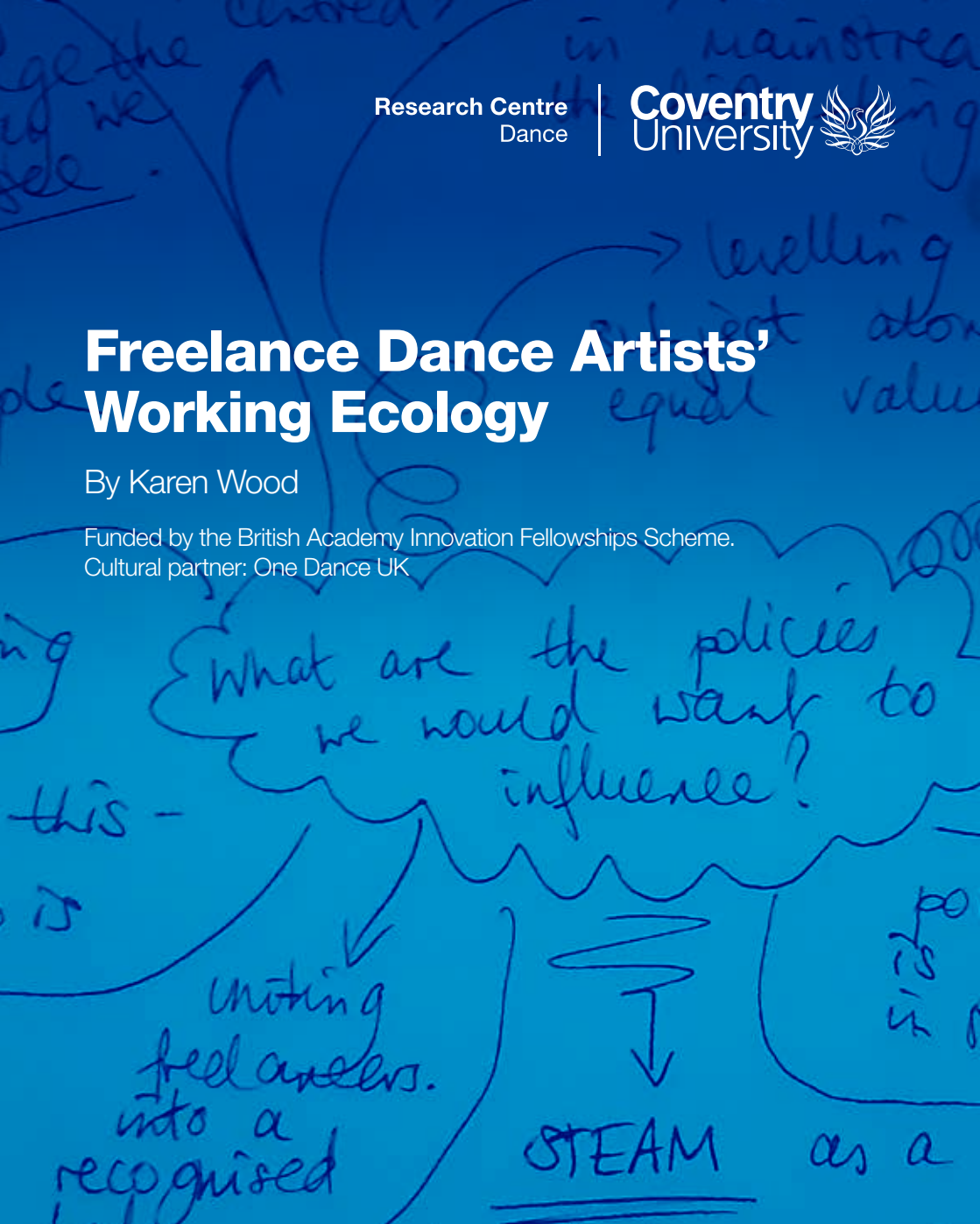


Freelance Dance Artists' Working Ecology

By Karen Wood

Funded by the British Academy Innovation Fellowships Scheme.
Cultural partner: One Dance UK





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Executive Summary

This report summarises the research activity and findings of a knowledge exchange project.

The project was funded by the British Academy, and was conducted by Karen Wood, dance artist and Associate Professor at the Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University, with One Dance UK, the UK advocacy body for dance, as the cultural partner. The research was co-produced with 74 freelance dance artists based in the UK. Over 12 months, we surveyed and gathered groups of artists to discuss their working conditions. This report collates the activities and findings, interspersed with practical recommendations for policymakers, arts organisations, venues, education institutions and all who interact with freelance workers.

