COVID-19 was an unexpected intermission for creative workers in Victoria: but what happens next?

A Research Snapshot

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The language to describe workers, artists, the sector and industry shifts throughout the report, e.g. “creative arts sector”, “the arts industry”. This reflects the diversity of language in participant responses and the amorphous nature of sector.

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Eight participants did not report any information on JobKeeper or JobSeeker.

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Acknowledgement of Country
RMIT University acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations as the traditional owners of the land on which the University stands. RMIT University respectfully recognises Elders both past and present. We also acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands across Australia where we conduct business, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures and heritage.
The arts industry in Victoria was among the most affected by government restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic including the ‘lockdown’ periods.1

We invited creative arts workers to share their pandemic experiences in an online qualitative survey. The survey was open from August to October 2020 and early findings were published in The Conversation (Flore, Gaylor & Hendry 2020).

40 Victorians participated in our survey. They told us about their work and creative practices before and during the COVID-19 restrictions, income support they applied for and/or accessed, their digital work practices, and their experiences of mental health and wellbeing during the restrictions.2

Participants shared their experiences, frustrations and, for some, loss of hope. Most shared that they were motivated to participate because of the challenges they, and the industry, faced.

Creative arts workers are familiar with precarity and insecurity as consequences of long-term insufficient funding and complex arts policies (Pacella et al 2020). The pandemic has entrenched this insecurity. Participants described securing a liveable income through holding multiple, concurrent jobs and project-based employment. Some were “regular casuals” (even working more than 40 hours a week with same employer for over 10 years); others juggled contracts with multiple companies, venues and institutions, including jobs in arts administration, technical support for live events, and teaching in the community, schools and higher education.

“The insecurity of my work is part of the gig. The creative insecurity (Is this idea any good?), professional insecurity (Will they hire me?), financial insecurity (Where’s the next underpaid job coming from?). But COVID-19 is a whole other layer of insecurity on top of that. This insecurity is the killer.”

— Playwright
The pandemic disrupted the structures and practices creative arts workers had built to negotiate this familiar insecurity. One freelance technician and stage manager explained: “The performing arts and events are defined by constant, tangible deadlines. All of the structures in my life are built around the presence of this pressure. To have it suddenly and totally removed threw my entire world into disarray...” Others plan for uncertainty, for example, by shifting between periods of boosting income and periods of intense creative practice. Participants stressed that uncertainty and income insecurity intensified their wellbeing and mental health challenges.

**Creative arts workers are grieving the loss of their future.** A sense of grief and loss was poignant in many responses to questions about mental health. Participants also felt ignored and abandoned by the Federal government, expressing anger, sadness and frustration. This lack of support is also documented in the press and underlines widespread anxiety about the future of the creative arts industry (Anatolitis 2020).

“I cry when I think of my last 20 years in my studio going down the drain... I feel I’m lobbying government all day every day and I may as well be screaming at the wind. I feel so useless. So unheard. So value-less.”
— Performer and arts school operator

“I have lost a lot of hope for the future of the arts industry in Australia (as well as the future in general). Working against stagnating wages, the gloom of climate change, and other issues was already a challenge. The COVID-19 crisis has turned this from a challenge to a near impossible task... **This lack of hope for the future has made it really hard to stay motivated at work where I feel I am already overworked/underpaid.”**
— Administrator in a large public festival and independent producer

“Theatre is never going to die. People sharing live performance together will come back. This is about as sure a thing as humans gathering in any way, shape or form. So maybe just relax, take this enforced break to work behind the scenes.”
— Playwright
Before the pandemic, the experience of burnout was common for participants. The pandemic ushered in a welcome pause for some creative arts workers. Initially, the first few months for some workers were a break or “long service leave”. Two participants found that they managed better emotionally in the second lockdown period. A musician reflected that working from home and home schooling their children enabled them to “spend quality time with my family and that is a blessing. It was a joy to play such a strong part in our children’s education. Our family is much happier as a result.”

Participants described the lockdowns as an emotional and mental “rollercoaster”. For some, this intensified over time, as they “lost all [their] energy gradually,” “it is hard to get out of bed and find a good reason to enjoy my days” or found that life was increasingly difficult in the second lockdown, and “now in October my mental health is completely shot.”

