Changing income and employment circumstances of individual artists

BACKGROUND

In November 2003, the Australia Council published *Don't Give Up Your Day Job - An economic study of professional artists in Australia* by Professor David Throsby and Virginia Hollister – the fourth report in a series spanning 20 years. The Throsby research provides useful information on artist incomes that is not otherwise available. At the December Council meeting the Council asked the Research Centre to take the data to all the Boards and report back on key issues for professional artists.[1]

Over the past six months the Research Centre has prepared separate research reports by Board area and analysed key trends. This work comprises part of a broader ongoing investigation of the state of the arts sector.[2] Boards discussed the economic situation of artists generally and examined trends, issues and potential solutions.

The main findings and 20-year trends for Boards are at **Attachment A**. The data is most useful for looking at artists by artform. This creates difficulties for multi- artform areas and the research is of limited use for new media arts, community cultural development and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts. The relevant Boards have asked that this lack of data be addressed.

Professional artist incomes
On average, artist income from art practice is low. Fifty per cent of all artists earn less than $7,300 from their art in a year and less than $30,000 from all employment.

While some artists are able to make a living from their work, most artists support themselves through work outside the arts and will continue to do so. Artists usually work two to three jobs – their art practice, an arts related job such as teaching and a non-arts job in an area such as hospitality. This makes the arts sector quite unique in that the majority of professionals earn most of their income from other sectors. This in turn diminishes the creative capacity of professional artists.

Almost one third of all professional artists earn less than the minimum wage from all employment sources. Recent increases in artist incomes reflect increased earning outside the arts. Arts practice income has only marginally increased in the last decade.

Artist incomes differ significantly across artforms (see Graph 1, **Attachment A**). Income disparity between artists also appears to be increasing. Visual artists, craft practitioners and community cultural development workers earn below the artist average income and have experienced declining income over the past 15 years. The incomes of writers and performing artists have been rising. However, for writers, this reflects growth in non-arts income.

ISSUES

There are three factors influencing artist incomes: (1) the growing supply of artists, (2) the nature of professional arts production and practice, and (3) demand from Australian audiences.

(1) Supply of professional artists

Sector, artform and career stage trends indicate that average artists creative incomes are likely to plateau, or even fall, over the next ten years.

Australia has about 45,000 professional artists, which is almost twice as many as 20 years ago. This number grows each year by 2–3 per cent. This means that in another ten years time there could be at least 55,000 to 60,000 professional artists in Australia. This will be compounded by an increasing supply of students – currently 50,000 students are enrolled in creative arts courses.

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[1] The data was not taken to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board, as the research did not adequately cover ATSI artists. These issues will be addressed as part of a broader ATSI research strategy.
[2] During 2004 state of the arts research has been focussed on arts employment issues. Over the coming year the focus for state of the arts research will shift to Australian arts audiences and participation.

Since the late 1980s, the number of writers and visual artists has grown by 75% compared to 25% growth in performing artists. This means there are now nearly three times as many visual artists in Australia and more than twice as many writers as there were twenty years ago (See Graph 2, Attachment A).

Musicians still dominate Australian artistic practice, as they have done for the last twenty years. However, musicians represent a smaller proportion of the sector than they used to – a result of growing numbers of visual artists and writers. After two decades of contraction the number of actors has returned to 1983 levels.

The sector is made up of artists at different stages of their career. There are more established professionals today than there were 10 years ago. Roughly half of the sector are established professionals; a third are early career and a fifth are established but part time. This is a shift from a decade ago where each group made up roughly one third of the sector. Literature and visual arts show different trends with more than half of the artists in these sectors being early career artists. This suggests that these areas will continue to expand.

(2) Professional practice

Professional practice is an important factor in artist income. The type of artistic practice, the way art is produced and how artists engage in the marketplace shape income opportunities and levels.

Artists working alone or in groups

Artists produce art individually, or in groups, and promote and sell their creativity in different ways. Different institutional and market structures for creative activity impact on artist incomes.

Among artists working as self-managing individuals – visual artists, writers and composers – there are some clear winners who are able to earn over $80,000 from their creative practice. The majority however earn creative incomes of less than $5,000, barely enough to cover the cost of expenses. These low earning individual artists must cross subsidise their work from other employment and have a high dependence on grants, as these buy time away from non-arts employment. State governments play a strong role in supporting these artists.

