff to feel they can share their ideas for developing the college. A good team spirit permeates the work of the college. Responses from employers were overwhelmingly positive, resoundingly supportive of the leadership work and extremely complimentary about the high calibre of graduates.

### **Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors**

#### **What students like:**

- the highly disciplined learning environment which nurtures student talent and respects individual difference
- excellent guidance for diet, health and fitness made pertinent to the female and male dancer's body in different dance training requirements
- very good care and guidance for injury treatment and prevention with excellent communication between the staff when dealing with injured students who watch classes
- clear and supportive guidance for assessing their progress over time, with regular and useful assessment, clear feedback and constructive dialogue to set improvement targets
- the diversity of staff experience and how staff use their experience and industry knowledge to enrich the teaching and guide students in planning their careers
- a tightly-focused curriculum inclusive of different genres and styles and resolutely underpinned by a core of ballet and jazz training
- good opportunity to perform in college productions enhanced through the well equipped on-site theatre
- many chances to be involved in outreach work across the Manchester area, notably with project with the Hallé Orchestra and local schools.

#### **What students would like to see improved:**

- there were no areas recommended for improvement by the students.

### **Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors**

#### **What employers like:**

- high standards of training in ballet and jazz, and versatile dancers who meet the needs of the industry
- highly disciplined graduates who show commitment, professionalism and maturity

- outstanding communication with leaders of the school who understand the requirements of the dance and musical theatre industry.

**What employers would like to see improved:**

- there were no areas recommended for improvement by employers.

## **Main inspection report**

### **Capacity to make and sustain improvement**

**Grade 1**

6. Outcomes for students are outstanding and continue to improve. The Principal and course leader have helped staff sustain an excellent standard of work in lessons and have adapted the curriculum to make certain that students' preparedness for a rapidly changing industry is secure. Graduate destination data for the last three years exemplify high standards of training not only in the percentage quickly securing employment, but also in the progression of students in regular and highly regarded dance work. The school's capacity to nurture relationships with leading agents, casting directors, and increasingly with agents in America, is very good and helps students to feel confident in the career guidance they receive.
7. Students continue to make at least good and often outstanding progress because the quality of teaching rarely falters to anything less than good; throughout three years of training students are consistently challenged to succeed. The course leader evaluates student progress at individual levels and is steadily securing greater capacity in heads of discipline and staff teams to evaluate outcomes for students by gender, ethnicity and by learning difficulties and/or disabilities. There is still more scope for quantitative data analysis to solidly underpin subject development plans.
8. Leaders have improved retention of students greatly, put in place a more rigorous system of setting goals for students, and have carefully expanded the lesson observation programme to involve more staff. Recognising the significance of formal teaching qualifications in raising the quality of learning in studios has been a key shift in last three years and is borne out in some exemplary studio practice. Staff comment favourably about how the opportunities afforded to them through different professional development courses is helping staff engage more fully in pedagogical discussion. In particular, feedback against specific lesson observation criteria is helping staff become increasingly reflective about how learning and teaching methods can be more inclusive of different student needs. Communication is a key strength at the college and staff say that everyone feels included in decision making.

### **Outcomes for learners**

**Grade 1**

9. Student achievement is outstanding. As a result of often stimulating and challenging teaching coupled with excellent care and guidance, students make at least good and often outstanding progress. Throughout their training there is a sharp focus on setting high expectations for securing a career in the dance industry and continuous stretch of students to achieve their potential identified during rigorous audition processes. Reports by external assessors for all year groups comment very favourably about the level of versatility of dancers, strong partner work, dynamism and secure musicality. Recent third-year jazz work was judged as 'slick and clean' and good characterisation and footwork was seen in the performance of the ballet 'The Nutcracker'. By the third year, the pointe work of those students who choose to major in ballet is well accomplished and reflects demanding class work. Leaders acknowledge that the vocal work of the majority of students continues to improve and although not as outstanding as the profile of dance, external reports verify much strength in ensemble voice. A small minority of students each year really excel in singing in final year performances. Recent reports confirm the college as an 'exemplary provider' of the Trinity diploma award.
10. The accomplished skills acquired by students provide a very secure basis for success at audition. Data for the last three years show a rising trend in the percentage of students securing employment within six months of graduation, rising from 72% in 2008 to 92% in 2010. The large majority of students enter the dance industry through a jazz dance route, securing work in cruise ship tours, productions such as 'Dirty Dancing' in the West End, contracts in Disneyland in Paris, and cabaret. A small minority secure work in smaller scale ballet companies. A few students pursue careers as dance teachers. The profile of graduate destinations continues to support the highly-regarded reputation of Northern Ballet School. This is a key driver for students choosing to study at the college.
11. Retention has improved from the last inspection and is averaging over 90%. Leaders are more detailed in questioning students as part of the interview process, ascertaining their commitment to a physically intensive course. Leaders do their utmost to support students who may be injured and try to provide additional funding for students who are not in receipt of dance and drama awards. Of the students who completed their course over the last three years 100% passed their diploma qualification. Punctuality and attendance are outstanding and professional conduct in arriving on time for class is reinforced.
12. Students feel very safe and well cared for by staff and appreciate the open door policy of the Principal. They are guided well in securing appropriate accommodation and are astute in managing their own personal safety, especially in travelling from the college after late rehearsals. There is very good monitoring of students health and well being. Students possess insightful understanding of food groups and how diet affects both the dancer's physique and performance. Hydration, care of the voice and the key principles of warming up and warming down are ingrained practices as part of their dancers' life. Study of biomechanics, strength and flexibility training are combined very well, giving students the technical capacity to use the body in various ways

