

FutureNow.

Performing Arts

FutureNow is an independent body that provides industry informed advice to influence skills development strategies across the creative, leisure and digital technologies sectors. Our work assists Western Australia to be prepared with the new order skills required by the evolving economy and our changing society.

The performing arts bring vibrancy and liveability to our cities and regions, support community cohesion, and create connection and meaning for the people of Western Australia. Post-Covid, there has grown among Western Australians a renewed appreciation of the communal experiences the performing arts provide. Ticket sales have been strong, with Western Australian audiences enthusiastic about exploring homegrown talent. Artists and art organisations have developed new skills and greater capacity to adapt to rapid change, draw in broader audiences, engage with them digitally, and work collaboratively with their peers to achieve outcomes despite adversity.

However, historically low unemployment rates and a booming resources sector are drawing workers away from the performing arts and particularly the support industry of live technical production, creating challenging operating environments for remaining staff and employers.

Live technical production industry instability

The live technical production sector, as a service industry to the venues, events, and performing arts industries, continued to suffer through a period of high uncertainty and unpredictable, last-minute cancellations from 2020-22. An almost total cessation of activity in the sector through the middle of 2020 saw a number of events organisers and associated businesses such as live production companies and furniture hire companies, close their doors. Several ceased trading permanently.

This downturn drove a worker exodus from the industry, especially as the cyclical nature of industry activity meant that most workers were employed on a contract basis, and often not eligible for JobKeeper. Industry sentiment is that many of these workers have been absorbed by the resources and construction industries, and have adjusted to higher wages and better job security in those sectors.

In the last 12 months this trend has been exacerbated, with sections of the Western Australian technical live production industry estimating at least 50% of the workforce has been lost post-Covid-19. A recent demonstration by Arts and Culture Trust (ACT) employees outside the Black Swan State Theatre Centre highlighted the severe current plight of the live technical production industry in WA. Attended by Minister for Culture and the Arts the Hon David Templeman, the event was underpinned by an internal report produced by ACT that had assessed the organisation's annual resignations and concluded that it had lost over 40% of its skilled workforce.

The live technical production industry is a sub-sector within the live production industry. Technicians work on lighting, sound, props, scenery, costume, audiovisual and augmented reality tools and in production management. They are distinct from events organisers who will also be responsible for marketing, ticketing, chair or fencing hire, volunteer coordination etc., although many events companies have internal technical productions teams in order to be able to offer wraparound services. Gaps exist

across the events production industry but are most acute in the technical production space. They are also distinct from the film technical production workforce, although a high degree of skills crossover is present and this may provide an avenue for exploration of hybrid careers.

Professional circus training in limbo

Student enrolments in Australia's only degree-level circus arts course have been suspended for 2024, with no indication to date of longer-term intentions for the qualification. Swinburne University's National Institute for Circus Arts (NICA) made the announcement in July 2023, meaning a significant cohort of students that have already invested in the pathway may be left with no way to complete their studies.^{1 2} Circus represents one of the most accessible, popular, and lucrative live events categories, and the NICA Bachelor degree attracts prospective students from across the country and internationally, with most training over a number of years for the opportunity to audition for a place at the prestigious school. The absence of a higher education pathway for circus artists may force aspiring practitioners to travel to Europe to complete their studies, increasing the risk that the artists will not return to Australia to work.

Contemporary music recovering

Australia and Western Australia have a significant contemporary music profile globally and this export market is key to growth for the sector. Contemporary Music has a scalable model, in that the same product can be sold an unlimited number of times (unlike for instance a live theatre performance). Royalties-per-play on sites such as Spotify are controversially low, however they allow artists to reach very broad audiences, and in this indirect way boost attendance and viability for live touring performances. This means that live touring is by far the most lucrative income stream for contemporary music artists. Therefore, the COVID-19 crisis globally had a magnified impact on the professional contemporary music sector, who were unable to tour their performances currently, or forward plan to tour in the coming years. Attracting local audiences became more important in this context and again, a warm response from local audiences, with strong ticket sales, boosted industry's perception of WA's recognition and appreciation of local talent.

