



# gradedexams

The Definitive Guide



Confirming quality in Dance, Drama and Musical Theatre



*Written by*

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*Produced by*

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[www.devised.co.uk](http://www.devised.co.uk)

## *over a million candidates annually*

Graded examinations grew from the examination structures put in place by the music conservatoires in the mid 19th Century which aimed to assess the development of young musicians and to support standards in teaching. By the beginning of the 20th Century the scope of the assessments had expanded to include drama and dance. It is little surprise that the early geographical spread of these examinations mirrored the footprint of the old British Empire with Awarding Organisations' archives recalling examiners leaving from UK ports on sailing ships for long international tours, certificates in hand.



Today, graded exams are available in over 90 countries and attract well over a million candidates annually. The range of performance specialisms covered includes an extensive list of musical instruments and styles, dance genres, drama disciplines and musical theatre.

*Front cover from left:* Trinity College London, Kevin Ricks  
British Ballet Organization, Johan Persson  
Trinity College London, Kevin Ricks

*Back cover:* Dance Proms, Elliott Franks

*Inside front cover:* Associated Board of The Royal Schools of Music

*This page from left:* Thinkstock library image  
National Association of Teachers of Dancing  
New Era Academy

## WHAT ARE GRADED EXAMS?

Graded exams 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 exams are offered in:

- **Music**  
*For example orchestral instruments, piano, electronic keyboards, singing and guitar*
- **Dance**  
*For example ballet, tap, freestyle, modern jazz, ballroom, Spanish and contemporary*
- **Drama and Communication**  
*For example acting, speech and performance arts*
- **Musical Theatre**

*Photos from left: Rockschool  
Royal Academy of Dance, David Tett  
English Speaking Board*



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.

Preparation for graded exams develops high standards of performance, perception, creativity, knowledge and understanding. Additionally, the grades provide a scheme of clear incremental standards by which candidates, teachers, parents/carers and employers may measure progress in acquiring genuine command of the skills required in each discipline, whether for educational, vocational or social purposes.

*internationally understood benchmarks*



The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) is the regulator of qualifications in England. Many Awarding Organisations offering graded exams are recognised by Ofqual and its partners in Wales and Northern Ireland.

These Awarding Organisations are committed to submitting annual statements to the regulator confirming their compliance with Ofqual's General Conditions of Recognition. Ofqual evaluates these returns and ensures that Awarding Organisations carry out their roles correctly through formal audits and, where relevant, comparability studies of assessment standards.

Further, graded exams are included in Levels 1 to 4 of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) as shown in the table below.



| Qualifications   | RQF            |
|--|----------------|
| Grades 1 to 3 in Music, Dance and Drama  | <b>Level 1</b> |
| Grades 4 and 5 in Music, Dance and Drama<br>Vocational Grade—Intermediate Foundation in Dance              | <b>Level 2</b> |
| Grades 6 to 8 in Music, Dance and Drama<br>Vocational Grades—Intermediate and Advanced Foundation in Dance | <b>Level 3</b> |
| Vocational Grades—Advanced 1 and 2 in Dance  | <b>Level 4</b> |

Photos from left: London College of Music Exams/University of West London  
Trinity College London  
Performers College, David Bartholomew

## *promote the currency of qualifications*

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) relates different countries' national qualification systems around a common European reference allowing learners, employers, education institutions and other agencies to evaluate a qualification from another country against one from their own. The EQF thus aims to improve the portability of qualifications across Europe.

On recognition to the RQF, qualifications regulated by Ofqual are given two Level references on the Register of Regulated

Qualifications in England. The first Level refers to their placement within the RQF and the second to an appropriate EQF Level.

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.



## *reliable and valid assessment processes*

Graded exams test skills, knowledge and understanding in the performing arts by means of formal practical examinations conducted by examiners selected and trained by Awarding Organisations. The grades are 100% externally assessed and encourage students to evidence their performing abilities under examination conditions. Candidates' performances are judged according to how effectively the principal skills of each discipline are employed as a means of artistic expression.

Syllabuses spell out the assessment requirements in terms of content, evidence and standards. The duration of each examination increases as the grades progress, with some variation according to the specialism being assessed. Clear assessment criteria are applied to establish highly reliable and valid assessment processes.

