

# Freelance Dance Artists' Working Ecology Gathering

*Written by Sumi Xiaomei Cheng*

*On the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2023 we – the freelance dance artist working group – facilitated the Freelance Dance Artists' Working Ecology Gathering.*

The Freelance Dance Artist's Working Ecology Gathering was an interactive, holistic gathering at which we introduced our past year's research to professionals from the industry and the public. Amongst the attendees were representatives from leading dance organisations including One Dance UK, Independent Dance, Siobhan Davies Studios, Equity UK, and People Dancing, as well as members of the public. Participants represented a range of UK-wide geographic areas – including Bristol, Manchester, Nottingham, Wales, and London.

Questions were asked to allow members to reflect on their impressions of dance. They included:

*What support systems do you currently have?*

*What do you like about them?*

*How do you recognise value?*

*What is valuable for you?*

*Where and how does culture show up in your life?*

*What barriers do I encounter?*

*What dance networks am I using?*

*What cultural ecologies are you part of?*

*Who are your three ancestors that have opened a door for you?*

*What impact will your current actions have on the next seven generations?*

The questions were discussed in several round-table groups. Answers were taken down on sticky notes. Every group used a different colour of paper. The results were then shared among the groups by putting the sticky notes on posters referring to each topic. It was interesting to see that London, as a city, seems to be an integral part of dance culture, even though the attendees were not specifically London-based but came from all parts of the UK. This poses the question 'Is work for freelance dancers in the U.K. London-centric?'

Another important topic was:

*What would a Universal Basic Income (UBI) change in your life, or in the lives of the people that you live or work with?*

To receive free money for basic needs is a nice fantasy. The majority of the attendees stated that UBI would give them more opportunities to develop and improve the quality of their art. Others pointed out more objective points: UBI would mean collective care over the nuclear family. This leaves room for future discussion points about the pros and cons of a UBI.

For Equity, I took away the importance of the contract and a greater understanding of the content a contract requires, plus the need to set binding income standards significantly above minimum wage. It should be a consideration for Equity to suggest realistic rates for professionals, that reflect the training and skills dancers have whilst aligning with the cost of living as being self-employed professionals.

Finally, the Freelance Dance Artists' Working Ecology Gathering was an inspiring event with a holistic element that celebrated movement and the nature of dancing. It offered opportunities for practitioners to reflect on practice and industry about the working conditions for freelance dancers, and how dance is considered in the business world.

*Sumi is a freelance dance artist, actress, arts performance consultant, and co-chair of Equity U.K.'s dance committee. Her work is inspired by Polynesian, Chinese Folk, and Modern dance, together with Postmodern approaches. Sumi's performance portfolio includes The British Museum, Netflix, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, RiotGames, Dansens Hus Stockholm, and Teatro do Bairro Alto Lisbon. Follow her on Instagram @Londonsdancer for more information.*