Shifting skills needs

The sector continues to report a need for increasingly sophisticated knowledge in the area of income generation. Marketing, outreach, customer relations management, and a comprehensive use of social media are essential tools to reach a targeted market, campaign for funds, and build an organisation's narrative. Rapid developments in the areas of big data and data analysis are creating new opportunities to target audiences and demonstrate outcomes, bringing with them new skills and knowledge requirements.

Sector upskilling priorities have centred around participant safety in recent years, including a focus on the safety of children in learning environments, the safety of patrons, venue and event workers, and performers, and the safety of women. At the national level, Safe Theatres Australia has been established to "drive lasting cultural change to eliminate sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination in the sector" and locally, Safer Venues WA has launched an industry toolkit aiming to make live music venues in Western Australia safer and more inclusive, particularly for women and the LGBTQIA+ community.^{3 4}

Seeking solutions: training and traineeships for the live technical production sector

Vocational qualifications exist to service the live technical production sector, however only the WA Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) currently has a relevant offer, and only from Diploma level and above.

WAAPA offer *CUA50420 Diploma of Live Production and Technical Services*, and *CUA60220 Advanced Diploma of Live Production and Management Services*. However typically, less than 1 in 50 applicants to WAAPA's courses apply for these pathways, being instead drawn to the more visible performance areas of dance, acting, and music.

These qualifications provide an excellent grounding for high-level careers across live theatre, event, and film contexts, however are not targeted at the all-round technical workforce that venue operators are currently in urgent need of. For this workforce, an ideal pathway would be via the *CUA30420 Certificate III in Live Production and Technical Services*, and *CUA40420 Certificate IV in Live Production and Technical Services*. These qualifications are not currently available through a Western Australian training provider.

Raising awareness among secondary students

In March 2023, Crown Theatre in conjunction with Global Creatures Production Company and *Moulin Rouge the Musical*, hosted 1300 secondary students for an event called 'Get Technical!' which brought the backstage crew out on to the stage to talk about their departments and careers. The success of the event has inspired WAAPA in conjunction with ACT and His Majesty's Theatre, as well as the Spare Parts Puppet theatre, to launch similar events. The aim of these events is to demystify backstage careers and entice secondary students to consider these pathways, which provide sustainable work immersed in the creative industries.

New performing arts honours program

The WA Academy of Performing Arts debuted a new honours degree in performing arts in 2022. Offering streams in Dance and Performance Making, the course provides students with "an opportunity to focus in depth on a particular research topic of their choice while also receiving further research training at fourth year Honours level." The course is the first of its kind in WA and an opportunity for students in the performing arts field to pursue academic research at a higher level than previously available in the state.

Revive National Cultural Policy to support First Nations performing arts

The Federal Government's new Revive National Cultural Policy has acknowledged the particular challenges facing the nation's Aboriginal performing artists and arts workers, noting there are significant pressures placed on First Nations arts workers, including "an ongoing problem of training and skills shortages in First Nations arts jobs, including management, technical and administrative positions, whether that be curators, lighting technicians or sound engineers, which provides limitations for the growth of First Nations arts and related organisations, and contributes to a lack of autonomy." With recognition of the need to support career pathways at all stages through access to culturally appropriate training and skills development, the Policy commits to "increase support for First Nations arts and culture, with autonomous decision-making determined by First Nations peoples, through the creation of a new body... that will support a wide range of First Nations projects, prioritising performing arts projects in the first instance and broadening to other art forms as investment matures."⁵

Please get in touch with FutureNow

FutureNow is continually seeking broad input from stakeholders and representatives in the Western Australian performing arts sector. If you would be interested in providing your perspective on this snapshot or related workforce matters for your sector, our Creative Industries Industry Manager would love to hear from you:

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References

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