



A Preliminary Exploration of Frameworks for Building Artists' Resilience

Ryan Daniel & Robert Johnstone, James Cook University, Australia¹

It is well known in the literature that artists face particular challenges when attempting to establish a viable and sustainable career in the creative industries. Given extant research points to the precariousness of careers in the creative and performing arts, the capacity to be resilient, confident and determined appears to play a major influence on the extent to which graduates are successful. While the concept of resilience, for example, is well understood and taught in such areas as teacher training, it has received virtually no research attention or focus in the area of the creative and performing arts. This paper contextualises these various issues, argues the need for new research, and proposes that higher education providers should revisit their curricula in order to place a greater emphasis on the mental strength that graduates will require as they transition towards a career in the creative industries.

Key Words: Artists, creative industries, resilience, professional wellbeing, tertiary education.



1. INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of a career in the creative and performing arts involves a number of particular challenges. These include an ongoing flood of new entrants to an unregulated market with an oversupply of labour (Banks & Oakley, 2016; Menger, 1999), non-linear work patterns and job insecurity (Bridgstock & Cunningham, 2015), and a range of physical and mental pressures associated with the act of being creative. In terms of the latter, this can occur in such situations as high-pressure auditions, competitions or performances, critical reviews presented by peers or other gatekeepers, negative client feedback which challenges the creator's intent, the solitary and intensive nature of much creative work, along with the particular physical stressors and injuries for those in such areas as the performing arts (e.g. dance, music, acrobatics). While these various challenges are well documented, there remains an increasing number of students who choose to study the creative and performing arts at the tertiary level, internationally and in Australia (Authors, 2016). However, the extent to which tertiary curricula provide students with a framework for developing resilience – or “the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity” (Herrman et al., 2011, p. 259) – is less well understood.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The motivation to become an artist has been explored in the literature for some time, with reference to such drivers as personal reward, love of risk taking, passion for creativity and/or a particular art form, the social status that being an artist brings (negative or positive), or the significant degree of autonomy and freedom that a career in the area allows (Towse, 2001; Bowman, 2011; Brook, 2013; Lindemann, 2013; Menger, 2006, Muñoz, Norris, and Fine 2014). Coulson (2010) argues that many artists are simply *compelled* to pursue their chosen creative discipline, while Elias and Berg-Cross (2009) propose that some artists have an inherent need to self-express in order to deal with particular mental health challenges and conditions. The stereotype of the ‘mad’ or ‘on the fringe’ artist is a feature of history, be this in relation to poets (e.g. Baudelaire), painters (e.g. van Gogh) or composers (e.g. Schumann) for example. In fact, throughout history there have been strong connotations about artists having to pursue madness to achieve success, and that some authors argue persist today (Becker, 2014; Kaufman, 2014).



Kaufman (2014, p. xxi) is one who claims that most people “still accept this connection as a truth”. Greason, Glaser, and Mroz (2015, p. 54) agree, claiming that the modern perception is that artists must be “substantially different from the rest of the population, if not outright ‘mad’”. In terms of popular media for example, Hollywood films continue to promote this ideology, such as *Amadeus* (1984), *Shine* (1996) and *Black Swan* (2010), where the main artist protagonist displays mild through to severe mental health challenges.

In addition to the particular challenges of engaging in art-making, artists face a range of pressures in relation to creating a sustainable and viable career. The sector where they work, known widely as the creative industries (Flew & Cunningham, 2010), is in many countries continuing to grow faster than the rest of the economy (Bridgstock & Cunningham, 2015; Vaag, Bjørngaard, & Bjerkeset, 2016). However, this broad sector of creative activity typically involves short-term projects or contracts, freelance work and casual appointments, as against long-term or linear employment (Bridgstock, 2011; Bridgstock & Cunningham, 2015). Vaag, Giæver, and Bjerkeset (2014, p. 205), in a study involving 12 freelance Norwegian rock/pop musicians, recently described some of the implications of a career in creative industries as including an “unpredictable future, threats to the family/work balance and significant amounts of external pressure”. In addition, the creative industries is an extremely competitive field, where reputation and word of mouth are often more influential in securing employment than qualifications and experience (Townley, Beech, & McKinlay, 2009). Many artists also have to sustain multiple identities, including an artistic or creative one, as well as one or more mainstream identities given many have to sustain non-arts work in order to survive and subsidise their creative exploits (Bridgstock, 2013). Managing these multiple identities and different work roles can therefore lead to additional stressors (Author, 2016).

