

Integrating primary and secondary arts education with the work of awarding organisations offering graded examinations in the performing arts



1. Introduction

This paper summarises the current situation with regards to the impact of Covid-19 on cultural learning in the UK and the wellbeing of children and young people. It outlines practical and achievable ways in which the graded examinations sector, particularly across dance, drama and musical theatre, could support schools and colleges in providing a good quality cultural education in primary and secondary settings, specifically in a context where learners may have missed out on learning opportunities over the past year and resources are limited.

2. The case for cultural learning

2.1 The educational benefits of learning dance, drama and musical theatre

There have been numerous statements in support of the wider educational benefits of learning within the arts, which address the development of valuable personal and employment skills such as collaborative working, initiative, problem solving, and emotional intelligence. A survey by the Cultural Learning Alliance¹ concluded that the advantages to be gained from cultural learning include:

- stronger educational attainment in general
- the encouragement of positive behaviour and participation in learning
- improved health and wellbeing and engagement in the community.

There are also well acknowledged connections for participation in the performing arts to the promotion of good self-motivation, physical and mental well-being, the ability to work positively with others and the development of inner-resilience. This is underlined in a Durham Commission² report, commissioned by Arts Council England, which concluded that:

'creativity makes a valuable, indeed vital, contribution to learning in all subjects. We have heard that music, dance, drama, art and design all require the acquisition of technical skills, subject knowledge and understanding alongside opportunities to express and explore creative thinking.'

In 2019, the arts and culture sector³ contributed £10.8 Billion to the UK economy and £2.8 Billion to the Treasury through taxation, and generated a further £23 Billion annually and 360,000 jobs. It is a matter of national interest to ensure that the next generation of employees are suitably equipped to join a sector that can help drive the growth, job-creation and innovation that the UK now needs more than ever to recover and thrive.

¹ <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/evidence/key-research-findings-the-case-for-cultural-learning/>

² <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/durham-commission-creativity-and-education>

³ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/contribution-arts-and-culture-industry-uk-economy-0>

2.2 The effects of the pandemic on children and young people

There has been much discussion about the impact the pandemic has had on the education of children and young people. In November 2020, Ofsted published a number of briefings⁴ on the findings of its research into the effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning. Whilst this focussed mainly on the impact on core subjects such as English, mathematics and science, there was acknowledgement that children and young people have been significantly disadvantaged across all subject areas. Other research, including by the Youth Sports Trust⁵, highlighted that the lockdown conditions and changes to the arrangements for schooling has worsened the wellbeing of children and young people generally.

The teaching of creative subjects has been particularly impacted by the pandemic as students have struggled to access resources and facilities usually provided by schools and colleges. Further, strict social distancing requirements have restricted their ability to work together in groups to prepare and present work, particularly in the performing arts. Additionally, many creative subjects are offered as extra-curricular or enrichment activities, and have been severely disrupted by the constraints on after-school clubs and out-of-schools provision (indeed, limitations on out-of-school settings remained in place beyond the time primary and secondary schools were permitted to return to in-person teaching.)

The pandemic has presented much economic uncertainty, and lower-income families have struggled to afford extra-curricular lessons for their children, such as performing arts classes, further curbing many young people's access to a rounded education.

2.3 The importance of the performing arts in supporting children and young people's post-pandemic recovery

The UK Government recently announced the Education Recovery Plan⁶, the intention of which is to offer funding across a range of areas, including 'catching up' on lost learning by pupils as well as additional support for disadvantaged students. This is particularly important when many children and young people are suffering the effects of prolonged isolation, the stresses of learning remotely and anxiety for the future⁷.

The Education Recovery Plan intends to have a longer term impact on approaches to education. For instance, the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the impact of the pandemic on children's services and education highlighted its potential to support schools and colleges in delivering a broader programme through embracing enrichment and co-curricular activities, alongside subject based learning⁸, which opens the door to provision leading to graded examinations in the performing arts.

