

5. The life of a dancer: Employment, training and career paths

5.1 Introduction

Without the talent, training and dedication of individual dancers and choreographers there would be no dance, and no dance companies.

Compared with other artists, dancers' earnings are low. Even experienced practitioners undertake a substantial amount of work for which they receive no remuneration.

Many independent dancers and choreographers need assistance with administration and marketing, areas for which they have not been trained. The time and skills needed to negotiate the grant application process is a burden which is keenly felt by independent practitioners—some have given up applying for support because of the low overall success ratio of applications to grants awarded. Following their initial training dancers have to maintain a demanding regime of exercise and 'class' to retain their skill and fitness. The addition of administrative responsibilities seems to be considered unreasonable and difficult to sustain.

There is a widespread frustration among choreographers that the high level of personal time invested in producing work often results in very short seasons and limited exposure of the work.

More positively, the support provided by the Dance Board to make rehearsal space more affordable (Project Workspace) was highly valued, and suggests that similar initiatives should be considered in the future.

Because of the limited employment opportunities in Australia there has been some loss of talent overseas. Realistically, this is not a reversible trend, given the small scale of the Australian market; and there are undoubtedly benefits both in carrying a positive image of Australia abroad, and in dancers and choreographers benefiting from exposure to international best practice. There may be opportunities to increase productive interchange between those whose careers have taken them abroad and those who remain Australia-based.

Regarding training, there appears to be a high degree of cooperation between tertiary educators, although there are opportunities for greater coordination between the tertiary sector and the Australia Council.

Despite a wide network of programs, choreographic training has not yet been adequately addressed.

Some of the institutions offer graduates the option to periodically rejoin practical classes, and endeavour to provide continuing support. There may be more which they could offer to the sector. However, most dance education sector interviewees referred to having to continually achieve more with less resources and with little or no administrative support, leading to long, exhausting hours of work.

5.2 Interviews with dancers and choreographers

This section of the report presents findings from research undertaken with individual dance practitioners and with leaders in the dance training sector. The Dance Board provides project funding, fellowships and other support for individual dancers and choreographers, further analysed in section eight of this report.

5.2.1 Sample profile

Twenty-five individuals were interviewed, with representation from each of the states and territories. Of these, 17 were female, 11 were aged between 26–35, half were choreographers and half were performers. Only three of the interviewees were ensemble company performers, with the remaining individuals comprising freelance dancers and independent choreographers. Their level of experience ranged from three years to over 30 years, but the majority were mid-career, with experience ranging between 10–20 years.

Just over half of the interviewees had received funding from the Dance Board, some under the Project Workspace Initiative or the Young and Emerging Artists Initiative, and two in the form of fellowships.

Of the 25, seven individuals had received two or more grants from the Dance Board and 11 of the more experienced individuals had applied to the Dance Board more than twice. Fourteen individuals had received state funding and four performers had received funding from other areas of the Australia Council, such as Audience and Market Development, New Media and CCDB.

5.2.2 Issues identified

5.2.2.1 Income

The majority of dancers and choreographers stated that they usually undertake unpaid dance development work during the research and development stage of a project, especially at the beginning of their careers. Several of the more experienced individuals referred to continuing low levels of pay, well into their careers:

You achieve a point where you are considered one of the best—and you still struggle financially

The earnings mentioned by interviewees were consistent with levels indicated (below) in research recently undertaken by Professor David Throsby and Virginia Hollister of Macquarie University:

I spent my first five years unpaid—huge investment in my career

I currently earn about \$16,000 per year and it is very difficult to survive

On extended or major projects it appeared to be common that only a very small proportion of the time invested was remunerated. One interview indicated, for example, that a project had involved three months' preparation, but it was only the conclusion of the project that attracted payment, of \$700. Another referred to a major work, involving dancers, a Symphony Orchestra, a film-maker and a partnership with a major corporate sponsor—the choreographer leading the project worked on it for a period of a year, but was paid for just six weeks work. It was only by putting in such substantial amounts of unpaid time that many projects could be brought to fruition.

Rosalind Crisp

Based in Sydney, Rosalind has over 12 years experience as a professional independent dancer and choreographer. She trained and performed in Australia, Europe and Canada until the early 1990s, and then established her own studio-based dance practice. She has received project funding from both the Dance Board and from the NSW Ministry for the Arts. She was a recipient of a two year fellowship from the Australia Council in 2001–02.

As part of her independent practice she has consistently developed partnerships with elements of the Australian dance infrastructure that are supportive of her artistic intentions. In particular she has an ongoing and vibrant relationship with Performance Space in Sydney. Since 2000 she has also been developing partnerships with European Dance Organisations (notably Monty, Antwerp and TanzFabrik Berlin) which have led to her receiving commissions for new work from the Biennale de Danse du Val-de-Marne (Paris) in 2002–03.