Three themes emerged: Fair Pay and Contracts, Cross-Organisational and Union Working and Dance's Value in Culture and Education. Findings are integrated into discussion of these themes and a list of recommendations accompany these. The report concludes with thoughts on infrastructure and remuneration.





Introduction

Just over 2 million people in the UK work in the creative industries (DCMS, 2021). Around 50% of this workforce is made up of freelance/self-employed workers compared with 13% of all UK workers¹.

Approximately 300,000 people work in music, performing and visual arts (MPVA, as categorised by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport), of which 216,000 are self-employed (72%). The only other similar DCMS sub-sector is design and designer fashion, where the numbers are around half those in MPVA. The latter sub-sector is broad and does not differentiate between individual art forms; however, it does reveal the amount of freelance work being done and it highlights the importance of the current piece of research in supporting the sector. Aujla et al (2019) found that 81% of 'dancers and choreographers' were self-employed (using Office for National Statistics data on this sub-category), which reflects the short-term nature of teaching/projects and contracts.

This report summarises the research activity and findings of a knowledge exchange project. The project was funded by the British Academy, and was conducted by Karen Wood, dance artist and Assistant Professor at the Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University, with One Dance UK, the UK advocacy body for dance, as the cultural partner. The research was co-produced with 74 freelance dance artists based in the UK. Over 12 months, we surveyed and gathered together groups of artists to discuss their working conditions. This report brings together the activities and findings, interspersed with practical recommendations for policymakers, arts organisations, venues, education institutions and all who interact with freelance workers.

Presented next is a list of recommendations that emerged, following which are the methods of gathering knowledge and of co-production.

Summary of Recommendations

- **Seriously consider universal basic income (UBI, or an alternative model) for arts workers with full costing undertaken.**
- **Increase pay for freelance dance artists to cover all invisible and extraneous activities, e.g., project management, budget management and administration.**
- **HMRC to clearly differentiate freelance arts workers. Have an option to select 'freelance' as a type of work.**
- **Unions and advocacy campaigners to support organisations to work closely together.**
- **Provide a freelance body/organisation. This would be support for different types of working, e.g., business models, governance, and a place to advocate for freelance workers.**
- **Set up a national dance advocacy group. Their role to be defined by freelance dance artists.**
- **Increase participation in dance from the primary to secondary level.**
- **Science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics (STEAM) curriculum to include finances and resources for professionals to teach in schools.**

¹ See here: https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/documents/AoKE_GEF_Activities-English.pdf

Methods

Methods

The methodology was one of qualitative co-creation and knowledge exchange. The research questions explored were:

1. What are the working practices of the freelance dance artist community and how are they shaped by the current cultural policy of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) and Arts Council England (ACE)?
2. What are the barriers facing freelance dance artists in terms of participation in policymaking and what policy do they want to influence? How can their participation be increased?
3. What supporting and/or organisational infrastructure is missing in the participatory process and how might this be established going forwards?

The methods used were:

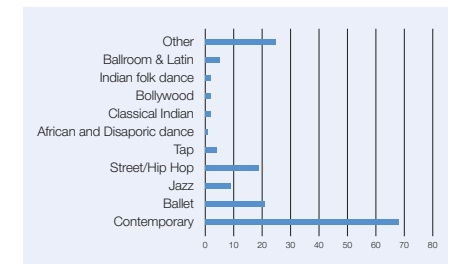
- A short survey – devised to gather baseline data on the working conditions of freelance dance artists. We sent out the survey as part of the enrolment process for the Knowledge Café. Dance artists were asked to self-identify with categories taking from the typology from Henry et al's (2021) *Mind the Understanding Gap: The value of creative freelancers*, which categorised freelancers as Creative Entrepreneurs, Creative Contributors, Creative Work-Life Balancers, Precarious Projecteers, Creative Ecologists and Community Creatives.
- A Knowledge Café – involving freelance dance artists, academics, and local and regional policymakers and organisations (e.g., Equity UK, the performing artists' union) and exploring the labour landscape for freelance dance artists. Knowledge Cafés, as described by the Global Exchange Facility (www.thegef.org) in its 2017 document¹, are 'facilitator-led conversations' that surface collective knowledge, share ideas and encourage collaborative dialogue in a relaxed environment. The Knowledge Café collected insight from the group through discussion and the exchange of ideas. This activity was centred around four themes: Working Practices and Conditions, Communication and Infrastructure, Training and Education, and the Impact of Policies. These themes were table discussions during which artists shared their experiences.

