

THE FOOD PROJECT

Final report



Lectoraat Excellence and well-being in the performing arts

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The food project

Introduction	2
Description of the project	3
Food at the Rotterdam Dance Academy	4
Planning your food	5
Knowing what to eat	6
Body image and food	9
Conclusions: what the school can do	11
Appendix A: Announcement of the Food Project	
Appendix B: Interview questions	
Appendix C: The student's petition	
Appendix D: IADMS nutrition sheet	
Appendix E: International food guides	

Introduction

Food is fuel for every dancer's body. Dancers need a healthy diet to maximise their energy stores, maintain their immune systems and enable them to train effectively. Dancers who eat healthy will feel less tired and reduce the risk of getting injured.¹

The Rotterdam Dance Academy strives to create an optimal environment for its students. From earlier research projects by the *Excellence and well-being* research team, it had become clear that in relation to food and eating behaviour improvements were called for. A survey among dance students in 2005, asking them their opinion about the RDA canteen, showed a strong dissatisfaction with the food that is offered there. An interview project with 1st year students in 2006, on their experiences with injuries, raised questions about the student's knowledge about food and eating behaviour in relation to their health.

As an educational institution the RDA has a responsibility towards its students. Students, on the other hand, are responsible for their own health. To facilitate a school's policy that is based on knowledge about student's needs, the lectoraat Excellence and well-being initiated the Food Project. For the Food project RDA students from all year groups were interviewed. The main subjects of the interview were:

- student's knowledge about food and good food choices
- cultural differences and food habits
- food and body image
- student's experiences with practical obstacles that keep them from eating healthy
- student's views on what the school can offer them.

The interviews were very informative. Students spoke openly about their eating behaviour, their knowledge (or the lack of it), about food in relation to health, their opinions about the situation at the RDA, and their problems with adjusting to the Dutch food culture. Their words are presented in this report.

¹ See Koutedakis Y. & Sharp, C. *The Fit and Healthy Dancer*, England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1999; Gigi Berardi, *Finding Balance. Fitness, Training and Health for a Lifetime in Dance*, New York: Routledge, 2005; Scylla Dyke,(ed), *Your Body Your Risk*, London: Dance UK 2001.

Description of the project

The aim was to interview students from different year groups. In March 2007 all RDA students received a letter, informing them about the Food Project and inviting them to join by putting their names on a list (see Appendix A). Almost 40 students volunteered to be interviewed. The interviews were held in March, April and May. All the interviews were taped and transcribed verbally. The material was then analysed.

There were two types of interviews: focus groups and individual interviews. Most of the focus group interviews were held in March; 19 students participated in them. Some of the focus groups consisted of students from one particular year group, others were mixed. The information from these interviews was then used to design the individual interviews, which were held in April and May; 10 students were interviewed individually.

In the group interviews the focus of the discussion was on:

- the student's knowledge about food and food choices
- the student's experience of the school in relation to food and eating
- practical obstacles that keep students from eating healthy.

These subjects were also discussed in the individual interviews. In addition to that, questions were asked about cultural differences, body image and personal food histories (see Appendix B).

Just after the start of the Food Project an incident occurred at the RDA that suddenly brought everybody's attention to food and eating habits. The RDA artistic director's decision to take one of the students out of a performance, because of the way she looked, caused a stir among students and teachers. The students drew up a petition, asking the school to formulate a clear policy on the issue of physical appearance (see Appendix C). On March 22 the director discussed his views with the students during a public meeting. The incident and its aftermath came up frequently in all the interviews.

Anna Aalten and Noortje van Amsterdam did the Food Project, with the help of several students from the University of Amsterdam.

Food at the Rotterdam Dance Academy

Although the RDA canteen was not an explicit part of the questionnaire, it came up in every one of the interviews. It is, therefore, fitting to start this report with student's experiences with the canteen.