according to different dance genres. Most teachers are quickly able to draw links between the application of technical and interpretative skills across classes.

13. Northern Ballet School welcomes all students as individuals and the small, cohesive and inclusive student community is complemented by good working relationships with teaching staff. Students who speak English as an additional language, students from different minority ethnic groups and students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve as well as their peers.

## **The quality of provision**

## **Grade 1**

14. The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding, enabling the majority of students to reach their potential. Students relish challenge. They are focused, show attention to detail and persevere in lessons where pace is demanding. Expectations are high and the combination of technical skill and artistry is taught very well. In a Horton technique dance class students were able to quickly learn the spiralling action into the floor and were confident in asking questions about the transition from floor to standing. In several ballet classes inspectors observed demanding enchainment to improve dancers' stamina and ability to respond to different rhythms.
15. Teachers have an excellent rapport with students. Most teachers help students to peer and self-assess their learning. Inspectors observed very good use of searching questioning, effectively testing students' understanding and helping them analyse how to apply corrections. Teachers use open-ended questioning to develop students' analytical skills and help students to annotate their technique logs and record key points arising from lessons. In some lessons teaching does not use enough targeted questioning to students who speak English as an additional language and opportunities are lost to further enhance their confidence in spoken English. In vocal classes students are used to marking up scores. Students watching classes as a result of injury are actively brought into discussion work and the small group and paired feedback has good impact on students' progress. Students confirm that critiquing each others' work is a feature of most lessons and helps them in end of term assessments when they agree targets for improvement with their tutors. Students have mature attitudes in giving criticism to each other. They recognise that this is built on good trust amongst students who want to help each other succeed. Diary logs are very detailed and show much reflection and appreciation of their progress over time.
16. Assessment of students is detailed, transparent and fair. External assessors confirm the accurate marking of student work and the double marking processes ensures that staff are appropriately applying assessment criteria. Outcomes from assessments in each discipline are well documented in students' own files and in the tracking documents collated by the course leader. Targets set by students and their tutors record their strengths and areas requiring improvement. Students know what they need to work on, how and why, and are encouraged to ask questions in lessons and in tutorial sessions to address their goals. The goal-setting information is shared very well at course team

meetings and there is regular dialogue about student progress; but not all staff are using this effectively to plan lessons to consistently address these targets. The numerical grading scale is understood by staff and made clear to students in the course handbook, but description of what characterises the numerical grading is less clear. Occasionally aggregation of marks means that the mark band can appear quite narrow.

17. The curriculum offers training in the genres of ballet, tap, jazz and contemporary dance with many styles taught such as classical ballet, Horton and Cunningham technique, commercial street jazz styles, and styles derived from influence of leading figures such as Fosse. Since the last inspection singing tuition and the overall quality of vocal work has improved and has more prominence in the curriculum. The revised schemes of work for all disciplines are largely good and give clear overview of three years, but there are missed opportunities to cross fertilise the links between disciplines and learning outcomes for different genres, style periods in history and key practitioners being studied. Bibliographies for students are variable in detail. Recent vocal training is more comprehensive in giving students a wider range of complementary skills for musical theatre auditions. Students benefit from the stretch and tone classes and use practical sessions to complement their learning about the dancer's physique in theory-based sessions.
18. Through contextual studies students develop a good understanding of the history of dance and musical theatre but not all staff exploit the many good text-based and digital recordings available to complement studio-based learning. Studios are well equipped with television and playback facility, but this is not used frequently enough to give students the chance to appraise stylistic features in professional works and then transpose this learning into their physical interpretation in the studio.
19. The pastoral welfare of students is outstanding. The attention to the needs of students is very good and well supported by a small staff team who know students very well. The student disability officer and the Japanese student liaison officer ensure additional support is offered to targeted students with medical, learning or languages needs. Staff development has increasingly included sessions from external agencies and experts in areas such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, but some sessions need to give more practical links to studio-based teaching. Injury support is outstanding because the college draws effectively on its own in-house expertise to work with reputable physiotherapists and local medical practitioners to individualise after-care support and treatment packages. Students feel safe and well cared for around the building because facilities are well maintained.