As a consequence of both the personal challenges and the issues they face when attempting to establish a sustainable and viable career in the creative industries, many artists are vulnerable to experiencing significant physical and mental health challenges (Jacobs, 2004; Elias & Berg-Cross, 2009; Seton, 2004, 2010, 2013; Moyle, 2012, 2013). This includes such conditions as depression and stress (Jacobs, 2004), addictive, co-dependent and destructive habits (Seton, 2004, 2010, 2013), and self-identity issues



(Moyle, 2012, 2013). Thomson and Jaque (2015, p. 161) argue that dancers, in particular, are prone to “low self-esteem, obsessive compulsive tendencies, hypochondriasis, anxiety, introversion, and depression”. Nettle (2006, p. 887) contends that “[a]rtistically creative groups share the unusual and sometimes chaotic thought processes which typify both mild and severe psychopathology”. He also provides a summary of the significant number of extant research studies exploring the relationship between creativity and mental illnesses. These five areas of research include:

1. Biographical and survey studies which found high levels of depression and bipolar disorder in eminent individuals in literature and the arts;
2. Family studies which found evidence of creative interests and aptitudes in close relatives of psychiatric patients;
3. Studies of psychiatric patients (usually with schizophrenia) who typically have enhanced performance in divergent thinking compared to controls;
4. Performance tests for creativity on the general population which correlate with scale scores relevant to liability for psychopathology; and
5. Psychometric tests on creative individuals which typically reveal high scores on the Psychotocism (P) scale.

The performing arts has certainly received a stronger focus in the literature than other areas (e.g. visual arts, design, film/video). Recent studies exploring the relationship between performing artists and mental health include Greason et al. (2015); Thomson and Jaque (2015); Vaag et al. (2016) and Wanke, Schmidt, Leslie-Spinks, Fischer, and Groneberg (2015). In the study by Greason et al. (2015), they compared the mental health needs of 607 music students in the United States with 87,105 students from traditional colleges and universities. They found that the music students demonstrated increased levels of stress and made higher use of on-campus counselling services than did the control group of students. Thomson and Jaque (2015) explored the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 209 pre-professional and professional dancers who had been exposed to stressful events (trauma). They found that dancers had a higher distribution of PTSD (20.2%) compared to the normal population (7.8%). They also identified that the dancers who exhibited signs of PTSD had a higher frequency of 1) family members with mental illness, 2) an inability to speak about their trauma, and 3)



more suicidal thoughts. Vaag et al. (2016) compared the use of psychotherapy and psychotropic medication between 1,607 Norwegian musicians and 2,550 individuals from the general Norwegian workforce. In relation to the musicians, they found “three-fold higher odds of use of psychotherapy and 50% higher odds of use of psychotropic medication” (Vaag et al., 2016, p. 1439). Wanke et al. (2015), in a survey of 133 dance pedagogues, found that nearly 60% felt their body was being physically jeopardised by their profession and 50% had a fear of financial insecurity.