- A working group – comprising 15 self-nominated freelance artists who attended the Knowledge Café along with two members of One Dance UK. This was a paid opportunity. The working group met three times from September to November 2022. Conversations at these meetings were facilitated around the research questions. Brainstorming, which is a method used to generate new ideas and facilitate problem-solving, was employed to co-create responses, which were recorded. The group members' diverse experiences brought different perspectives to the research questions and facilitated vital cross-disciplinary discussions on the opinions and concerns of the workforce in this sector.

Figure 1 shows the broad coverage of the Survey respondents' dance genres — their primary genre and any others they might teach. We attempted to have representation from different dance genres, gender identities, disabilities, ages, social classes and cultural identities but we acknowledge that this was only partially achieved. The graph points to the dominance of contemporary dance, which could include both subsidised and commercial dance contexts.²

Figure 1. Dance genres mentioned by survey respondents.

Dance genres - mentions



From the findings of these methods, three themes emerge. Discussion on the themes will integrate results from these methods. The themes are as follows.

1. Fair Pay and Contracts
2. Cross-Organisational and Union Working
3. Dance's Value in Culture and Education

¹ See here: https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/documents/AoKE_GEF_Activities-English.pdf

² No further analysis has been conducted at this stage to see if there is any relevance in dance genre and freelance working.

1. Fair Pay and Contracts



Image 1: From table discussions at the Knowledge Café, Bristol, 13 July 2022. Credit: Camille Aubry.

COVID-19 highlighted the precarity of the freelance arts worker community, the fragility of their working practices, and the attendant weakness of this economic model. Around half of the UK's workforce in the cultural and creative sectors is made up of freelance/self-employed workers (DCMS, 2021). A recommendation in a DCMS committee report on levelling up was to improve working conditions in the creative industries (2023). One of the main points of conversation at the Knowledge Café held in Bristol was about fair pay and the need to address inequalities in freelancers' pay and conditions, e.g., sick pay, access to training, and acknowledgement of extraneous tasks. One survey respondent noted that 'having the time to find opportunities, write applications, while also developing your performance, as a young Dance Artist, the research required to find the opportunities is very time consuming and not easily accessible'. Another respondent comments on

the limited number of jobs and paid opportunities compared with the artists applying to these jobs. This means that most dancers are having to find work that is flexible that allows them to pay bills and live while still having the freedom to attend auditions and classes and maintain training. This balance is hard to find and feels unstable.

And here:

The continual justification of what dance artists do within that fee and the constant expectation that

elements of work are underpaid or expected to be delivered for free. I would also like to mention the difficulties of longevity for aging female dancers with young families.

The continual justification of fees and the perception of a specific career length is a concern especially for those entering the profession, those who have caring responsibilities and those at particular stages of their careers.

Equity's suggested 'minimum' payment for artists is now deemed low but it is nevertheless often used as a recommended amount rather than as a minimum payment. This low pay, coupled with an unhelpful narrative of unpaid work in the arts, is an essential element of career progression that sees artists as 'under-remunerated' (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2020b, p.574). Artists often have a portfolio career consisting of self-organised projects, invoicing as a sole trader and contracts issued by arts organisations, universities and other bodies. Figures 2 and 3 reveal how the numbers of issued contracts have declined over the past few years.

We asked the artists how many clients (organisations, institutions, etc) contracted them from 2019 to 2021 to compare the number of freelance contracts issued. Figure 2 highlights that the number of clients fell 67% to 15 in 2021 from 45 in 2019, demonstrating the adverse effects that COVID-19 had upon the work of freelance dance artists.

Figure 2. Total number of clients that issued freelance contracts per year, 2019-21.

