What makes a creative community? What does it need to thrive?

Creative Ecologies

An investigation

The partners in the Creative Ecologies initiative would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation as the traditional owners of the lands on which central aspects of this project's work was undertaken. As a continent-wide initiative, we pay our respects to all Elders past, present and emerging, recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty across all lands and seas was never ceded. Through our work we endeavour to contribute to the project of decolonisation.

Creative Ecologies is an initiative of Future Tense, undertaken in partnership with Artlands Victoria, RMIT University, Ludowyk Evaluation and Clear.

Special thanks to all the artists, organisers, policymakers and community workers who contributed to the survey, consultations and workshops.

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Creative Ecologies is a collaborative investigation into what makes Australia's creative cultures tick. The aim is to understand what it takes to build thriving creative communities and develop tools to foster their growth.

The goal of the project is to develop a simple way of articulating the complex ways creative ecologies operate. Core to this will be highlighting connections to the wider society and demonstrating value beyond purely economic indicators.

The long-term ambition of Creative Ecologies is to expand our understanding and appreciation of creative exertion – and have its central place in Australia's national character recognised. It will do this by developing and raising awareness of a framework and resource for policymakers, practitioners and advocates. This will be a live, interactive visual map of the nation's creative ecologies, combining data, case studies and avenues for connection across the sector.

The process

01—Investigation

2018
Define the attributes that drive creative ecologies.

02—Development

2019
Create a tool for practitioners and policymakers.

03—Implementation

2019–2020
Launch and promote the resource.

This report collects the outcomes from the investigative stage of the project, highlighting what we have learned so far and how this will shape the development of the Creative Ecologies tool.

What’s been done so far

Literature review — 89 pieces of academic literature reviewed. Sector survey — 370 respondents from around the country completed the online survey. Depth consultations — 13 one-on-one discussions. Workshops — Three interactive sessions conducted at Artlands Victoria in October 2018.

What we learned

— Creative industries have swallowed arts and culture
— Demonstrating non-economic value is difficult
— There’s no agreement on measures of success
— The sector defies definition and categorisation
— Longevity and sustainability are constant concerns
— The greatest opportunities are at the local level
— It’s all about connectivity (and relationships)
— There’s no one culture
— Funding is a fraught issue
— What’s needed depends on your point of view

The creative industries have swallowed arts and culture

The term ‘creative industries’ was first introduced as a peripheral component of the Federal Government’s *Creative Australia* policy in 2013. Since then it has moved to centre stage of the public policy discourse. Arts and cultural production has been lumped in with other creative commercial activities. And while they are connected, the touted economic benefits are almost exclusively concentrated in the ‘industry’ end of the creative industries. This shift has narrowed the lens through which cultural production is viewed and valued.

This amalgamation prioritises economic impact above cultural and community benefit. Conflating the different types of labour and their output in the single basket of ‘creative industries’ means there can be no nuance in our understanding of the relationship between creativity in the cultural sector and economic value generation[—01].

‘... in these circumstances policy becomes drained of any relevance other than as a servant of the economy.’[—02]

David Throsby, Distinguished Professor of Economics at Macquarie University

01—Lee, H. (2017). The political economy of ‘creative industries’. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(7), p. 1085.
02—Throsby, D. (2018). Art, Politics, Money: Revisiting Australia’s Cultural Policy. *Platform Papers*, 55, p. 9.

Demonstrating value outside of economic terms is difficult

While it is important to note their economic impact, the benefits of creative activities extend far beyond monetary terms. Creative and cultural practices are more than their material outputs, and their effects on the community are more than their economic value.

Measures of success must be relational. Producers, audiences and policymakers all contribute in different and often intangible ways. To accurately account for a cultural endeavour's impact, these perspectives must be considered[—03].

Many participants in the consultations were exasperated by the limited lens through which the value of their organisation's work could be expressed. While they had mechanisms for acknowledging the breadth of their impact internally – for example, celebrating community wellbeing, health and connectedness – there's a tendency for these to be reduced to the economic metrics required by funding or governance bodies. Something's being lost in terms of value.

'The value of these programs isn't going to be in the data.'

Arts organisation manager, Creative Ecologies consultation (2018)

03— George, J. (2015). Examining the cultural value of festivals. International *Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 6(2), pp. 123–124.

There’s no agreement on measures of success

There needs to be a sharper focus on the social and cultural aspects of creative practice. Consideration needs to be given to how creativity and creative communities contribute to cultural, political and economic autonomy[—04].