However, it was disappointing to learn that the funding of £1.4 Billion recently announced by Government would not encompass the wide range of approaches that had originally been discussed. It is a missed opportunity to provide longer term support for children and young people as appreciation of, and engagement in, the performing arts together make an essential contribution to supporting the wellbeing of individuals and society more widely. This is especially important in the current context. It is widely acknowledged that preparation for graded examinations⁹ in dance, drama and musical theatre develop high standards of performance, perception, creativity, knowledge and understanding. They provide a scheme of clear incremental standards by which students, teachers, parents/guardians and employers can measure progress in acquiring genuine command of the skills required in each discipline, whether for educational, vocational or social purposes.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-covid-19-series>

⁵ <https://www.youthsportstrust.org/news-insight/research-papers/returning-to-school-after-covid-19>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-education-recovery-package-for-children-and-young-people>

⁷ <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/news/covid-prioritise-on-attendance-assessment-and-recovery-over-time-schools-urged/>

⁸ <https://committees.parliament.uk/event/3844/formal-meeting-oral-evidence-session/>

⁹ <https://cdmt.org.uk/images/gradedexams/CDMT%20Flip%20Book%20Output/GradedExamGuide/>

3. The graded examination context and how it connects to pre-vocational education

3.1 The scale of graded examination provision

Awarding organisations offering graded examinations operate in 100+ countries globally and have an approximate combined:

- turnover of more than £175M each year, of which £120M is directly related to examinations activity in the performing arts. The proportion of income generated in the UK compared to overseas is in the order of 55% to 45% respectively
- annual examination entries in the UK of 1.1M¹⁰ and 0.75M overseas. Out of a total 1.85M, 925,000 entries are in music (50%), 725,000 in dance (39%), and 200,000 in drama (11%)
- number of examination venues approaching 12,000 in the UK and 17,000 overseas
- engagement with 80,000 teachers in the UK and 100,000 overseas
- UK staff of over 1,000 along with 2,500 examiners.

The number of students achieving graded examinations in dance and drama is significantly higher than those taking similar subjects at GCSE and A Level. Over the past decade, changes to education policies and accountability structures, has resulted in a lessening of performing arts provision in and beyond mainstream schools. The most conspicuous evidence is illustrated by the reductions in the number of students taking dance examinations in schools since 2010 - 42.2% for GCSE and 53% for A Level. A similar pattern is replicated for drama and music, which show a decrease of approximately 50% in both subjects for A level and 30% for GCSE.

The general decline of arts provision within schools is underlined by a reduction in the number of teachers from 46,800 to 36,308 (-22%) during the same period, and a decrease in the amount of teaching time specifically allocated to arts in the curriculum from 467,400 hours to 361,963 hours (-23%). Regrettably, the opportunity for students to study towards achievement and reward in the performing arts is largely dependent on their ability to access and pay for extra-curricular activities.

3.2 How the graded examinations sector connects with other out-of-school provision

The numbers of UK teachers preparing students towards graded examinations in the performing arts is estimated at 15,000 for dance and 10,000 for drama and musical theatre. These practitioners operate in privately-owned or hired settings and make a significant contribution to the cultural provision in their local area. The teachers typically offer education from pre-school through to pre-vocational level training with many students progressing to vocational or higher education courses based on the technical skills they have acquired during the study of one or more graded examination syllabi.

The role these syllabi play in nurturing the next generation of creative artists is clearly illustrated by an outstanding track record of past candidates working as dancers, choreographers, rehearsal directors, teachers and arts leaders in the commercial, competitive and funded sectors. However, as classes towards this type of provision do not generally attract public funding, the means of many students to access these pre-vocational studies are limited to individuals with the financial wherewithal to pay for lessons.

The graded examinations sector for dance sits alongside existing funded opportunities for children and young people to learn through local, regional and national youth dance companies, as well as offers made

¹⁰ These figures include regulated and other provision. Ofqual-regulated graded examination certifications in 2019 stood at 0.5M in England. By comparison, in the same subject areas and year, there were 110,000 candidate entries at GCSE and 17,500 for A levels.

by the Centres for Advanced Training¹¹. Much of the work is coordinated through a network of National and Regional Dance Agencies, with a focus on broadening access and building new progression routes. However, funded dance provision is often patchy, and access is therefore highly dependent on local availability, with students typically supplementing their technical development with learning acquired through graded examination syllabi.