As an artist who has chosen to work outside the company-based infrastructure in Australia she regards her practice as based on value-adding to tightly constrained grants with in-kind support from partnerships, and substantial unpaid administrative work by herself and her husband (who is also a performer).

Rosalind is primarily interested in pursuing her artistic agenda as a choreographer. Broadening her market to include both Australia and Europe is the only economically and artistically viable method of maintaining her practice.

Since she started to receive funding in 1987 she believes that funding in Australia has become increasingly competitive as more artists seek the independent path, while funding levels for this sector have not increased. As a mature artist Rosalind increasingly receives invitations to create and present her work and, while this is exciting, it has also increased the amount of volunteer labour she contributes to levels which she believes unsustainable, especially while operating in both Europe and Australia. Finding and developing a professional, streamlined and cost-effective administrative base is of the highest priority for her professional development.

5.2.2.2 Skills, resources and quality

Many of the interviewees referred to the need for practical support with administration and marketing. This included the need for support in project delivery, and support in navigating the funding system. A very common concern was the range of administration demands made upon the time-poor independent practitioner, whose skills lie in creative development and leadership, but who has to be successful in meeting the accountability requirements of government funding systems to maintain their practice. Many felt over-stretched, referring to an unreasonable degree of multi-skilling required.

A small number mentioned the need for administration and management training, not only to meet short-term project requirements, but looking further ahead to a transition to dance administration as a necessary career-shift once they were unable to continue as dancers. Other resource needs mentioned included rehearsal and development space, suitable performance spaces, development time, travel and interaction with other artists.

The Dance Board's recent Project Workspace initiative (providing a large number of artists with access to modest grants to cover short-term space hire) was very highly regarded. Similarly, the Board's investment in Mobile States (a presentation initiative with PICA and Performance Space) was mentioned positively by several of the interviewees.

Some felt that inexperienced choreographers were being fast-tracked into producing work before they were fully ready to do so, largely because of the lack of alternative opportunities for them. This created a danger of lower-quality work being exposed to the public.

Maintaining performance skills requires a high level of investment—a significant difference from most other artforms (other than circus and physical theatre).

It takes long hours to keep in shape. I am required to do three hours a day of maintenance, and then develop new work—it leaves little time for marketing and all the other demands

Tim Brown

Tim is an emerging choreographer based in Brisbane Queensland who has been practising for three years. Upon graduating as a dancer he received a Young and Emerging Choreographers Grant from the Dance Board to create works for members of Queensland Ballet's Professional Year (i.e. emerging dancers). This initiative assisted Tim to secure ongoing employment with the Queensland Ballet.

If Tim had been unsuccessful in securing the grant he would have ventured into something more independent, such as working as a freelance dancer rather than in a company. He believes working in a company is the best way for a young aspiring choreographer to learn. However, in the future he would take the opportunity to be more independent and to self-generate projects.

Tim also stated that independent practitioners can be more experimental and are able to 'push the boundaries' particularly if they have the opportunity to work with a project funded company and festivals.

Tim faces a number of key issues as an emerging practitioner. These include employment security, touring opportunities, maintenance, access to information on grant programs, and funds for research into new works.

5.2.2.3 Extending the work

The independent practitioners were proud of the fact that much innovative work is generated by individuals and small companies in the dance sector. However, many of the independent choreographers referred to the frustration of investing a high level of time and effort into the development of a project, which then enjoyed only a handful of performances:

*It is very frustrating to work hard for long periods of time,
when your work is on for only three nights*

Several indicated there is a need for more producers and production houses to provide an interface between the work being produced and the venues, presenters and audiences. This could extend the life of the work generated, but was also seen by some as a way in which the independent practitioners might access administration and marketing skills, and secure advice and support through the funding process.

The majority of the individuals interviewed wanted more opportunities to collaborate with other artform practitioners and the opportunity to exchange ideas and network with dancers and choreographers from interstate and larger companies.

The majority also wanted increased exposure of their work through touring circuits, and the opportunity to benefit from logistical support from small to medium companies or the major companies to achieve this.

5.2.2.4 The scope and definition of dance

The type of work being produced has changed to accommodate a multi-disciplinary, collaborative approach. Contemporary dance has also expanded to incorporate a range of practices such as translating dance into film or interactive screen productions.

A concern expressed by several of the interviewees was their perception that the Dance Board worked to a narrow definition of dance. At a time when dance practice was fluid and changing, becoming more inter-disciplinary, and hybrid dance forms were emerging, it was felt that greater flexibility was needed in the range of dance supported. Some addressed this issue by approaching other areas of the Australia Council for funding.