This notion was backed up through the survey and consultations, were many highlighted the difficulties they faced in trying to measuring success quantitatively. They were aware of the social value and impact of their work, but struggled to benchmark and prove its worth.

It’s clear that success and failure look different to everybody. For some participants, success was about cooperation and connection, while for others it was sustainability and viability. Financial growth, increased participation, and expanded creative ambitions were also cited as factors that indicate success.

There’s no shortage of proposed frameworks in the literature. But they vary wildly in their perspectives, such as whether they see activity belonging to an economy, industry or social good. This leads to a lack of consensus and uptake.

Only 11% of workers in arts organisations and government believe they’re measuring success in the right way.

Creative Ecologies survey (2018)

04—Lee, H. (2017). The political economy of ‘creative industries’. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(7), pp. 1080–1081.

The sector defies definition and characterisation

Formal mechanisms for tracking the creative sector – such as economic impact and job numbers – don't reflect the reality of the what's taking place across Australia. The current measurements render some participants invisible, including those who make substantial contributions to their creative ecologies but may not self-identity as a creative or cultural practitioner.

Wearing multiple hats and playing multiple roles is the norm within creative communities. The porous line between professional and amateur practitioners further complicates any attempt to obtain a clear picture of the sector's size and scope. This challenge means the sector's impacts are underreported as informal activity is often missed.

It's also makes it harder to advocate with a unified voice – unless complexity and the diversity becomes the message.

81% of survey respondents have two or more roles in their creative communities.

Creative Ecologies survey (2018)

Longevity and sustainability are constant concerns

A recurring theme throughout the consultations with arts managers was a fear their organisations were constantly on the verge of collapse due to a lack of funding, staffing, good administrative systems and short political cycles. This lead to confusion and an increase in pressure on the organisations that interface directly with the community, as well as individual artists and creative practitioners themselves.

Many were adamant that good governance practices were essential to keeping community-based projects and organisations afloat, and to alleviate stresses that may stem from a lack of adequate project and staff management. Quite a few respondents noted the exceptional assistance they had received from the Cultural Development Network in overcoming evaluation and strategy challenges.

However respondents either inferred or directly stated that their processes tend to be more reactive to external pressures. This is in distinction to how they'd preferably be operating: proactively creating pathways that are both sustainable and catered to the ecology they are situated within.

The greatest opportunities are at the local level

The survey highlighted the critical role the local environment plays in shaping creative communities[05].

75% listed their local community as a key influence on their work
89% collaborated with people within their town or city in the last year
78% identified an engaged local audience as critical to their success
76% said their town or city was key to shaping their creative community
64% stated their local community was the main audience for their works

This clearly shows that actions at the local level – even very small interventions – have the potential to have a big impact on an area's creative ecology.

05—Creative Ecologies survey, 2018.

It’s all about connectivity (and relationships)

Government policies follow a logic of artistic individualism, assuming practitioners act as independent entrepreneurs within a marketplace. However, artists never exist in isolation. They are always embedded within a community, society and locale. This is why the cultural value of a project or product should factor in the communities themselves, as they are the point from which an expression of both economic opportunity and place identity commence[—06].

So, while the persistent cliche is of the lone artist toiling away in isolation, our research showed reality to be very different. 89% of all survey respondents collaborated with people within their town or city in the past year (with only 5% claiming to not have collaborated with anyone)[—07].

Creative ecologies thrive when their participants connect with each other and the wider community.

82% of participants in thriving creative communities cited the support of their peers as critical to their success.

Creative Ecologies survey (2018)

06—George, J. (2015). Examining the cultural value of festivals. International *Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 6(2), 122-134.
07—Creative Ecologies sruvey, 2018.

There’s no one culture

Creative ecologies are made up of multiple cultures, each with their own underlying purposes, values and expressions. The combination of these societal groups and their cultural and linguistic diversity give the ecology strength. Because of its social character, creativity is an excellent conduit by which communities can navigate differences and similarities and bring down barriers to access and understanding[—08].

Creative ecologies can thrive through these differences, rather than be constrained by them. We learned that asking the right questions, and putting in place frameworks that allows cultural differences to be understood and co-exist leads to productive outcomes. This is an important part of how creative exertion underpins all walks of society.

‘Just because you don’t like or understand it, doesn’t means it isn’t worthwhile. Our challange is to find ways for everyone to express their culture. We’ll all be better for it.’

Government policy manager, Creative Ecologies consultation (2018)

08— Wilson, N. (2010). Social creativity: Re-qualifying the creative economy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 16(3), p. 367.

