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# Dance in higher education in the UK

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## Abstract

Universities are not individually unique. They stand next to each other in the various hierarchies of excellence that are underpinned by commonalities of the various statures that they accrue in learning, teaching, research and a host of cultural and social impacts as are measured regionally, nationally and internationally. It is as we move toward closer international ties with our World Dance Alliance colleagues in higher education who work in dance that we look to our own ways and means with a view to revealing what we, in the UK, do in our delivery of dance to higher education students, and some of the constraints within which we work. With this in hand as a reference, we might then seek to discuss with our colleagues in other countries the many ways and means in which the similarities and differences have emerged from our various contexts as we all work towards inspiring the next generation of dancing graduates.

Keywords: UK higher education dance, World Dance Alliance—Europe

## Introduction

In preparing to attend the World Dance Alliance Global Summit in Angers, France, in 2014, we were aware of efforts being made to re-establish WDA-Europe. We wondered how dance in higher education in the UK might differ from that across Europe. To start a discussion of these variations we have taken the liberty to discuss some aspects of dance in higher education in the UK. The proposition is that we reveal some of the working context and various visions of the practices and processes used in the UK and from this starting point open a conversation with our

WDA colleagues throughout the world. Through this exercise we might come to know one another, and so come to recognise and share a wealth of good practice and innovation.

To that end we, a group of academics working in dance in separate institutions, met to consider the ways in which undergraduate dance in higher education in the UK might be represented with regard to the:

- UK higher education system;
- manner in which undergraduate dance programmes started and how that is represented in perpetually developing curricula;
- ways that UK students pay for their dance education;
- views UK dance students have upon arrival at our institutions and what their prospects might be for their futures;
- expectations for academics to do high-quality research.

### **The dancing context for dance in higher education in the UK**

By the mid 1970s, when dance as a discipline entered higher education in the UK, the impact of American postmodern dance and British New Dance had been developing for a decade or more. This combined new trend in dance began to have a significant influence on many practitioners across the UK, as a source of innovation. Many of these practitioners were appointed to work as dance 'animateurs' or community dance artists in arts venues and community settings as the driving force in the significant development of community dance programmes across the UK.

Similarly, the introduction of a range of different somatic practices into dance making and training also became a feature of postmodern and New Dance (Banes, 1987; Claid, 2006; Jordan, 1992). For example, the influence of the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, Skinner Releasing Technique, Ideokinesis, and Body-Mind Centering can be evidenced in the pages of a number of dance specialist journals from the UK and internationally: *New Dance* (UK), *Writings on Dance* (Australia) and *Contact Quarterly* (USA). Many of these practitioners and others from this field began to have significant influence on dance pedagogy in university dance programmes through participation as guest artists and eventually as university artists/scholars.

These New Dance originators added their work to a range of higher education institutions: Sarah Rubidge at Laban and later at Chichester University, Mary Prestige at the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts, Sue McLennan at the London Contemporary Dance School, Sara Reed, Sarah Whatley and Cecilia MacFarlane at Coventry University, Jayne Stevens at DeMontfort University and Duncan Holt at the University of Hull, among others. Their collective influence directed dance in higher education towards a new understanding of embodiment and a more liberal and inclusive cultural baseline with regard to the choreographic and creative potentials of dance.

While a familiar objective for many dance degree programmes is to prepare graduates to be independent practitioners, most dance graduates are likely to

progress to careers in a wide variety of contexts as well as performance (Burns, 2007). Therefore, the teaching and learning of dance within UK higher education is often seen as an education for life.

It is the case that there is a spectrum of study across dance in UK higher education institutions including universities and conservatoires. This diversity encourages a significant questioning among dance scholars and students and a critical approach to the development of each student's dance practice (Fortin, Vieira, & Tremblay, 2009).

### ***An example: dance at Coventry University***

For example, at Coventry University it is expected that students will develop their own styles and methods of working. The department works within a shared value for somatic practices. This is delivered in a variety of ways according to the specialisms and research interests of the academics. High on this agenda is each student's notion of what dance technique and somatic practice might be. As they become more knowledgeable they learn to make links between their dancing pasts and their experience of the somatic in a dancing context.