Performing artists working collaboratively in groups tend to earn higher incomes overall but the income range is narrower – for example, dancers have the highest average creative incomes but will rarely earn more than $50,000. Access to work opportunities for these artists is a key issue.

Professional artist as small business

Most artists are engaged in short-term project based work. Today, the majority of the sector operates as freelancers with 85 per cent registered as a business. The number of freelance artists has grown significantly since the 1980s.

All Boards observed the greater pressure for artists to act as a small or micro-business across commercial and/or not-for-profit arts practice. The Boards confirmed data showing that artists working independently, without professional and/or collaborative support mechanisms, earned the lowest incomes. These artists are often responsible not only for creative work, but also project management, business development and representation.

One of the interesting trends highlighted by Boards is the growing entrepreneurialism among graduates and the need to find ways to support it. In a recent discussion about artist incomes Su Baker of the Victorian College of the Arts highlighted this:

> *The students coming out of art schools are incredibly enterprising. They leave art school and they go into the art community and create their own structures - their own economy if you like. And what I think is beholden on us, is that we prepare them for that, so the public system supports them in those enterprises in all sorts of different ways - an investment in their creativity, through seed funding, through tax exemption. All of those things are a fantastic way of promoting this burgeoning enterprise.*[3]

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[3] ABC Radio National – the Deep End 05/07/04 *Artists and their incomes*

Artists working with agents

Agents help connect artists to employment or markets. The average income of an artist with an agent is over $50,000 and more than half this income will be from their art. Using an agent also affects non-arts income, which is double that of other artists who sometimes or never use an agent.

However, 60% of the sector operates without an agent. Given low returns to intermediaries for artists with low incomes this is unlikely to change. Other ways for individuals to engage with the marketplace – through self-representation or cooperative marketing should be developed.

(3) Demand from Australian audiences

Willingness to pay is a contributing factor to artist incomes. The earned income from audiences or buyers may not cover the cost of materials and time spent creating art.

The research and the Board discussions primarily focused on professional practice issues. However, the importance of a national strategy to build audiences was consistently raised as a providing long-term solution to increase artist incomes.

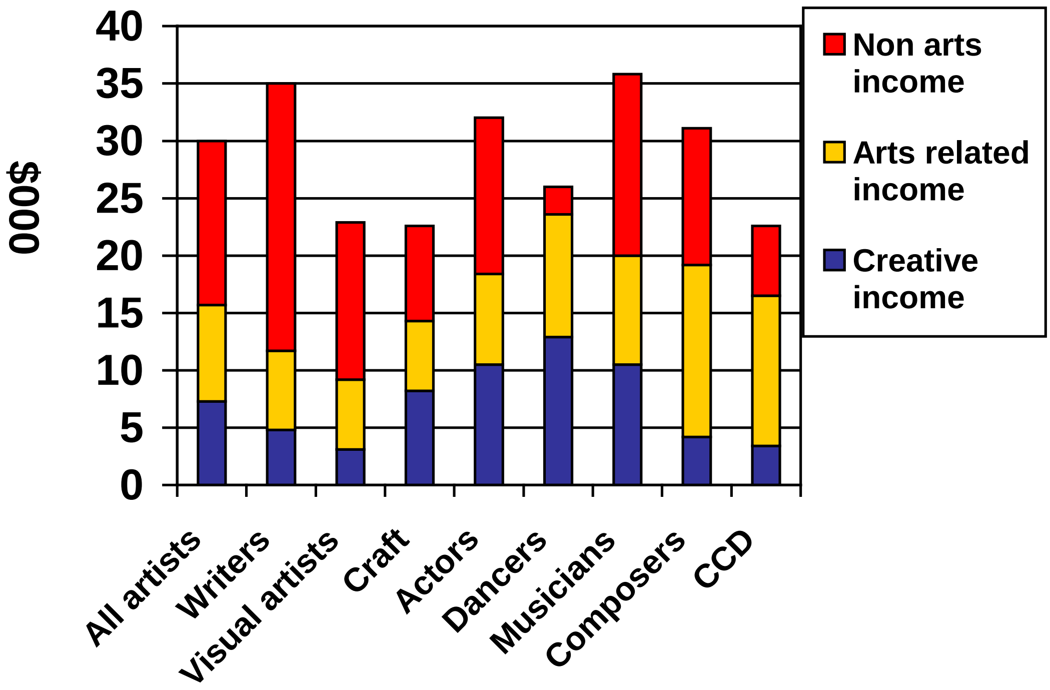
Attachment A

KEY FINDINGS

The graph below shows median incomes for all artists and the source of income. Creative income is from arts practice. Arts related income is non-creative work in the sector such as administration or teaching. Non-arts income is work outside the arts sector.