The overall scheme of assessment uses a progressive mastery model which allows candidates to enter and exit the system at any point.



## *benefit candidates beyond the examination domain*



This approach permits fine distinctions to be made between different levels of achievement, with the expected competences and complexity of tasks increasing as candidates advance. There is also a progressive shift of responsibility for initiating and sustaining performance work from teacher to learner which benefits candidates beyond the examination domain in terms of autonomy and independence.

The syllabuses are cumulative in design and the outcomes for each grade assume mastery of the outcomes of the previous grades. Parameters for examination components including technical

work, unseen tests and theoretical questions are clearly defined. These provide a structured framework which teachers can integrate into the curriculum. There are no prescribed courses of study.

When syllabuses are revised, transitional arrangements are put in place to cater for variations in preparation periods and for the orientation of teachers to any new requirements. All materials are generally published in English, though specific demand for translation is given positive consideration.

*mirror performance in the 'real world'*

Photos from left: National Association of Teachers of Dancing  
Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music  
Trinity College London

Graded exams complement other qualifications such as GCSE, A-level and School Leaving Certificates. Whilst these generally contain some assessment of practical skills including performing, devising or improvising, the nature of the examination is significantly different from that in the grades. Graded exams do not permit more than one performance of a set work, whereas some other types of qualifications allow for numerous performances followed by the opportunity to select the best 'take' for assessment through the use of, for example, recordings. The grades therefore have a higher degree of criticality built into their design, more closely mirroring performance in the 'real world'.



Graded exams are designed to provide maximum positive feedback on learning while not defining either resources or teaching methods too prescriptively. Preparatory work on material and rehearsal encourage collaborative group activity, where appropriate, whilst examination content adds depth to candidates' practical studies, introducing them to a wider range of repertoire.

