



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

NORTHERN BALLET SCHOOL

**Inspection of dance and drama schools in receipt of awards allocated by the
Department for Education and Skills**

This inspection was carried out by OFSTED under section 62 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000. It was a joint inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI).

Office for Standards in Education
Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

Telephone: 020 7421 6800

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NORTHERN BALLET SCHOOL INSPECTION REPORT

Inspection: May 2002

Basic information about the college

Name of college:	Northern Ballet School
Type of college:	Dance school
Director:	Ms Patricia McDonald
Address of college:	The Dancehouse 10 Oxford Road Manchester M1 5QA
Telephone number:	0161 237 1406
Fax number:	0161 237 1408
Name of reporting inspector:	Tim Clark HMI
Dates of inspection:	May 2002

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Part A: Summary

Information about the academy

Northern Ballet School was founded in 1977 at a site in central Manchester. In 1992, the school moved to its present site, a converted and renovated 1930s cinema known as The Dancehouse. In 1994, the school opened its own 430-seat theatre. The school offers a three-year diploma in professional dance. At the start of the second year, students choose whether to focus on classical ballet or jazz theatre dance as the main subject for the rest of their course.

There are 90 female and 15 male students on the professional dance course. The total number of students in receipt of financial awards from the Department for Education and Skills (DFES) is 73. A few students are from minority ethnic groups, and 16 are from abroad. The school also offers a dance teachers' course, adult evening classes and classes for children in the evening and on Saturdays.

Northern Ballet School is a non-profit making company limited by guarantee; the principal, who founded the school, and the administrator, who is also the financial manager, are the two executive directors. There is a group of seven non-executive advisers who can be called on to provide expertise in a variety of fields. A separate property management company manages the premises. A third company manages the theatre, its bar and associated facilities. The school's mission refers to a choice of courses designed to optimise students' dance career prospects through rigorous full-time training. The prospectus makes it clear that the school offers ballet training and jazz theatre dance training. The school is neither exclusively a ballet school nor a musical theatre school.

How effective is the school?

Key strengths

- good teaching
- well-integrated elements of training
- productive links with the profession
- good performance opportunities for students
- effective leadership and management
- well-organised provision.

What should be improved?

- students' confidence in their own work
- the approach to contemporary dance.

Students' views of the school

Students' views of the college were taken into account and are summarised below.

What students like about the school

- approachable teachers and friendly atmosphere
- the quality of the teaching and training
- range and variety of training on the course
- wide performance opportunities
- classes onstage in the theatre.

What they feel could be improved

- the amount and stylistic variety of contemporary dance
- the number of workshops on street and hip-hop dance styles.

Part B: The professional dance course

Inspectors judged the provision to be **good (grade 2)**

They observed 13 classes, which were graded on a seven-point scale for teaching and learning.

Summary of grades awarded to teaching and learning by inspectors

Grade	Teaching	Learning
1	4	2
2	5	7
3	3	2
4	0	1
5	1	0
6	0	1
7	0	0

Key: The range of grades includes: excellent (grade 1), very good (2), good (3), satisfactory (4), unsatisfactory (5), poor (6) and very poor (7).

Strengths

- much very good teaching
- well-integrated elements of training
- skill with which students use teacher's corrections
- good singing
- productive professional links
- good performance opportunities
- the school's excellent theatre.

Weaknesses

- lack of confidence which restricts some students' work in class
- lack of clarity about contemporary dance.

Scope of provision

1. The school offers a three-year professional dance course. Students choose a ballet or a jazz focus at the start of the second year. They can also take classes leading to external dance and dance teaching examinations. Ballet focus students study pointe work, pas de deux, virtuosity and solo and corps de ballet work. Jazz focus students take two core jazz techniques, musical theatre repertoire, tap, double work and a fortnightly workshop in various jazz styles. All students take classes in tap and contemporary dance as well as ballet and jazz. Other performance studies include drama, singing, choreography and stage and audition technique. Contextual and ancillary studies include anatomy, stage fighting, music and information technology (IT). All students have a fitness programme built into the curriculum. Male students visit a gym and female students take Pilates body strengthening classes. Students may also take General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and Advanced (A) level subjects.

