

A firm foundation: People Dancing professional qualifications

Credits: Rachel Cherry (top) and Chris Stenton.



Taking a long and occasionally winding journey of development, via some unexpected bumps in the road, the new People Dancing Professional Qualifications were recently released into the world. Executive Director of Qualifications **Anna Leatherdale** and CEO **Chris Stenton** explain more about where the idea came from, how it all works and what the qualifications can offer the profession now and in the future.

In setting out to write this article, we initially began by saying that we started on our qualifications journey in 2011 with the creation of something called (rather uninspiringly) National Occupational Standards for Dance Leadership. But actually, the truth is we started out on this road much earlier and just hadn't realised it at the time. So we are in fact going to commence with some history and context to explain how we have arrived where we have.

How it came about

If you're longer in the tooth, you might recall – or even have taken part in – a consultation programme led by us in 2005-2008 called Making a Move: A strategy for the development of a professional framework for community dance. This initiative aimed to capture views from across the profession about the skills, knowledge and experience needed for a successful and sustainable career in community and participatory dance. The intention was to provide the community dance profession with a strategy to address its current and future development needs.

We undertook extensive consultation and surveys and talked – yes talked! in person! – to a large and diverse range of dancers, teaching artists and community practitioners across the whole of the UK, together with organisations and employers in dance, education, community development, criminal justice and health. And we listened. The resulting strategy, launched in 2006, set out to articulate professional standards, support and prioritise professional development and validate professional status in community dance.

This work generated our Professional Code of Conduct – a version of which is in current use for our membership – and our organisation's renewed



Photo: Rachel Cherry.



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commitment to professional development, which now threads through and across all our work and was initially supported with funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. In 2008, People Dancing joined the group of organisations cooperating as the Dance Training and Accreditation Partnership (DTAP) to realise the strategy in a collective way, including in 2011 the creation of the National Occupational Standards for Dance Leadership.

Alongside this, we joined the ArtWorks: Developing Practice in Participatory Settings special initiative of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and worked alongside sister organisations in music, visual arts, literature and museums & galleries education to network and add value to knowledge and resources, some of which continues through the now independent ArtWorks Alliance network.

So, back to the seemingly dry but oh-so-important National Occupational Standards (NOS). What the NOS do is to outline key skills and areas of knowledge that members of the profession need to draw upon and develop throughout the course of their professional life. In addition to artform skills and dance technique(s) the NOS broadly cover a range of subjects such as communication, safer practice, developing working relationships and inclusive practices, self-reflection and evaluation.

When the NOS were developed there was an understanding that not everyone would need or want all the areas of knowledge set out in the standards at every point in their career, but that they provided a valuable set of guidance that was adopted by a range of universities and course providers to develop continuing professional development opportunities for participatory dance artists.

Most recently People Dancing Professional

Qualifications have used the NOS as a framework for creating specific qualifications – at different levels – that will enable dancers, teaching artists and community practitioners to evidence their knowledge and understanding in relation to specific areas of dance practice.

People Dancing Professional Qualifications – devised as a result of consulting with individuals and companies in a similar way to how the NOS were originally created – use learning outcomes to set out specific skills and areas of knowledge that practitioners may need in their work, enabling skills and knowledge to be further evidenced.

What qualifications can you gain?

Our qualifications range from simple, single subjects like Risk Assessment for Participatory Arts Practitioners through to more complex subjects that require a demonstration of an understanding of how to apply dance and dance-related skills when working with specific population groups. So, for example, we've created a qualification called Approaches to Dance with Early Years that covers topics like child development, learning theories, structuring a session and safe practice.

At present we've made four qualifications available:

- Approaches to Dance for Early Years
- Approaches to Dance with Older People
- Approaches to Dance for People with Parkinson's
- Risk Assessment for Participatory Arts

Over the next few months we will introduce qualifications relating to safer dance practice, planning, structure and progression and self-reflection, assessment and evaluation.

