

The Urdang Academy

Inspection of colleges participating in the Dance and Drama Award scheme

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Information about the college

1. The Urdang Academy is a private performing arts academy that trains students for employment in the musical theatre and dance industries. The academy runs a three-year course in musical theatre and dance and students elect to study for either the national diploma in professional musical theatre or the national diploma in professional dance, awarded by Trinity College, London. The academy is accredited by the Council for Dance Education and Training.
2. The Urdang Academy is based at the Old Finsbury Town Hall and uses additional teaching spaces local to the main studios. Urdang enrolls students from across the country and abroad and has an ethnically diverse student population. There are currently 217 students enrolled at the academy, of whom 74 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

Overall effectiveness of provision

Grade 1

Capacity to improve

Grade 1

Overall effectiveness

3. The Urdang Academy is an outstanding academy with outstanding capacity to sustain further improvement. Since the last inspection the pace of change has been rapid and insightful resulting in much improved outcomes for all students. The move to Old Finsbury Town Hall has undoubtedly been a catalyst for change over the last four years, with Urdang becoming a hub for community and outreach work and extending the original ethos of its founder to attract a diverse student population. The academy enrolls many students from different ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds onto the foundation and diploma courses and to the new degree programme. The use of the building for rehearsal for West End shows and other performing arts events means that students are immersed in seeing the professional industry at work in the academy.
4. Students make good and often outstanding progress during their time at Urdang. Students strive hard to achieve high standards and reach their potential. Many exceed their potential because of outstanding guidance and good quality teaching. Students told inspectors that a rigorous work ethic, instilled from induction, leaves them under no illusion about why they are pushed hard and why they need to develop a mature, professional approach to their studies. Students' potential and incremental skill development from

audition to induction and through mid- and end-of-term assessments are tracked regularly by heads of department and the course director.

5. Students celebrate their judicious choice to study at Urdang for three key reasons: they recognise how much the profile of Urdang has changed and see progression of graduates in the industry; they enjoy the training because of high quality teaching and support; and they judge that the equal balance of the 'triple threat' training gives them confidence in acting, dancing and singing, fully integrated in training and audition preparation. The curriculum meets the needs of students and their interests outstandingly well. Leaders are highly responsive to industry trends. They make relevant changes to the curriculum to give students skills which dominate auditioning trends, such as commercial jazz styles. The combination of rigorous technical training, especially in vocal work, and contextualisation of training helps students quickly make links between the history of musical theatre and dance and studio work. Some teaching does not consistently use audio-visual extracts to reinforce references to key musicals or dance pieces. Pastoral guidance and welfare, including the prevention and treatment of injury, are exemplary.
6. Urdang is very well led and managed. Students achieve outstanding outcomes and the passionate commitment to being an inclusive centre of excellence has been realised. The very good reputation of Urdang has improved and numbers auditioning have tripled in four years. Urdang is regarded by employers, students and staff as a leading school. The 40 responses received from employers commented unanimously on high standards and students' preparedness for the industry, exemplified in comments such as: 'the Urdang Academy is, in my view, among the very best of the dance and musical theatre schools in the country. The staff are approachable and very open to new ideas and concepts, the standard of tuition is exemplary and their students graduate with not only polished talent and craftsmanship, but a real understanding of their chosen profession'.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What students like:

- the very well balanced and structured curriculum which has clear connections across disciplines
- high levels of care and guidance for diet, health and fitness
- access to exemplary treatment and expert therapists in the voice clinic and physiotherapy suite
- 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 breadth and depth of expertise of teachers whose current industry experience is used effectively in lessons
- the welcoming and friendly community that is highly inclusive and celebrates diversity
- bright, airy studios and excellent location for attending West End productions

- many opportunities to perform both in house and at external events
- regular theatre trips which enrich the curriculum.

What students would like to see improved:

- options to have larger studio spaces or smaller classes if student numbers continue to increase
- increased access to professional counselling services for personal support with mental health issues.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- equally high standards achieved in the disciplines of acting, dancing and singing
- very good communication between leaders and employers
- high levels of professionalism when students join the industry, with a notable willingness to listen and learn
- high calibre, hard-working students who are receptive to advice from visiting casting agents, directors and guest performers.