Funding is a fraught issue

Private and government funding of the creative and cultural sector is declining. Funding for environments where experimentation and innovation occur is being overlooked in favour of things that have already been proven to work. This is placing significant stress on the sector, and eroding opportunities for creative and cultural expression and existence.

There is evidence that, in order to meeting funding requirements, many individuals and organisations are changing their practices to such an extent that they become bent out of shape. While it is reasonable to expect funds to deliver a return, some of the criteria are so tightly defined that creative undertakings are being transformed into pure service delivery. This puts them at odds with what the needs and ambitions of their local communities and constituents.

Conversely there is evidence that in some ecologies participants are sticking what they do well, and are able to get funding criteria to align to them.

‘The local council engages with us regularly, which results in their funding guidelines being naturally aligned to what we do. Conversely, translating what we do in to the language necessary to secure state government funding is a lot of work, and it does not always fit.’

Arts organisation manager, Creative Ecologies consultation (2018)

What's needed depends on your point of view

When it came to the question of what was required for a creative ecology to succeed, there was a stark contrast in views, depending on whether respondents thought their creative communities were thriving or not[—09].

The top three reasons why creative ecologies succeed – according to those in thriving creative communities:

— A connected network of peers
— An engaged community
— Supportive network of institutions

The top three things creative ecologies need to succeed – according to those in unsuccessulf creative communities:

— Funding
— Spaces to work and present
— Support from

09—Creative Ecologies survey, 2018.

These findings led to the identification of six conditions that form the foundational elements of a thriving creative ecology.

Conditions of a thriving creative ecology

— Participants are connected and engaged
— There are local opportunities and the possibility of growth
— Audiences are central
— Experimentation is encouraged
— Resources are available
— The contribution of the arts is recognised by the wider community

What the tool will look like

The work to date provides clear guidance on what is needed from the Creative Ecologies tool. It must be live, open source, interactive and bring together existing data. It needs account for the different ways creative ecologies form and function. It should include benchmarking tools and case studies, as well as connections to practitioners around the country. And finally, it should be free for all to access.

Where to from here

The next stage of the initiative is to develop metrics for mapping and measuring the Creative Ecology domains and build a beta version of the open source tool. Involvement from those on the ground is essential to ensuring the outcome remains relevant. To join the project, email creative-ecologies@futuretense.com.au.

Appendicies

— Appendix A: Methodology
— Appendix B: Key survey results
— Appendix C: Reviewed literature

Appendix A: Methodology

Literature review

We reviewed 96 articles concerned with how creative ecologies are currently defined, and the strategies in place to identify, measure and prolong their success. The parameters we set for analysing the literature focussed on the following aspects of what constitutes a thriving or declining creative ecology, including:

- The differences, if any, that are annotated between culture and creativity
- How economic value is framed and prioritised, and what measures of economic success were indicated, and their relationship to creative practices
- What non-economic forms of value are indicated as essential to a creative ecology
- Any metrics that are outlined as useful tools to determine the value of a project, product or community of creators
- The role of policy and instrumentality in supporting a creative ecology
- Implementation
- Any conditions that are outlined as indicative of a quality community
- The role of creative and cultural networks
- The Impacts of professionalisation
- The role of art in society
- Definitions of what constitutes a boundary or a network

The findings of the review were used to inform the development of the sector survey.

Sector survey

An online survey was created to capture the views and experiences of artists, arts workers, government representatives, organisers, advocates and those working in supporting fields. The survey was hosted on creativeecologies.net and was open between 1 August and 9 October 2018. A link to the survey was included in the Artlands Victoria registration process, as well as promoted on the event website and through its social media channels and electronic direct mail (EDM). Future Tense also undertook promotion via its networks and social media channels. A total of 370 respondents participated.