These dancers, both students and academics, constantly question the construction of their bodies through the development of a range of body technologies. The opportunity to question different body 'knowledges' may perhaps be seen as a common element in dance in higher education in the UK. There is a desire amongst a community of dance academics in the UK to define a future for dance somatics. A resolution to this continuing debate relies upon the value of the relationship of somatics to dance techniques, choreographic practice, and the education and training of dance students.

It is argued that in terms of higher education dance somatics might provide a radicalisation of or simply a resolution to the modernist/postmodernist model, and that the key concepts of dance somatics could be the vehicle for this resolution. Its focus upon increased sensory awareness, body/mind integration and efficiency of movement might be seen as a significant contribution to twenty-first century dance pedagogy and by extension to some professional practice in general. Such training would prepare dancers to care for themselves and those with whom they work with regard to health, safety, self-knowledge, and artistic criticality, and thereby potentially securing the sustainability and longevity of their careers and that of those with whom they work.

If the role of dance in higher education is to broaden and deepen students' understanding of themselves, their art and their community then the somatic proposal may be a significant way forward. As such, it reflects in practice the high words of many university mission statements. For instance the mission statement of the University of Hull says:

We shall encourage and empower individuals to achieve their full potential and to make and implement well-informed decisions about their careers and continuing professional development. (University of Hull, 2015)

This would appear to be consistent with much of the thinking involved with the somatic in the dancing context.

## The structures

In the UK, higher education is governed by a group of quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations—‘quangos’. These bodies stand at arm’s length from government, and work with the higher education institutions (HEI’s) to agree upon policy and the overall direction of higher education, how it relates to pre-HE, and how its graduates might serve society with their skills and knowledge.

The main quangos are:

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (and Wales) (HEFCE) is responsible for funding higher education. Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own versions of this body.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) delivers top-down definitions of standards of proficiency within disciplines and the quality of the ‘student experience’ of their learning. They negotiate subject benchmarks with subject specialists under the headings:

- Subject Knowledge;
- Cognitive and Analytic Skills; and
- Practical/Transferable Skills.

At the time of writing these two institutions have been under government review and are likely to undergo significant change in the near future.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is concerned with the quality of learning and teaching from the academic’s point of view. It performs its role as an academic friend offering discipline-based pedagogic support and advice about best practice in the field. It awards formalised recognition of teaching achievement.

Also influential are:

- Universities UK, the employers association;
- DanceHE, the Standing Conference on Dance in Higher Education;
- UCU, the University and College Union.

## Drilling down to the discipline

Dance appears in a variety of higher education settings:

- Dance-only contexts such as conservatoires like the London Contemporary Dance School or the School of the Royal Ballet.
- Faculties of universities as departments or subsets of schools such as the dance programme within the School of Arts at DeMontfort University.
- In tandem with other subject areas located with:
  - Arts, sometimes with: music, or drama, or fine art
  - Physical education;
  - General education;

- Therapeutic disciplines;
- In combined and joint degrees with almost any other subject on campus.

Dance in the UK is delivered through academic structures of a predominantly learning outcomes-based system. The modular delivery of these units of study is compliant with the Bologna Agreement that facilitates for students the transferability of degrees and credits between most European countries.

The format looks like this:

- One credit equals approximately 10 hours of learning/study.
- Each institution designs its own modules and degrees; therefore, there are many versions of modular designs across the sector.
- The goal is generally for undergraduate students to achieve 120 credits in each year of study that equates roughly to a forty-hour working week.
- A total of 360 credits over three years of study is the desired outcome for graduation.
- The pass mark is generally 40%.

Modules are weighted at 20 and 40 credits in some HEIs and at others in 15-, 30- and 60-credit units. Institutions value their autonomy in this regard as a means of making themselves distinctive in the market.

### Unique to the UK

Unique to the UK (and the University of Melbourne, Australia) is the system of classification of Honours degrees. The percentage grades are divided as follows:

- First Class 70%–100%
- Second Class 50%–69%
- 2:1 60%–69% (admission to postgraduate study)
- 2:2 50%–59%
- Third Class 40%–49%

An Ordinary Degree can be achieved with 300 credits and is unclassified.