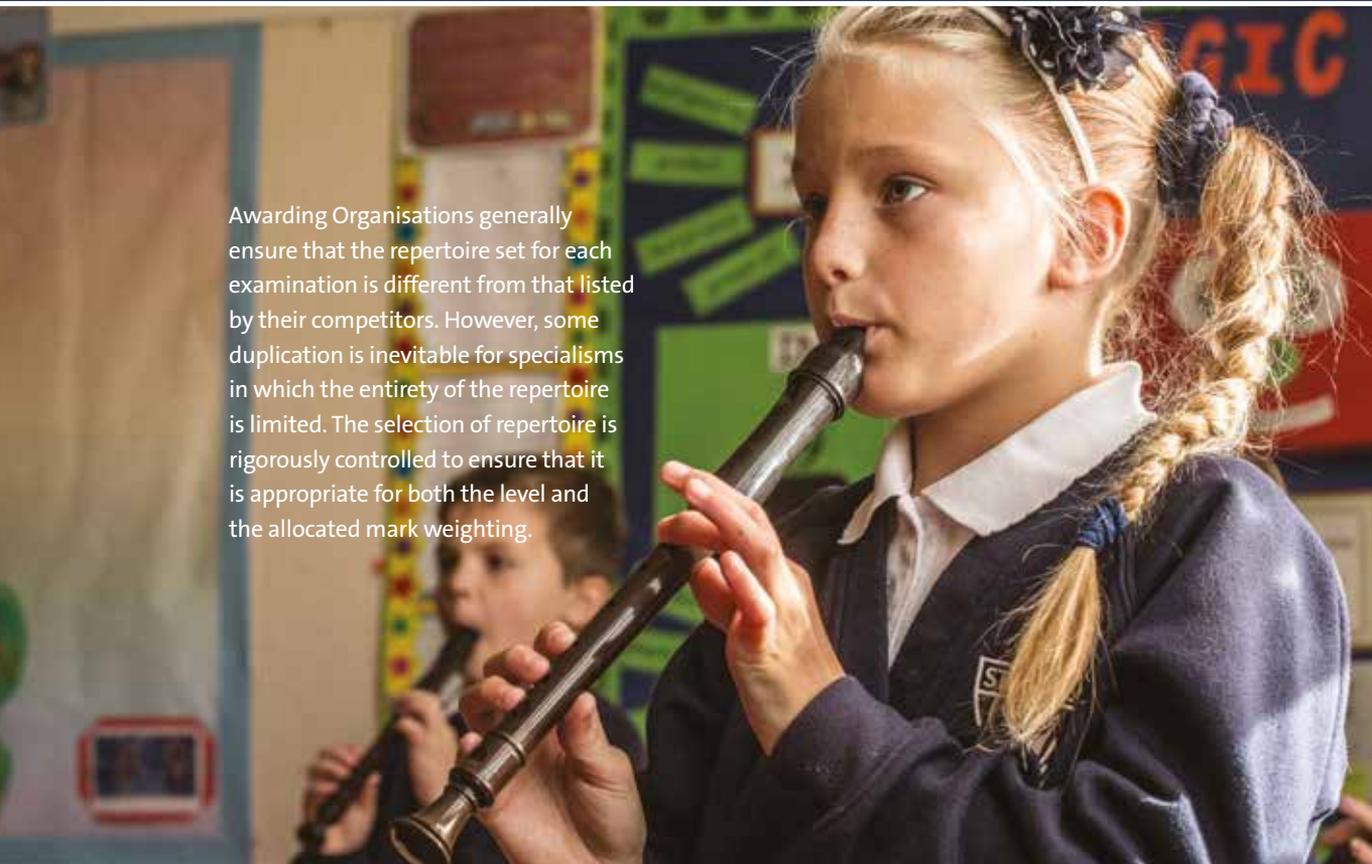


## *assessment systems which are distinctive*

Because they grew from a common structure and were developed along similar lines, graded exams in music, dance and drama offered by the various Awarding Organisations are broadly similar. For example, most require candidates to perform set works.

However, there are some differences which allow teachers to choose not only between various subjects offered by Awarding Organisations but between assessment systems which are distinctive in terms of their focus on specific disciplines, genres and, in some cases, preferred teaching methodologies.

Awarding Organisations generally ensure that the repertoire set for each examination is different from that listed by their competitors. However, some duplication is inevitable for specialisms in which the entirety of the repertoire is limited. The selection of repertoire is rigorously controlled to ensure that it is appropriate for both the level and the allocated mark weighting.



Trinity College London

### *content is carefully controlled*

This is usually achieved by convening panels of selectors who work under the supervision of a senior academic with reference to detailed guidelines and previous syllabuses. However, in case of own choice material, Awarding Organisations generally provide comprehensive guidelines and/or exemplar material to assist candidates in making an appropriate selection of repertoire. Since many Awarding Organisations operate globally, special care is taken to include works which are suitable for candidates and teachers from a variety of backgrounds. In some cases, candidates may perform their own works. These must meet the expectations indicated in the syllabus.

## *parity of standards between options*

The assessment criteria for performances highlight the need for candidates to relate closely to the repertoire they perform. Learning outcomes indicate the progressive depth of understanding demanded and, where available, candidates' choices from the repertoire lists are guided by the necessity to demonstrate these qualities.

Examiners often carry confidential tests. These are written by specialists, working under the supervision of a senior academic, and are replaced at regular intervals. Detailed guidelines for all unseen tests are given in the syllabuses, and exemplars are usually published for the benefit of teachers and candidates. Where there is a choice between different types of test, their content is carefully controlled to ensure parity of standards between options.





Graded exams are appropriate for learners of all ages from primary through to tertiary and continuing education. There are no restrictions in terms of age, gender, disability, ethnic or social background. The age range of candidates entering is extremely wide, and Awarding Organisations generally do not seek to tie one grade to a particular age group.

The grades are open to children and young people learning in schools, colleges or privately. They are also taken by adults wishing to increase their performing experience for the purposes of employment or pleasure. For example, they could provide a useful qualification for primary school teachers who need evidence of their practical performance skills, or for individuals who wish to enhance their experiences in the arts for leisure.

Research indicates the importance of creative training to other fields of study, including the development of physical co-ordination, communication skills, individuality, self-discipline and mental application. Graded exams encourage the development of transferable skills: improving own learning and performance (reflecting, critically evaluating, discussing ways to improve learning); working with others (group work, discussion, social skills, benefiting from what others think, say and do) and, in the case of the drama grades, communication (reading, reflection and language across the curriculum).