Recent literature therefore proposes that artists need to have a strong framework of resilience capabilities and attributes in order to build mental strength and sustain professional wellbeing (Wiggins, 2011; Moyle, 2012, 2013; Seton, 2004). Resilience can be broadly defined as not only the capability to recover quickly from various challenges and forms of adversity, but to do so to such an extent that the individuals produce positive outcomes and thrive under these experienced hardships (Jackson et al., 2007; Adamson et al., 2012). Given the various challenges that they will face in their career, Latekefu et al. (2013) argue that creative and performing arts graduates need to be “particularly resilient professionals” (p. 65). While resilience as a concept has been explored in depth in a range of professional practice areas such as education, nursing, medicine, defence and social work for example (Authors, 2016), it remains a nascent field in the creative and performing arts, hence a research gap and opportunity for inquiry. This is particularly the case in terms of tertiary training, where research to date is minimal. Therefore, the research question pursued in this study is as follows: to what extent are professional wellbeing and resilience capacities currently being addressed within higher education creative and performing arts curricula in the Australian context?



3. METHODOLOGY

While there were various possible ways of gathering data to develop a response to the research question, including surveys or interviews, it was decided to initially undertake a content analysis of University websites. Content analysis research is described as “a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314). As an exploratory method, it is unobtrusive, efficient in navigating unstructured material, able to cope with large volumes of data and cost-effective (Hashim, Hasan, & Sinnapan, 2007). Content analysis has been used extensively in the analysis of online information – from assessment of newborn screening program websites (Araia & Potter, 2011) to interactivity in online newspapers (Hashim et al., 2007). Whilst considered a viable research method (Bramstedt & Dave, 2013; Parker, Saundage, & Lee, 2011; Hopkins, 2010; Sodhi, & Son, 2010; Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009;), Bowen (2009) cautions that researchers be cognisant of the impact of any lack of detail in selected documents. Generally, documents under scrutiny were not created for the purposes of complex analysis, and therefore may lack the depth required to answer research questions.

Being mindful of the strengths and weaknesses of the method, this study employed content analysis to explore Australian creative and performing arts degrees – with a prime focus on determining the existence of specific curricula or learning sequences aimed at preparing students for the realities and stresses of a career in the arts. The emphasis was on programs that targeted the professional wellbeing of students as they launched their careers. A range of key concepts emerged from a review of the literature on wellbeing and resilience. These were selected as content search terms. Terms included:

- Resilience
- Vulnerability
- Mental Strength
- Criticism
- Wellbeing



The approach of the content analysis was to firstly identify which tertiary institutions in Australia offered relevant degrees. In order to manage scope, diplomas and certificates were not included nor were postgraduate programs considered in this particular audit. Double degrees were only included in the sample if they were in fact discrete or specialist awards as against the typical practice of aligning two degrees and extending the study over a longer period of time. The sampling frame of institutions was then stratified by state. This divided the sampling frame into non-overlapping subgroups. A representative sample of twenty-one institutions was then selected independently across the strata. For each of the identified institutions, a comprehensive search and analysis was undertaken to drill down to the structure of the degree and the individual subject level. The accessibility of requisite data varied between institutions with most providing nominal data at a high level, and more detailed curricula at deeper, less readily accessible levels. The extraction of information from these deeper levels required a considerable investment of resources, with some resultant data displaying undeveloped characteristics. While there was a significant investment of time in finding this information, the process was followed consistently and systematically through the full list of selected degrees. Detailed notes were kept within data management software that was also utilized to synthesize the findings in terms of the overarching use of curricula that would facilitate the professional wellbeing of students. Table 1 below details courses which contained subjects where resilience and/or professional wellbeing was directly addressed in a subject/unit curriculum, courses where it was indirectly addressed, courses where it was addressed broadly across the institution's goals/mission, as well as those where it was not addressed to any noticeable extent.

Table 1: Australian undergraduate creative arts programs: Professional wellbeing coverage including resilience

