

CHAPTER 13

Artists with disabilities

Our survey data suggest that about 10 per cent of practising professional artists live with a disability. Of these about two-thirds have a physical disability and about one-third suffer from mental illness or intellectual impairment. Within the different artforms, the proportions of artists with disability vary considerably, with the highest proportions among visual artists and composers (17 and 16 per cent respectively), and the lowest among dancers and choreographers (just 3 per cent).

For most of these artists, living with a disability is simply a part of everyday life. They cope with disability in the pursuit of their artistic practice in the same way that they cope in everything else they do. Some artists see their disability in positive terms, as a stimulus to new avenues of creativity and as a challenge to the form and content of the artistic ideas they want to express.

In this chapter we look at the situation of practising professional artists with disability, looking at their employment circumstances, the factors affecting their career development and their incomes.

An overview of artists with disability

In some respects, such as age, gender, country of origin and level of training, artists with disability have the same characteristics as any other artists. However, their disability is likely to be a key element in determining their mode of practice and the way in which they pursue their artistic work on a daily basis. Table 69 shows the impact of both physical and intellectual disabilities on artistic practice.

Table 69 Impact of disability on artistic practice(a)

Frequency of impact on artistic practice	Physical disability %	Mental illness/intellectual impairment %	All disabilities %
All of the time	4	5	4
Most of the time	20	12	17
Sometimes	59	65	61
Not at all	17	19	18
Total	100	100	100

(a) Proportions are of artists with a disability.

Note that overall, only about one in five artists with disability say that their impairment impacts on their artistic practice all or most of the time. Roughly the same number says it has no effect at all. This leaves a majority, about 60 per cent, whose disability has some effect on their practice, but not often or strongly enough to be a serious impediment in carrying out their artistic work.

Table 70 shows the degree of establishment of artists with disability compared with non-disabled artists. When interpreting these results and others presented in this chapter, remember that some artists have been living with disability since birth, whereas for others, disability occurred at some later point as a result of illness or accident. Thus artists' career paths will be affected differently by disability according to whether it is long-term in nature or sudden and unexpected. In the latter case, the disability might necessitate a substantial reorientation in the type and amount of artistic work the individual can undertake.

Table 70 Degree of establishment of artists with disability

	Artists with disability %	Artists with no disability %
Beginning/starting out	8	7
Becoming established	29	28
Established	31	45
Established but working less intensively than before	32	20
Total	100	100

Although the proportions of artists with and without disability who are starting out or becoming established are virtually identical, artists with disability are much more strongly represented among those who are established but working less intensively than before. This fact could simply indicate that the active careers of artists with a disability are shorter than those of artists without disability. It could also be due in part to the impact of sudden, unexpected disability as referred to above, where an otherwise active artist is obliged to slow down as a result of impairment due to illness or accident.

Apart from the differences in establishment noted above, artists with and without disability are broadly comparable for most other working arrangements. However, as a group, artists with disability are more likely than non-disabled artists to have experienced some unemployment in the period between 1996 and 2001. They are also more likely to have suffered longer periods out of work. Table 71 shows the relevant results.

More than half of artists with disability who have been unemployed at some time in that period have been out of work more than one year. The prevalence of artists with disability among the long-term unemployed probably parallels the situation in the wider workforce in Australia, and points to the continuing need for appropriate assistance for people with disability through the overall social welfare system.

Table 71 Unemployment experience of artists with disability

	Artists with disability	Artists with no disability
Experienced some period of unemployment between 1996–2001:		
Yes	41	33
No	59	67
Total	100	100
Total time unemployed in that period(a):		
1 year or less	46	60
More than 1 year—less than 5 years	42	34
5 years	12	6
Total	100	100

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

Factors affecting professional development

Artists with disability have broadly similar attitudes towards factors advancing their professional development as all artists. In regard to factors inhibiting development, however, there are some differences. Table 72 shows that lack of work opportunities seems to be less of a problem for disabled artists. Lack of financial return and lack of time for creative work are nominated in equal proportions across both groups as being the most important factor inhibiting career development, both throughout the career and at the present time.