The students are united in their opinion about the food that is offered in the canteen: they do not like it. Their main objections concern the lack of food that is specific for a dancer's needs, the abundance of fatty food and sweets, and the bewildering 'Dutch-ness' of the canteen's food supply.

Normally I cook something in the morning. Or I have something left from my dinner and I bring that to school. I do not use the canteen at all, because it's disgusting! (female student, 4th year)

I could buy here in the canteen, but it's too expensive and there is not so much good food. There are sandwiches, but I don't get full with a sandwich. (male student, 1st year)

I think the catering here is too much fixed on this country. That's what I'm noticing. It is such a Dutch canteen. There is bread, there is soup and there are snacks, and that's it. (group interview 4)

The canteen closes at 6 o'clock because everything in this country closes at that time! (male student, 3rd year)

Why do we have these candy machines? It is really not good, because at that time you are: give me, give me, give me, I'm hungry! They don't have food, they don't have anything and then you go there. (group interview 4)

Given the international nature of the RDA's population, it is not surprising that the students do not find much of their liking in a canteen that is dominated by sandwiches, *kaassoufflés*, chocolate muffins and dairy products. Many of these food products are unknown to them or do not constitute 'real' food.

The students are also outspoken and clear about what they miss: salad meals, fruit and vegetables, hot meals that have pasta, noodles or rice as its basis. Most of them are knowledgeable about the dancer's need for a high quality diet that contains protein and carbohydrates; they do not find that need catered for by what the RDA canteen has to offer.

Without wanting to, the RDA canteen conveys a hidden message to its dance students: it does not matter what you eat. The canteen is part of the RDA environment. And if the school takes its mission to promote excellence and well-being seriously, paying attention to its student's nutrition is also part of that.

Planning your food

In the 2005 survey 50% of the students said that their lunch break did not give them enough time to eat properly. In the 2007 Food Project students were asked explicitly about their experiences with the school schedule and whether they felt it had an effect on their eating behaviour. Here again, students voiced problems with the lack of time to eat and digest their meals, due to their full schedule and its irregularity.

The schedule is the main problem. It is 45 minutes and supposedly you need that to digest. But here in the school they don't care about digesting at all. We have 45 minutes at 12 o'clock and I eat a bit, but not too much. But then the next break that we have that is more than 15 minutes is maybe at 4 or 6 o'clock and all this time the body has been going on. And I'm hungry, you know. You might take an apple in between classes, but I don't know... I don't know how to do it right. (male student, 3rd year)

I have gastric pains also, because of these irregular timing and I think a lot of dancers have this problem. Because they dance you know, maybe have a rehearsal at 3 o'clock. And then yesterday you had it at 1 o'clock, so the timing changes. And everyday it changes and the body starts to produce acid at different times, it starts to burn on the stomach lining, but there is no food. And it is not good. So I don't know, I just try to have food ready as much as I can. But sometimes it is really difficult also, because you don't know. (male student, 2nd year)

On Fridays we have a cardio class just after the lunch break. But that is outside the school. So we have a ballet class, and then when the lunch break starts we have to go to the cardio class, so we do not have time to eat. And there we have to do all this running, and then we come back here and the teacher wants us to start class immediately. That is really difficult. (male student, 1st year)

However, just as in the 2005 survey, not *all* students have these problems. Dutch students, for example, are used to a light lunch, consisting of sandwiches, at midday. Other students say it is mainly a matter of getting used to eating small quantities during the day.

Students present two possible solutions to the problem of lack of time to eat and prepare their food: planning ahead and sharing responsibility.

This year I started to organize better. With my girlfriend, she cooks one day and I do the other. And it helps. We now cook more often. But if you do not have somebody with who you plan, like I was last year, it's very complicated. (group interview 5)

Obviously, dance students are not the only ones struggling with the complexities of planning and preparing good meals. But because of the extremely high demands on their physique, their need for eating good food and eating it regularly is greater than that of the average person.