What employers would like to see improved:

- two of 40 employers suggested that the acting strand could be enhanced even further.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 1

7. Leaders at all levels demonstrate outstanding capacity to improve. Leaders have a comprehensive understanding of strategic priorities for the academy and improvement planning since the last inspection has significantly enhanced the quality of provision and outcomes for students. Self-assessment is largely accurate and quality assurance procedures are robust. Heads of department show good understanding of targets for improving teaching and how the academy improvement plan dovetails into their department action plans, especially in monitoring the impact of new schemes of work on learning across subject areas. However, the missing link in the cycle of improvement planning and evaluation is the recording of data analysis to underpin action points and success criteria. Whilst staff discuss progress and destinations data there is a lack of quantitative data in key documents.
8. Leaders work with energy and focus to find ways to continually improve all aspects of Urdang's work. The buzz about pedagogy is infectious. Staff have an openness and willingness to change and ensure the academy is an innovative place of learning for staff and students. As a result of the sharing of best practice, teaching is solidly good, helping students make at least good progress in lessons. A rigorous strategic review of the curriculum is evident in excellent schemes of work for musical theatre, dance and contextual studies, successfully

interlinking the 'triple threat' training programme. Students appraise the new schemes of work each term, helping leaders further refine the curriculum.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 1

9. Urdang students achieve an outstanding level of work by the time they complete their course. Over the last three years the overwhelmingly majority of students have achieved the diploma and secured employment within six months of graduation. Graduates increasingly secure work in leading West End and touring shows and the career trajectory of graduates is impressive with quick progression from ensemble to soloist work. The impact of a newly-formed partnership with a leading West End agency is also supporting high employment statistics; 42% of the current third year have already secured employment contracts. Of students in receipt of dance and drama awards, over 90% gain related employment each year. Alongside roles in the West End, typical jobs include roles in national and international touring productions, regional theatre work, dance roles in the commercial industries and, for a few, cruise ship work. Retention of students has improved averaging 83% over three years and 90% for those in receipt of dance and drama awards.
10. Students uphold high professional etiquette as young professionals who want to learn. Students graduate from Urdang having achieved a very high standard of work. Reports about first, second and third year performances by external assessors describe work as exemplary and outstanding in both musical theatre and dance. This is also a unanimous view of employers. Students' singing ability is of a very high standard with crisp diction, mastery of accents, excellent harmonic work and subtle use of voice for character portrayal. In lessons students perform with vocal confidence and good breath control derived from effective use of 'Estill Voice Training'. Students' skill in a range of dance genres is equally as accomplished as their vocal work. Their ability to perform demanding partner work is very good. They possess disciplined technique complemented by good musicality. One employer reported that 'Urdang provide a high standard of dancers who can also act; most impressive is the standard of the students' singing ability. It is unusual to find dancers who can sing to principal role standard'. Students' portrayal of character and their versatility as performers in lead roles and ensemble work captures vulnerability, truthful and believable interpretations and comedic skills, all evident in recent performances such as Grease, Guys and Dolls, Side by Side and Once on this Island. Achievement in contextual studies and final year performance portfolios shows outstanding levels of research, application and insight in realising their own productions.
11. Students feel very safe and are pleased they are treated as individuals with different skill sets. Students from different minority ethnic groups and students who have learning difficulties and disabilities are fully integrated into the welcoming community. Students possess an outstanding knowledge of care of their body and voice as instruments for their future professional lives. They develop a good understanding of diet and nutrition from year one, complemented by excellent conditioning work throughout their training. They know how to prevent injury and manage recovery if injury occurs. In a partner

work class careful attention was paid to safe lifting and catching giving students confidence in the teaching and in working with each other.

The quality of provision

Grade 1

12. The quality of teaching is good and continually improving because of a passionate commitment of staff to learn from each other and use current practice to refine teaching. As a result, the best teaching is characterised by stimulating, energetic pace, well-planned learning sometimes responding to different student abilities, and use of probing questioning to assess students' understanding. Good and outstanding teaching is not reliant on didactic teaching. Where lessons use different teaching methods students engage in purposeful group discussion about artistry, safe practice and how to improve, using self-criticism and peer review. This is not yet used consistently throughout the academy. Teachers and students use much technical language in lessons, although some students would benefit from more detailed annotations of scripts and scores in lessons. Inspectors saw students working with focus, commitment and excellent understanding of how to apply corrective feedback to develop their artistry. Students have excellent knowledge of changes in the musical theatre and dance industries because teachers have high levels of subject expertise and many still work in the industry. Teachers often refer to current trends in auditioning and lead insightful discussion about what casting directors are currently looking for.
13. Leaders have devised a comprehensive series of assessments with relevant and demanding assessment criteria. The transparency for students is good, and helps them to see the connections between schemes of work and how they are marked in both mid-term and end-of-year assessments. The tracking of progress through summative and formative assessments is good but because of multiple assessment methods the aggregation of marks over time slightly skews the overall picture of levels of achievement. Individual tutorial sessions are used purposefully by staff to set realistic targets for each subject and require students to take responsibility to review their progress. Individual student records show a comprehensive picture of students' progress and are used well by course teams. Students' progress is monitored effectively by heads of departments and teaching teams but not all lesson planning is sharp enough in using progress data to establish different ways to support the less-able whilst really stretching the more-able students.
14. The outstanding curriculum for both the dance and musical theatre diplomas is firmly underpinned by detailed planning. The entire overhaul of schemes of work, now much more integrated across different subject areas, has helped staff and students understand the progression of work over time and how each component of the musical theatre and dance courses link together. Revisions to the curriculum such as the streaming of jazz classes, improvements in ballet technique, inclusion of a 'swing bible' and intensive vocal work thorough Estill and acting through song, have consolidated and improved the rigour of the training. The entire curriculum is very well balanced and is a key reason why students choose to study at Urdang.