5.2.2.5 Career sustainability

Last year I was on the verge of resigning from dance. I think about my future and it is frightening. There is a lack of opportunity. There are no examples of sustainable careers.

There was a predominant feeling of exhaustion and malaise. A significant number of those interviewed were either contemplating resigning or retraining, or had relocated overseas for extensive periods due to a lack of opportunity and lack of financial security in Australia. They expressed concern at the limited number of commissions, and the decline of small to medium companies.

There were very few examples or role models for emerging practitioners of a sustainable long-term career, and although mentors and established practitioners provided honest advice about the future, it was often negative and disheartening.

All perceived companies as a training ground and some suggested that it was easier to find employment if you have worked with a company. Because of a reduction in full-time contracts with companies⁹, there are limited potential employment opportunities for dancers.

Several of the experienced practitioners who had established regular work in Europe expressed ambivalence towards this. They valued the connection with dance practitioners elsewhere, and the exchange of ideas and skills. But they regretted the fact that they were unable to maintain a professional career in Australia, and felt that the need to work abroad exacted a price in personal quality of life and stability.

More experienced dancers especially were concerned about the dangers of injury. Good maintenance practice was an essential preventative measure. Universally, the older dancers were acutely aware of their vulnerability, of their 'sell-by date' as performers.

⁹ This change in employment patterns is considered further in Section 6 of the report

Delia Silvan

Until recently Delia was a company performer based in Adelaide. She is 35 and has over 14 years of experience as a professional dancer, winning a top Australian dance award in 1999. Two years ago she made a decision to change from a company performer with a medium-sized company to an independent dancer/choreographer. Delia felt this was a necessary step in her growth as an artist—to move into finding her own creative voice through making work, and to further challenge her performing and interpretive abilities by working with a diversity of choreographers and choreographic styles.

In the transition from a company performer to an independent, she has faced a number of difficulties, primarily the reality of needing to gain choreographic experience with limited resources—how to find dancers/collaborating artists willing to work with little or no funds, performance avenues and opportunities, studio space, finances, etc. Simple things such as taking class to maintain professional technique standards can cost \$60 per week, and studio space at its absolute cheapest rate can be \$150 per week for 15 hours work time.

She feels that in order to get launched on the independent market she needs to have her work performed, which means finding solutions to the above problems, or winning lotto! In particular, Delia recognises that ongoing support is critical for the learning process, which by its nature includes hits and misses that are part of any creative experimentation and development.

Every day she faces challenges as she seeks to both survive and develop as an artist—an independent artist.

5.2.2.6 Audience development

A quarter of the interviewees felt that there was a lack of audience understanding of contemporary dance, and that it was difficult for contemporary dance to compete with other entertainment sectors. Some found it extremely difficult to gain media exposure, and felt that critics were hindering the sector through a lack of knowledge or interest in contemporary dance. There was a substantial job to do to raise audience awareness and appreciation—but the nature of the sector (fragmented, micro-businesses, over-stretched) hindered this type of coordinated effort.

5.2.2.7 Funding

Over the last 10 years there was considered to have been an increase in the number of independents and as a result, a more competitive funding pool. There was praise for the Australia Council's endeavours to provide most or all of the funding requested, but also a recognition that the limited resources of Council prevented it meeting the needs of the sector effectively.

The majority of interviewees who were not working within a company structure referred to the problem of budgeting for administration, marketing, agents, production managers. Project funding was poorly-gearred to providing any of the supporting infrastructure necessary for a project to be delivered effectively.

Over half felt that the response times between application and receiving notification were too long, which made planning and applying for other grants very difficult. State and federal funding time-lines could usefully be coordinated. Suggested improvements to funding systems also included quick response grants, more assistance with grantsmanship, and a streamlined application process.

5.3 Dance training

Interviews were undertaken with nine tertiary education sector representatives, all members of the Tertiary Dance Council of Australia (TDCA).

5.3.1 Strengths and weaknesses of training infrastructure

Almost all interviewees commented on the strong relationship between Tertiary Dance Council of Australia (TDCA) members, and the fact that several members of the TDCA have brought with them a high level of experience through their managerial work with professional dance companies. Cooperation between tertiary institutes is advocated where possible, e.g. in the form of student and teacher exchange programs, and accreditation.

Almost all interviewees mentioned the funding difficulties being faced by both the dance and tertiary sectors, requiring the dance education sector to continually achieve more with less resources and with little or no administrative support, leading to long, exhausting hours.

While the Australian Ballet School is planning to add an Advanced Diploma of Dance Choreographic Studies, at present many young choreographers are required to learn in an unstructured way through their work with companies.

5.3.2 Student numbers

The following tables summarise the combined student intake figures for the past five years¹⁰.