### The content

The content of dance degrees in the UK university sector varies by the research interests and specialisms of the academics and the degree design in each institution. Most offer practical study with practical assessments that range from classical ballet to conventional modern dance to British New Dance to street dance and to hip hop. Some specialise in somatic practices as a central core and ethos of their work; others may use this information more peripherally.

It appears that nearly all UK university dance programmes deliver some elements of theory with written assessments. The approaches vary, from programmes delivering a standard view of dance history as the theoretical content to others that teach elements of somatic theory, phenomenology, aesthetics or choreology as

their theoretical underpinning. This combining of theory and practice appears to be common in the UK (Coughlan, 2010).

### **A changing landscape: the costs for dance students**

Prior to 1998, university education in the UK was essentially free to all those with a place to study, with the potential for additional government funding to support living costs. The introduction of the political necessity of charging student fees for their university education began with the Dearing Report (1997). This wide-ranging study offered a comprehensive overview that made recommendations for significant changes in UK Higher Education. The influence of this report is still reverberating nearly twenty years later.

Subsequently the landscape of dance and all undergraduate disciplines in higher education has seen a significant shift following the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees in the UK in 2012 (Coughlan, 2010). This new level of cost for tuition together with students having to fund their living expenses brings with it new levels of financial burden that many families may find difficult to justify without an absolute guarantee of subsequent employment.

Public perceptions of arts education may also have been skewed when Michael Gove, the then Shadow Minister for Children, Schools and Family, said in the *London Evening Standard* (Gove, 2009) that 'our leading universities have made it clear that taking soft subjects such as media studies or dance at A Level harms candidates' chances of admission'. Of course this would be the case where students with Dance A Levels applied to other subjects. For university dance programmes, success in the Dance qualifications for the A Level, the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC), the International Baccalaureate, or National Vocational Qualification are still seen as a major advantage.

However, in the context of the economic downturn a large proportion of students may have been swayed toward an implied need to select STEM (sciences, technology, engineering, mathematics) subjects in the belief that these are a guarantee of successful employment upon graduation. 'Benign advice—now profoundly mistaken,' according to Ken Robinson (2006).

In this context, students have become conscious of their right to 'value for money' with regard to the quantity and quality of their experience as a student. Student impressions of the quality of their learning and teaching, the resourcing of their programme of study and other aspects of the student experience are now nationally assessed through the National Student Survey, with the data made public through UniStats. Future students and their families are able to use this data as they consider their options. For dance students, the specific implications of this close examination raises concerns that most dance institutions manage with a degree of implicit preparedness. The level of commitment and the depth of study, characteristic of many dance degree programmes, imply a high degree of rigour and innovation. In current generations it is clear that the value of an education in dance cannot be directly measured in immediate monetary terms and that the employment prospects for dance graduates are wide ranging; they include employment in the industry, in the

community and in a variety of other fields in the same way as for students from many other disciplines.

In 2015, UK universities will be at liberty to set their fees according to market forces. What changes this will bring to dance in higher education remains to be seen. The hope is that student dancers will continue to have the opportunity to study their art at this level and that in so doing they will realise the inherent values, skills and multiple intelligences that are studied and exercised during a degree in dance.

### **Origins and expectations**

In identifying the expectations of graduates it is the experiences of the students rather than the academics' perceptions that are more useful as a starting point. A focus group questionnaire was conducted with students at the University of Northampton at the end of the academic year 2013/2014. Most student responses indicated that they had very clear preconceptions about curriculum content, with one of the primary topics of discussion being techniques they expected to study. However, those who had not studied dance in high school or further education (16-19 year olds) for GCSE, A Level or BTEC qualifications, and had primarily danced in private schools, expressed that they had very few preconceptions about curriculum content.