*Photos from left: London College of Music Exams/University of West London  
Midlands Academy of Dance & Drama, Sophie Pearcey  
London College of Music Exams/University of West London  
Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music*

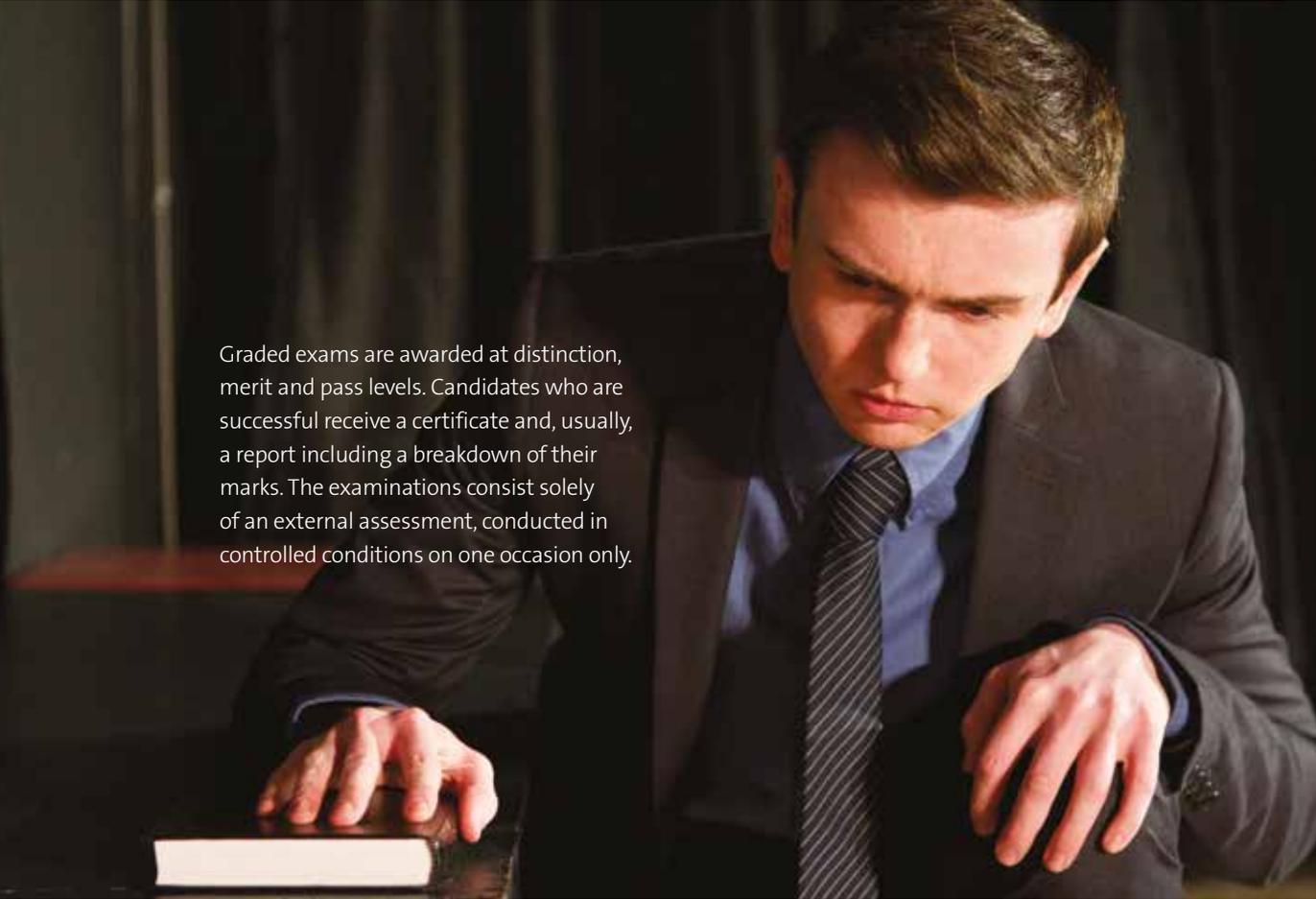


## *encourage the development of transferable skills*



Assessments are generally conducted throughout the year on dates requested by centres or set and announced in advance by Awarding Organisations. Examinations are held in a wide variety of venues such as schools, colleges, universities, and private education centres, many of which have a long and distinguished history. All centres are expected to demonstrate that they are able to offer appropriate facilities such as a warm-up room.