Knowing what to eat

Because of their high level of physical activity and risk of injuries, dancers need a diet that is rich in proteins and (complex) carbohydrates. The technical requirements of dance and specific body image call for a strong lean body, which means a diet that is low on sugar and fat. Basically, all the students know this. The problems arise when they have to 'translate' this knowledge to their own personal situation. From the interviews we can identify three problem areas:

- contradictory information
- cultural differences
- general knowledge versus personal needs

Many students confess that they often become confused by what they experience as conflicting or contradictory information about food in relation to health.

Everyone says something else. One person tells you to eat lots of pasta, while another person says 'don't eat that'. One person says 'eat lots of nuts' and the other person says 'no, nuts are too fat'. Everyone has his or her own ideas and it is so contradictory. (female student, 1st year)

It is difficult, because there is no one to summarize. Because we talk and you go home and you have five different advices and well... now I don't know anymore. (group interview 4)

I think we have the lack of some professional person telling us: you are dancing and you need those proteins during your dance lesson or not. I have no idea what to do. (group interview 5)

The enormous differences between food cultures deepen their confusion. Each student arrives with his or her own cultural ideas about healthy foods. While the Dutch students will see a glass of milk as a healthy protein boost, this might be very different for a student from an Asian country, where dairy products are not part of the normal diet. And while the Spanish student will consider olive oil as part of any healthy diet, the student from Northern Europe might see it as fattening.

Finding food that tastes well is a real problem for many foreign students. Finding food that tastes well and fits a specific dancer's diet presents to be a major task. Many students are literally 'lost' in the Dutch food culture: they do not know what to buy, they cannot find their way in the supermarket, and they find it difficult to determine whether a specific food item is healthy or not.

Every student experiences within the first couple of weeks that they cannot get their food to taste like it does back home, because the seasonings in the supermarket are not [the same]. [...] Because food is so important for us and you try to find the same meats and it's different. Or fish, it's like, why is there no fish in the supermarket? Because in the supermarkets there, you have real fish, that's just part of it, you know. [...] Where food is concerned, I still feel totally different. (female student, 1st year)

Eating bread makes me feel bloated. And it feels empty at the same time. Because I don't feel that I am eating a meal. My brain doesn't work that way, you know. My brain registers: if you have rice, it's a meal. You have noodles, it is a meal. You have bread, it is just snacks. (male student, 2nd year)

Students explicitly say that they would like the school to take more initiative in relation to food and eating behaviour.

I think it [food] is really important, especially in a dance academy and I think they should care more about that and give us more information right away from the beginning. (male student, 3rd year)

They should guide us more, I think, and also because people who come here come from all over the world and things are so different here, and especially girls are getting fatter. (female student, 4th year)

That's why it's important in the beginning of the first year, to have information that goes maybe a little bit deeper and more specific about eating, even maybe about the food in Holland. So that everybody knows, because a lot of us at the beginning [don't know anything]. (group interview 4)

We have so many cultures here in school, because it's an international school, you cannot just say you know, you have to eat this, because it doesn't work the same for everybody. But they can give some advice, and maybe they can say where the supermarkets are... I don't know what kind of guide [lines] that depends, but let's say, not like 'eat beef in stead of bread' because all the people have so many different ways of eating. (female student, 4th year)

It's all kind of, everyone fend for themselves. And you will hear eventually if you are on the right path or not. But by then it's usually too late, you know. Because then you will have started habits and patterns. You are screaming for help almost: what do I do? (group interview 3)

The third problem area is the need for personalized advice on food. Students feel that the information they receive on how to eat is too general to be useful. As many of the students stated repeatedly: 'it doesn't work the same for everybody.'

Since September 2005 the RDA has employed a nutritionist who is available for questions for a few hours every other week. Ideally, having a nutritionist in the school would be the solution to the lack of knowledge about a specific dancer's diet and helpful when it comes to individual needs. When asked about their experiences with the nutritionist, very few students admitted to ever having consulted him. Those who went to see the nutritionist appeared not to be satisfied with his advice.