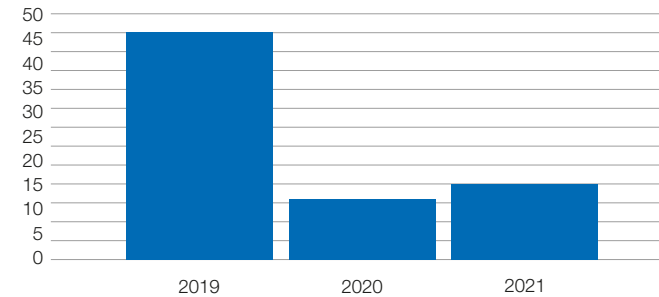
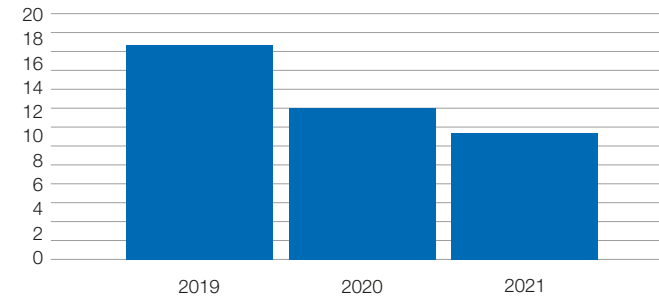


Figure 3 shows, for the same period, the number of organisations that employed freelance dance artists and taxed them at source through PAYE.

Figure 3. Total number of organisations that employed participants on PAYE contracts per year, 2019-21.



Figures 2 and 3 show two things: firstly, that artists are not being offered the same level of PAYE opportunities in 2021 as they were in 2019 and, secondly, that the number of self-employed contracts offered in 2021 did not reach the same level as in 2019. If COVID-19 is the reason for this, this is a very slow recovery rate, or perhaps there is another reason why contractors are now less likely to offer PAYE opportunities and there are not as many contracts available. These results show an increased precarity in freelance working. Less involvement in PAYE can mean less likelihood of enrolment in a pension scheme and more administration in terms of national insurance contributions and tax, and it therefore places dance artists in further workplace precarity, without long-term security. This comment is from a survey respondent:

The general understanding and awareness of dancers' right to rest, holiday pay and feeling like it is ok to ask for it to be added to fee. Feeling like fees are something to be cautious around. The frustration around jobs being offered without the fee stated within the offer of work. Power dynamic between director and dancer sometimes being unbalanced so communication is avoided.

To consider precarity and security further, the project used the typologies of freelance creatives outlined in the *Mind the Understanding Gap* report (Henry et al, 2021). Dance artists were asked which description best aligned with their way of working. 72 artists responded to this question. Table 1 summarises the six typologies and gives the number of participants who identified with each.

Table 1. Typologies of creative practitioner identified by freelance dance artists.

Typology group	Descriptor of typology	Number of participants identifying with this group
Creative Entrepreneur	This group 'work within and beyond the creative industries' (Henry et al, 2021) and entrepreneurialism is a key motivation for their working practices. 'Sufficient income' from their activity is gained through their seeing potential growth opportunities and adapting their business model appropriately. They choose who they work with and may offer a variety of activities.	6
Creative Ecologist	These people are deeply embedded in the cultural ecology through projects and networks that may involve close working with institutions. Their creative practice and outputs are their main motivation and they are 'likely to achieve sufficient income' (Henry et al, 2021). They can choose who they work for, and their working conditions are generally stable.	16
Creative Work-Life Balancer	The biggest motivation for this group of people is to achieve a work-life balance around the home or other situational commitments. They value autonomy and might have other income streams to draw from.	16
Creative Contributor	This group delivers creative products within and beyond the creative industries. This is likely to be supplemented by other income from a member of their household or a portfolio of work. Networking is important to this group.	11
Community Creative	These people work within, and are motivated by working with, community groups to share their practice and have a social impact. Sufficient income is not always achieved from this and they are likely to supplement their income with another source.	12
Precarious Projecteer	This group goes from project to project, sometimes relying on repeat or further projects from the same contractor and having to go with what is offered, sometimes forfeiting contractual terms and working conditions. They rely on networks. The continual bidding process is absorbed into their costs (Henry et al, 2021) and produces constant uncertainty and an unstable environment.	7
Other/none of the above	These are participants who did not identify with any typology.	4

The table shows that 68 dance artists identified with one of the typology groups and 4 did not identify with any. This demonstrates that there could be an array of business models used in the freelance dance sector to suit varying personal and home-life situations. However, only one of these, the Creative Entrepreneur, offers any sort of stability. The joint most popular typology, the Creative Work-Life Balancer, could point to the caring roles of those in the sector who try to find autonomy in the balancing of work and other responsibilities. The Community Creative, the third most popular typology,

shows the drive for creative practice to have social impact, but this is not a sustainable source of income. Overall, Table 1 illustrates that there is no dominance of one model between typologies for freelance dance artists and, therefore, not a 'one size fits all' model when you are a freelancer.

