

CHAPTER 11

Regional artists

As noted in Chapter 3, most artists, like the rest of the Australian population, live in capital cities. Nevertheless, there are significant numbers of artists—around 26 per cent—who live in regional cities or towns, in semi-rural surroundings, or in rural or remote areas. Some do so by choice, others by necessity or for reasons such as family circumstance.

Does living and working in a location distant from the major population centres affect the conduct of a professional artistic practice? This chapter considers the working conditions, career paths and incomes of artists in regional Australia.

Location of artists

There is significant variation in where artists live, according to their artforms, as seen in Table 57. These variations are easily explained. Performing artists seek employment with, among others, theatre companies, music ensembles, film and television studios; most of these are located in capital cities. Hence the great majority of performing artists live in the major cities, with smaller numbers in regional centres and virtually none in rural and remote locations (apart from Indigenous artists working in remote areas, who are not covered in this survey).

On the other hand, craft practitioners and visual artists may find working conditions in the country—access to studio space, a quiet environment—more congenial for creative work. Accordingly, significant numbers are located outside of capital cities; more than one in three craft practitioners and visual artists in our survey live in the regions.

Similarly, community cultural development workers can be found in greater proportions in rural and regional Australia; this is because one of the most important functions of the community arts movement is bringing art experiences to people who do not have immediate access to the facilities and resources located in major urban centres.

Somewhere in the middle are writers and composers, whose location is, to a large extent, irrelevant to the practice of their art. We observe that the geographic distribution of these artists roughly parallels that of the Australian population as a whole.

Table 57 Geographic location of Australian artists

	Capital city %	Regional city %	Semi-rural %	Rural/remote %	Total %
Writers	74	15	9	2	100
Visual artists	65	16	9	10	100
Craft practitioners	63	8	20	9	100
Actors	81	10	6	3	100
Dancers	81	19	—	—	100
Musicians	82	11	6	—	100
Composers	78	13	6	3	100
Community cultural development workers	59	13	16	13	100
All artists	74	13	9	5	100

— indicates nil response in this sample.

About half of the artists surveyed who live in the regions believe their location has a generally positive effect on their artistic practice (see Table 58). Positive feelings towards their regional location are felt most strongly by craft practitioners. At the other extreme, actors are the least likely group to say their artistic work has been positively affected by their location in the regions.

Almost 20 per cent of artists do not see their regional or rural location as having any effect on their artistic practice. This leaves about one in three artists who regard the effect as negative. Presumably most of the latter group live away from the major urban centres out of necessity rather than choice.

Table 58 Effect of living in a regional city, semi-rural or rural/remote area on artists' practice

	Generally positive	Generally negative	No effect	Total
	%	%	%	%
Writers	40	38	22	100
Visual artists	57	28	14	100
Craft practitioners	67	29	4	100
Actors	27	54	20	100
Dancers	64	29	7	100
Musicians	40	24	36	100
Composers	40	34	27	100
Community cultural development workers	40	24	35	100
All artists	51	31	18	100

In regard to demographic characteristics, our survey data show that in most respects regional artists are little different from their capital city cousins. Thus, in terms of factors such as age, gender, family circumstances, country of birth and first language, regional and capital city artists are virtually indistinguishable.

Similarly, other characteristics of artists such as training, time allocation, degree of establishment and achievement are much the same between the two groups. In the following sections we focus on several aspects where differences are actually revealed.

Working conditions

Table 59 shows the employment status of regional artists, compared to artists working in capital cities, in their PAO, in arts-related work and in non-arts work. In pursuing their creative practice, most regional artists work on a self-employed or freelance basis rather than as an employee working for wages or salary.

The proportion of artists working as an employee in their PAO is much smaller for regional artists than for capital city artists. This partly reflects the differences in PAO distribution between the capital cities and the regions as noted above (more performing artists, for whom wages and salary employment is more important, live in the cities), and partly the fewer artistic employment opportunities in country areas.

A similar though less pronounced pattern occurs in regard to arts-related employment; a slightly lower proportion of regional artists work as employees in arts-related areas than in the city. On the other hand, in the case of non-arts work, the proportions of artists working as employees and as freelance or self-employed are roughly the same between city and country.

Table 59 Employment status of regional artists(a)

	In PAO		In arts-related work(b)		In non-arts work(c)	
	Regional artists %	Capital city artists %	Regional artists %	Capital city artists %	Regional artists %	Capital city artists %
Employee working for wages or salary	13	30	27	47	68	72
Self employed or freelance	86	69	68	51	28	28
Other arrangement	2	1	4	2	4	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

(a) Regional artists in this and subsequent tables in this chapter include artists living in a regional city, semi-rural, or rural/remote location.

(b) Proportions are of artists in each category who undertake arts-related work.

(c) Proportions are of artists in each category who undertake non-arts work.

Regional unemployment is a serious problem in some parts of Australia, affecting most occupations, including artists. As Table 60 shows, a larger proportion of artists in regional areas than in capital cities experienced a period of unemployment between 1996 and 2001.

What is more striking, however, is the difference in length of time that artists experiencing unemployment have spent out of work. Of the artists who were unemployed in this period, almost half of the capital city artists were out of work for less than one year, whereas three-quarters of regional artists were unemployed for a year or more, with 15 per cent falling into the seriously long-term unemployed category.

Although it may be true that the long-term unemployed tend to move away from capital cities because, for example, living in the country is cheaper, it remains a disturbing fact that regional artists seem to suffer more extensively from the problems of unemployment than do their counterparts in the capital cities.