Graph one: <u>Median artist incomes by artform</u>

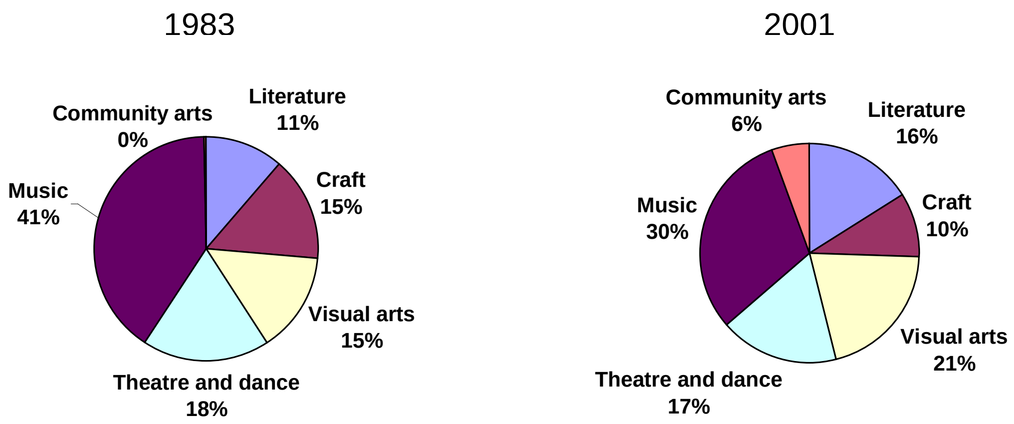
- Artist incomes differ significantly across artforms



Source: Throsby and Hollister (2003) *Don't Give Up Your Day Job – An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia,* Australia Council.

Graph two: <u>Proportions of artists by artform or area, 1983 and 2001</u>

- The composition of the arts sector has changed



Source: Throsby and Hollister (2003) Don't Give Up Your Day Job – An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia, Australia Council.

A. RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR ARTFORM BOARDS

Visual Arts and Craft Board

Visual artists and craft practitioners struggle more than most other artist groups to make a living from their profession. Main findings are:

1. Visual artists numbers have tripled in twenty years. There was a decline in the number of craft practitioners over the 1990s.
2. Visual artists and craft practitioners earn 20% less than the artist average. Expenses are high – about half of all income.
3. Representation trends have changed over the last ten years – the number of visual artists represented by a gallery or dealer has decreased from 45% to 40% and the number of craft practitioners represented has increased from 26% to 43%.
4. There is a dependence on grants and a strong investment by state governments.

Dance Board

Dancers face highly precarious income and employment circumstances. Main findings are:

1. Dancers are the smallest artist group in Australia with the latest research identifying 1,250 dancers. (The Dance Board noted that this number was low and estimated that the number of dancers in Australia is closer to 3,000) Dancers are likely to be young, female and urban. They are also highly trained and experienced in their creative practice.
2. Over the past 20 years performance opportunities for dancers have been declining. Unemployment is also a key issue with half of all dancers having experienced unemployment over the past 5 years. Dancers experienced difficulty registering for unemployment.
3. Dancers earn some of the lowest incomes among artists, however this is more a reflection of the low wages they command from work outside of the arts. Dancers' incomes from creative work are comparable to those of other artist groups.
4. Dancers are unusual among artists in deriving the majority of their creative incomes from salaries, wages or fees. Less than half work as freelancers in their creative occupation – well below the artist average.

