

Northern Ballet School

Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

Inspection report

Provider reference	53634
Published date	June 2008

Main findings

Course:	Three year National Diploma in professional dance
Overall effectiveness:	Outstanding (grade 1)
Date of inspection:	16 April 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 2004 when it was graded outstanding (grade 1) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training, and outstanding (grade 1) for leadership and management.

Achievement and standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London show that the standards of dance in classes and performances have been maintained at an outstanding level. The recent re-validation report judges the college to be 'an exemplary provider' and notes that there are 'several outstanding students in every cohort'. Assessors remark on 'very well honed (dance) technique, in both corps and virtuosity'. Commendation is made, in particular, of the quality of all-round performances by students: one assessor noted that in 'one of the best school performances I have seen. . . students work seamlessly as a team' and another enthused over some 'remarkably successful musical theatre performances', despite the fact that the course is not formally accredited for musical theatre. Students develop very high professional stagecraft and presentation skills and apply them in performance with impressive discipline. These evaluations support the school's own very thorough and rigorous assessment profile, which shows that since the last inspection students' attainment has improved steadily from what was already a very high level. The school is attracting a higher calibre of student at audition, particularly in ability and potential in jazz dance.

Retention and success rates are satisfactory. They have varied between 70% and 77% over the last three years. A quarter of the cohort of students that

started the course in 2004 did not complete it to graduate in 2007. All those who have completed the course in the last three years have achieved the qualification. The college keeps very good records of why some students leave. Punctuality and attendance are excellent.

Almost all students gain employment in the performing arts profession when they leave, and a very large majority of those secure their first contract before they leave the school in July. Of those students graduating in 2005 and 2006, all but two had worked in a dance-related job by the time of the inspection, many continuously; of those who left in 2007, only one student had not yet worked in the profession. The school is highly successful in collecting and collating information from individual students about their employment histories, and their records are regularly updated by some students who left the school more than ten years ago and who have subsequently progressed to notable roles as dancers or choreographers.

Typically, recent ex-students have joined dance companies on national and international tours, joined ballet companies in the UK and abroad, and worked on cruise ships and in commercial cabaret. Recent graduates have danced with New Adventures in *Edward Scissorhands*, the Jose Montes Ballet Company, sung and danced in *Fame* on a European tour and in *Grease* in the West End, and appeared as part of the Cirque du Soleil company.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are outstanding. Lessons are very well structured and specifically focused so that teachers know exactly what they are looking to get from students in class. There is an inveterate work ethic coupled with rigorous personal discipline: students are expected to take considerable responsibility for their own development and progress in class and this motivates them to strive for the highest standards. Contextual studies are now enhanced by the planned contribution of all practical dance teachers, so that practical and theory work are very well integrated. Students maintain excellent personal logs on the development of their technique, and these are well used to define and modify what they need to work on to improve. Attendance and punctuality are excellent.

The core focus of the course remains on dance, with students additionally able to focus on ballet or jazz in years two and three. More attention is now devoted to singing and the development of the student's voice, and regular drama workshops are run to give students a good grounding in characterisation and story-telling. The curriculum is being constantly reviewed in the light of changing patterns of potential employment and stylistic fashions in dance, and has been responsive to students' interests and requests.

Guidance and support for students are outstanding. As a recent Trinity report remarks, 'teachers and tutors bring to life the language of assessment'. All

students are regularly assessed against a wide range of clearly understood technical and performance criteria. All assessments are visually recorded, watched and discussed by students and their tutor. Oral and written feedback is detailed and specific. Personal goals derive from these reviews, and all students discuss their progress towards these with their tutor and with the principal once a year. The school seeks to improve this thorough process further still by bringing all these different strands of assessment into a framework of overall progress review. Students receive very good physiological, nutritional and injury support throughout their course. Close attention is paid to the development of core strength and muscle tone. Those with additional learning needs are diagnosed at an early stage and offered specialist support through the services of the local authority.

Leadership and management

The course is strongly led, and managed with expert efficiency. The school makes very good use of a variety of data to inform its own evaluations of how well it is doing with each cohort of students. Self-assessment, linked to a development plan, is a mature, astute and searching process which establishes an ambitious culture of continuous self-criticism and improvement. The lesson observation programme provides senior staff with good, detailed insights to the particular strengths and weaknesses of individual teachers, although observations are currently conducted entirely by just one member of staff.

Teachers work very effectively as a team and share their ideas and approaches well. All teachers are highly experienced practitioners in their specialist artistic field and several are also trained, or undergoing training, as teachers. The school engages its teachers very well in discussions about the different ways in which students learn.

Links with professional companies and agencies are very good, and the school has close relations with several key, regular employers who particularly value the set of skills students acquire at the school. There are good links with the Royal Northern College of Music and the Hallé orchestra, creating imaginative choreographic opportunities. Resources are excellent, and include a good-sized public theatre on the premises which is used for frequent showcases of student work. Students have plentiful opportunities to present work to a public audience under the company banners of Manchester City Ballet and Jazz Galore. These experiences ensure that students place a high premium on all-round stagecraft, performance and presentation skills and professional discipline.

Students are very closely involved in the running of their school. As well as influencing the changing timetable and assuming considerable responsibility for their own progress and development under the watchful eye of their tutor, they make a formal contribution to annual staff appraisal by evaluating the effectiveness of their teachers. This process has been refined over time to

create a powerful dynamic in which both students and teachers share exploration of how dancers learn and develop professional skills. Used as it is with sensitivity, and embraced by all, this is a powerful tool for quality assuring the self-critical appraisal of both teachers and students alike.

The school actively seeks to attract to the course students from under-represented ethnic and social class groups. A close collaborative relationship has been established with a local community group that works specifically to promote participation in the performing arts to minority ethnic and under-privileged groups of young people. The school undertakes a number of outreach activities, including running free ballet workshops for street dancers and open days aimed to attract boys into dance training.

Points for consideration

The school might usefully:

- ensure that more students who start the course complete it
- further develop the process of personal goal setting for students to create an overall framework for reviewing progress
- expand the lesson observation programme to make use of more than one observer.