



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE



Office for Standards
in Education

Inspection report

Northern Ballet School

Date of inspection: 22-26 November 2004

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The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspects dance and drama colleges in receipt of awards allocated by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

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Reference:

Contents

Section	Page
Basic information about the college	iii
Part A: Summary	1
Part B: The Dance Course	3
Part C: Leadership and management	7

Basic information about the college

Name of college:	Northern Ballet School
Type of college:	Dance School
Principal:	Ms Patricia McDonald
Address of college:	The Dancehouse 10 Oxford Road Manchester M1 5QA
Telephone number:	0161 237 1406
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Name of reporting inspector:	David Hornbrook HMI
Date of inspection:	22-26 November 2004

Part A: Summary

Information about the college

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 performers course leading to a national diploma in professional dance and a Northern Ballet School Diploma.

There are 110 students on the professional dance course. The total number of students in receipt of dance and drama awards (DADA) is 67. A few students are from minority ethnic groups, and 12 are from non-European Union countries. The school also offers adult evening classes and classes for children in the evening.

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 six 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 training designed to optimise students' dance career prospects through rigorous full-time training. The prospectus makes it clear that the school aims to offer a course covering very broad fields of theatrical dance performance.

The Northern Ballet School was last inspected in May 2002 and was graded 2 for the provision and 1 for leadership and management.

How effective is the college?

Inspectors judged the quality of training and the quality of leadership and management both to be outstanding. The main strengths and areas that should be improved are listed below:

Key strengths

- good and very good teaching
 - a commitment to the best teaching practices
 - reflective, articulate students
 - high standards of performance in all subjects
 - good performance opportunities
 - good support for students
 - very effective leadership and management
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- very effective quality assurance procedures
- the active promotion of equality of opportunity.

What should be improved

- no significant weaknesses.

Further aspects of provision requiring improvement are identified in the sections on individual subjects and courses in the full report.

Students' view of the college

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

What students like about the college

- the emphasis given to dance
- the performance opportunities
- the chance to perform with outside groups
- the balance of the programme overall
- the ethos of the school
- the use of video in assessment
- the support and guidance they receive
- the social mix of the student body.

What they feel could be improved

- nothing.

Part B: The Dance Course

Inspectors judged the provision to be outstanding (**Grade 1**)

Strengths

- good and very good teaching
- a commitment to the best teaching practices
- high standards of performance in all subjects
- reflective, articulate students
- good performance opportunities
- the school's excellent theatre
- a varied outreach programme
- good formative assessment
- good support for students.

Weaknesses

- no significant weaknesses.

Scope of provision

1. The school offers a three-year professional dance course – the performers' course - which aims to prepare students for satisfying professional careers in dance. All students study a range of dance styles throughout the course, including tap, contemporary dance, ballet and jazz; they also have opportunities to develop their drama, vocal and general stagecraft skills. At the start of the second year, they opt for a ballet or jazz focus. Ballet focus students study *pointe*, *pas de deux*, *corps de ballet*, virtuosity and solo; jazz focus students take two core jazz techniques, musical theatre, double work and attend a weekly workshop which covers various jazz styles. All students also study anatomy, dance history, nutrition and health and safety and all have a fitness programme, which includes Pilates body strengthening classes; male students visit a nearby gym. Students may also take classes leading to external dance and dance teaching examinations.

2. There are many challenging opportunities for students to perform in front of an audience, mostly in the school's own theatre. During their years at the school, ballet focus students

may participate in three full-length ballets; jazz focus students take part in three musical theatre performances. An annual showcase involves all the students and there is a varied outreach programme. Some students take part in professional productions while at the school. Agents and potential employers visit the school towards the end of the third year.

Achievements and standards

3. Standards of performance are high in all subjects. The high standards in some first year classes show that the school continues to attract able students. All students have good muscle tone and appropriate physiques and they continue to achieve high technical levels in dance classes. Ballet focus students are proficient in *corps de ballet* and some produce solo work of a very high standard. Jazz focus students display high levels of technical competence, particularly in double work. The school produces some very good singers. Students display good pitch and understanding of basic technique and can deliver sensitive and mature interpretations. In a third year class, students sang difficult solos with ease, managing to move comfortably between different types of song. In rehearsal and performance, students continue successfully to bring together the separate elements of their training in a professional manner and the standards achieved in the school's public performances are very high. In a musical theatre performance routines were performed with high levels of accomplishment and flair. The clarity of line and precision of movement in a rehearsal of *The Nutcracker* were exemplary. In a drama class, most students were able to create convincing characterisations from an unfamiliar text. Students make good progress in class and respond in a keen and focused manner to direction, displaying high levels of motivation and self-discipline. In a first year tap class, for example, students continued to practise difficult rhythmic combinations after the class had ended. At 94%, retention is good.

