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Raising standards

The Foundation for Community Dance, on behalf of the Dance Training and Accreditation Partnership (DTAP), is well underway with developing professional standards with and for those who deliver dance work in community settings and contexts. **Lisa Craddock** outlines what this could mean for you and your organisations

In 2009 the Foundation for Community Dance launched the National College for Community Dance (NCCD), with a view to developing a collective framework within which to house professional development opportunities relevant for dance artists and any individuals or organisations delivering person-centred dance work in community settings and contexts.

While the NCCD has this last year offered some great new courses, it's about so much more than that. The key aim of the NCCD is to work collectively to raise quality of practice across our sector by provoking debate, encouraging reflection and more critical self-regulation as well as sharing the professional development opportunities that are offered in each country and country in the UK. The NCCD supports research, too, by disseminating recent findings from advanced practitioners to hand down to future practitioners and to campaign for recognition within other relevant sectors.

Raising quality is all very well, but what if you're not sure we're all speaking the same language?

This is where the professional standards come in. A key part of the NCCD's work is the role that the Foundation plays, with the Dance Training and Accreditation Partnership (DTAP), in leading on their development. DTAP includes representatives from national organisations, conservatoires and agencies. The group aims to increase access to and raise standards within participatory dance for people of all ages and abilities. You can read more about it at www.dtap.org.uk

All of the partners within DTAP and organisations across the UK will continue to offer their own professional development specific to their sector needs. Any professional framework developed for community dance leadership will not affect a free market system from which

you choose what professional development you might want to do. But, and for the first time, professional standards will be created that all individuals and organisations can sign up to that meet our requirements. These standards will cover the knowledge and understanding that must be present for a dance practitioner to function effectively in scoping their projects, leading and delivering them at both basic and more advanced levels, as well as evaluating their impact and effectiveness.

What DTAP is effectively saying is that whether you're leading a ballet class for the over-50's, folk dance sessions at a village hall, a street dance group or an early years' creative movement session, there are basic essential competencies that everyone can sign up to, and some specialist ones too. These will change over time as new styles and ways of getting together to dance evolve. (There is room for this, as the standards will have to be reviewed every few years.) The process could lead to a much more respectful dance field where people are appreciated for their leadership skills, and the myriad ways in which access can be given to the physical challenge and creative engagement that dance offers.

Once professional standards are created they can then be taken through a process of becoming National Occupational Standards. Once approved as such the qualifications will evolve to meet industry standards. While this all sounds terribly official, and possibly a bit dull, it is potentially the biggest shift we've seen in dance leadership for a long time.

Over time the dance workforce should become more cohesive in its knowledge and understanding of what is expected both from employer and dance artist, making transferability of skills more consistent from region to region. The implications for employers are that job descriptions and appraisals can be managed with

What are National Occupational Standards?

First of all it's important to understand the difference between professional standards and National Occupational Standards. As a sector we can set ourselves agreed standards and a framework we can all sign up to. There are no rules as to what this should look like, or how it's interpreted. National Occupational Standards are a progression from this in that they require an overarching consensus and a rigorous testing of review systems and consultation processes. They're developed for and by specific sectors to illuminate what that sector as a whole does, and the competencies required to operate within it.

The simplest way to look at NOS is to breakdown the term:

National – We have to evidence that there's a need for these standards nationally, consulting within all four nations of the UK.

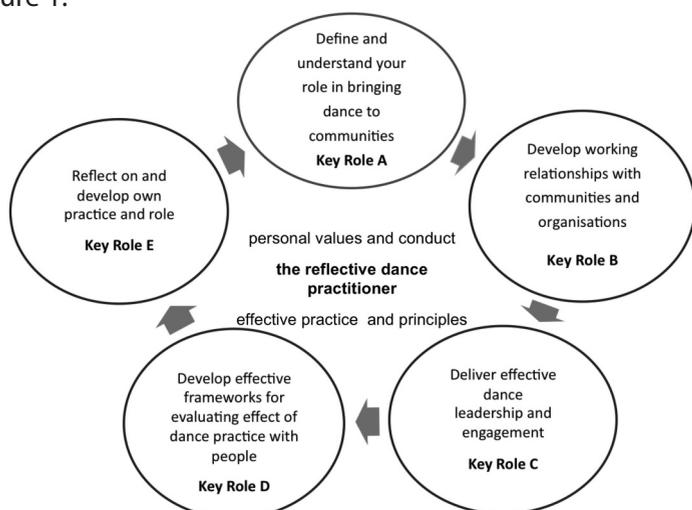
Occupational – Because they cover the technical functions that people carry out in occupations, and

include a range of broader functions such as teamwork, customer service, health and safety, communications, information technology and many more. We find out what our functions are for our occupation are by analysing an area of work, mainly using the input of employers and others who have a close interest in the occupation such as practitioners and professional bodies.

Standards – The essential things that employers and the other stakeholders agree that people in the occupation should be able to do. Standards are a consensus view amongst a variety of employers and have to go through the UK approvals process.

Approvals for NOS take place via Sector Skills Councils. Creative and Cultural Skills is the key sector skills council working with us to support the development of NOS. We can adopt existing standards relevant to our field of work, meaning that we're also in touch with many other standard-setting bodies and sector skills councils.

Figure 1.



the knowledge that while competencies that matter to you locally are addressed, you're writing these in line with national standards. For the independent practitioners who make up the bulk of our sector there will be a way to measure and plan their professional development, celebrate their progression and set fees at appropriate levels.

Best of all, these standards are about knowledge and competencies to deliver a particular occupation, and because most other industries have them in place too it gives us equivalence in the workplace. As such, an individual practitioner should see more clearly where some of his or her skill sets are transferable to - for example, care work or youth work. This also will help establish status that will prove useful if you need to argue your corner as an individual working within a bigger institution. In short, these standards will support the articulation of career progression in dance leadership in the community.

Have your say

Figure 1 reveals the key roles around which we're currently working to build professional standards. In London, in May, we'll be sharing the work that's been done so far on the professional standards. We'd welcome feedback as we'll have three months after this meeting to take on board your opinions, adding to or altering the standards to reflect your experiences. They are, after all, yours to own and use. Please sign up on our website if you'd like to have your say on the standards as they develop. Go to www.communitydance.org.uk/registerinterest

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National College for Community Dance

Offering an annual series of continuing professional development (CPD) to support, inspire and improve your practise.

Programme for 2010/11

- Passport to Practice handbook: a brand new guide to starting out plus three new handbooks on dance in specialist contexts: Health, Disability, Intergenerational
- Seminars about evaluation, ethics, and professional standards
- Passport to Practice courses happening regionally
- Summer school of specialist pathway courses
- E-newsletters and dedicated web pages about CPD.

visit www.communitydance.org.uk/nationalcollege