Freelance Dance Artists and Employment Patterns: Survey results

Key findings

- As a result of the Covid Pandemic, there is more instability and uncertainty in the freelance dance sector.
- Led by Karen Wood from the Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University, the project found that freelance dance artists have had less contractual and paid work since 2020.
- The research has also highlighted the poor infrastructure for freelance working and that the Policy Recommendations made in the Freelancers in the Creative Industries policy briefing (2021) need to be upheld and reinforced across the dance industry.

Introduction

Just over 2 million people in the UK work in the creative industries (DCMS, 2021). Around 50% of this workforce is made up of freelance/ self-employed workers, which compares to 13% of all U.K. workers[1]. Approximately 300,000 people work in 'music, performing and visual arts' (categorised by the DCMS) of which 216,000 are self-employed (72%). There are more self-employed people in 'music, performing and visual arts' (MPVA) than employed people and the only other DCMS sub-sector like this is 'design and designer fashion' where numbers are around half of that in MPVA. This sub-sector is broad and does not show individual art forms however, it does reveal the amount of freelance working and highlights the importance of this research to support the sector. Aujla et al (2019) found that 81% of 'dancers and choreographers' were self-employed (using the Office for National Statistics data on this subcategory) and this reflects the short-term nature of teaching/ projects and therefore contracts.

There has been an increase in research conducted in the arts sector over the last two years. This research adds to it, with a spotlight on dance artists. Freelance dance artists exist within the same structures and have similar working conditions as other freelance art workers, but form a higher proportion of the workforce and with particular needs for resources. Their freelance income is also lower on average at £11,669 (Aujla et al, 2019) compared to £16,000 for performing arts freelancers (McDowall et al, 2019). The Coronavirus pandemic highlighted the precarity of the freelance art worker community, the fragility of their working practices, and the consequent weakness of this economic model.

Freelance Dance Artists Project

This research was co-produced with 74 freelance dance artists from the United Kingdom. It was facilitated by Karen Wood, dance artist and Assistant Professor at Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University, Helen Laws, PhD student at the Centre for Dance Research and One Dance UK, the UK advocacy body for dance, as the cultural partner. We surveyed artists to find out about their working conditions and employment patterns. This report highlights some of the impacts of COVID-19 on employment and the slow recovery post-

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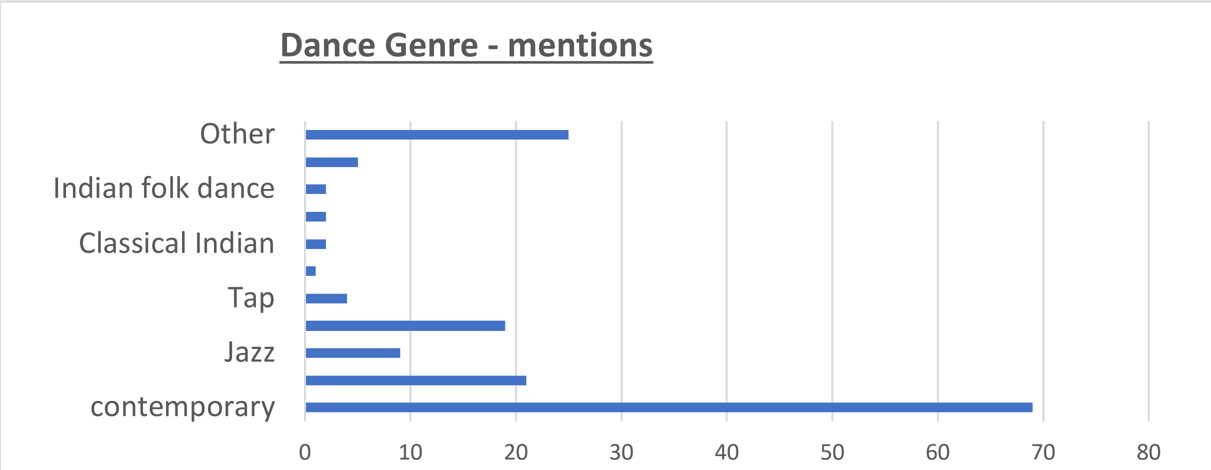
[1] Labour Force Survey, Dataset EMP01 SA | Released 15 November 2022

pandemic revealing organisational tendencies and suggestions for consideration for employing freelancers. It directly links and evidences the issues discussed in Easton and Beckett's (2021) policy discussion paper on Freelancers in the Creative Industries.