<i>Nil Reference</i>	Queensland University of Technology: BMus
	Central Queensland University: BMus BTh
	Melbourne Conservatorium of Music: BMus
	La Trobe University: BCA BVA
	Monash University: BVC BPA
	University of Tasmania: BCA BFA
	University of South Australia: BVA (Glass)
	Sydney Conservatorium of Music: BMus (Performance)
	University of Western Sydney: BMus
	University of Technology: BSoundMusDesign
	Australian National University: BDesA BMus
	RMIT: BA (Music Industry) BA (Photography)
	University of Western Australia: BA (Music)
	University of Adelaide: BMus (Sonic Arts)
<i>Indirect: University Curricula</i>	University of NSW: BFA BDes
	University of Newcastle: BFA BMus
	Curtin University: BA (Humanities) BA (Fine Art)
<i>Indirect: Course Curricula</i>	James Cook University: BNewMediaA BCrInd
	Victorian College of the Arts: BDA
	Edith Cowan University: BA (Acting) BA (Music Theatre)
<i>Directly Addressed</i>	Queensland University of Technology: BFA (Dance)
	Victorian College of the Arts: BDance
	Charles Darwin University: BCA (New Media) BCA (Fine Art)

4. FINDINGS

Data obtained from the exploration of degree programs indicated that coverage of fundamental issues associated with professional wellbeing (resilience, vulnerability, mental strength and dealing with criticism) was marginal. Of the 35 courses assessed, only four (11.4%) offered curricula that appeared to directly address the subject; five (14.3%) provided indirect reference within curricula; six (17.1%) were framed within a university wide focus on professional wellbeing; and 20 (57.1%) of the 35 degree programs provided no visible coverage of matters related to the professional wellbeing of artists. In order to explore further the four specific courses containing units directly



addressing professional wellbeing issues, coordinators linked to each were subsequently contacted by email and/or follow up phone calls with a request to provide further information, such as a full course guide or other details that were not included on the website. This approach yielded additional data via two respective academic staff members at two of the three institutions in question. New material obtained about the direct learning experience offered at Charles Darwin University (“Cultural intelligence and capability”) revealed that this university-wide and compulsory subject was aligned strongly to a deeper understanding of cultural intelligence in a range of contexts, including an awareness of self as cultural identity. Supplementary information about the Queensland University of Technology direct learning experience (Integrated professional skills) highlighted the embedding of performance psychology for dance students, including a holistic approach to preparing for the numerous features and challenges of a career in this industry. Both of these units also included a focus on self amidst either a cultural or an industry context and in relation to life span and space.

In terms of those units that appeared to indirectly address the focus of the audit, the majority of these units were oriented towards typical professional practice skills. This included such areas as grant writing, preparation of a folio of work and/or curriculum vitae, basic budgeting and business planning skills, intellectual property, legal and ethical skills and knowledge, as well as insights into industry trends and standards. While some of these units’ learning outcomes referenced concepts such as career management and personal development, the publically available material did not provide detail about the extent to which concepts such as resilience, mental strength and wellbeing were explicitly addressed. In addition, it should be noted that in terms of the courses within which these units were located, they often represented a small part of the curriculum (one unit of an entire degree) and typically at the end of the degree in the final year or semester. Finally, in relation to those units at the second level of Table 1 (Indirect: University curricula), references to resilience and the other key search terms were housed in generic university-wide support services and the embedding of these concepts at the degree level were not explicit. Further, while one institution through their careers office had produced a comprehensive document related to visual artists’ careers including extensive discussion of wellbeing, it was not clear if or how this was being embedded within courses or units.



5. DISCUSSION

While important to acknowledge both the limitations of the method of desktop analysis in terms of the potential for a lack of detail (Bowen, 2009), along with the fact that the data was a sample of courses from one country only, the findings provide a basis by which to respond to the overarching research question driving this study. That is, in terms of the extent to which professional wellbeing and resilience capacities are currently being addressed within higher education creative and performing arts curricula in the Australian context, the analysis here proposes that it is only being addressed to a limited extent. At one level this represents a concerning finding, given that in the global context, and as evidenced in this paper's introduction, an increasing number of individuals are attracted to the study of the creative and performing arts at the higher education level. In addition, the sector to which they graduate is fraught with challenges, including an oversupply of workforce capacity (Banks & Oakley, 2016), changing practices and employment patterns, as well as the need for considerable autonomy and self-management for a viable and sustainable career (Bridgstock, 2011; Bridgstock & Cunningham, 2015). Further complicating these broader career patterns and idiosyncrasies are the particular mental and physical challenges that creative and performing artists will potentially face during their lifetime, and which will require that they display a range of attributes and skills relevant to long-term professional wellbeing, including resilience (Latekefu et al., 2013; Moyle, 2013, 2012,).

