

Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts Ltd

Dance and drama college

Inspection dates 20–21 January 2016

Overall effectiveness **Outstanding**

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Outstanding
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Outstanding
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Outstanding
Outcomes for students	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Outstanding

Summary of key findings

This is an outstanding provider

- Leaders promote a culture of excellence, and maintain this through highly effective strategic planning.
- Curriculum management is very strong and well regarded by tutors and students.
- The academy provides students with exceptionally high-quality professional training in key disciplines, so that they make rapid progress and become accomplished performers with a very wide range of skills to offer employers.
- Tutors provide very detailed, clear and supportive comment on students' assessments and assignments. Oral feedback and correction in classes are frequent, purposeful and highly individualised.
- Outstanding teaching, learning and assessment have resulted in all students passing the Trinity diploma across the past five years, and almost all students complete their diploma courses.
- Many students benefit from gaining valuable industry-relevant additional qualifications in dance, stage combat, and in aerial skills that greatly enhance their opportunities for employment.
- Managers and staff model the highest professional standards. Students emulate these and develop a very strong work ethic that prepares them very well for employment in the industry.
- Destinations for graduates of the academy are outstanding; the majority of students gain high-quality contracts in the industry upon, or soon after, graduation.
- Students' behaviour and attitudes are exemplary.
- Managers have made good progress to ensure that students and staff are aware of the dangers of radicalisation and extremism.

Full report

Information about the provider

- The Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts, founded in 1911, is a private performing arts academy that trains students for employment in the musical theatre industry. The academy runs a three-year course in musical theatre leading to the national diploma in professional musical theatre, awarded by Trinity College, London. The Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET) accredits the academy.
- The academy is based close to the Barbican Centre in London and attracts many students from across London, the United Kingdom and internationally. At a second site in south London, Italia Conti offers a three-year Bachelor of Arts course in acting, and a two-year part-time acting course; these did not form part of the inspection. There are currently 113 students aged 16 to 18 enrolled at the academy, of whom 64 are in receipt of dance and drama awards (DaDA) funded by the Education Funding Agency (EFA).

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Enlarge and strengthen the current governing body to include members of the arts industries and, if possible, members from education or training backgrounds, so that the board can more effectively support, advise and challenge the Principal and senior leaders.
- Provide more frequent feedback to students on the views expressed through student surveys and representatives' councils, and consider establishing a permanent noticeboard or display for such purposes.
- Discuss with departmental heads and their staff the most beneficial ways to identify and share good practice encountered by tutors in the course of peer observations.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding

- The Principal, senior leaders and heads of departments maintain a culture of excellence where students and staff excel. Leaders have unwaveringly high expectations for staff performance and for students' skills and achievements. Tutors and senior managers have maintained outstanding teaching, learning and assessment, and dealt successfully with all recommendations from previous inspection reports and from Trinity and CDET revalidation and accreditation visits.
- Managers, students and staff demonstrate very positive working relationships and a clear professional regard for one another. Behaviour in classes and around the academy models the best standards of the industry and prepares students very well for casting auditions and professional life.
- Comprehensive measures are in place to collect students' views and feedback. Students value highly the openness and approachability of staff and the easy access they have to managers, and they appreciate the representatives through whom they can express views. Managers analyse students' feedback thoroughly and act swiftly to make any possible changes to improve provision. However, managers do not inform students what they are doing in response to feedback with sufficient frequency; currently, students only learn about responses to feedback in end-of-term letters.
- Arrangements to maintain and improve standards through class observations are excellent. These are trusted and valued by staff, and have proved highly effective in driving and sustaining improvement since the previous inspection. Areas of good practice identified and disseminated widely include imaginative strategies to connect theory to practice, effective use of questioning to develop students' critical thinking, and effective planning to meet the needs of individual students in lessons. Tutors also engage in a wide range of informal peer observations, and many benefit from observing good practice in their colleagues' classes. However, managers have yet to develop formal measures for sharing more widely the many examples of good practice identified through these observations.
- Heads of department provide excellent leadership, support and guidance for tutors. Careful management of the curriculum has brought about a greater focus on broadening students' skills and a successful range of measures to meet individual needs better in classes. Curriculum planning meetings involve a student representative, which ensures that any developments meet students' needs and take account of trends in students' feedback.
- Managers and staff use self-assessment effectively to identify strengths and weakness in provision. The self-assessment report links well to a comprehensive action and improvement plan with realistic targets and aims. Reports from each department are highly evaluative and suitably self-critical.