Since graded exams are entirely externally assessed by an examiner appointed and trained by the Awarding Organisation, venues where examinations are held are not 'centres' in the same sense as schools delivering courses such as GCSEs and A levels in the UK. The centre is not responsible for assessing any part of the qualification.

A man in a dark suit, light blue shirt, and striped tie is leaning over a desk. He is looking down at a book or document on the desk with a serious expression. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

Graded exams are awarded at distinction, merit and pass levels. Candidates who are successful receive a certificate and, usually, a report including a breakdown of their marks. The examinations consist solely of an external assessment, conducted in controlled conditions on one occasion only.

Examiners arrive at a result by judging each component from the following three perspectives:

- The general standard of achievement expected at the grade attempted and articulated by the repertoire
- The assessment criteria and related attainment descriptors
- The attainment bands applied to the specific grade attempted (i.e. distinction, merit, pass or below pass). Marks indicate low, mid or high achievement in each category

## consistency of assessment judgments



Photos from left: CPA Studios  
Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, James Hudson  
Spanish Dance Society, George Abdilla

The examiner assesses the candidate according to the criteria of a specific grade. Whilst the syllabus is cumulative and skills from earlier grades are integral to the candidate's performance, in order to ensure reliability the examiner does not examine skills other than those required for the grade entered. Candidates are not awarded a pass at a lower grade in the event of a failure at a higher grade.

Awarding Organisations monitor examiners for consistency of assessment judgments, understanding of assessment criteria, application of attainment bands, and the conduct of unseen tests.

All examiners take part in training and standardisation activities during which marks, grades, comments (where applicable) and results are analysed, compared and discussed in detail. The outcome of this kind of session is a greater reliability of marking across the panel. These events also provide a good opportunity to share working practices.



Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music

*provide a progression route to the higher-level diplomas*

The pattern of progression through the grades varies according to individual choice. Some candidates choose to advance through the sequence from grade to grade, others prefer to select only specific grades. Depending on the ability of the learner and the purpose of assessment, every grade is a potential exit point.

Grades 6 to 8 in music, dance, drama and musical theatre, and Intermediate and Advanced Foundation examinations in dance are included in the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service's (UCAS) Tariff. This provides a means for

Higher Education institutions in the UK to make broad comparisons between applicants holding different types of qualifications. The specific ratings for these RQF Level 3 grades can be found at [www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com)

The grades provide a progression route to the higher-level diplomas in performing and teaching offered by the Awarding Organisations. In music, conservatoires often specify Grade 8 as a prerequisite for their courses. In dance and drama, colleges often identify a pass at RQF Level 3 as appropriate additional evidence to support candidates' applications.



*Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, Chris Christodoulou and Music for Youth*

Higher level qualifications in music, dance and drama remain true to Awarding Organisations' commitment to conducting relevant and reliable assessments which enable candidates to show their best in examination conditions which are supportive of their aspirations and endeavours. They provide schemes of assessment at standards comparable to those expected in full-time tertiary training.

The fundamental principle of these industry standard qualifications is that the opportunity is created for candidates to display their skills in whatever role they choose, be it performer, teacher, director or another specialism. Holders of higher-level diplomas have excellent potential employability, not just in the arts and creative industries, but in a wide range of spheres.




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**The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM)**

4 London Wall Place  
London EC2Y 5AU

020 7636 5400  
www.abrsm.org

*Founded in 1889*




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**British Association of Teachers of Dancing (BATD)**

Pavilion 8 Upper Level  
Watermark Business Park  
315 Govan Road  
Glasgow G51 2SE

0141 427 3699  
www.batd.co.uk

*Founded in 1892*




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**bbodance**

Ensign House  
Battersea Reach  
Juniper Drive  
London SW18 1TA

020 8748 1241  
www.bbo.dance

*Founded in 1930*

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**British Theatre Dance Association (BTDA)**

The International Arts Centre  
Garden Street  
Leicester LE1 3UA

0116 262 2279  
www.btda.org.uk

*Founded in 1972*




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**English Speaking Board (ESB)**