While there is certainly evidence of a focus on professional wellbeing issues in a limited number of courses, they appear to be addressed in only one or at most two units within a three-year undergraduate degree, hence less than 10% of course content and focus. More noticeably, there are a significant number of courses where there are no explicit references to professional wellbeing issues. This in fact reflects the status of current research literature, with very few studies identified that detail strategies for coping with stressful training programs and/or scenes, or that these studies are largely limited to the performing arts (Moyle, 2013, 2012,; Seton, 2013, 2010, 2004). While professional wellbeing issues may in fact be dealt with explicitly in more degree programs than the desktop analysis identified, the detail of how they are embedded in curricula is not publicly available through existing web and course material, hence at the very least



prospective students and parents accessing course material would not readily engage with professional wellbeing concepts as a focus of the degree or course.

At the same time, it could be that some course designers and academics involved in creative and performing arts programs believe that capacities for resilience and professional wellbeing are progressively developed as each individual artist gains confidence and skill in their chosen discipline. It may also be the case that the vagaries and highly personal elements of the creative process lead many higher education providers of tertiary programs in the creative and performing arts to leave students to the freedom of their own creative space and time. Thirdly, it is likely that the majority of academics are not qualified in performance psychology and/or career management strategies hence do not feel comfortable broaching such issues, nor do they have the resources and/or time to work across disciplines with psychology or sports science for example in developing and delivering interdisciplinary curricula. Fourthly, it may be the case that within the classroom, many academics are in fact dealing with these issues and in some depth. Nevertheless, given the relevant issues identified in the research literature, including the common perceptions associated with the pursuit of a career in the arts and connotations of 'madness' (Becker, 2014; Kaufman, 2014), it is perhaps time that higher education providers place greater emphasis on equipping students with an understanding and skills needed to respond to a highly challenging, complex and changing career path; these currently accepted realities in on-going research literature (Bridgstock & Cunningham, 2015).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS

The findings of this research, amidst the broader context of the role and place of artists in society, proposes that there are a range of complicating factors and issues of relevance when considering the future focus of tertiary programs in the creative and performing arts. There are clear implications of the need for further research in terms of the particular health issues and challenges artists currently face. Future research might involve a number of approaches, such as interviews with current academics involved in higher education creative and performing arts programs about the notion of focusing on resilience and professional wellbeing in the curriculum, new studies involving a wide range of creative practitioners and their methods for coping with the stresses of a



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creative profession, explorations of situated knowledge within communities of creative practice, as well as collaborative research involving academics from creative/performing arts, psychology and medicine to further explore mental health issues and challenges that those in the creative industries currently or are likely to face. There is also significant opportunity to explore related issues and which are likely to have relevance to individual artists' capacities for resilience, such as their motivations for study or creative practice, their general mental health, their self-perceptions and sense of meaning-making. Ultimately, this paper proposes that there is significant potential for new approaches and thinking about how higher education curricula in creative and performing arts fields are designed, managed and evaluated in order to equip every graduate with the necessary skills and attributes in support of sustainable professional and personal wellbeing.



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Author Affiliation

Ryan Daniel

James Cook University Division of Tropical Environments and Societies
College of Arts, Society and Education

E: Ryan.Daniel@jcu.edu.au

ORCID - orcid.org/0000-0002-2325-8210

Robert Johnstone

James Cook University Division of Tropical Environments and Societies
College of Arts, Society and Education

E: Robert.Johnstone@my.jcu.edu.au

ORCID - orcid.org/0000-0002-0068-3927

Correspondence to:

Professor Ryan Daniel

James Cook University Division of Tropical Environments and Societies

P: +617 4781 4612

E: ryan.daniel@jcu.edu.au