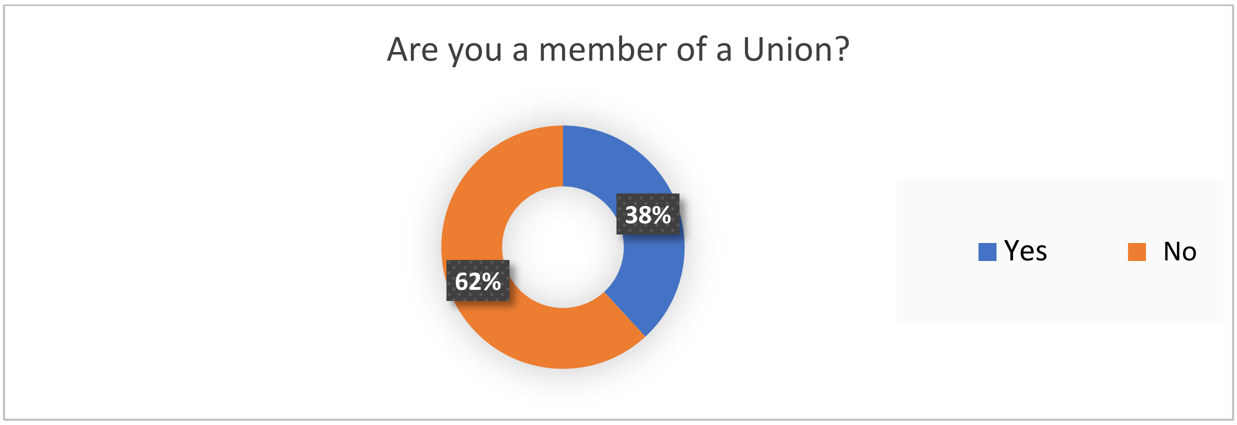
Survey Results
Figure 1 shows the broad coverage of dance genres that the group participated in, showing their primary dance genre and others that they teach.

Figure 1. Dance genres mentioned by participants



We asked about union membership as a structure to support working conditions (as illustrated by Figure 2). Ashton (2021) points to the Musician's Union as a good example of how contracts have been negotiated for musicians. We wanted to know if people were union members to gauge the uptake of union membership and their value in supporting working conditions. Figure 2 demonstrates that over half of those surveyed (62%) were not union members and this could be because of the requirement to pay for membership from an already low wage.

Figure 2. Participants' union membership



We asked how many clients (organisations, institutions etc) contracted the artists to compare the number of contracts issued from 2019 to 2021. Figure 3 highlights that the number of clients fell dramatically by 67% from 45 in 2019 to 15 in 2021, demonstrating the adverse effects that the Coronavirus pandemic had upon the work of freelance dance artists.

Figure 3. Total number of clients who contracted participants per year, 2019 to 2021[2]