The graded examinations sector for drama and, increasingly in recent years, musical theatre, is similarly widespread and diverse, although there is no equivalent network of national or regional agencies. The only partial equivalent is the National Association of Youth Theatres, although this is not all-encompassing and often does not include independent schools or facilitators. Generally, a broad range of drama activity, education and engagement is undertaken and enjoyed by children and young people, from pre-school to post-secondary. Contexts for learning include:

- private teachers offering tuition on their own premises or as peripatetic visiting practitioners
- extra-curricular fully-staged school and college performances of plays and musicals
- weekend and evening clubs
- youth theatres associated with regional theatres, both in the subsidised and commercial sectors
- national producing bodies including the National Youth Theatre and British Youth Music Theatre.

Again, as with dance, many drama students apply practical learning acquired through graded examination syllabi alongside the above. Therefore, there are no clear pathways linking funded and private provision in the performing arts. There is a need to build a clear and consistent infrastructure for children and young people to develop progressive skills and experiences in dance, drama and musical theatre in line with their interests and aptitude, regardless of their background and economic circumstances.

3.3 Educational recognition of graded examinations

Graded examinations provide a series of qualifications that offer a progressive learning structure for developing performers. They form a set of motivational milestones from beginner level to a standard of proficiency and artistry appropriate for entry to higher education - either colleges specialising in the performing arts or the university and conservatoire sector. Working through the grades represents a typical route for those wishing to become performing artists, as they are an authoritative source of internationally understood benchmarks.

Graded examinations in dance, drama and musical theatre are recognised by the regulators in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Awarding organisations are monitored in how they carry out their activities through formal audits and annual statements of compliance. Regulated qualifications are given two Level references on the Register of Regulated Qualifications in England as described below. The first Level refers to their placement within the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and the second to an appropriate European Qualifications Framework (EQF) Level¹².

Qualifications	RQF	EQF
Grades 1 to 3 in dance, drama and musical theatre	Level 1	Level 2
Grades 4 and 5 in dance, drama and musical theatre Vocational Grade - Intermediate Foundation in dance	Level 2	Level 3
Grades 6 to 8 in dance, drama and musical theatre Vocational Grades - Intermediate and Advanced Foundation in dance	Level 3	Level 4
Vocational Grades—Advanced 1 and 2 in dance	Level 4	Level 5

¹¹ <http://www.nationaldancecats.co.uk/what-are-cats/>

¹² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840837/Referencing_the_Qualifications_Frameworks_of_England_and_Northern_Ireland_to_the_European_Qualifications_Framework.pdf

The graded approach, which typically encompasses eight grades, encourages learners at all levels of competence to develop and display their skills sequentially. It also provides a structure for teaching, monitoring and rewarding individual achievement, leading at each grade to an independent assessment of the candidate by an external examiner. There are clear stages people move through in education and training that are common to many countries, and awarding organisations generally liaise with authorities around the world in order to promote the currency of their qualifications.

Grades 6 to 8 appear in the UCAS Tariff¹³ for the purposes of facilitating entry to Higher Education.

4. How awarding organisations' networks of dance, drama and musical theatre teachers could support schools and colleges

4.1 Existing strategies to support arts education

Arts Council England's *Let's Create*¹⁴ strategy outlines a clear aspiration that young people from every part of the country should have opportunities to explore the many possibilities associated with a career in the cultural sector, along with access to appropriate support to fulfil their creative potential. Awarding organisations' networks of teachers could play a key role in delivering this goal by working in partnership with local schools and other arts providers to reach a broader range of participants, including disadvantaged children and young people, and build more robust progression pathways across classes, youth groups and companies. Furthermore, these performing arts teachers have the technical subject knowledge required to support schools with the delivery of dance and drama in the curriculum.