The working group listed ideal environments and ecologies to work in; the list was long. We narrowed it down to one main priority, which was a strong desire for UBI to be considered and piloted, as in Ireland. The

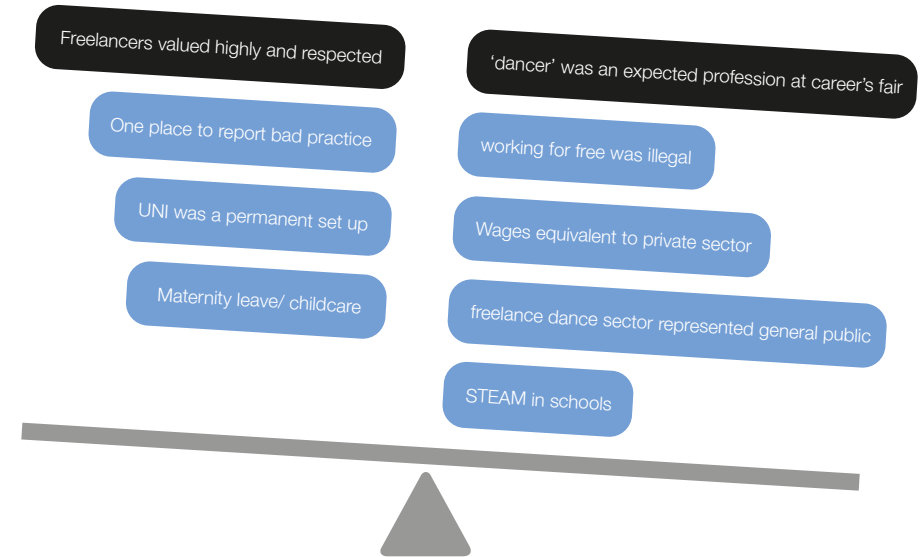


Image 2: The words of the working group members when thinking about ideal environments.

Musicians' Union is currently backing this initiative, and Equity called for it in 2021. UBI would provide a minimum income with which to sustain living while making, creating, teaching and administering art projects and undertaking freelance working. In turn, this would support the dance sector to remain stable, grow, be valued in society (discussed in the last theme), and become more present in commercial, educational, and cultural settings³.

Recommendations

- **Seriously consider UBI or an alternative model for arts workers with full costing undertaken.**
- **Increase pay for freelance dance artists to cover all invisible and extraneous activities.**
- **HMRC to clearly differentiate freelance arts workers.**

³These are the working group's priorities and thoughts. An exercise in costing UBI has not been undertaken.

2. Cross-Organisational and Union Working



Image 3: From table discussions at the Knowledge Café, Bristol, 13 July 2022. Credit: Camille Aubry.

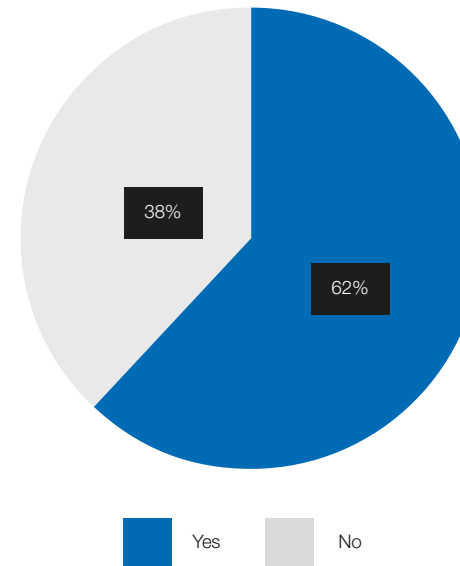
In industrial and employment relations disciplines there has been a long-standing concern with the representation gap. This is a concept that reveals both the kind of representation a worker has in the workplace and the one they desire (Freeman and Rogers, 2006). The gap is articulated as a missing platform for collective voice and/or ‘management unwillingness to share power’ (Freeman and Rogers, 2006, p.1). Becoming unionised or having in-house workplace committee platforms are options for collective representation that, when they work well, foster mutual respect and the sharing of power. The problem for freelance creative workers is that they do not have a single fixed workplace and, therefore, there is a pressing need for cross-organisational working to support them with a platform for representation, which should involve unions and relevant support organisations.