■ The governance of the provider

- Senior managers established a board of directors in response to recommendations made at the previous inspection. However, current membership of the board is too restricted to provide adequate challenge and support for the Principal and senior leaders or to provide a suitably broad range of views from current industry professionals. Governors recently appointed a student representative and a member of staff to the board; they will take up their posts in the near future.

■ The arrangements for safeguarding are effective

- Leaders and managers make sure that the academy offers a safe and secure environment for learning. Good levels of staff training ensure that safeguarding measures reflect the latest legislative requirements and the best sector standards.
- Students receive good guidance about how to keep themselves and others safe, and how to recognise unlawful and unsafe behaviour. Students feel safe and are safe at the academy. They understand the importance of maintaining personal security online, and they receive good induction training in safeguarding and periodic reinforcement training during the course. They know how to report any concerns and they are confident that managers will treat concerns seriously and investigate them thoroughly.
- Leaders have taken a good range of steps to meet the academy's legal duties under Prevent legislation. Staff have been trained in recognising and countering extremism and radicalisation, and British values are promoted well through visual displays around the academy and through induction and class activities for students.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding

- Tutors use their industry experience and expertise extremely well to plan and teach classes that stimulate and engage students very well. Lessons and modules are highly relevant to current industry expectations and prepare students thoroughly for employment. For example, during the inspection, students engaged in realistic audition-style classes that were fast paced and planned to challenge students, help them develop quick responses and improve their movement memory and recall.
- Staff and managers monitor individual students' progress very thoroughly to identify and deal with any areas of weaknesses. Tutors and students agree tough targets for theoretical and skills-based progress and development, and the careful monitoring of these contributes positively to students making good and often outstanding progress. Effective and realistic student self-evaluation, focused tutorial discussions and developmental feedback from tutors further support progress.
- Few students require additional English or mathematics support, but for the small number taking GCSE courses in these subjects, support is wide ranging and highly individualised. Students benefit from both small-group and individual coaching in each subject.
- Oral and written feedback from tutors is frequent, sequential, personalised, specific and detailed. It is also constructive and supportive, ensuring students understand what they need to do to improve and how to do it. First- and second-year students benefited greatly from a range of coaching sessions and master classes in preparation for their directors' singing audition; this enabled them to be more confident and better prepared for their assessment.
- Tutors are adept at building the confidence and skills of students to identify and self-correct faults in their own technique. In one jazz technique class, for instance, the tutor gave specific and individualised feedback that allowed students to reflect on their personal strengths and areas for improvement so that they could quickly perform better and understand which skills they need to develop further.
- Students make excellent progress within sessions and over time, because of careful planning of developmental and progressive activities that build skills and confidence. They are able to articulate the progress they have made and demonstrate this in lessons. In a range of sessions in acting, dance and singing, during rehearsals and in mock auditions, students made rapid progress and demonstrated new techniques learned during the session or in a previous class.
- Students demonstrate high levels of engagement and enjoyment in classes because of high-quality, challenging and frequently inspirational teaching in all disciplines. They develop their confidence and make sustained and rapid technical and artistic progress. During third-year rehearsals for a final showcase production, for example, exceptionally clear, sensitive and thoughtful direction allowed students to refine movements, better understand the script and work more dynamically.
- Students have developed high levels of physical awareness and demonstrate in their classes excellent applied knowledge and understanding of anatomy and physiology for all three disciplines. In dance classes, for example, teachers used a wide range of technical terms and instructions with which students were familiar and to which they responded in ways that improved performance and posture. In singing and acting classes, students applied very successfully their theoretical understanding of the physiological aspects of vocal work.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