Achievements and standards

2. Standards of work are high. The standards achieved by first-year students, at the time of the inspection, demonstrated the school's capacity to attract increasing numbers of able students. Students generally have good muscle tone and well-trained bodies. In one class, held on the stage, the students succeeded in bringing all of the elements of their training together. They sang, danced and created roles well. A classical pas de deux, which formed part of a public performance was technically demanding and was danced with confidence and style. Students perform well but, in class, some lack confidence in their own abilities, and fail to do themselves justice. The school produces some good singers. In one class, students sang solo with flair and confidence. They displayed good pitch and technique and had a well-developed sense of delivery. In rehearsal and performance, students bring the separate elements of their training together in a professional manner. They are able to maintain their focus on the technical demands of the two disciplines whilst receiving directions on dramatic content and corrections from the teacher. Those students focusing on ballet are proficient in corps de ballet skills. The standard of some students' work in performing the more difficult solo steps is high. Retention is satisfactory. Students succeed in securing employment related to their training; for example, they find work on large cruise liners, in small-scale ballet companies and in dance/musical theatre touring shows. Graduates from 2001 are currently employed in cabaret, on three leading cruise liners, with European Ballet and Vienna Festival Ballet, in television work and in small roles in films.

Quality of education and training

3. Most of the teaching observed was good or very good, and some of it was excellent. Students generally make good progress in class and are adept at responding to corrections. Teachers expect a high standard of work, but they also support students well. Some classes, in particular jazz dance and third-year ballet classes, are taught as they would be to professional dancers. Particularly good use is made of the stage as a teaching resource, for example, some repertoire classes are taught by two teachers so that technical development can be addressed whilst students are also learning stagecraft. Students are encouraged to think for themselves and to have a voice within the school. The students are better prepared for employment in the core jazz techniques than in hip-hop or street dance styles. Contemporary dance is taught once a week for each year. Students do not have a clear

understanding of this discipline. In one class, some of the students were bewildered by the content of the exercises they were asked to carry out. Following a change of staff, the school has reconsidered the role of the drama department. Teachers encourage dramatic expression and characterisation in their own classes, and do so with particular success in repertoire classes.

4. There are three full-time teachers, including the course co-ordinator, in addition to the principal. All staff have either extensive teaching and professional experience, or are well qualified as dance teachers. A few are still active within the industry as directors and choreographers. Their current first-hand knowledge is a significant asset to the school. There are guest teacher workshops every fortnight. The school operates a mentoring system for new members of staff.

5. The building, a former cinema, has been converted very effectively into a dance school. The five well-equipped studios are effectively utilised, but suffer from noise leaking through from the street and from nearby activities. The theatre is a valuable asset. The male students' dressing room is too small for the present number of students and there are plans to extend it. A café provides hot and cold food at affordable prices. There is a small but useful collection of books and a good selection of videos and recorded music. Students are given tuition in IT according to ability on the school's new computer suite.

6. There are three major performances a year; one is a full-length ballet, one is a jazz dance/musical theatre programme and the third is mixed. Although students from both strands of the course take part in all performances, the split focus gives opportunities for experience in the students' chosen discipline. The students also have valuable opportunities, carefully monitored to prevent interruption to the training, for small-scale professional work; for example, students get small parts through the British Broadcasting Corporation or Granada Television.

7. The course is well structured. There is a good balance between classical ballet and jazz theatre dance. Schemes of work for ballet and jazz are discussed regularly to ensure that teaching approaches are complementary. A few students take advantage of arrangements negotiated with a local further education college to allow them to take GCE AS and A-level courses during the day, as well as in the evening. Students are well prepared for seeking employment. They are given effective practice to prepare them for auditions. They are also given help with their curriculum vitae and with using the Internet to research auditions. A local agent visits the school to hold auditions.

8. Assessments are thorough. The students are assessed termly in core subjects of ballet and jazz, and once a year in the performance studies of singing, drama, tap, choreography and contemporary dance, and in contextual studies. Criteria for assessment are clear. Assessments are recorded on video, then used to good effect to guide students.