Literature Board

While writers earn on average some of the highest incomes among artists, this not because writing as an art form is itself particularly well remunerated. The main findings are:

1. The number of practising professional writers has almost tripled in twenty years. While the average total income of writers is higher than that of other artist occupations, growing income disparity is emerging as a critical issue. One in four writers earn below the poverty line and half earn less than $4,000 from their creative practice in a year, while close to 10 per cent earn over $70,000 from the creative practice alone.
2. While writers' average incomes have grown over the 1990s this reflects wage increases in non-arts employment, of which only one-quarter of writers participate in. For most, neither creative activity nor additional arts-related work is well remunerated.
3. While representation has increased among writers over the 1990s it is well below that of many other artist occupations at 25%.
4. State/Territory government arts agencies are a significant source of financial assistance to writers. The Australia Council funds a lower proportion of writers than it does artists practising in other artforms.

Music Board

There is a lot of crossover in terms of income and employment patterns between musicians and composers – reflecting the fact that people who are primarily instrumental musicians or singers also compose, and people who are primarily composers also perform. The main findings for the music sector are:

1. Musicians earn the highest average wages, however:
    a. Relatively high average incomes among musicians and composers mask significant income disparities, with close to 50 per cent earning less than $30,000 a year from all income sources.
    b. Composers earn close to the lowest incomes among artists from their creative work.
    c. Both musicians and composers are able to earn high incomes from employment outside the arts.
2. Around two-thirds of musicians now use an agent, up significantly from the 1993 survey. Among composers only one in five use an agent, and subsequently a significant proportion of composers are unhappy with their promotional arrangements.
3. A high proportion of musicians are either unsatisfied with or uncertain about the adequacy of current provisions for copyright protection.
4. Musicians are less dependent on financial assistance than other groups. Most of their funding derives from either the Australia Council or State/Territory arts agencies. Composers on the other hand are highly dependent on financial assistance and the majority of their funding also derives from the Australia Council or a State/Territory arts agency.

Theatre Board

Actors and directors earn relatively high incomes both from their creative work and additional employment. This means that many actors are in fact able to make a living from their profession, either through their acting work or through the use of their acting skills in additional employment contexts. For actors the chief issue appears to be employment: a high proportion are not working in their most desired area of employment and report that lack of employment opportunities are a major inhibitor to professional development.

Main findings for actors are:

1. Growth in numbers of actors has been significant over the past 10 years, with the number of actors growing 5 – 7 per cent each year.
2. Average incomes including creative incomes are relatively high. The biggest issue facing many actors is lack of employment opportunities, with half of all actors working less than 20 hours a week and half having experienced unemployment in recent years. On average less than 30 per cent of actors’ time is spent on their most desired occupation, well below the artist average.
3. Over half of all actors report difficulty in gaining recognition as legitimate claimants of unemployment benefits.
4. There is a concentration of actors in capital cities.

B. RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR MULTI ARTFORM BOARDS

The Throsby research has limited use for the multi artform boards – New Media, Community Cultural Development and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Boards.

New media artists

New Media was not included as a category and new media artists are likely to be spread across visual and performing artist groups. However, niche markets for experimental art practices means that artists practising in these areas probably have significantly lower incomes than the artist average.

Community Cultural Development artists

The CCD Board raised concerns about the validity of the CCD data and did not think it sufficiently captured CCD artists. The methodology used by Throsby meant that many CCD artists would be classified under artforms. Key findings for Community Cultural Development highlighted by the research are:

1. CCD artists' incomes are two-thirds what they were in 1992-3 and are well below the artist average. Not only do CCD artists earn less than other artists in their main occupation but they also receive low incomes from additional work in non-arts areas.
2. As the majority hold multiple jobs and are facing declining incomes, CCD artists are increasingly struggling to devote time to their primary area of activity.
3. The majority of CCD artists are women who on average across all artforms earn significantly less than men. CCD artists are also more likely to be located in regional areas, where incomes are also lower.
4. CCD artists appear much more likely to receive funding by government arts agencies, despite the fact that a comparatively low proportion of their income is in the form of grants.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists

Don't Give Up Your Day Job does not include reliable data on the income and employment circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. Only 15 ATSI artists were interviewed as part of the survey[4] and their responses have been aggregated according to artform area.

The Research Centre has accessed the unpublished responses of these 15 ATSI artists. While not a reliable sample from which to project broad conclusions, they point to some distinctive income and employment characteristics that merit further investigation. For example, the mean income of interviewed ATSI artists was $22,800, well below the artist average of $37,200. ATSI artists were also much less likely to be employed in multiple jobs than non-ATSI artists.

[4] 1062 artists were interviewed in total. ATSI artists therefore represented around 1.4% of all interviewed artists.