is outstanding

- Students benefit from very high levels of pastoral care and support. Staff work hard and effectively to ensure students are safe, healthy and able to continue with their training. Students also become strongly reflective practitioners, recognising the importance of taking care of their own health and welfare and supporting one another very well.
- Students demonstrate a highly disciplined and professional approach to their studies, enabling them to develop excellent and industry-ready skills. They maintain excellent levels of attendance and punctuality, arriving well prepared for their lessons, in appropriate dress, and with the vast majority arriving early to warm up and prepare physically for classes. Staff monitor all aspects of attendance, punctuality and absence very effectively. On the rare occasions when students are absent without prior notification, staff investigate quickly and take appropriate steps to support individuals with any difficulties.

- Students and staff demonstrate very strong mutual respect and trust, and they maintain high levels of professionalism in all lessons and in social and public spaces around the academy. Students take immense pride in their work, becoming increasingly confident and self-assured as they develop their skills and strengthen their practice. In a jazz technique class, for example, students worked relentlessly to refine a movement phrase, with concentration, perseverance and effort, until it met the high expectations and professional standards set by the teacher.
- The standard of students' work is extremely high and, as a result, a very high proportion successfully achieve their diploma and secure good employment on graduation. Rehearsal and performance standards are exceptionally high, and students work to professional standards well before graduation.
- Historical dance workshops allow students to learn period dances and these successfully widen their repertoire and enable them to audition confidently for period television drama. Aerial skills training sessions give students confidence in traditional circus skills with hoops and silks, in ground-to-air movement, and in aerial choreographic techniques using wire, rope and harness; these broaden the skills they can offer directors and agents.
- Staff prepare students exceptionally well for progression into employment through a well-planned learning programme of workshop sessions with current industry professionals. These result in students entering the employment market well equipped, knowledgeable and confident. During the current year, for example, students received workshops on managing tax, self-employment, safeguarding, working with casting agents, preparing for auditions, and a wide range of other well-focused events.
- Final-year students benefit from very good guidance from the Italia Conti Agency in their approaches to appropriate castings or auditions. Third-year students are supported well to develop a robust and realistic assessment of their own skills and employment prospects.

Outcomes for students are outstanding

- Pass rates for the Trinity diploma have been at 100% for many years, and nearly all diploma students are retained across each year of the programme. Students make very good progress in relation to their starting points and against course requirements across the three skills areas of the programme.
- Students benefit from a good range of additional courses and qualifications. Alongside their diploma in dance or musical theatre, students take qualifications in dance, complete a certificated stage-fighting course, and can pursue a number of externally validated acting and stage management qualifications.
- Very high levels of employment on graduation reflect the strong multi-skill training provided at the academy. Around 80% of DaDA students graduating in 2013/14 remain in sustained employment in the industry. Of 2014/15 DaDA graduates, around 92% remain in employment in the industry.
- Employment trends over the past three years show that graduates gain high-quality work in West End, regional and touring theatre, on cruise ships, in professional singing and commercial recording, and in film and television. Many graduates gain lead or principal roles.

Provider details

Type of provider	Dance and drama college
Age range of students	16+
Approximate number of all students over the previous full contract year	125
Principal	Anne Sheward
Website address	www.italiaconti.com

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
Total number of students (excluding apprenticeships)							113	
	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
Number of students aged 14–16								
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency (EFA)							

Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Richard Beynon, lead inspector

Judy Lye-Forster

Her Majesty's Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

The vice-principal, as nominee, assisted the above team. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of students and employers; the report reflects these views. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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