9 Hattersley Court  
Burscough Road  
Ormskirk L39 2AY

01695 573439  
www.esbuk.org

*Founded in 1953*




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**Graded Qualifications Alliance (GQAL)**

The International Arts Centre  
Garden Street  
Leicester LE1 3UA

01162 624 122  
www.gqal.org

*Founded in 2003*

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### Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD)

Imperial House  
22/26 Paul Street  
London EC2A 4QE

020 7377 1577  
www.istd.org

*Founded in 1904*

## IDTA

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### International Dance Teachers' Association (IDTA)

International House  
76 Bennett Road  
Brighton BN2 5JL

01273 685 652  
www.idta.co.uk

*Founded in 1967*

## LAMDA

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### London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art (LAMDA)

155 Talgarth Road  
London W14 9DA

020 8834 0500  
www.lamda.org.uk

*Founded in 1861*




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### London College of Music (LCM)

University of West London  
St Mary's Road  
Ealing W5 5RF

020 8231 2364

www.uwl.ac.uk/academic-schools/music/lcm-exams

*Founded in 1887*




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### National Association of Teachers of Dancing (NATD)

44-47 The Broadway  
Thatcham  
Berkshire RG19 3HP

01635 868888  
www.natd.org.uk

*Founded in 1906*




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### New Era Academy (NEA)

2 Aglaia Road  
Worthing  
West Sussex BN11 5SN

01903 246790

www.neweraacademy.co.uk

*Founded in 1940*

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**Professional Teachers of Dancing (PTD)**

The Studios  
Morecombelake  
Dorset DT6 6DY

01935 848547  
[www.professionalteachersofdancing.co.uk](http://www.professionalteachersofdancing.co.uk)

*Founded in 1992*




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**Rocks School (RSL)**

Harlequin House  
7 High Street  
Teddington TW11 8EE

0845 460 4747  
[www.rslawards.com](http://www.rslawards.com)

*Founded in 1991*




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**Royal Academy of Dance (RAD)**

36 Battersea Square  
London SW11 3RA

020 7326 8000  
[www.rad.org.uk](http://www.rad.org.uk)

*Founded in 1920*




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**Russian Ballet Society (RBS)**

20 Champion Court  
Essex Road  
Stevenage SG1 3EY

01438 489901  
[www.russianballetsociety.co.uk](http://www.russianballetsociety.co.uk)

*Founded in 1923*




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**Scottish Dance Teachers' Alliance (SDTA)**

101 Park Road  
Glasgow  
G4 9JE

01413 398 944  
[www.sdta.co.uk](http://www.sdta.co.uk)

*Founded in 1934*




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**Spanish Dance Society (SDS)**

1 Blakett Close  
Staines  
Middlesex TW18 3NW

01784 460 419  
[www.spanishdancesociety.org](http://www.spanishdancesociety.org)

*Founded in 1965*




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**Trinity College London (TCL)**

Blue Fin Building  
110 Southwark Street  
London SE1 0TA

020 7820 6100  
[www.trinitycollege.co.uk](http://www.trinitycollege.co.uk)

*Founded in 1877*

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**United Kingdom Alliance (UKA)**

Centenary House  
38/40 Station Road  
Blackpool FY4 1EU

[www.ukadance.co.uk](http://www.ukadance.co.uk)

*Founded in 1902*

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**United Teachers of Dance (UTD)**

58a High Street  
Coleshill  
West Midlands B46 1AZ

01675 463700

[www.unitedteachersofdance.co.uk](http://www.unitedteachersofdance.co.uk)

*Founded in 1976*

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*Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, Simon Richardson*





This booklet describes the history, distinctiveness and purpose of Graded Exams, particularly how they contribute to the development of performing artists of all ages and ability - encompassing music, dance, drama and musical theatre - across the world.

It draws on the research and academic practices of twenty Awarding Organisations, all of which are committed and passionate about promoting progressive mastery in a range of performance disciplines. These organisations offer rigorous assessments, based on the well-known internationally acknowledged benchmarks that form 'the Grades'.

Today, Graded Exams are available in over ninety countries and attract more than a million candidates annually. We hope that you enjoy this booklet which explores why the Grades have become the world's most popular assessments in the arts.