Table 72 Most important factor inhibiting professional development of artists with disability

	Proportion of artists nominating factor as most important in inhibiting their professional development(a):			
	Throughout career		At present time	
	Artists with disability %	Artists with no disability %	Artists with disability %	Artists with no disability %
Lack of work opportunities	12	26	14	28
Lack of financial return from creative work	28	26	23	22
Lack of access to funding or other financial support	9	7	6	6
Lack of time for creative work	20	20	13	24
Difficult accessing markets and promotion	7	5	8	5
Living with disability	7	-	14	-

(a) Proportions are of artists in each category (artists with disability/artists with no disability). Columns do not sum to 100 because not all inhibiting factors are included in the table.

In the past, lack of access to funding or other financial support may have been more of a problem for artists with disability compared to non-disabled artists, but this difference between the two groups seems to have disappeared at the present time. It appears that difficulties in accessing markets and promotion may have more importance for artists with a disability than for others, though this effect is barely significant.

Finally, the numbers of artists who point to their physical or intellectual impairment as the most important factor in inhibiting their professional development are compared to the results reported in Table 69. Altogether 7 per cent of artists with disability see their condition as the most important inhibiting factor throughout their careers, and 14 per cent see it as very important at the present time.

These percentages can be compared with the roughly 20 per cent of artists who see their disability as impacting on their artistic practice all or most of the time. It would seem that for many of these latter artists, their disability affects not just the daily business of going about their artistic work but also has long term effects on the direction and pace of their career development.

Financial circumstances

Table 73 shows the mean and median incomes of artists with and without disability, and also art-related expenses and minimum income requirements. In regard to incomes it is clear that living with disability impacts negatively on an artist's earnings. This negative impact is evident in respect to all income sources.

The earnings differential between artists with disability and those without can be partially explained by the differences between the two groups in their degree of establishment, as noted above, and partially by differences in their respective distribution across artforms. Further research will be required to specify these effects more precisely.

Table 73 Mean and median incomes and expenses of artists with disability, 2000–01

	Artists with disability \$	Artists with no disability \$
Mean incomes		
Creative income	11,300	17,800
Arts-related income	6,000	7,600
Total arts income	17,200	25,400
Non-arts income	9,500	13,000
Total income	26,700	38,400
Median incomes		
Creative income	5,000	8,000
Total arts income	8,000	16,600
Total income	23,000	31,000
Expenses related to art practice		
Mean	7,600	8,400
Median	3,600	4,100
Minimum after tax income required to meet basic needs		
Mean	28,100	28,600
Median	25,000	26,000

Table 74 shows that roughly the same proportions of artists with and without disability applied for funding from one or more sources between 1996 and 2001. Similarly, the same proportions of artists in each group who applied for funding were successful in one or more of their applications. The figures in the lower part of the table cannot be interpreted as success rates for individual applicants. However, the majority of grants received by artists with disability—by number, though not necessarily by amount—come from state and territory government funding sources.

Table 74 Access to financial assistance by artists with disability

	Artists with disability %	Artists with no disability %
Artists who applied for assistance between 1996–2001		
from one or more of the following(a):		
Australia Council	16	19
State/territory arts departments	23	19
Local government	7	10
Private foundation	6	8
Arts organisation, body or company	14	13
Did not apply for funding from any source	56	59
Applicants who received assistance between 1996–2001		
from one or more of the following(b):		
Australia Council	24	44
State/territory arts departments	64	61
Local government	63	57
Private foundation	57	50
Arts organisation, body or company	47	45
Did not receive funding from any source	38	39

(a) Proportions are of artists in each category (artists with disability/artists with no disability).

(b) Proportions are of artists in each category (artists with disability/artists with no disability) who applied for assistance from each source. Note that because of possible multiple applications/grants received, these data cannot be used as an indication of success rates for individual applications to any single source.