4. Students continue to succeed in securing suitable employment when they leave. Typically, graduating students will work in cruise ships, touring companies and small-scale ballet companies. Examples of the employment destinations of students graduating in 2002 include the Vienna Festival Ballet, Disneyland Paris, two West End shows and a number of cruise ships. Records of students who left in the late 1990s suggest that a significant number use their initial experience to good effect to move on to more demanding roles.

Quality of education and training

5. Almost all the teaching observed was good or better and a significant amount was excellent. Teachers clearly signal a unified approach to the training by consistently cross-referring to other subjects in their classes. Classes are well planned and well-pitched to the aims of the course. Classes are taught at a professional pace and students rise comfortably to the challenge. Teachers' expectations are high, but they also support students well, encouraging students' independent analysis of their own work and that of others. In a stage rehearsal of *The Nutcracker*, the teacher sensitively reinforced the disciplines needed for performance while encouraging the students to reflect on their performances and those of others. In a drama class, the teacher gave particular support to some students who spoke

English as a foreign language by altering the task he had set. The students are well prepared for employment; in a singing lesson, the teacher's choice of song repertoire was informed by the requirements of professional auditions. Teachers make sure that all students have the chance of receiving detailed feedback, for example, in a dance class, by continually rotating the lines of students to the front, and throughout the school teachers consistently encourage students to think and learn for themselves. In the first term of a first year jazz class students were already demonstrating the ability to work independently and to refine their own subtle dynamics.

6. All the school's 20 teachers are part-time. Most have extensive teaching experience and others have worked professionally in the performing arts; a few still work as directors and choreographers. The school works hard to maintain a balance between these two strengths. Since the last inspection, the school has increased the number of guest workshops; they are now programmed weekly. The school's accommodation, a former cinema, is a listed building which has been very successfully converted. There are five well-equipped studios that are effectively utilised, but which still suffer from noise leaking through from the street. The theatre is a valuable asset and is used daily for rehearsals and classes as well as for public performances. Its well-equipped stage offers students the opportunity to develop a range of stagecraft. The school has a café which provides hot and cold food at affordable prices. In the library there is a small but useful collection of books and a good selection of videos and recorded music. Students also have access to four computer terminals in the library, which are networked and connected to the internet.

7. With its emphasis on dance, the course fully reflects the mission of the school. There is a good balance between classical ballet and jazz theatre dance and these subjects are appropriately supplemented by singing and drama classes. As part of the course, the school provides individual singing tutorials for those that need them, ensuring that every student graduates with adequate vocal skills. Aspects of acting, as they apply to dance theatre, are also covered in other classes. There is a successful outreach programme offering students the opportunity to perform in schools and alongside other performing artists such as the musicians of the Hallé orchestra. There are also opportunities for exchange visits with similar training schools in the USA. The school offers a good variety of sustained performance opportunities for students each year, including a full-length ballet and a jazz dance/musical theatre show. Some students may also undertake professional work; this is carefully monitored to ensure no interruption to their training.

8. Assessments are well-planned and systematically applied. The students are assessed by teachers termly in the core subjects of ballet and jazz, and once a year in singing, drama, tap, choreography, contemporary dance and contextual studies. Objectives for assessment are very detailed and reflect the mission of the school. Assessments are recorded on video, which is used to good effect to feed back to students their strengths and areas for development.

9. Candidates attending auditions for entry to the school are given a talk by the principal, a tour of the building, a short physical examination and an interview. Auditions take place on a regular basis throughout the year as demand for places is increasing. Candidates also attend a class where they are assessed in classical and jazz dance. Candidates are judged according to clear criteria, although these are not available to the candidates. A list of alternative providers is available for unsuccessful applicants.