One Dance UK is an active and enthusiastic sector support organisation, and other organisations support freelance working through their infrastructure in the sector. The Trades Union Congress (TUC), Equity and other unions are motivated to represent and act for freelance artists in negotiating with policymakers. However, unless you pay for membership of these bodies, you do not get access to all their resources and this could be a barrier for some artists.

We asked about union membership as a structure to support working conditions (as illustrated by Figure 4). Ashton (2021) points to the Musicians’ Union as a good example of how contracts have been negotiated. We wanted to know whether people were union members in order to gauge the uptake of union membership and its value in supporting working conditions. Figure 4 demonstrates that over half of those surveyed (62%) were not union members and this could be because of the requirement to pay for membership out of an already low wage. There could also be a low uptake because of the perception and critical view that unions do not act on members’ behalf.

Figure 4. Participants’ union membership

Are you a member of a union?



With the newly formed Equity Dance Committee, there is an entry point for discussion with the union. The artists reported a need for visible support structures and a clear route to representation. There was a call for organisations to join and provide platforms for communication, representation and the co-design of processes (see Image 3). One survey respondent comments:

I think there should be a more freelance-focused system to support freelancers in the arts industry. Most of the time self-employed artists are penalised for being an ‘in-between’ and undervalued compared to self-employed in other sectors. The governmental system of support and benefits claims (e.g. Universal Credit) is not aware of what does it mean to be a professional self-employed in the Arts and how our sector, and job market, works. This knowledge gap makes it harder for a freelance artist to be heard and supported in achieving a stable financial security. I think the government representative and freelance artists should engage in dialogues and conversation around how to provide an efficient network and support to our sector. We must learn from each other and come up with a plan of action that will stop freelance artists to worry about their security when the workload is quieter. It’s time to act. It’s time to step up and create change!

As stated by Heery (2009), workers feel better supported when unions and management work cooperatively. In the case of freelance dance artists and creative workers, this would be a combination of unions and organisations and a collective representative.

Recommendations

- Unions and advocacy to support organisations to work closely together.
- Provide a freelance body/organisation.
- Set up a national dance advocacy group.

3. Dance's Value – Culture and Education

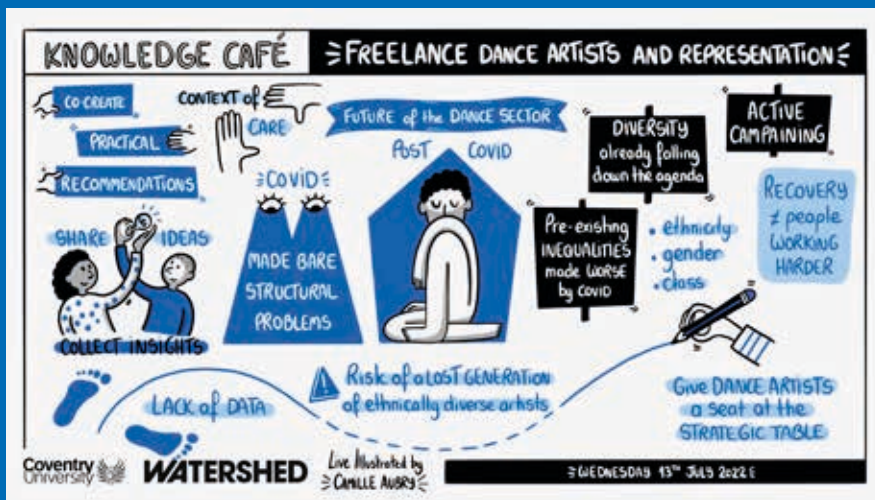


Image 4: From table discussions at the Knowledge Café, Bristol, 13 July 2022. Credit: Camille Aubry.

The dance artists in this research point to the value of dance regularly through the variety of methods that were used. Value is used in myriad ways and differing contexts but particularly here, value was aimed at how it is received and perceived by the artist and that encompasses education and people's views. The value of dance has many edges – artistic, aesthetic, social, political, educational and economical – and sits within the broader frame of cultural value. Hetty Blades (2018) discusses dance's contributions and makes the distinction between instrumental and inherent value. She notes that 'instrumental value implies an artwork serves a particular function. Intrinsic value, on the other hand, is that which is valuable about the appearance and experience of the work, rather than any external function' (p.90). Blades points to instrumental value as a 'means to an end' and, in the context of this report, this would appear as a dance artist having a performing contract to get paid and live. Intrinsic value is what the work looks like and how we experience it to reflect on our position in the world, our perceptions of it and our interactions with others.