15. An overwhelming majority of students express how much they feel cared for at Urdang. The guidance students receive for welfare and professional development is outstanding. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities are carefully monitored and Urdang draws on external expertise to support these students. Established relationships with leading medical experts and physiotherapists for preventative and post-injury care are extremely well resourced and managed efficiently. From initial screening at induction and regular body-conditioning work staff have a detailed picture of students' well-being. An analysis of any injuries is discussed regularly at department meetings. Treatment plans for students help them return to training with an even deeper knowledge of how to care for their bodies and voice. The impact of excellent guidance in the 'voice clinic' coupled with immediate referrals for expert medical treatment ensures that any vocal difficulties are resolved and students do not face terminating their studies.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

16. The academy's mission and values are clearly communicated and understood by staff. The managing director provides inspirational leadership and is well supported by the principal and course director. A culture of continuous improvement permeates Urdang's work. Increased rigour in action planning and quality assurance has secured an outstanding quality of provision and outstanding outcomes for students. Members of the board fully endorse the work of leaders, although capturing how leaders engage with and use feedback from employers is often informal. There are missed opportunities to use the very good links with the industry to evaluate improvement planning.
17. Leaders have successfully tackled the points for action from the last inspection. The portfolio of staff qualifications reflects a concerted effort to help staff acquire relevant teaching qualifications. Outcomes from conferences and formal teacher-training courses are disseminated at whole staff and department meetings, giving staff a deeper knowledge of contemporary practice in training performers. For example, the work of the singing staff in the Estill voice method enables staff to help students with breath control in dance and acting classes. Leaders who attended a course at the British Dyslexia Association gave useful guidance to staff who now feel more confident in supporting students with learning difficulties.
18. Systematic monitoring of teaching through formal lesson observations is securing a realistic picture of strengths and weaker areas in teaching, but this is not available as a summary for staff. A new lesson observation form has a better focus on learning but commentary does not always give a penetrating view of students' progress. Leaders have rightly identified that a priority in raising the quality of teaching from good to outstanding is honing the observer's ability to assess progress so that feedback helps staff consistently plan work for different abilities.
19. Resources for learning are outstanding, Studios provide inspiring spaces for learning. An increase in books and information and communication technology resources helps students achieve very well in contextual studies assignments. A

small minority of students wish for larger studios because of increasing class sizes. Human resources are well deployed. Clear roles and responsibilities for leaders and support staff mean that students' needs are met and that staff training is linked to outcomes from staff appraisals.

20. Procedures to keep students safe and compliance with regulations for safe vetting of the workforce are outstanding. Students evaluate the quality of support they receive for finding accommodation and leaders are diligent in monitoring its suitability. Central records of attendance data are much improved, helping staff quickly follow up absence. Managing risk on site and rigour in upholding health and safety legislation helps staff and students feel looked after. Any minor studio issues are remedied quickly.
21. The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Urdang monitors equality and diversity carefully so that achievement of students from minority ethnic groups and those with learning difficulties and disabilities is equitable to their peers. The academy's track record in attracting students from minority ethnic groups and different socio-economic backgrounds is impressive. The academy continues to successfully widen participation of under-represented groups.
22. Value for money is outstanding and high levels of investment in library resources, staff training and a new intranet all support developments at Urdang. Leaders maximise the potential of the building by leasing studios, developing community classes and using rooms for external functions, to secure additional revenue. Additional monies are used to help some students pay fees, giving an opportunity to study at Urdang to those who would otherwise struggle to secure funding.

What does Urdang Academy need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of teaching that is consistently outstanding and establish regular use of teaching methods that encourage teachers and students to use peer and self-evaluation to evaluate progress.
- Exploit use of the good audio-visual resources so that students listen and watch a range of performances to enhance technical skill and interpretation in studio-based learning.
- Establish access to professional counselling services to help support students with any mental health needs.
- Improve how all leaders record and use data so that improvement plans and evaluations have a firm foundation of both quantitative and qualitative outcomes.
- Develop cross-departmental lesson observations to further enhance the sharing of best practice.

Information about the inspection

23. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the course director as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors took account of Urdang's most recent self-assessment report, department improvement plans, reports by the qualification awarding body, the previous inspection report, and data on students' achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
24. Inspectors observed lessons, some of which were jointly conducted with the course director and principal. Inspectors used group interviews with students and staff and considered feedback from employers.

Record of main findings			
Provider name	The Urdang Academy	Inspection number	364505
Learning types: 16-18 learner responsive: FE full-time.			

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall
Approximate number of enrolled learners at the time of inspection Full-time learners.	217
Overall effectiveness	1
Capacity to improve	1
Outcomes for learners	1
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>	2
Quality of provision	1
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2
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
Leadership and management	2
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?	1
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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