10. The support offered to students during the course is very good. There is a personal tutor for each year-group of female students and a tutor for all male students. Formal tutorials are given on a regular basis individually, and in groups. Students produce twice-yearly action plans and their progress overall is monitored effectively. Students value the informal support given to them by their teachers and the opportunities they have to express their views about teaching and other aspects of their training. Students' basic skills are assessed in the first week of the course. Subsequently, individual learning needs are met through individual tutorials with a trained member of staff and an external specialist who visits the school. Injury support is very effectively provided. A very efficient system is in place for identifying injured students by the use of badges in classes and for monitoring their recovery by an identified member of staff. Healthy nutrition and safe dance practices are energetically promoted and produce tangible results. A physiotherapist visits the school when necessary. There is a first aid room and five staff members are qualified in first aid.

Part C: Leadership and management

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

Strengths

- very effective leadership and management
- very effective quality assurance procedures
- comprehensive data on student employment
- the active promotion of equality of opportunity.

Weaknesses

- no significant weaknesses.

11. The course and the school continue to be well organised and managed very effectively. The principal provides firm, clear leadership, closely supported by the course co-ordinator and heads of department. The administration of the course is very good. Staff identify with the aims and philosophy of the school and appreciate the disciplined but supportive ethos. The principal teaches some classes and is directly involved in contributing to and monitoring students' progress and the quality of teaching. The structure and content of the course is made clear to all in the prospectus and course documents. A number of improvements have been made since the last inspection, including greater involvement of heads of department in the management of the school, the appointment of an assessment co-ordinator, the introduction of student feedback on teaching and the upgrading of sound facilities in the studios.

12. The principal and the administrator meet regularly to consider the overall direction of the school. In turn, the principal has regular briefing meetings with the course co-ordinator. Formal and informal communication between staff and managers is effective. There is a staff meeting every two or three weeks held on different days of the week to allow as many staff as possible to attend. Staff meetings are used to monitor students' wellbeing and progress, and for operational matters; notes are taken of what is discussed and circulated. Heads of department meet regularly with their teams on an informal basis.

13. The school continues to monitor its strengths and weaknesses very thoroughly, gathering evidence from staff and students. The principal, course leader, heads of department and other teachers observe classes. 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 and

teachers are supported with regular staff development. Students' views are collected through questionnaires and 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. In addition, students are asked to evaluate and grade the performance of their teachers, a practice now well-embedded and valued by both staff and students. This comprehensive evaluative process contributes to the consistency of good practice in the teaching, for example in the fostering of independent learning. Students have confidence that their views are listened to and that where requests are not met, reasons are given. There are many examples of changes being made as a result of consultation.

14. The self-assessment report produced by the course leader is comprehensive, perceptive and accurate and takes account of staff views. Data on retention, including reasons for students' early departure, students' post-course destinations and the gender and ethnicity of students on the course are conscientiously recorded and readily available. The school makes considerable efforts to keep track of its former students and is able to produce up-to-date employment records for most of those who have left within the past eight years. This enables the school to recognise the achievement of those students who achieve most notably only after a number of years in the industry. The school continues to make good use of its links with the profession to inform the quality of its training and the standards expected of students.

15. There are appropriate policies in place for equal opportunities, health and safety and disability. Equal opportunities and health and safety policies are reproduced in the staff and student handbooks and new staff are required to confirm in writing that they have read them. The prospectus highlights the school's aim to attract students with disabilities and from minority ethnic groups and the administrator is a member of a Department of Education and Skills working group on the widening of disabled access to dance and drama courses. The principal and the administrator are responsible for monitoring the equal opportunities policy. Apart from the top two studios, the building, including the theatre, is fully accessible to people with physical disabilities. A health and safety committee, which includes a student representative, meets every term. In its efforts to broaden the cohort of applicants for dance training, focusing particularly on males and young people from minority ethnic communities, the school continues to invite young people from an ethnically diverse foundation dance course at a further education college in the city to attend a free evening class.

16. A well-qualified team including the registrar, course co-ordinator and the full-time administrative and financial manager continues to administer the school effectively. Accounts are audited annually and the principal and the administrator receive a statement of accounts each term. There is no governing body but the school's non-executive advisers are individually able to offer good specialist advice on a range of matters.

Notes