

**TITLE: Unique British Partnership venture:
Birmingham Royal Ballet Dancers join Birmingham University**

AUTHOR: Dr Tansin Benn

AFFILIATION: University of Birmingham

**ADDRESS: University of Birmingham
Selly Oak Campus,
Weoley Park Road,
Selly Oak,
Birmingham,
B29 6LL,
England**

E-mail address: t.c.benn@bham.ac.uk

ABSTRACT –

**Unique British Partnership venture:
Birmingham Royal Ballet Dancers join Birmingham University**

Birmingham Royal Ballet Company is the second largest dance company in Britain and one of the most innovative in the world in terms of projects and initiatives undertaken. The Education Department is responsible for many exciting and courageous ventures, including the negotiation of a partnership degree programme for its dancers in 1997. The partnership between Birmingham University and Birmingham Royal Ballet enables full-time dancers to study part-time for higher education qualifications to Masters degree level. The unique feature that has enabled the programme to succeed has been its customised nature. The University provides a customised programme that is managed specifically around the Company's rehearsal, performance and touring schedule.

The paper focuses on an evaluation of the first five years of the partnership, which began in 1997. Between 1997 and 2000 ten dancers undertook the programme and a second cohort, who began in 2000, are now in their final year. Methodology involves a narrative by the author who has been programme leader from the degree's inception, enhanced by ongoing programme internal and external evaluations, in-depth interviews with dancers and Company managers, documentation and secondary sources. There is a strong international dimension since the Company attracts the best dancers from around the world, as indicated by those who have joined this University programme from America, Australia, Spain, Romania, China, Poland, Italy, Austria, Scotland and England.

The context of the partnership is significant for three reasons. First, the political drive for inclusion has led the British higher education system to address important issues such as widening participation, continuing professional development and lifelong learning. Second, elite ballet dancers usually enter specialised training around the age of eleven years. This early vocational decision and pathway, it can be argued, disadvantages them educationally, closing traditional routes into higher education.

This partnership has re-opened opportunities for professional dancers to enter University, recognising their enormous gifts and expertise whilst seeking to extend them in new and challenging ways. Third, a dancer's career pattern is relatively 'high-risk', short and unstable, with enforced second careers due to age or injury being the reality. Individuals who have dedicated their lives from childhood to the demands of the ballet world can face an enormous sense of loss and identity. Any action to empower dancers to move through difficult life-stages and to find new skills and abilities for second careers is valuable.

Results of the ongoing evaluation provide evidence that the opportunity for professional dancers to enter a University programme has made a difference in multiple ways. It has impacted on the Company through bringing new awards and opportunities for extending thinking about continuing professional development of all Company members. Skilful ways of using the graduates from the programme within the Company has led to a positive change in the culture of the whole Company in terms of valuing and prioritising the work of the Education Department with school and community sectors.

The degree programme has impacted on the dancers in many positive ways. They have been empowered and found higher education to be a place to grow in confidence, self-esteem, skills, reflective and critical thinking. They have broadened and deepened their perspective of the world both inside and beyond professional theatre. Their life-chances have been enhanced through qualifications gained. Interesting second careers are being secured because of the degree programme, for example one graduate has recently been appointed as 'Learning Manager' at London's Royal Opera House, and another has been offered an appointment in a Texas University Arts Department. Reciprocally, being programme leader for this venture has enriched my life in many ways, bringing challenges and rewards along the way.

The programme will continue to impact on the wider dance / arts world. It has provided a pioneering model that has been successful. The higher education experience has contributed more critical thinkers to challenge arts cultures and practices. It has stimulated breadth and depth of original research from practitioners who belong to a traditionally silent world:

"I know of no other analysis of dance practice which is of equal breadth and depth either nationally or internationally. This has been made possible by the involvement of practitioners, who have been empowered by higher education and who have provided scholars with an unparalleled insight into the world of dance."

Professor Christopher Bannerman
External Examiner 1997 – 2001
(Chair of the Dance Panel, UK Higher
Education Research and Assessment Exercise)