Table 60 Unemployment experience of regional artists

	Regional artists %	Capital city artists %
Experienced some period of unemployment between 1996–2001:		
Yes	37	33
No	63	67
Total	100	100
Total time unemployed in that period(a):		
< 1 year	25	46
1–4 years	60	51
5 years	15	3
Total	100	100

(a) Proportions are of artists who experienced some period of unemployment between 1996–2001.

Factors affecting professional development

In what ways, if any, does living and working outside the capital cities hold back the professional development of regional artists? We noted in Chapter 6 that the most important inhibiting factors affecting all artists' professional development, both throughout their careers and at the present time, were lack of work opportunities, lack of financial return from creative practice and lack of time for creative work.

Table 61 indicates that capital city artists are more likely to nominate lack of work opportunities rather than lack of financial return as the most important inhibiting factor, whereas the reverse is true for regional artists. However, these differences simply reflect the different proportions of employed/self-employed artists noted above. In fact the combination of these two factors gives identical totals for regional and capital city artists; half of all artists nominate lack of work opportunities or lack of financial return as most important, regardless of whether they live in the city or the country regions.

Similarly the same proportions of artists in regional and capital city locations cite lack of time as the most important factor throughout their career, though regional artists seem more relaxed about the time constraint at the present time.

Note that there are virtually no differences between regional and capital city artists in the frequencies with which they identify difficulties of access to materials, equipment, markets, promotion or training as the most important factors holding back their professional development.

Table 61 Most important factor inhibiting professional development of regional artists

	Proportion of artists nominating factor as most important in inhibiting their professional development(a):			
	Throughout career		At present time	
	Regional artists %	Capital city artists %	Regional artists %	Capital city artists %
Lack of work opportunities	16	27	18	29
Lack of financial return from creative work	34	24	30	20
Lack of access to funding or other financial support	8	7	6	6
Lack of time for creative work	20	20	19	24
Difficulty accessing materials and equipment	*	1	1	1
Difficult accessing markets and promotion	6	5	7	5
Difficult accessing education and training	1	1	1	1

(a) Columns do not sum to 100 because not all inhibiting factors are included in the table.
* indicates less than 1%.

Financial circumstances

Table 62 shows mean and median incomes and expenses incurred in arts practice and minimum income requirements for regional and capital city artists. We observe significantly lower incomes across the board in regional areas. The earnings of regional artists from creative work, arts-related work and non-arts work are all lower than the corresponding earnings of capital city artists.

To some extent this result reflects again the urban/regional differences in the PAO distribution, with a somewhat higher concentration of those occupations that show a lower income result in regional areas. Even so, there appears to be a systematic downwards bias in regional incomes that cannot be explained by differences in the two populations other than by their location.

It should be noted that this phenomenon may not be restricted to artists. It is likely that wage rates are generally lower in regional Australia than in the capital cities. Hence, incomes of all types of workers are correspondingly lower. To the extent that this is true, regional artists' lower incomes may simply reflect the wider economic characteristics of the Australian community.

As might be expected, the costs incurred in running an artistic practice are slightly lower in the country than in the city. Likewise, the relatively cheaper living costs away from major urban centres are reflected in the lower minimum income requirements of regional compared to city artists.

Table 62 Mean and median incomes and expenses of regional artists, 2000–01

	Regional artists \$	Capital city artists \$
Mean income		
Creative income	12,700	18,700
Arts-related income	5,400	8,200
Total arts income	18,100	26,900
Non-arts income	10,100	13,500
Total income	28,200	40,400
Median income		
Creative income	5,800	8,000
Total arts income	10,100	18,800
Total income	21,600	33,100
Expenses related to art practice		
Mean	7,500	8,600
Median	4,000	4,100
Minimum after tax income required to meet basic needs		
Mean	24,000	30,200
Median	20,800	26,000

Finally, to what extent have regional artists accessed financial assistance from sources providing grants or other funding for artists? Table 63 shows the proportion of artists who have applied for funding from different sources, subdivided by regional or capital city location. A slightly larger proportion of regional than capital city artists applied for funding between 1996 and 2001.

There is no difference in the proportions applying to the Australia Council or to state and territory governments, but regional artists have applied in greater proportions to local government than have capital city artists. The proportion of grant applicants receiving assistance favours capital city artists to a small extent with respect to all sources except private foundations.

However, given the relatively small numbers involved, no significant conclusions from these figures can be drawn. There do not appear to be any systematic problems that inhibit regional artists from accessing or receiving financial assistance compared to their capital city counterparts.

Table 63 Access to financial assistance by regional artists

	Regional artists %	Capital city artists %
Artists who applied for assistance between 1996–2001 from one or more of the following(a):		
Australia Council	20	19
State/territory arts departments	22	19
Local government	14	8
Private foundation	7	9
Arts organisation, body or company	17	12
Did not apply for funding from any source	55	61
Applicants who received assistance between 1996–2001 from one or more of the following(b):		
Australia Council	38	43
State/territory arts departments	51	60
Local government	58	60
Private foundation	68	43
Arts organisation, body or company	41	47
Did not receive funding from any source	39	38

(a) Proportions are of artists in each category (regional/capital city).
(b) Proportions are of artists in each category (regional/capital city) who applied for assistance from each source. Note that because of possible multiple applications/multiple grants received, these data cannot be used as an indication of success rates for individual applications to any single source.