

CHAPTER 12

Artists from a non-English speaking background

One of the most important roles for the arts in this country is in celebrating the cultural diversity of contemporary Australian society. There are many professional artists in Australia who specialise in creating and re-creating art derived from a wide range of cultures, especially in the performing arts of music, dance and theatre.

Artists from a non-English speaking background (NESB artists) also pursue their professional practice in the mainstream, often enriching their contribution through the influence of their particular cultural heritage. All of this activity is a vital element in the evolution of Australia as a truly multicultural society.

In this chapter we examine the situation of NESB artists in terms of their general demographic characteristic, the factors affecting their career development, and their financial situation compared to artists from an English speaking background.

An overview of artists from a non-English speaking background

As noted in Chapter 3, the definition of NESB for purposes of statistical classification is not always clear cut. For our purposes we simply asked survey respondents whether the first language they learnt was English or another language, with the latter group then defined as NESB.

This group comprised 8 per cent of our total sample. Note that the great majority of NESB artists are now perfectly fluent in English; survey interviewers reported that only 7 per cent of all NESB respondents spoke English 'not well' or 'not well at all'.

As Table 64 shows, the largest group of NESB artists originate from non-English speaking countries in Europe and the former Soviet Union. Almost a quarter of NESB artists were born in Australia, 13 per cent in the Americas and 10 per cent in Asia.

Apart from birthplace, NESB artists have similar demographic characteristics to artists from English-speaking backgrounds. There are no significant differences in age distribution, gender composition, levels of training or geographic location. Likewise, they are much the same as other artists in their employment arrangements, experience of unemployment, allocation of working time and working patterns. This is not surprising since there is no reason to expect any significant differences in characteristics resulting from language background.

Table 64 Birthplace of artists from a non-English speaking background(a)

Country of birth	Non-English speaking background artists %	English speaking background artists %
Australia	23	78
New Zealand	—	3
UK and Ireland	4	13
Europe and former Soviet Union	43	1
Asia	10	1
Africa and Middle East	6	1
Americas	13	2
Other	3	1
Total	100	100

(a) This breakdown cannot be compared directly with population census data owing to differing definitions of non-English speaking background. See comments in text.

So, does coming from a non-English speaking environment influence the progress of professional artists' careers? Table 65 shows the proportions of NESB artists who identified positive or negative effects on their artistic practice as a result of their non-English speaking background. Two-thirds of NESB artists saw the effects as either positive or more positive than negative, indicating that on the whole an artist's NESB status enhanced rather than impaired their practice as an artist.

No artists regarded their NESB status as having unequivocally negative effects on their artistic practice, although 20 per cent thought the overall effect had been more negative than positive. Despite the adverse feelings of the latter group, it has to be concluded that language background has not been a handicap to Australia's NESB artists; indeed the reverse is true.

Table 65 Effect of non-English speaking background on artistic practice

Proportion of non-English speaking background artists	
	%
Positive	41
Mixed, but more positive than negative	26
Mixed, but more negative than positive	20
Negative	–
No effect	14
Total	100

– indicates nil response in this sample

Factors affecting professional development

In identifying the factors advancing their professional development throughout their careers and at the present time, NESB artists responded in terms very similar to those of other artists. However, there are some differences in relation to factors inhibiting professional development.

Table 66 shows the comparison between NESB and English speaking background artists' responses when asked to identify the most important factor inhibiting their professional development throughout their careers and at the present time.

Table 66 Most important factor inhibiting professional development of artists from a non-English speaking background

	Proportion of artists nominating factor as most important in inhibiting their professional development(a):			
	Throughout career		At present time	
	Non-English speaking background artists %	English speaking background artists %	Non-English speaking background artists %	English speaking background artists %
Lack of work opportunities	12	25	22	27
Lack of financial return from creative work	29	27	22	23
Lack of access to funding or financial assistance	13	7	7	6
Lack of time for creative work	10	21	9	24
Lack of support from family and friends	9	1	9	*
Non-English speaking background	4	–	5	–
Ethnic background	6	–	4	–

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

It is unclear why lack of work opportunities and lack of time appear less important for NESB artists than for other artists. In regard to other differences in this table, lack of access to funding 'throughout their

careers' is identified as being more important for NESB than other artists. But this disparity disappears when measured 'at the present time'. This difference may reflect past shortcomings in the funding of multicultural arts that have now been overcome.

Lack of support from family and friends is much more evident as the most important factor among NESB artists than other artists. This may reflect a persistent sense of isolation of some NESB artists from the mainstream of arts practice, though the numbers nominating this factor are very small.

Similarly only a handful of NESB artists, around 10 per cent overall, see their non-English speaking or ethnic background as being the most important factor inhibiting their professional development. This result is consistent with the observation made in the previous section that only a minority of NESB artists have suffered negative consequences in the pursuit of their artistic practice as a result of their language background.

Financial circumstances

Despite the positive picture painted above, when we turn to financial outcomes we find that NESB artists' incomes are lower than are those of English speaking background artists. Table 67 shows that for most income, whether mean or median, NESB artists earn less than other artists.

Table 67 Mean and median incomes and expenses of artists from a non-English speaking background, 2000–01

	Non-English speaking background artists \$	English speaking background artists \$
Mean income		
Creative income	11,900	17,500
Arts-related income	7,800	7,400
Total arts income	19,700	25,000
Non-arts income	10,800	12,700
Total income	30,500	37,700
Median income		
Creative income	4,500	7,800
Total arts income	11,000	16,200
Total income	25,400	30,100
Expenses related to art practice		
Mean	6,700	8,400
Median	5,000	4,100
Minimum after tax income required to meet basic needs		
Mean	27,800	28,600
Median	26,000	26,000

Given there are no significant differences between the two groups of artists in terms of demographic or work-related characteristics, the income disparity cannot be explained as being caused by these variables. However, a partial explanation lies in the fact that the NESB artists in our survey are concentrated in the lower income earning occupations such as in the visual arts, the crafts and community cultural development. Further research would be required to clarify these influences more precisely. Table 67 also shows that there are no major differences between NESB and other artists in their expenses or their minimum income needs.

Finally, we turn to the extent to which NESB artists have accessed financial assistance such as grants, compared with the rest of the artistic population. Table 68 shows the proportions of artists who applied for funding from various sources between 1996 and 2001, and the proportions of applicant artists who were successful in obtaining assistance.

We observe a slightly higher application rate among NESB artists than among other artists, and a lower proportion of NESB artists who received funding than other artists. Note that because of multiple applications/multiple successes, these data cannot be interpreted as success rates for individual grant applicants. Nevertheless we note relatively fewer NESB grant applicants have received funding from all the sources listed except for local government, when compared with other artists.

The prominence of local government in providing assistance for NESB artists probably reflects the involvement of local government in promoting multicultural arts activities within communities. However, the absolute numbers of NESB recipients in all cases shown are small, meaning that in statistical terms none of the differences shown in the lower part of Table 68 are particularly significant.

Table 68 Access to financial assistance by artists from a non-English speaking background

	Non-English speaking background artists %	English speaking background artists %
Artists who applied for assistance between 1996–2001		
from one or more of the following(a):		
Australia Council	23	18
State/territory arts departments	22	19
Local government	13	9
Private foundation	11	8
Arts organisation, body or company	20	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	32	43
State/territory arts departments	53	62
Local government	64	57
Private foundation	13	53
Arts organisation, body or company	31	46
Did not receive funding from any source	50	37

(a) Proportions are of artists in each category (non-English speaking background/English speaking background).

(b) Proportions are of artists in each category (non-English speaking background/English speaking background) 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.