## **Leadership and management**

## **Grade 1**

20. The Principal and course leader drive the vision and ambition for the college very well and have the 'buy-in' of staff to help all changes be purposeful and successful. The Principal's open door policy means that she meets regularly with staff in teaching teams and on a one-to-one basis to share her ideas and listen

to theirs, resulting in very good communication throughout the college. This is particularly so in discussions about current practice in dance teaching and how the college can use the more formalised programme of lesson observations and peer observation to promote excellence. Since the last inspection more teachers have acquired a recognised teaching qualification and the impact of their training is starting to support deeper reflection about planning and teaching amongst all staff. From the formal observations of teaching leaders know what characterises the very best teaching at the college and where there are a few remaining weaknesses, but how this is collated, evaluated and documented in self-assessment and action plans is not always cohesive.

21. Leaders have a secure understanding of the main priorities for the college. Self-assessment overall is good, and comments on outcomes from quality assurance procedures are robust and purposeful in monitoring progress of students, assuring quality in teaching, and helping staff to contribute to course development. Feedback from students is regularly received formally and informally and shared with staff, as is feedback from leading industry figures, all of which helps shape changes to the training course. However, while staff know strengths and areas for development and the rationale for these from the annual course review, the line of sight through analysis of quantitative and qualitative evidence to measurable success criteria is not as cogent on paper as in discussion. The missing link in the whole course evaluation and self-assessment is the bringing together of evaluations of evidence against measurable outcomes for all students. All staff are ambitious for the professional success of students and do their very best to use their own connections in the industry to support graduate employment prospects. Staff track destinations well and ensure that contact from ex-students and information from casting directors and agents is captured. The destinations of different categories of student, such as by gender, ethnicity or disability are not currently analysed.
22. The promotion of equality and diversity at Northern Ballet School is outstanding. The college continues to attract a proportion of international students each year and actively seeks to attract students from under-represented groups. Students and staff are treated fairly and there are no reported incidents of discrimination. Students say that auditions and casting for productions are equitable and over the three years there is equal chance for students to take part in performances. The college is compliant with regulations for safe vetting of the workforce and processes to ensure that students are safe and well looked after are good.
23. Resources are used extremely well and students really benefit from the on-site theatre. The library and information and communication technology resources support students well in projects such as their own risk assessment portfolio, creating curriculum vitae and completing performance reviews. The use of the studios and theatre for external hire and community dance classes helps the Principal secure additional revenue to be invested in the high quality of training offered. The college provides outstanding value for money.
24. Northern Ballet School is frequently involved in outreach work that supports its own students' development and that of children in the local community. Projects

with the Halle Orchestra engage dancers in creative work with musicians to devise dances with children in primary schools in Years 5 and 6. Feedback from Halle personnel praises the quality of work by Northern Ballet School students. The college offers numerous days of dance for boys from local secondary and primary schools as part of its work to promote equality of opportunity for young male and female dancers.

### **What does Northern Ballet School need to do to improve further?**

- Enable all teachers to make better use of the good target setting with students so that all lesson planning and teaching consistently stretches the ability of every student in the class.
- Encourage all teachers to make better use of audio-visual resources in studio-based learning and link this back to the learning in contextual studies.
- Ensure that all schemes of work are equally detailed in both learning outcomes, content and key resources so that there is more explicit documenting of links across disciplines
- As part of the cycle of evaluation and improvement planning, strengthen how leaders interpret, evaluate and document key trends in statistical and qualitative evidence to evaluate changes to provision measured against outcomes for students.

## **Information about the inspection**

25. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the course leader as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of Northern Ballet School's most recent self-assessment report, reports by the qualification awarding body Trinity, London, the course improvement plan, the previous inspection report and data about students' achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
26. Inspectors observed lessons, some of which were jointly conducted with the course leader and Principal. Inspectors conducted group interviews with students from all three year groups, met with teaching staff and considered feedback from employers.

<b>Record of main findings</b>			
<b>Provider name</b>	<b>Northern Ballet School</b>	<b>Inspection number</b>	<b>364629</b>
<b>Learning types: 16-18 learner responsive: FE full-time.</b>			

<b>Grades using the 4 point scale</b> 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	<b>Overall</b>
<b>Approximate number of enrolled learners at the time of inspection</b> Full-time learners.	105
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Capacity to improve</b>	1
<b>Outcomes for learners</b>	<b>1</b>
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	1
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	1
How well do learners progress?	1
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	1
How safe do learners feel?	1
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	1
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	
<b>Quality of provision</b>	<b>1</b>
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	1
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	1
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	1
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	1
<b>Leadership and management</b>	<b>1</b>
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	1
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	NA
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	1
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	2
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	2
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	1

\*where applicable to the type of provision

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