



**THE CHAMBER
OF ARTS AND CULTURE**
WESTERN AUSTRALIA



SNAPSHOT SUMMARY

WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S INDEPENDENT ARTS SECTOR RESEARCH

Chamber of Arts and Culture WA

June 2021

Supported by Media Super

Research into Western Australia's Independent Arts Sector

Definitions

For the purpose of this research project, an independent artist/ arts worker is defined as an individual who considers art and culture to be their main career pathway but is not employed on either a full-time or ongoing part-time basis in this role.

Methodology and Status of Research

Research was conducted by interviews with focus groups and an online survey.

Who participated in this research?

- 57% have degree or post-grad qualification
- A range from emerging to senior professionals. But 65% had 20+ years as a professional artist.
- Participants included people who identified as Aboriginal, CALD or differently abled.
- 95% identified as multi-disciplinary artists

"As an independent artist, when I think about programs that are quite high profile in really high-profile venues or spaces... the artists are effectively the only people who aren't getting paid very much. And everybody else around those structures and scaffolding is on a wage, and that's increased quite significantly [across my career]."

Key Themes

1. Sustaining artists and artistic practice

- The discussions highlighted a high degree of adaptability, flexibility and multiple skill sets as strong characteristics of this workforce.
- Can the way art is made achieve a better balance between people and product? Artists typically subsidise projects by working extra time without pay. Have we created a culture and system that disadvantages artists by focusing on the outcomes with not enough regard for the process of reaching them? The average total annual income for artists is \$48,400 – 21% below the workforce average - [Making Art Work, David Throsby and Katya Petetskaya, 2017](#)
- Career sustainability is becoming more precarious – particularly if reliant on project funding which is more and more competitive.
- Artist led initiatives are harder to progress.
- Inconsistency, confusion and lack of information across the sector regarding fees, wages and conditions.
- 2 participants aged over 50 described the lack of future stability and security, including housing, income and superannuation.

2. Independent Artists and their place within the arts ecology

- Independent artists are vital connectors through their mobility within the sector. They fertilise our institutions with new ideas and links to wide networks.
- The divide between waged workers and independent artists damages the overall culture of our sector creating misunderstandings, resentment and low self-worth amongst those with less secure incomes.
- The financial stress experienced within the small-medium arts companies impacts on the independent sector.
- WA independent artists lack affordable and regular access to space despite what they perceive as the underutilization of existing arts venues/spaces.
- There is a strong desire for more connection, communication and support between independent artists – more opportunities for cross-disciplinary, cross-sectoral professional community building.

"That's more important than anything, that coming together, and being able to skill share, being able to exchange ideas in the kitchen, it's all those intangible things that you can't put on paper necessarily ... And things will come out of that, amazing things happen as a result of that."

Key Themes

3. Impact on Families

- Childcare was identified as a key factor influencing careers
- 57% of participants have assistance from partner or family to support their careers. This impacts equity in the sector with people who do not have access to this support less likely to pursue creative careers.

4. Impact on Health

There is a greater awareness of health and wellbeing and the need to improve how this is dealt with in our sector.

- 63% of participants reported experiencing mental health issues ranging from anxiety to clinical depression
- Physical and mental health an overwhelming concern. Uncertainty and isolation being two key factors affecting health.
- Historically the sector has poor attitudes to health with burnout, lack of support and normalization of working while unwell. COVID-19 is changing this behavior.

“The institutions who are there to support artists are now having their support taken away.”

“I have actually been at work sick quite a lot in my life. If you’re directing, or whatever you’re doing, the reality is no one can step in because you’ve only got 3–4 weeks to put the gig on. But being unwell on the job, as a regular occurrence, is a problem. In the sector...to be able to...take time out to be sick is not possible, quite often.”

5. Retaining WA’s independent artists

- Western Australia is seen by the majority positively as a place to live and work .
- Independent artists are highly motivated to offer something of value to their communities in many different contexts. However, they feel the opportunity to have greater impact is constrained by a lack of understanding of what they offer.
- There is still a significant dependence on touring and travel to gain work and opportunities to further their careers.

6. What can we do better?

- Advocacy and information about the value of our creative community.
- Support greater connectivity between independent creatives and with the wider sector.
- Opportunities such as fellowships and residences to support practice development.
- Opportunities for longer term funding stability – even one year of stable wages could boost a career immeasurably.
- Creative more artistic and creative positions within organizations. Artist employees as connectors or collective builders.
- Mentorships and PD for artists within arts organisations
- Project planning to allow for health contingencies.
- Create access to mental health and wellbeing resources.
- Create physical hubs and spaces where independent artists can work.
- Have more flexible funding to support collaborations and cross-sector initiatives.
- Childcare.

“Good arts comes from proper funding – time and space to create without stress.”

Acknowledgements

The Chamber thanks its Better Business Partner Media Super for supporting this research and Daisy Saunders, Ceri Nordling, Dr Renee Newman (ECU) and Dr Helen Rusak (ECU) for their work on this project.