

# Submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry

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Submitted on behalf of the research team leading the ARC Linkage Project [Visual Arts Work: sustainable strategies for the Australian visual arts and craft sector](#) (project LP200100054). Professor Grace McQuilten, Associate Professor Marnie Badham, and Chloë Powell (RMIT University) and Professor Kate MacNeill and Associate Professor Jenny Lye (The University of Melbourne).

The *Visual Arts Work* Project aims to strengthen the sustainability of the visual arts and craft sector. In a context where artists' incomes are low and falling, commercial galleries are financially vulnerable, and public galleries face funding challenges, this project addresses barriers to the sector's economic health and the challenge of improving artists' and arts workers' incomes.

## Summary

The precarious nature of work in the visual arts and craft sector was well known prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who work in the sector tend to hold multiple jobs and/or be self-employed, with few-to-no employees, in their arts practice. This results in less access to paid time off work or continuing income in case of illness. Earnings for many self-employed Australians across the workforce are also known to be low and unstable. For example, median earnings for part-time self-employed individuals with no employees were around 60% lower than for full-time paid employees in 2017 (Carney & Stanford, 2018). Furthermore, working conditions and the nature of precarious work itself are also connected to potentially detrimental health and well-being outcomes in general (Tuisku et al., 2016).

Australian Government public health measures to contain the pandemic exacerbated these existing circumstances, severely impacting the visual arts and craft sector. During lockdowns, art galleries and museums across the country were forced to close and on re-opening were severely restricted by social distancing and capacity restrictions. Art exhibitions, programmes and events, and festivals were cancelled, postponed or redesigned. Although many in the sector recognised the necessity of these measures for the health and safety of the whole population, for a cohort that already faced uncertainty and low incomes in their employment, these measures were particularly devastating.

Our findings demonstrate that the lack of support responding to the specific nature of employment and income generation in the arts resulted in multiple negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on livelihoods and well-being of visual artists and arts workers in Australia. This accords with the findings reported by Biddle and Gray (2020, 2021) for the general population.

We find that artists and arts workers were strongly affected by pandemic restrictions, as were those in other professions dominated by the self-employed and those individuals with scarce resources to rely on. These results are also consistent with findings internationally, with a strong consensus among the research that early career and/or younger arts professionals were most impacted in terms of financial security and overall well-being.

## Background

Our submission addresses the impact of COVID-19 on the visual arts and craft sector using data collected from artists and arts workers through two online surveys. The first was undertaken by the

National Association of the Visual Arts (NAVA) in August and September 2021, and was designed to collect information about the unique pressures that visual artists and art workers experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second survey was undertaken by our research team in 2022 as part of the *Visual Arts Work Project*. It sought information on sources of income and modes of work and employment over two separate financial years: 2018-2019 and 2020-2021. While not devised as a specific inquiry into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it did enquire into the experience of our survey respondents to this extreme event.

We employ these surveys to discover the relationship between the pandemic and both the incomes and mental health of artists and arts workers. Data analyses on both surveys have been attached as evidence as part of this submission and are listed in the reference list at the end of this document.

### **Response to terms of reference**

*Broader health supports for people impacted by COVID-19 and/or lockdowns (for example mental health and suicide prevention supports, and access to screening and other preventive health measures).*

Reduced hours and loss of contracted work and commissions due to the pandemic were both related to declines in income and mental health outcomes for artists and for arts workers.

A significant finding from the NAVA survey is that younger visual artists and arts workers were most likely to experience a decline in mental health. In addition, we found that all visual artists and arts workers who experienced housing stress also reported a significant or extreme decline in mental health. In addition, given other factors accounted for, a greater decline in mental health outcomes was observed for those who primarily identified as visual artists and also as female.

Those under 30yrs old were also more likely to experience a significant or extreme impact on their mental health. However, those living in Western Australia or South Australia were less likely to experience a significant or extreme impact on their mental health, suggesting that the more relaxed restrictions in these states supported better mental health outcomes. Developing online methods to present and sell their work and undertaking visual arts teaching opportunities also seemed to offer some protection against a significant or extreme impact on mental health through staying engaged with the sector.

*Financial support for individuals (including income support payments).*

*Support for industry and businesses (for example responding to supply chain and transport issues, addressing labour shortages, and support for specific industries).*

Due to large-scale business closures toward the end of March 2020, Australia experienced a considerable spike in unemployment and underemployment. This was particularly the case for the arts, as well as the service and retail sectors (Raynor & Panza, 2021).

COVID-19 pandemic specific art grants were available between 2020-2021, however the VAW survey results indicate they had little impact on artists' incomes: almost 80% of respondents did not apply for any of these grants.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of these types of grants include the Australia Council Resilience Fund, Arts NSW COVID Development Grant and Sustaining Creative Workers Initiative.

Casual employees were only eligible for JobKeeper if they had been consistently employed by the same business for more than 12 months and were not employed on a permanent basis elsewhere—whether part-time or full-time. Arts workers in casual roles were therefore the first casualties for organisations reducing staff during the peak of the pandemic.

Another significant factor in the low impact of financial support measures provided by the Government during the pandemic is the high numbers of those working as art educators—with most Universities ineligible for JobKeeper funding, arts educators were particularly vulnerable to loss of employment and income during the pandemic.

As noted by Australia Council of the Arts (2020), the JobKeeper programme was also unlikely to support a large proportion of the creative workforce given the high levels of casualisation and freelancing that characterise this industry. A similarly large proportion of arts workers in the NAVA survey indicated that their employer did not apply for JobKeeper (28%), or it was not applicable to them (52%). Those who identified primarily as artists and were also arts workers were most likely to be engaged in educator/academic/teacher/public programming in their arts work. Thus, they are most likely to be working in the education sector, and those employed in the university sector were generally not eligible for the JobKeeper programme (Senate Select Committee, 2021). As government entities, some local, state and national galleries also were not eligible for JobKeeper programme. As such, artists who were engaged in professional roles with these galleries were unable to access the support provided by the JobKeeper programme.

In the VAW survey, JobKeeper recipients were younger on average, and likely to have been eligible through their engagement as an arts worker and/or engagement in other work outside of the arts and cultural sector. Artists were known to have had difficulty establishing the necessary reduction in turnover to be eligible for JobKeeper in relation to their art practice. Many artists are sole traders and while sole traders were potentially eligible for JobKeeper, many found it hard to establish the ‘significantly reduced turnover’ criteria.<sup>2</sup>

Although the majority of survey respondents did not receive JobKeeper, for those who did, it provided significant financial security. As one respondent said, ‘JobKeeper was critical in supporting me last year.’

## **Recommendations**

When short term health, business, and financial measures are introduced to mitigate against the impact of catastrophic events such as pandemics:

1. The precarious, hybridised and self-employed nature of Arts Work and Artistic Practices needs to be taken into account to ensure equal access to government support payments.
2. The particular vulnerability of some groups, such as young people and those living under severe restrictions, must be considered in the development of mental health supports.
3. As a major employer of arts workers and artists—and the workforce in general—Universities must be included in supports provided by government.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/briefing-paper-jobkeeper-and-5ebcc73109bea-2.pdf>

## References

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