The nutritionist was like; you have to eat two pieces of fruit per day. And I was like, what? I eat like eight! Is that wrong? [...] So maybe [the advice] can also be more precise. (male student, 1st year)

In the beginning of the year he took us to Albert Heijn and that was really great. He did say some very useful things then. But he focused very much on how to avoid eating fat, you know. Pointing out things that had fat in them. He was really focusing on how to stay slim. (group interview 1)

While the nutritionist's advice may have been correct, students complained that it was too general and he did not address their personal needs.

A major difference is that between male and female students. While many female students constantly try to keep their weight under control, many male students look for ways to become a bit bigger. For both groups a general advice, even when it is well-informed, is not satisfying.

Another problem with this particular nutritionist was, that he was not very 'culture sensitive', i.e. his dietary advices were based on a Dutch diet, with a lot of brown bread and other food articles that do not appeal to students who are used to another diet. As a result, the students felt they were not taken seriously and they could not trust his judgement and advice.

Unfortunately word gets around very fast in school. So while probably only a few students have had a negative experience with the nutritionist, his reputation is now damaged. As a consequence his effectiveness has become questionable.

To conclude: in the interviews the students express the need for more knowledge about food, i.e. good, unambiguous information about the best dancer's diet. And they would like to have access to some one who can give them advice on their own personal problems with food.

Students from abroad also need assistance with the adjustment to the Dutch food culture. For them, the general information about proteins, fat and carbohydrates has to be 'translated' into a specific daily reality of eating food that they like and are used to in relation to their own cultural backgrounds.

Body image and food

Put simply, a person's body image is how one sees oneself and one's body and how one feels about it. In reality, someone's body image is very complex. It is not static, but is constantly influenced by one's environment. In the case of dance students, school is a major influence. Comments from teachers and other students, and feedback given on one's dancing have an enormous impact on the body image of a student.

In *Fit to dance 2*, the 2005 survey on dancer's health in the UK, the researchers state that 'body image' is a problem area for many dancers. Dancers who struggle with their body image run a greater risk of developing eating disorders.

In recent years, knowledge and education about the nutritional needs of dancers have been improved. A study to determine whether this improvement has made positive changes in the lifestyle of female dancers showed, that more knowledge does not always lead to healthier eating patterns. Dance students definitely know what a dancer's diet should look like, but they often choose to ignore this knowledge in favour of an eating pattern that will, in their own expectation, keep them as thin as possible.²

The official policy at the RDA is, that there is no ideal body shape. Talent and personality are more important than shape. But even within a school that does not acknowledge an ideal body, certain shapes are preferable to others. Students are very aware of this. The recent decision of the RDA's artistic director to take a female student out of a performance, because of the way she looked, increased their awareness. In most of the interviews they mentioned the incident as an example of the importance of body shape.

Students accept the demands that their education and profession make on the way their bodies look. They do not question this. But they have a problem with the uncertainties that arise when body shape is not discussed openly.

I think also the general school policy about this is really vague [...] In general we know what to do and we more or less eat properly. But then when you get a comment about your weight with no support, it's like: you're too big. Okay, but then what do you do? (group discussion 4)

And I think, because they're not so clear, sometimes you get a comment: you're bigger. But you don't know if it's meant as, you should do something about it or just a remark about the fact that you're not as skinny as you were, which you know probably because you see yourself in the mirror every day. And it's difficult to know what you should do about it, if you should actually do something or not. (group interview 4)

I think that is what the school is lacking, the support concerning eating habits and food for the students that come here [...] I believe just more directness can sometimes be helpful. Just to tell people if they should loose weight for that and that reason and not make it such a mysterious thing that nobody dares to speak about it. Everybody actually knows that you, I mean, you know it yourself that you should loose weight. But nobody really tells you and nobody also helps you. (female student, 3rd year)