Others distinguished between familiar and new uncertainties, and new challenging emotions. A live performance producer explained: “I am a resilient person and used to managing the ups and downs of the performing arts sector. There have been emotions not usually experienced. I have had to sit with them and know I would come out the other side ok.” Whereas some participants experienced a “double whammy of disempowerment” as they lost work through the lockdown, but also were delayed in moving to a new house and living transiently, negotiating new health diagnoses, or adjusting to moving states or countries. Access to support was especially challenging for participants on visas.

“I don’t know anyone here. I have developed insomnia, anxiety and depression and had to seek the help of a psychologist and psychiatrist... I don’t have a social support network and the physical as well as social isolation is profoundly tiring.”
— Artist and lecturer

Uncertainty, fear and grief disrupted motivation, focus and productivity. For many participants, the second lockdown period increased feelings of anxiety, amotivation and “clouded [their] ability to work efficiently.” Some questioned not only how they felt, but if they should express their personal fears and anxiety amidst complex social and global issues including a pandemic, climate change, socio-economic inequalities, and Australia’s recent bushfires. One performer expressed that “I feel guilty for feeling these things when so many people have lost work.”

“During this time, I wasn’t feeling motivated to create any new works. And when I saw on [the] news or online singers release lockdown songs or comedians taking shows online - it made me feel inadequate, particularly from the journalist saying [to an interviewed artist] things like ‘you’ve been very productive in lockdown’.”
— Producer
Digital practices were exhausting and, at times, something to escape. Some participants turned away from social media as they struggled seeing other artists’ challenges as well as their successes. Other artists’ challenges compounded participants’ own struggles. One participant who runs a large production and design firm illustrated this: “I have had to severely reduce my exposure to social media as I see many friends fall deeper into depression. For my own mental health, I have had to funnel certain exposure to the outside world and social media.”

Loss of creative work and community is a loss for wellbeing. Creative work also offered ways for participants to support their communities through the pandemic. A regional creative arts worker in the health sector struggled with restrictions that prohibited their arts-based health care as “health [services] are unable to recommend participation in ... arts [events].” Others stressed that their connections to community, both creative and local, were important to maintaining their wellbeing. These connections were compromised through the lockdown but also while work was stalled.

Managing mental ill-health during the pandemic brought new opportunities and challenges. For some participants already living with mental ill-health, chronic illness or disability, the pandemic provided a much-needed break. For one participant, this was an opportunity for “real recovery”. As another participant with multiple arts jobs reflected, “While it's been devastating in so many ways, not having the burden of feeling like I need to prove my value as an actor and compete has been helpful while I have therapy and try to heal.”

Most identified that their health symptoms worsened this year. For one musician living with anxiety, “I have always struggled with self-doubt and am highly critical of myself, both of which have worsened during COVID-19. I still haven’t pinpointed exactly why I’m more self-critical during this period, but my best guess is that my isolation allows my brain to more easily fixate on myself.” Likewise, a theatre production worker shared that it was difficult to “keep a hold of depression and anxiety” as they noticed more highs and lows, but found they have “more time to realise these are happening, so at least I’m self-aware?”

Strategies to care, treat and manage health issues were reduced or on hold. Many identified that doing what kept them “balanced” – going to the gym, losing themselves in their creative practices, speaking with a therapist or counsellor, seeing other people – was difficult during the lockdown period. Reengaging with these practices will take time.

“I suffer from depression and anxiety in normal life. But pre-COVID-19 I was coping really well and not having any episodes.... Once I lost my job my anxiety got really bad because I was worried about what I was going to do. Before JobKeeper was announced, the reality of having to move back with my parents started to become a little too real... After JobKeeper was announced my anxiety wasn’t as bad. But now, 3 weeks into stage 4 my depression is getting quite bad.”

— Theatre lighting technician
Financial supports during this time is critical, yet creative arts workers did not always meet criteria for accessing it. Just over half of the participants received financial support from JobKeeper or JobSeeker this year, and eleven reported they were excluded from these schemes. Thirteen applied for various grants from sources including Creative Victoria, The Australia Council, The Myer Foundation, the City of Melbourne’s Quick Response Grant, and the Victorian Government’s Business Support Fund – ten of which had at least one successful grant application.