Table 5.3.2a Tertiary Dance Undergraduate Student Intake Numbers

Institute	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Total Undergraduate Student Intake	189	230	249	304	224

Table 5.3.2b Tertiary Dance Postgraduate Student Numbers

Institute	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Total Postgraduate Students	43	62	51	71	42

5.3.3 Trends in training content

The tertiary dance sector was reported to have become both more holistic in program content (e.g. more emphasis on health and injury prevention and management, including Pilates or other techniques) and more inter-disciplinary (several courses require students to take subjects from other disciplines such as drama, visual arts, media; e.g. QUT has a new unit in dance and technology), and with an increased emphasis on digital technology. Reasons for this shift in focus are to offer students more rounded career prospects to counteract fewer traditional employment opportunities, and for students to be positioned to manage 'portfolio careers'.

Some of the institutions assist students in terms of professional placements and career diversity, and all encourage students to stay in touch and keep the institution informed of their career path development. Some of the institutions offer graduates the option to periodically rejoin practical classes free of charge to assist them to keep in shape, with perceived benefits for current students through contact with graduates. Some have formalised contact with professional dance companies

¹⁰ With exception of the Australian Ballet School where total student intake is calculated by dividing the total number of students equally across the years, where intake figures were unavailable for a year they have been counted as zero.

such as Leigh Warren and Dancers, Australian Dance Theatre, Expressions (and the Australian Ballet School with the Australian Ballet), through which students can gain valuable experience. Some concern was expressed about the lack of structured support for choreographers in their early years.

Several interviewees noted another trend being a shift away from duplication in Australian tertiary institutions. Some programs have been shut down or are being redesigned, with universities being under pressure to find a point of difference for their courses. The Wesley Institute, for example, has a strong focus on Dance Therapy as one of only three tertiary institutions in Australia that offer this course, and has strong affiliations with the professional dance therapy sector in both New South Wales and Victoria. The Australian Ballet School, which is a separate entity from the tertiary Institutions and is considered to be Australia's national training school for ballet, has placed an emphasis on injury prevention and dance psychology research. This includes providing information sessions, and sending their consultants interstate to share strategies for disseminating information on dance related areas such as psychology, nutrition, physical therapy and Pilates.

5.3.3.1 Co-operation possibilities

With regard to future needs of the sector, one opportunity mentioned was more cooperation between Australia Council and the tertiary sector, particularly with respect to the issue of research students who undertake projects as part of a tertiary course being excluded Australia Council funding. Another opportunity mentioned was a potential link with the professional sector through hire of facilities such as studios when not in use for teaching purposes.

5.3.3.2 Career transitions

The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts and the Wesley Institute both have graduate dance companies; the third year of the VCA has a graduate dance company while the Australian Ballet graduates undertake professional work with the Australian Ballet before joining professional companies.

A perceived trend is that students are branching into dance education—mainly high school and primary school dance education—as there are more career prospects for qualified school teachers.

5.4 Career pathways and earnings

During 2002 Professor David Throsby and Virginia Hollister of Macquarie University conducted a survey of professional practising artists, following up a similar research projects carried out in the 1980s and 1990s¹¹. The survey included a sample of 51 dancers and 24 choreographers, and provided a detailed profile of their career including education, training, factors influencing their professional development, employment experience, and their current and future financial situation.

During 2001 over 49% of those surveyed had been employed on a full or part-time basis for a salary or wage, and 47% had worked on a freelance basis. Half of the individuals surveyed had been unemployed within the last five years (nearly 60% of dancers surveyed), and 35% had been unemployed for more than a year out of the last five years.

Dancers' and choreographers' gross income from creative work during the 2001 financial year was a median of \$12,900 and a mean of \$16,700. Total median income from all sources was \$26,000 and total mean income was \$26,900.

¹¹ The first study was published in 1983 with the title *The Artist in Australia Today*. The second, *When Are You Going to Get a Real Job?*, was published in 1989. The third, *But what do you do for a living? A new economic study of Australian artists*, was published in 1994. Each of these was published by the Australia Council. The most recent study was not available at the time of writing, but selected results were kindly made available by Professor Throsby.

Regarding superannuation, 73% of respondents did not have a personal superannuation scheme (79% of dancers) but 59% were with an employers superannuation scheme (53% of dancers). 16% did not have any arrangements for their long-term financial security (18% of dancers). Only 11 respondents (18%) thought they had made adequate arrangements for their financial future.

71% of dancers had no (personal) insurance for accident or illness.

The highest factor inhibiting the professional development of those surveyed was the lack of work opportunities (65%) closely followed by lack of financial return from their creative practice (63%, slightly higher for choreographers than dancers) and time pressures due to other responsibilities (49%, but markedly higher for choreographers than dancers). 31 individuals (41%) stated that a lack of access to funding or financial assistance inhibited their professional development.