Experiencing the arts is challenging to quantify. Ben Walmsley of the Centre for Cultural Value in Leeds discusses his research with participants:

Instead of striving to understand and rationalise the value of the arts, we should instead aim to feel and experience it. During a process of deep hanging out, our participants revealed the limitations of language in capturing the value of the arts, yet confirmed perceptions of the arts as a vehicle for developing self-identity and expression and for living a better life (2018, p.272, italics in original).

Walmsley highlights the importance of experiencing the arts as a means of expression, identity and meaningful living. Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor (2020a) state that cultural experiences are 'not just the preserve of canons or venerated aesthetic traditions. They are not just about happiness and joy. Rather, great cultural experiences are those that combine emotional and cognitive aspects to generate personal reflection' (p.42). These findings are expressed as a result of qualitative and quantitative research methods involving interacting with different publics.

The research of both Walmsley and Brook and her colleagues points to how the arts within the frame of cultural experiences provide space for expression, reflection and identity formation that is necessary for our wellbeing. The wellbeing aspect of what culture offers was a key recommendation in the Arts and Humanities Research Council's (UKRI AHRC) Boundless Creativity report (2021)⁴.

The above is crucially important when we think about education from primary through to further and higher education, where we currently see dance diminishing. One Dance UK's (2021) latest research shows this and reveals the impact, exacerbated by the pandemic, of the lack of dance in schools on young people's physical and mental health. This is partly due to external pressures and partly to lack of resources. As a leading recommendation, the report calls for 'an understanding of the value of dance in education' (p.30) and for politicians to change the rhetoric around arts subjects. This language use around arts subjects is unhelpful for advocacy and when considering the subjects' value.

You will notice that economic value is not the first thing to be mentioned in this section. The last two decades have seen an increase in viewing the arts as having economic value and impact. This has caused a decline in working conditions for artists (e.g. the rise of casual contracts) and a prevalence of unpaid work in the creative sector⁵. The dance artists involved in this project are 'familiar with the rhetoric and logic of the economic value of the creative industries' (Paschal and Ellis, 2022) but feel that dance is undervalued by the government, society and education. People's exposure to dance at an early age would mean that dance artists would have worked in primary schools. This relationship and trajectory would continue through to secondary, further and higher education. Children, teachers, parents and other family members would be exposed to the experience of dance and what it affords – social interactions, confidence and motivation, and physical and mental health, as mentioned in the One Dance UK report.

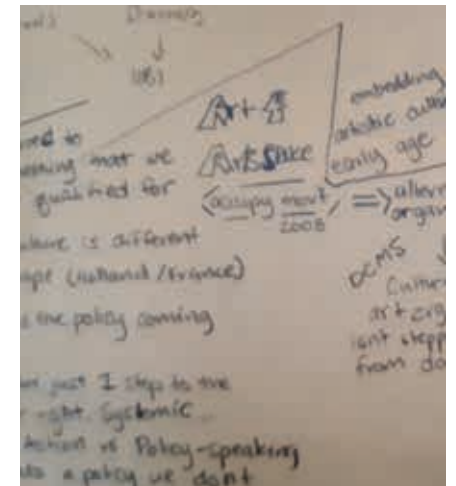


Image 5: Writing from the group when discussing what policies are needed.

The working group in this research want to see dance in education from an early stage (see Image 5); they want their skills valued as well as their art form. They want to see education policies that include dance and access to the arts as a fundamental component of education. This would have an important knock-on effect on audiences and in increasing engagement. Most of all, they want a platform/infrastructure where they can be involved in influencing policymakers and revolutionising the systems they operate in.

Recommendations

- Increase participation in dance from the primary to the secondary level.
- STEAM to include finances and resources for professionals to teach in schools.

⁴Found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/boundless-creativity-report>

⁵ See Brook et al (2020b) for a detailed overview.

Gathering of thoughts

We concluded the survey with two open questions:

- What do you think is the biggest barrier to a freelance dance artist being able to enjoy a sustainable and fulfilling career?
- What is the one most important thing you would like to see change that would help you to pursue your career as a dance artist more easily?