Several participants reported feeling unfairly excluded from JobKeeper because the loss of anticipated project- or gig-based work, as well as technical support work, is difficult to account for. The application processes were not accommodating of the intermittent nature of arts sector work. For example, a participant who works part-time in an arts organisation and is a live performer and musician described why it is difficult to calculate precisely how much work was lost: “Most contract events were booked approximately 2 months in advance, so it is difficult to say how many ‘future’ contracts were lost when the restrictions on gathering and stay at home orders came in.” The true loss of income for arts sector workers may never be known.

Others were concerned about the September reductions of JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments because they (correctly) anticipated that the creative arts sector would not be operating in its full, pre-COVID-19 capacity by September and hence work opportunities in the sector would remain limited.
DIGITAL WORK OFFERS NEW OPPORTUNITIES; HOWEVER, THESE ALSO REQUIRE NEW RESOURCES, SKILLS AND NETWORKS

For some workers, digital technology and social media enabled them to learn new skills, receive feedback from other artists, technicians and audiences, and maintain connections during the lockdown. One musician shifted from performance to musical composition and production. They composed electronic music individually which was then shared with an online group, and with music students: “It was really inspiring to connect with them in this way, and I think our desire to create, as well as our individual experiences of the impact of COVID, brought us closer together.”

“The online world has provided constant contact with work colleagues, available online courses around our technology and environment, a library and resource of forums and articles to pick apart for tips and tricks in your field of expertise.”
— Sound engineer and production technician

Nonetheless, many participants reflected that the pivot to the digital presented difficulties and was not a smooth or even process. Issues encountered included the lack of financial resources, skills and capability, and inadequate quality of technology and internet connectivity.

Some participants explained that it takes time to build a significant audience for online activities. The nature of live performance and the “energy” that is shared – and the difficulty to translate this digitally – were noted by many.

Not only did workers have to pivot to the digital, audiences needed to follow – this was not easily achieved. A worker with several roles including arts teacher noted that it was difficult to “sustain quality audience interaction” online.

“Our company has made a decision not to put our work online. We want to make sure that we don’t put out inferior work, doing damage to our reputation. Making live work for an online platform is a whole new skill set. We want to make sure we’re proficient, before we release any work.”
— Freelance director and designer, and manager of a theatre company

“We pivoted to a Zoom online event format. Technically this took some adjustment, cost, and wasn’t as personal an event than if we were live in person, online energy transfer from the audience isn’t the same. However, going online meant we were able to reach people in areas that we might not have been able to get to for budget reasons and geography.”
— Filmmaker
The creative arts after COVID-19 – An industry’s second act: Recommendations

FUNDING BODIES, GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND ORGANISATIONS

1. Develop grant opportunities in funding and program planning that respond to the nature of work in this sector, including funding for technical and digital resources and roles.

2. Extend income support beyond the acute phases of restrictions and lockdown, and ensure it addresses the fragmented nature of creative arts work. Acknowledge that demonstrating lost income is difficult when future projects are cancelled, or income is typically irregular.

3. Ensure there are sufficient funding opportunities for non-government and small to mid-level companies, organisations and venues that are unable to access grants due to their size, structure and/or resources, including support for technical and administrative workers.

GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS, COMPANIES, ORGANISATIONS AND ARTISTS

4. Acknowledge that artistic and financial insecurity can contribute to stress and anxiety, as well as exacerbate more complex or existing mental ill-health that require care and/or support, within and beyond the mental health system.

5. Develop collective and social programmes and initiatives that address emotional wellbeing and/or mental health challenges. Initiatives that propose only individual or lifestyle strategies to manage wellbeing may not be appropriate. Rather, collective initiatives will better support creative arts workers as they incorporate both workers’ social circumstances and the collective strategies they stress are important to their wellbeing.

RESEARCHERS AND ADVOCATES

6. Explore how “jobs,” “creative practice” and “work” have multiple and diverse meanings for different workers within the creative arts industry, especially in the context of a global pandemic with far-reaching consequences. These definitions change over time and qualitative research is especially important to generate in-depth understandings of workers’ experiences and how they influence wellbeing and mental health.

REFERENCES