9. Auditions for entry to the school are judged according to clear criteria, which are explained to applicants. Applicants attending for audition are given a talk by the principal, a tour of the building, a short physical examination and an interview. The demand for places is increasing. Auditions are watched by the school principal and several members of staff. Students are assessed in ballet and jazz. The school explains to applicants the particular nature of the training on offer and directs them accordingly. It has a list of alternative providers for applicants for whom the training is unsuitable.

10. There is a personal tutor for each year-group of female students and a tutor for all male students. Students are well supported in regular individual and group tutorials, and through informal discussions with tutors. Students are referred to specialists outside the school for counselling and physiotherapy. There is a first aid room. Five staff are qualified first aiders. Healthy nutrition and safe dancing are promoted effectively. There is a good system for identifying injured students and monitoring their recovery. Learning support needs are met on an individual basis. Basic skills support is being reviewed with the help of a specialist from a further education college in the area.

Part C: Leadership and management

Inspectors judged leadership and management to be **outstanding (grade 1)**

Strengths

- effective leadership and management
- well-organised provision
- productive quality assurance procedures
- good learning environment
- active promotion of equality of opportunity.

Weaknesses

- no significant weaknesses.

11. The course and the school are well organised and managed effectively. The principal provides firm, clear leadership, closely supported by the course co-ordinator and heads of department. Staff identify with the aims and philosophy of the school. The principal is directly involved in contributing to and monitoring students' progress and the quality of teaching. The course is well planned, and staff and students understand its aims and objectives. The structure and content of the course is made clear to all in the prospectus and course documents. Managers have strengthened provision in several respects over the last year. For example, an assessment co-ordinator has been appointed, and policy and procedures have been developed to provide students with more guidance following assessments. The students value these improvements.

12. Communication between staff is effective. There is a staff meeting every two weeks. Meetings are held on different days of the week to allow as many staff as possible to attend. They are used to monitor students' wellbeing and progress, and for operational matters, and notes are taken of what is discussed. Heads of department meet regularly. There is also a meeting for all staff three times a year.

13. The school has a clear view of its strengths and weaknesses, based on consulting students, staff and an external moderator. The moderator observes classes and gives feedback to teachers and the principal. The principal, heads of department and other teachers also observe classes. Students' views are collected through questionnaires. There are also two group tutorial meetings each term, for which student representatives gather views and draw up agendas. After these tutorial meetings, the student representatives take issues to the principal for consideration. Students have confidence that their views are listened to and that where requests are not met, reasons are given. Teachers review each show to identify improvements for the future and they are regularly asked to draw up written lists of any matters they would like changed. Each half term there is a review meeting that feeds into course planning and timetabling; the most recent was about assessment.

14. Staff contributed their views to the self-assessment report, and commented on the first draft. The self-assessment report is thorough and detailed. Data on retention, including reasons for students' early departure, students' post-course destinations and the gender and ethnicity of students on the course are readily available. The school makes good use of its links with the profession to inform the quality of its training and the standards expected of students.

15. There is an appropriate policy for the promotion of equal opportunities in the school. It is reproduced in the staff handbook and, in summary form, in the student handbook. The two directors are responsible for monitoring the policy, and they discuss equal opportunities in a small group which includes two other staff. There is, however, no regular, recorded discussion of progress in implementing the policy. The college has set about broadening the cohort of applicants for dance training, focusing particularly on males and young people from minority ethnic communities. Students on an ethnically diverse foundation dance course at a further education college in the city can attend a free evening class. One student who came to the course by this route, and others currently preparing for audition, are from minority ethnic communities. As a longer-term aim, the school seeks to encourage interest in dance by sending students to work with children at local primary schools.

16. A well-qualified team including the registrar, course co-ordinator and the full-time administrative and financial manager administers the school effectively. A large rent increase has been successfully managed so as not to damage the school's financial equilibrium. There is no governing body. A group of advisers offer specialist advice when consulted individually.