I think, if the school really has a problem with your weight, they should tell you personally. And they should coach you. Like we have Marianne as our mental

² See Benn, T. & Walters, D., 'Between Scylla and Charibdis. Nutritional education versus body culture and the ballet aesthetics: the effects on the lives of female dancers', *Research in Dance Education*, 2/2 (2001): 139-155.

coach, we could have something similar. A person where you could go to for help with your eating. Because your body is really important. (group interview 1)

Again, their need for more knowledge and more specific knowledge is mentioned frequently. They do not object to losing weight, but do not know how to do it.

The difficult thing is, if you already eat quite healthy then it's difficult to lose weight. If you eat pizza every day and ice cream, then it's easy to stop it and you lose weight. But when you're not doing that, it's more difficult. (group interview 4)

Students express the need for specific information and help in relation to losing weight, while keeping their energy levels up and maintaining their health.

Conclusions: what the school can do

As an educational institution the RDA has a responsibility towards its students. Students, on the other hand, are responsible for their own health. To facilitate a school's policy that is based on knowledge about student's needs, the lectoraat Excellence and well-being initiated the Food Project. For the Food project RDA students from all year groups were interviewed. The main subjects of the interview were student's knowledge about food and good food choices, cultural differences, food and body image, and student's views on what the school can offer them.

Here the main conclusions are presented and a few suggestions are made in relation to what the school can do.

From the interviews it became clear that the students are united in their opinion about the food that is offered in the RDA canteen: they do not like it. Their main objections concern the lack of food that is specific for a dancer's needs, the abundance of fatty food and sweets, and the bewildering 'Dutch-ness' of the canteen's food supply. The students are also outspoken and clear about what they miss: salad meals, fruit and vegetables, hot meals that have pasta, noodles or rice as its basis. Most of them are knowledgeable about the dancer's need for a high quality diet that contains protein and carbohydrates. They do not find that in the RDA canteen.

In relation to planning their meals, students voiced problems with the lack of time to eat and digest, due to their full schedule and its irregularity. They seem to have found two possible solutions to this problem: planning ahead and sharing responsibility.

However, with the lack of good food in the canteen and the lack of time to eat, the RDA conveys a hidden message to its students: food is not important. Of course this is not the message that the school wants to convey. But if the RDA takes its mission to create an optimal environment for its students seriously, paying attention to dancer's nutrition is also part of that.

In the interviews the students express the need for more knowledge about food. They often find the information they receive contradictory, too Dutch, or not specific enough for their own personal needs. What they want is good, unambiguous information about the best dancer's diet. And they would like to have access to some one who can give them advice on their own personal issues with food.

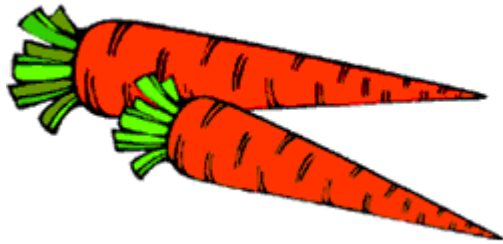
Students from abroad also need assistance with the adjustment to the Dutch food culture. For them, the general information about proteins, fat and carbohydrates has to be 'translated' into a specific daily reality of eating food that they like and are used to in relation to their own cultural backgrounds.

Students accept the demands that the educational institution and the professional dance world make in relation to body shape and aesthetics. They do not question this. But they have a problem with the uncertainties that arise when body shape is not discussed openly.

In relation to eating behaviour and weight control, their need for more knowledge and more specific knowledge is mentioned frequently. They do not object to losing weight, but do not know how to do it.

