

# Higher Education forging futures for communities dancing

**Fiona Bannon** is Chair of DanceHE the representative body for higher education departments teaching and researching dance in the UK. Here she reflects on its role in advocating for dance, a discipline ideally suited to investigate and articulate the social, cultural and political centrality of the arts to the quality of everyday life

**I write this introduction to the work of DanceHE at a time of considerable unease at all levels of our education sector.** We continue to work to secure fair access to arts and culture and seek to reinforce the significance of arts activity in terms of the quality of everyday life.

There are many stories to tell about the ways in which people come to dance in their lives. My route to dancing started in the excitement of community dance classes and through clubbing. Eventually this led to training as a dance animateur with Peter Brinson at the Laban Centre and now I work as a senior lecturer at the University of Leeds, still teaching dance as an artform that matters in this world.

In conversations with colleagues working in dance academia there is often a shared vision of the ways that dance can help people explore 'moments of being', in ways that other experiences cannot reveal. A significant number of dance academics have roots deeply embedded in community dance practice. DanceHE is firmly aligned with the sentiment offered by Chris Thomson that as practitioners we believe in "offering dance to everyone... on the premise that dance is the birth right and the potential of all human beings."<sup>(1)</sup>

The role of DanceHE is to be the representative body for higher education Dance Departments in the UK. Membership is open to all departments and to individual artists/ academics who work part time in university settings. As a network we

are interested in a host of ideas about dancing that share a sense of how dance contributes to living well, to ideas of community, to artistry and to forging individual identity. We work in partnership with our membership and related organisations to voice our reaction to arts, education and cultural policy and to continue a vibrant debate about the place and role of dance in culture.

Our constitution states our aims as follows:

- To represent and advocate for the interests of dance as a subject in higher education in the UK
- To provide a forum for professional and scholarly debate
- To promote and disseminate excellence in dance teaching, learning and research
- To collect, exchange and disseminate information
- To liaise and collaborate across the sector with other professional, scholarly and governmental organisations on matters relevant to the study and teaching of dance in higher education.

We often act as a mediating body facilitating collaboration and debate across institutions drawing together teachers, practitioners and researchers to share information and best practice. Although a relatively small sector within the higher education framework we are working hard to increase the profile of dance as a discipline aligned with arts, science, ecology and humanities. Where possible we share resources, information and training opportunities >>





Light Night Leeds with Dance BA(Hons) students. Photo: Fiona Bannon



“My route to dancing started in the excitement of community dance classes and through clubbing.”

through regular communication with our members. Increasingly we rely on the use of email and Facebook.

Members of the DanceHE Board have links with national and international HE institutions as well as a host of professional networks. We represent our subject discipline through participation in consultation events, important places to share opportunities and best practice with colleagues working in community settings, education and professional practice.

Dance has been a discipline in higher education in the UK for over 40 years with study available at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral levels throughout the country. There are now 88 providers offering a range of programmes that include vocational training, single subject study in dance, chances to combine different disciplines or to explore inter-disciplinary connections between artforms. Whilst the discipline remains a relatively late starter in academia, it has developed in depth and now offers a breadth of diverse forms and practices.

Dance scholarship has made its mark within an academic research context and in the professional sector. Moreover dance artists, practitioners and scholars regularly collaborate with other disciplines and lead significant research activity in fields including

health and wellbeing, community arts practice and education. Dance in Higher Education is an evolving field underpinned by strong traditions, practices, forms and styles at its core, yet it has always been open to new ideas, approaches, ways of thinking, reflecting and making.

We represent the interests of our members to organisations such as the Arts and Humanities Funding Council (AHRC), Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) and Higher Education Academy (HEA) as well as in areas concerning funding, policy and processes. We also contribute wherever possible to refine quality and standards through our work with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) consulting upon Subject Benchmark Statements for Dance, Drama and Performance; OCR Creative Arts Consultative Forum and through National and International Quality Assurance and validation events.

Our current projects include the development of an Early Career Network and Mentor Scheme and we are due to launch a Mid Career Mentor Scheme in the autumn of 2016. At our next symposium, Sustaining the Discipline: Embedding the Right to Dance, 28-29th October 2016, we will be exploring the ways people make value from their relationships with dance and how this can be translated into educational and cultural

policies for our shared futures. The Northern School of Contemporary Dance, the University of Leeds and Leeds Beckett University will host the event. It will include cross sector discussion, presentations and performances aimed at developing patterns of co-creation in terms of working for shared goals across different areas of dance provision. It is our aim to ensure that entitlement to dance is realised.

Here is what we see as being the chief challenges facing DanceHE;

- To advocate for dance as a discrete discipline
- Embrace the intersections between the differing dance contexts
- Support all dance specialists working in HE
- Collaborate with like-minded individuals and organisations such as SCUDD (Standing Conference of University Drama Departments) and NAMHE (National association of Music in Higher Education) to pool resources and develop joint initiatives to benefit those wishing to study and work in dance and related fields
- Work with colleagues in mainstream and post-compulsory education to explore issues relating to dance and arts education
- Disseminate relevant information to members and seek their advice in response to political debate.

Our work echoes that of People Dancing and we hope to build ever-closer links in terms of participatory practice, access to provision, regional arts policy, continued professional development and creative entrepreneurial research activity. Please do join us if you are interested in sharing ideas, have information to disseminate or are thinking about entering the HE profession.

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### Info

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### References

1. Thomson, C. (1989). Community dance: What community[Idots]what dance? Young people dancing: An International perspective. Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference of Dance and the Child, London, 3, 88-98.