The qualifications are at a range of levels of difficulty with Level 2 qualifications in subjects like risk assessment through to Level 4 for the more complex subjects that require the application of theory and practice with specific population groups. Our long-term aim is to introduce a Level 5 teaching qualification which will focus specifically on dance in community contexts.

How will it work?

The topics covered by each qualification and the method of assessment used is set out in each qualification specification document which can be found on our website; www.communitydance.org.uk/training-and-qualifications.

Learners may choose to take a training route that focuses on the topics that are required to achieve a specific qualification. So, for example, learners might want to take People Dancing's An introduction to leading dance for Early Years online programme before taking the Level 4 Approaches to Dance for Early Years qualification. More experienced practitioners, who are familiar with meeting specific learning outcomes, may choose to proceed directly to take the qualification assessment.

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In addition to People Dancing's online and in-person courses a range of course providers plan to offer learning routes that lead to the Professional Qualifications. We'll publish details of this on our website when available.

A secure online portal has been created and every candidate who wishes to take an assessment is allocated a unique username and password that enables their submission to be anonymised so that the assessors (who have been selected and trained by People Dancing) will not be aware of who is taking the assessment.

Candidates can take the assessment whenever they feel they are ready to prove they can meet the learning outcomes. Each candidate will log in to the assessment portal using their unique access details and will have one opportunity to take a timed assessment. Additional time and alternative formats are available for candidates with additional access requirements. Questions are randomised so that candidates will not be able to compare answers. All candidates receive a report related to their assessment. Candidates who successfully pass the assessment will be awarded a certificate to recognise the qualification.

Take our training and gain People Dancing Professional Qualifications

What we've described here is our attempt to make some 'positive change that sticks'. We believe it will make a difference now and in the future. As with many things, there is more work to do. The renewed focus on the challenges facing dance in education at all levels provides additional context and urgency. The cost-of-living crisis, and the impacts of Brexit and the Pandemic are shifting the economy of our sector and its fragile ecology, as are the national arts policies and the allocation of resources for these. We know that the language is sometimes clunky, and that we have to ensure we live up to our own talk around inclusion.

We are already encouraged by the response to our qualifications, with candidates signing up from the UK and from further afield - USA, Canada and South Korea - and we hope one day soon you too.

In the next few months on our website, in our blogs and the Summer 2024 edition of Animated, Louise Katerega, Head of Professional Development, will guide us through some frequently asked questions and offer some inspiration to help navigate how to engage with People Dancing Professional Qualifications and our training courses in the way that is right for you.

We'd like to thank everyone who has contributed to the development of our qualifications - there are many of you! - and offer our special thanks to Sue Akroyd, Ken Bartlett, Lisa Craddock, Dr Susanne Burns, Andrea Barzey, Claire Pring, Helen Angove, Pat Abraham, Louise Marshall and Jamieson Dryburgh.

QUALIFICATION QUICK FACTS

What are they?

Qualifications, based on national occupational standards, which enable learners working with dance in participatory settings to develop and evidence their skills and knowledge.

Which ones are on offer?

Currently we offer four qualifications

- Risk Assessment for Participatory Arts Practitioners - Level 2 Award
- Approaches to Dance for Early Years - Level 4 Certificate
- Approaches to Dance with Older People - Level 4 Certificate
- Approaches to Dance for People with Parkinson's - Level 4 Certificate

Click on their titles on this page to find out more including costs, options for each and how to sign up.

What do the levels mean?

They indicate complexity or depth of skills and knowledge. The lower the level the less complex the qualification. A Level 2 qualification is widely regarded as equivalent to (British) GCSE level, Level 3 to A level and Level 4 to 1st year UK degree standard.

What will the qualifications help me do?

- Improve your skills, knowledge and confidence
- Prove these to employers
- Link you with experts and peers in the same field
- Earn while you learn at your own convenience

Where do I find out more?

By exploring the Training and Qualification section of our website here where you can discover how to become a candidate and view more frequently asked questions.

www.communitydance.org.uk/training-and-qualifications