What the school can do

- change the canteen, i.e. make it more international and specific for a dancer's nutritional needs
- include more information and knowledge on dance nutrition in the programme, for example in the classes on anatomy or injury prevention, or in classes that are dedicated to nutrition
- make sure that the information that is offered in the school is clear and unambiguous (no contradictory information) and sensitive to cultural differences
- offer some special guidance to 1st year students (preferably not in their first week, when they are already overwhelmed by all the new info)
- set up a network of specialists, where students can go for individual advice
- formulate a clear policy on the requirements of body shape, which is agreed upon by the staff and unanimously presented
- organize help and support with weight control for students who need this.



WHAT'S FOR DINNER TONIGHT?

The Rotterdam Dance Academy strives to create a healthy environment for its students. Therefore we embark on a new research project concerning food and eating. We kindly ask students to participate.

In the next weeks we are collecting student's views on:

- their knowledge about food and good food choices
- cultural differences and food habits
- practical obstacles that keep students from eating healthy

We will organise some group discussions and ask individual students to be interviewed.

With the information gained by the research we aim to

- improve the school's policy concerning food and eating
- make teachers aware of student's needs and views on food
- stimulate a better food offer in the school's canteen
- support students in their eating practices.

This research project is initiated by the lectoraat Excellence and well being in the performing arts at Codarts.

For questions or more information, feel free to contact Anna Aalten, professor of Excellence and well being in the performing arts, room 8.25, email: ajjaalten@codarts.nl

Appendix B: Interview questions

Sex: Age: Year: Where did you grow up?:

Introduction: With this research we are trying to map the existing ideas on and knowledge about food that dancers have. Therefore we are also interested in the cultural context you grew up in. That's why I will start by asking you some questions about your youth.

I would like to get an idea about the **general** way food was considered in the country you grew up in as well as **your own** experiences with food and eating.

We will start by simply going through the different meals.

- What were the meals you had when you were a child?
- For each meal: What did you normally have? What did your parents have? Can you describe the situation (time, place, number of people)?
- Was this a common way of eating in your country?
- Did you ever eat anything in between meals? If so, what did you have?
- What was your favorite meal?
- Did you ever eat those things on a 'normal' day?
- Were there also things that you hated to eat? If so, what?
- And did your parents ever make you eat that? If so, why? If not, how was that kind of situation handled?

Thinking back, can you tell me something about the most important **ideas** that exist in [country] on food and **health**.

- Can you remember if there was ever any talk about healthy food? If so, what were you told about healthy food?
- Who gave you this information? Where did the information come from?

Now I'd like to talk about the time when you started dancing more seriously.

- At what age did your dance career start getting serious?
- What dance school did you go to?
- Can you remember if food was discussed there?
- If so, what did you learn about food? [Eventueel doorvragen] What did you learn about food in relation to health? And what did you learn about food in relation to body image?
- Where did this information come from?
- Did this change your ideas about food?

- Was body image an issue for you personally? [Eventueel doorvragen] Can you tell me some more about that?
- Did you start eating differently during that time? If so, what changed?

Then you came to dance here at the academy. You are not only dancing professionally, you also ended up in a different culture.

- What was the biggest change for you concerning food when you came to live in Holland?

We have been talking about the things that happened in the past concerning food. I am of course also interested in the way you handle food at the moment. Therefore I would like to go through the different meals again, just like in the beginning.

- What meals do you have? [Doorvragen voor elke maaltijd] What do you eat? Where do you have them?
- Do you eat in between meals? If so, what do you have?
- Are there things you were used to eating but do not eat anymore? If so, what are they and why did you stop eating them?
- Are there things that specifically haven't changed? Are there things you were used to eating and consider unhealthy that you still eat? If so, can you tell me why?
- How do you handle the organization of your food in your busy schedule?

We have talked about the concrete, practical aspects of food. Now I would like to ask you a few more **general** questions.

- What kind of information do you get about food? And where does this information come from?
- What do you hear concerning an ideal body type? Where do those ideas come from?
- Is body image an issue for you personally? If so, can you tell me some more about that?
- Looking back, have your ideas on healthy food changed since you moved here? If so, what changed exactly?

Thank you!