The responses strongly suggested the need for higher pay rates, more reflective of the time taken both to find work and to prepare for it, for example class planning, administration, choreographic planning and project management, which oftentimes are unpaid labour. Most freelance dance artists work on a project-by-project basis, which creates a short-termism in contracts. Contracts that include time to travel and cover travel expenses need to be offered. Access to space is an issue to enable the conditions to practice, as is continuous support for career development. Caring responsibilities were stated being as 'a juggle', and it was reported that it is difficult to find childcare outside of the regular 9-5 of other workers, and for project work. The lack of maternity pay is felt. Healthcare was also a main concern. Affordable and sometimes long-term healthcare (including physiotherapy) and support for disabled artists was felt to be patchy. Access support is sporadic for artists working on projects. One survey respondent summarises this as follows:

A culture of compliance and accepting less than we deserve due to forced gratitude (i.e. there are so many talented dancers and relatively few jobs therefore you feel pressured to accept and be grateful for any job even if it is poorly paid/damaging to one's mental and physical health). The fact that dance is often not seen as a legitimate career choice by those outside of the industry, and therefore, it is hard for unions and organisations that fight for better working conditions to be taken seriously.

And another response here:

Culture of unpaid labour makes it difficult for new artists to enter the industry and build a portfolio, perpetuating inequalities because only those with access to familial funds are able to work for no/low pay at the start of career. Dance as an art form not being taken seriously and not being remunerated to a level that reflects the time spent training or level of expertise of a professional dancer. Lack of security and support in policy, for example no sick pay, no maternity/parental leave, no minimum wage requirements, no regulatory committee or ombudsman to report malpractice or enforce fair treatment, etc.

What was the most important thing to change? There were three main things: **higher pay rates with equitable working conditions** (e.g., sick pay and holiday pay), **funding structures** that are fair and work effectively, and the artform being **valued**. A respondent articulates that one thing that would make life easier would be a 'funding structure that would reduce stressful and heart wrenching processes'.

To conclude this project, a Gathering was organised on 15 February 2023, at the Deaf Cultural Centre in Birmingham, to bring freelance dance artists, the working group, academics, organisations and policymakers together to share experiences and deeply listen to each other. This was designed as an untraditional format, asking questions that made people think of their impact on society and on the sector. What is clear from this research is that we have reflective, intelligent and thoughtful leaders in the freelance dance artists of the sector. They are under-remunerated and not properly represented. Infrastructure, combined with supporting educational and cultural policy, must be put in place for these creative workers to work and create to enable the art form to thrive (moreover, some of the points also apply to any freelance creative worker).

Over 40,000 people were lost from Music, Performing and Visual Arts during the pandemic and the recovery is slow (Walmsley and Feder, 2022). Brook and her colleagues' (2020a and b) work focuses on the stratification of unpaid creative jobs, and of who has these jobs in terms of social class, age, gender and cultural identity. Due to COVID-19, we have lost people from the industry who are from marginalised communities; so how do we get them back? How do we achieve a more equal and equitable society? And, finally, what conditions must be provided?

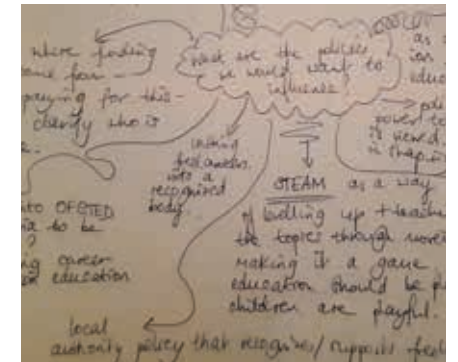


Image 6: Scribbles from the working group when discussing what policies they would want to influence.



Acknowledgements

The biggest thanks go to the 74 dance artists without whom the project would not have happened. Thanks for sharing your experiences, knowledge and intelligence and for being so gracious with it.

Thanks to the British Academy Innovation Fellowships Scheme for funding this project. I am very grateful to One Dance UK for its support as cultural partner. Massive amounts of gratefulness to the working group of freelance dance artists who have worked alongside this project and continue to energise and motivate this work and me! Appreciation goes to Helen Laws, a postgraduate research student at the Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University, for her help with the survey and the Knowledge Café. Huge thanks to Camille Aubry, illustrator, who captured the essence of conversations and brilliantly illustrated them in the images included in this report.



Image 7: Illustration of the Gathering conversations by Camille Aubry






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