One student commented that she had expected regular ballet classes because 'ballet is the core of everything'; with others concurring that they expected to primarily study codified techniques such as Cunningham and Graham, as well as choreography and improvisation. Their expected areas of study were largely historical and did not reflect the more recent prominence of postmodern, release or somatic techniques. It is also interesting to note that students expected 'practical' work to be codified dance technique, rather than the multitude of practices that come under this umbrella.

The general consensus was that theory meant dance history. Those who had studied A Level Dance expected a deeper version of the theory units they had previously studied (AQA, 2014). Several students expressed that they expected theory to be taught in a discrete module, rather than permeating their entire degree. As one student put it, they expected a separation between 'dancing and writing'. This emphasis reflects the construction of dance as a practice and subject area in the A Level Dance qualification offered as part of post-16 education in the UK (AQA, 2014). A Level dance constructs dance and dance knowledge in a very particular way, providing little scope for embodied ways of knowing, or many other concepts and practices that are central to a significant proportion of dance education and practice.

Lorna Sanders wrote in her article in *Research in Dance Education* that the syllabus at this level defines what dance 'is' and does not reflect an independent reality, but a constructed one (Sanders, 2008, p. 228) and a fixed body of pre-existing knowledge (Sanders, 2008, p. 229). As such, students often come to HE with very fixed notions about dance knowledge and curriculum, and are inclined towards a structuralist viewpoint of absolute truths in which 'ballet is the core of everything' rather than being open to the multiplicities of practice and theory that dance studies can offer.



In commenting upon the reality of their experience in dealing with concepts such as multiple types of knowledge, one student made an analogy with popular culture: 'It's like *Breaking Bad*, if you miss one episode you'll never get back into it, you're constantly catching up.'

### Graduate prospects: the statistics

Graduate prospects are recorded in multiple ways in the UK, with the primary outward-facing information being the statistics included in the Key Information Sets (KIS), introduced in 2012. These are intended to help incoming students decide where to study by comparing course data drawn from the National Student Survey (NSS) and The Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DLHE). These include everything from overall course satisfaction, to time spent in lectures and seminars, average salary within six months of graduating, and accommodation costs. According to KIS (Unistats, 2014), at the institutions represented by the authors of this paper:

- The average salary 6 months after the course is between £14000-£16000, well below the student loan repayment threshold.
- 75%-90% go on to work or further study, which is then broken down into what are termed professional/managerial and nonprofessional/managerial jobs.

Even though the average graduate starting salary has dropped by more than 11% since 2006, *The Complete University Guide* (2014) still reports an average professional starting salary for graduates in the UK as £21,701. Thus, the starting salary for dance graduates as reported by KIS is well below the national average.

Of course, measuring graduate prospects on a purely statistical basis is problematic and there are a number of issues with KIS. A study at the University of Lancaster has studied the impact of the NSS on institutional behaviour, and argues that KIS could further distract universities from focusing on more meaningful ways to improve their educational provision. Information on graduate destinations, employment and salaries is notoriously difficult to gather and verify (Partington, 2011) and does not address things like the range of opportunities afforded by a particular course of study, or job satisfaction. It also assumes a linear career structure, which is not always appropriate where project work and short-term contracts are common for successful freelance practitioners (Rees, Forbes, & Kubler, 2006, p. 66-7).

The QAA's *Subject Benchmark Statement for Dance, Drama and Performance* discusses graduate prospects or 'graduateness' in creative disciplines in reference to subject specific and generic skills, with the transferable skill set of our graduates being sought after in environments such as business and commerce. According to the QAA:

These skills include those of communication (written, oral and performance), of research and analysis, the ability to work independently, interpersonally and in groups, to deadlines and under pressure, with flexibility, imagination, self-motivation and organization. (QAA, 2007, p. 3)

These much sought-after transferable skills are sometimes referred to in the context of the 'creative graduate'. In his 2008 report on teaching-research links in the arts, Terry Wareham argued that creative subjects produce creative graduates who are self-motivated, capable of managing complex workloads, developing new ideas and problem solving. These features are critical to the development of the creative industries and other sectors (Wareham, 2008). This, versus the statistical approach, paints quite a different picture. The statistics present the prospects of our graduates as limited in terms of starting salaries, whilst Wareham's report and the QAA presents the desirability of our graduates in the creative industries and beyond.