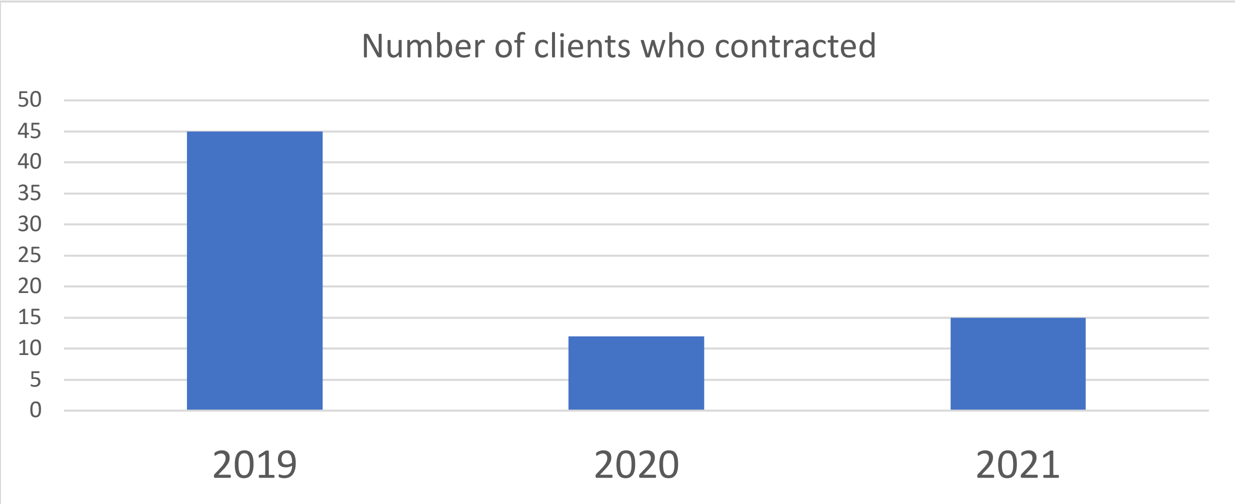
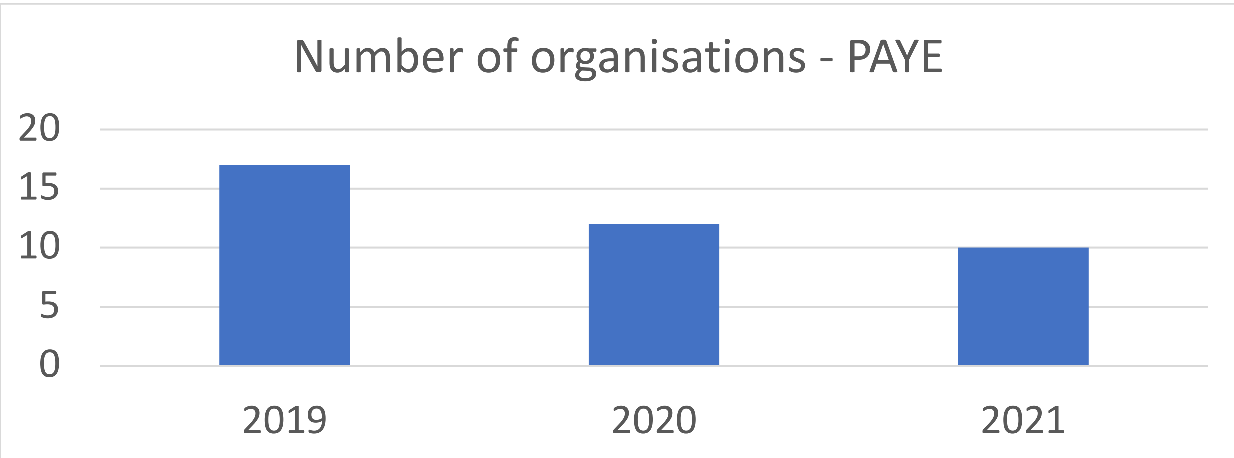


Figure 4 shows the number of organisations who employed freelance dance artists and they were taxed at source through PAYE. We asked for the number of organisations that contracted them from 2019 to 2021.

Figure 4. Total number of organisations who employed participants per year, 2019 to 2021[3]



Figures 3 and 4 show two things: firstly, that artists are not being offered the same level of PAYE opportunities in 2021 as they were in 2019, and secondly, that the number of self-employed contracts offered in 2021 has not reached the same level as 2019. This is a very

[2] Total number of clients contracted per year by participants on a self-employed basis and paid gross upon issuing an invoice.

[3] Total number of organisations that employed participants on a PAYE basis per year.

slow recovery rate, if COVID is the reason, or that contractors are less likely to now offer PAYE opportunities and there are not as many contracts available. These results show an increased precarity in freelance working.