Arts Council England in partnership with the Department for Education has also launched The Cultural Education Challenge¹⁵ to improve alignment of cultural education for young people through Local Cultural Education Partnerships (LCEPs). In each Partnership, a Bridge Organisation¹⁶ works with schools, the local authority, voluntary and community organisations, Higher Education, music education hubs, and other funders to drive a unified art and culture offer locally, to share resources and administer a more coherent delivery of cultural education. In varying stages of development, some Partnerships work to promote qualification progression pathways in the arts, whilst others do not view it as part of their role. This consideration should be made an integral part of strategies going forward - as too in the Creativity Collaboratives project, recently launched by Arts Council England.

4.2 Building on existing initiatives and networks

We recommend that the Department for Education builds on the established music education hubs model to initiate a more cohesive dance, drama and musical theatre education provision in response to local need. This approach has proven reasonably successful in bringing together local authorities, mainstream schools, arts organisations and community or voluntary bodies. These relationships could be usefully extended to include networks of teachers linked to awarding organisations offering graded examinations across the performing arts.

As already referenced, the Education Recovery Plan, in its fullest conception, affords scope to strengthen the subject offer made by mainstream schools and colleges through encouraging the development of partnerships with external providers, to cover areas such as mental health and wellbeing, physical activity and creative learning. This offer should become normal practice, with schools and colleges working with

¹³ <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/tariff-calculator>

¹⁴ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/letscreate>

¹⁵ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/children-and-young-people/cultural-education-challenge-0>

¹⁶ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/children-and-young-people/bridge-organisations>

partners to deliver an academic, pastoral and enriched curriculum to all students, supported by awarding organisations offering graded examinations.

Further, each primary school in England currently receives a minimum of £16,000 annually to support physical activity in the form of the *PE and Sports Premium*. This fund could be extended to ensure that all children have opportunities to access the performing arts and that pupils from low income families are supported in accessing associated extra-curricular classes.

4.3 How the awarding organisations can support cultural recovery from the pandemic

The awarding organisations' networks of teachers are ideally placed to deliver dance, drama and musical theatre teaching and learning through the development of closer working relationships with mainstream schools and colleges, particularly in a context where resources may be limited. These networks are of importance for students who have missed significant periods of practical learning in the creative arts due to successive lockdowns and local restrictions.

In particular, support to awarding organisations' networks of teachers would promote:

- stronger links with the maintained sector to ensure more efficient and effective delivery of education in dance, drama and musical theatre. This would help alleviate pressure on schools by outsourcing provision to specialist arts education practitioners, further increasing accessibility of the performing arts to learners of diverse backgrounds
- best practice across teacher networks, through promoting access to coherent programmes of continuing professional development delivered by awarding organisations within existing operational structures, and encouraging achievement of their Ofqual-regulated teaching qualifications.

The benefits¹⁷ of investing directly in these networks through awarding organisations include:

- immediate potential to reach large numbers of practitioners and students across the performing arts in both private and public settings, complementing mainstream provision
- existing support to practitioners through online resources, printed materials, workshops, conferences and specialist teaching qualifications, which could also extend to continuing professional development and upskilling for teachers
- world-class syllabi used in supporting lessons to students, and evidencing candidate outcomes in examinations. Graded examinations are exported as a global brand, generating significant revenue for the UK economy. As a model of assessment, they have remained stable and successful for decades
- the formal aspect of public accountability to regulatory bodies such as Ofqual. Awarding organisations are subject to scrutiny through audit activities, recognition processes, data provision and formal submissions of annual statements of compliance to the authorities
- involvement of the CDMT, which provides industry quality assurance, quarterly membership meetings to discuss common practices, annual review of standards, and preparation of joint publications. Further, CDMT acts as the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Performing Arts Education and Training.

¹⁷https://cdmt.org.uk/images/gradedexams/CDMT%20Flip%20Book%20Output/GradedExamGuide/Restarting_the_Sector_2021.pdf

5. Next steps

We recommend that the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Performing Arts Education and Training makes:

- the case for partnership working between schools, colleges and the awarding organisations offering graded examinations in dance, drama and musical theatre
- recommendations about how existing strategies for creative and cultural learning could connect with partnership working across the graded examinations sector, including how current and future funding could be used in support of these aims
- clear the benefits of a partnership approach in the medium to long term, especially in terms of ensuring a 'project legacy' beyond the period of any government support.