## Research in dance in the UK

Dance is a culturally significant and intellectually viable field for study. In one sense ... dance has been 'studied' throughout the ages and in most cultures. (Carter, 1998, p. 1)

There has been a developing heritage of dance study wherein western dualism has privileged the cognitive (mind) over the corporeal (body). An on-going issue for dance scholars has been that 'dance completes itself in the moment of its disappearance ... the *tracelessness* of performance, which has been regarded as the greatest impediment to its acceptance as a credible object of research' (Dempster, 1994, p. 3). However, for those who work in dance this ethereal nature is perhaps one of its attractions and a subject for research in and of itself.

Research in dance has often been approached from a range of extrinsic analytical perspectives: historiographical, anthropological, philosophical, political, phenomenological and sociological. Similarly, certain aspects of dance are the subjects of research using dance-specific methodologies which reach dance-specific outcomes. Dance sub-disciplines such as choreology, choreography, choreutics (the dancer's use and attitude to space) and eukinetics (the dancer's use of time) are intrinsic fields of research within a dance-specific paradigm.

Bachelor of Education degree courses (teacher training) and subsequently Bachelor of Arts degrees in dance were established in the late 1960s and 1970s. These developments necessitated the identification of theoretical frameworks to support a level of rigour and depth of study that would validate consideration of dance research within the academy. By that time theorists such as Betty Redfern (1973/1982) and Valerie Preston-Dunlop (1969) had investigated the concepts at the core of dance and were ready to develop the discourse. By the 1980s a model had evolved that identified three central and inter-related concepts in research in dance:

- performance;
- making;
- appreciation.

Professional companies used audience development arts funding to develop education and outreach literature that created a new body of researchable materials: literature and video recordings and eventually repositories of dance-related documentation and artefacts. Subsequently, the National Resource Centre for Dance

based within Surrey University was established in 1982 to catalogue, produce and disseminate these dance resources.

There was intense activity in dance scholarship during the period of the late 1980s to the early 2000s. Here, increasing concern developed for how dance engaged across a range of supportive disciplines. Anthropological studies (cultural creation of meaning) began to integrate with bodily practices and the study of culture (O'Shea, 2010, p. 3) leading to investigations of the political representations in dance. Such foci on representation intertwined the scholar's personal experiences and identity such as class, gender, race and sexuality as well as some work across disciplines such as history, cultural studies and, intrinsically, choreological analysis. The interpretation of dance as politics of identity remains a significant field of investigation. As O'Shea summarises:

Dance studies, in the process of studying the intentional production of identity in choreographic form, has drawn on postcolonial theory, feminist theory, queer theory and critical race theory... Dance studies puts gendered, sexualized, racialized bodies into motion, a tactic that enables further discussions about bodily inscription and agency. (2010, p. 8-9)

Philosophical inquiries and critical dance scholarship continues and includes recent developments in aesthetics and phenomenology that are concerned with bodily experience, 'value', artistic affect and effect, and the context of the embodiment of both performers and spectators.

In the late 1990s, dance medicine and science became recognised areas of dance education and research with foci on dancers' health, safe practice and well-being. Dance medicine and science are multifaceted and align with general medicine, sports science, somatics, body therapies, physical therapies, dance education, anatomy, physiology, psychology, kinesiology, biomechanics, movement analysis and nutrition (Minton, 2000, p. 110). The International Association of Dance, Medicine and Science and the Performing Arts Medicine Association and their influential journals, seminars and conferences have disseminated a range of work in the field of dance science.

Furthermore, academics engaged in analysis and shared practice in dance education launched in 2000 the *Journal of Research in Dance Education* based at Canterbury Christ Church University. This international, social, citation and indexed journal supports and investigates academic research on a range of issues in dance education.

Other research organisations such as the World Dance Alliance, Dance and the Child International and publications including *Contact Quarterly*, *Writings on Dance*, the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* and the *Journal of Choreographic Practices* all give significant national and international perspectives as well as prominence to this research.