Typologies

The project used the typologies of dance practitioners from the *Creating Value in Place* report (Henry et al, 2021). We asked the artists which description better aligned with their way of working. 72 artists responded to this question. Table 1 summarises each typology and the number of participants that identified with each group.

Table 1. Typologies of dance practitioners identified by participants

Typology group	Descriptor of typology	Total number of participants identifying with this group
Creative Entrepreneur	This group 'work within and beyond the creative industries' (Henry et al, 2021) and entrepreneurialism is a key motivation for their working practices. 'Sufficient income' from their activity is gained through seeing potential growth opportunities and adapting their business model appropriately. They choose who they work with and may offer a variety of activity.	6
Creative Ecologist	These people are deeply embedded in the cultural ecology through projects and networks that may involved close working with institutions. Their creative practice and outputs are the main motivation and are 'likely to achieve sufficient income' (Henry et al, 2021). They can choose who they work for, and their working conditions are generally stable.	16
Creative Work-Life Balancer	The biggest motivation for this group of people is to achieve work-life balance around home or other situational commitments. They value autonomy and might have other income streams to draw from.	16
Creative Contributor	This group deliver creative products within and beyond the creative industries. They are likely to be supplemented by other income from a member of their household or a portfolio of work. Networking is important to this group.	11
Community Creative	These people work within and are motivated by working with community groups to share their practice and have social impact. Sufficient income is not always achieved form this and are likely to supplement income from another source.	12
Precarious Projecteer	This group go from project to project, sometimes relying on repeat or further projects form the same contractor and have to go with what is offered, sometimes forfeiting contractual terms and working conditions. They rely on networks. The continual bidding process is absorbed into their costs (Henry et al, 2021) and produces a constant uncertainty and unstable environment.	7
Other/none of the above	Participants did not identify with any of the typologies.	4

Table 1 shows 72 dance artists identified with each of the typology groups and 4 artists did not identify with any of groups. This demonsrates that there are an array of business models used in the freelance dance sector to suit varying personal and home life situations. However, only one of these, Creative Entrepreneur, offers any sort of stability. The other popular typology, Creative Work-Life Balancer, could point to the caring responsibilites of those in the sector and trying to find autonomy in the balancing of work and responsibility. Community Creative, the next highest, shows the drive for creative practice to have social impact but this is not a sustainable source of income. Overall, Table 1 illusrates that there is not a significant difference between typologies for freelance dance artists.

We concluded the survey with two open questions:

- What do you think is the biggest barrier to a freelance dance artist being able to enjoy a sustainable and fulfilling career?
- What is the one most important thing you would like to see change that would help you to pursue your career as a dance artist more easily?

The responses strongly highlighted the need for higher pay rates more reflective of the time taken to find work and preparation for the work, for example, class planning, administration, choreographic planning, project management, which oftentimes is unpaid labour.

Conclusion

The lower numbers of contracts and less likelihood of PAYE contributes to an unstable and uncertain dance sector. Artists will have to find income from elsewhere, which results in less availability and less art being made and therefore, less supporting jobs (e.g. producing, project management, stage and set design). This potentially means we are downward spiralling and at risk of being a smaller sector. This may change slightly with the latest Arts Council England NPO announcements (Nov, 2022) but unlikely to resort to 2019 figures in the near future.

Freelance working should be a choice and comes with freedom of working, particularly for those that value variety, flexibility and have caring responsibilities. It should be supported by good infrastructure and sufficient pay conditions, as detailed in Equity's Professionally Made, Professionally Paid campaign. Action requires advice and direction from government to freelancers, funders, institutions and organisations.

The poor infrastructure for freelance working needs to be reimagined. The Policy Recommendations made in the Freelancers in the Creative industries policy briefing (2021) are upheld and reinforced by this research. In addition, there is a strong desire by artists, from this research, for Universal Basic Income to be considered and piloted, as in Ireland. The Musician's Union is currently backing this and Equity called for this in 2021. This would provide a minimum income to sustain living while making, creating, teaching and administering art projects and freelance working. In turn, this would support the dance sector to remain stable, grow and be valued in society and become more present in commercial, educational and cultural settings.