Dance and dance education research includes discourse concerning the philosophical and epistemological perspectives that guide this research. Current inquiry is located in the contemporary spectrum of artistry, aesthetics, ethics, new

technologies, performance, pedagogy and many other scholarly pursuits. The range of methodological approaches, such as interpretive, participatory, critical, embodied, reflexive, mixed method, ethnographic, and auto-ethnographic research and writing, informs this scholarship in both practice and theory.

Higher education institutions are accountable for the public outcomes of research activity and these have significant funding implications for institutions. Many UK universities now recognise that artistic practice in dance can constitute research. The Research Assessment Exercise (1996) and Research Excellence Framework (2014) have for twenty years assessed the quality and quantity of dance research and most UK dance academics are deemed to be 'research active'.

However, there are tensions and these are evident in the many attempts to balance teaching and research in a context in which many dance academics view themselves as artist/practitioner/scholars. In juggling this division of time and effort, dance academics join their colleagues from many fields.

## In conclusion

Matt Hunter suggests:

It's the depth of practice of an arts degree that sets it apart and makes graduates so unique, these degrees open more doors than ever before.  
(2014)

Dance exists in the fluidity of time and the architecture of space. Its participants, through their successes in higher education, are versed in the sophistications and complexities of time and space and as such are educated persons, able to interact in many fields wherein they might dance or they might take these experiences elsewhere. An education in this most human of art forms is indeed an education for life.

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## Biographies

**Duncan Holt**, MA, DC, FMCA, SFHEA (Panel Chair) a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy is a freelance lecturer and researcher in Dance in the UK. In industry he performed with Cycles Dance Company (UK), as well as companies in Canada and Australia and was Dance Artist in Residence at Theatr Clwyd, Wales. Postgraduate student research supervision includes site-specific choreography and current developments in Thai dance. Recent publications include work on 'touch' in dance and auto-ethnographic studies in career structures. His current research concerns aspects of men in dance, youth dance and his second career as a McTimoney Chiropractor.

**Dr Angela Pickard** has performed, created, taught and presented dance locally, regionally and internationally in her roles as dancer, choreographer, teacher, advisor, consultant and academic. She has worked with a number of independent and mainstream choreographers in a range of collaborative and creative projects and performances in Kent, London and Europe. Angela is also Artistic Director of Canterbury Dance Company: a creative and collaborative performing company, and Programme Director for BA (Hons.) Dance Education and BA (Combined Hons.) Dance. She specializes in ballet technique, dance pedagogy, choreography, and dance research, and is Editor in Chief for *Research in Dance Education* journal.

**Ms Kelly Preece** is the Researcher Development Programme Manager for Postgraduate Research Students at the University of Exeter. As a dance scholar and academic, she has taught on a range of dance and performance degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Her teaching practice has encompassed choreography, improvisation, dance history, screen-dance, dance in education and community (specialising in inclusive practice). Her research focuses on embodiment and somatic sensation in digital dance performance and blended learning pedagogies. Kelly has been a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy since 2010, and holds a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

**Dr Sara Reed** is Associate Head of Performing Arts Coventry University, UK. Her career has spanned a wide range of dance, performance, arts and education contexts. She has held senior posts at a number of higher education institutions and dance organisations including; the University of Surrey, Dartington College of Arts, The Northern School of Contemporary Dance, Dance and Theatre Cornwall and the Jerwood Dance House, Suffolk. After initial study and training at Laban she gained an MA in Performing Arts from Middlesex University and a PhD from the University of Surrey. Sara is a Feldenkrais Awareness through Movement teacher.

**Cathy Childs** is principal lecturer and Head of Dance at the University of Chichester. She leads the BA Dance and MA Performance Dance Programmes, including the touring company *mapdance*. Her teaching and research specialisms include dance technique and performance. She trained at Laban and performed with Transitions Dance Company before joining English Dance Theatre. Cathy leads courses in dance pedagogy and is a link tutor to trainee teachers, visiting schools and colleges with *3Fall* delivering training, workshops and performances. She has been an executive board member for DanceHE, the representative organisation for Dance in Higher Education in the UK.