Depth consultations

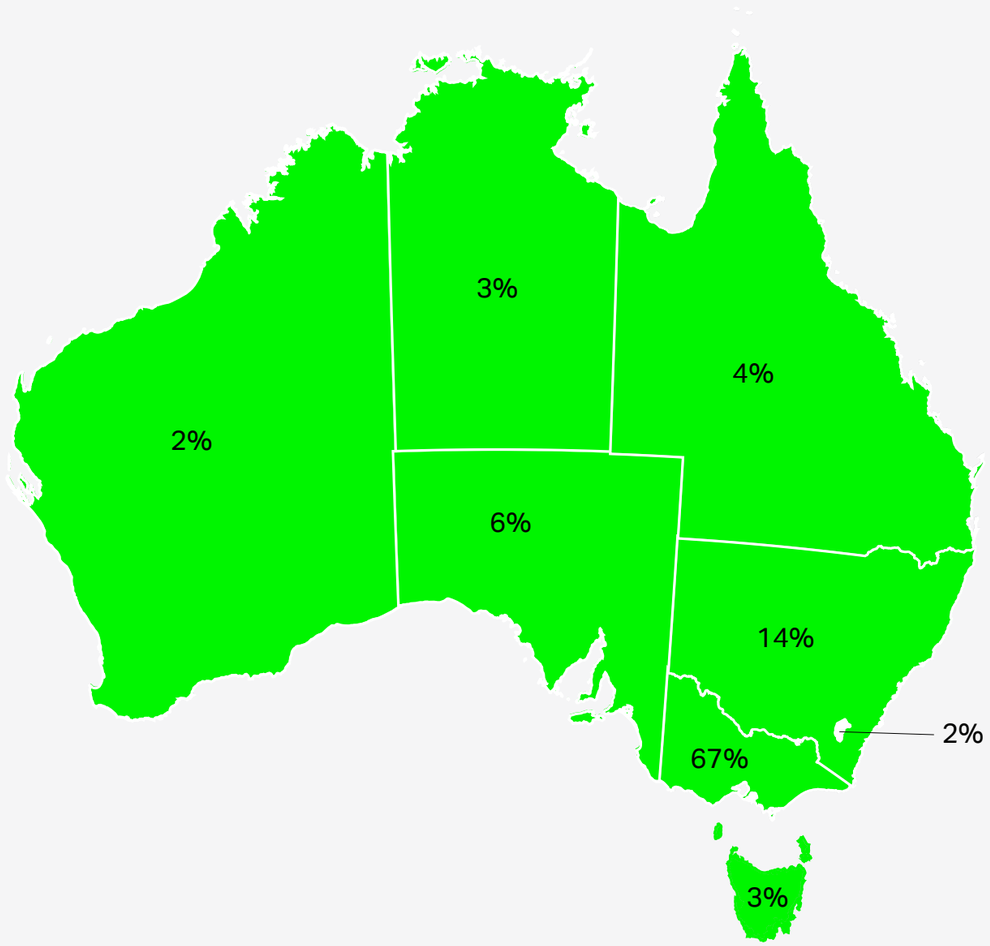
Thirteen on-on-one consultations were undertaken. These were conducted with survey respondents who had indicated they would like to engage in a further discussions. Interviewees were selected from each state and territory, focusing on organisational leaders and government workers. The conversations covered strategic planning and goal setting, funding, network connections, resources, gatekeepers, measuring success, what is and isn't working, and And weather a tool like Creative Ecologies would be useful.

Artlands Victoria workshops

The three sessions at Artlands Victoria in October 2018 were conducted as interactive workshops. They were structured to be evolving conversations with the sector around the why, what and how of the the Creative Ecologies initiative. The research findings were used as a framework for the discussion and were published in an EDM to all Artlands Victoria participants at the start of the conference. Throughout the session we attempted to describe the attributes of thriving creative ecologies and assessed the needs, available opportunities, and deficiencies that creative communities face. Each session was well attended, with approximately 80 participating on the first day, 50 on the second and 30 on the third. Several delegates participated in all three workshops.

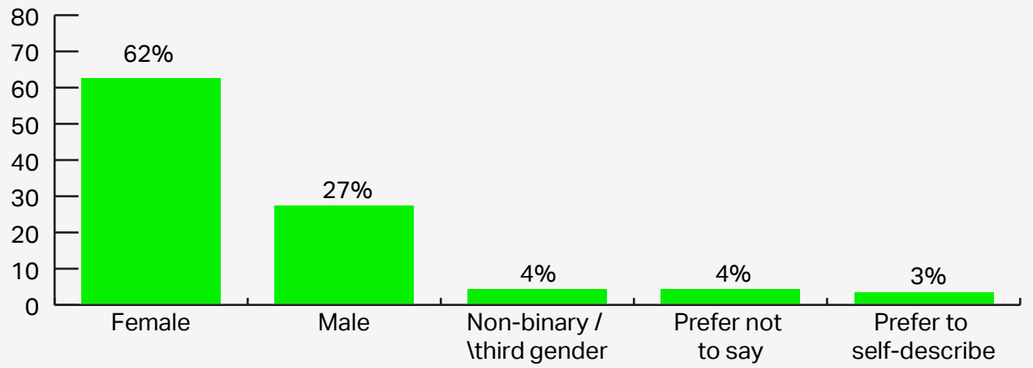
Appendix B: Key survey results

Number of respondents by state and territory



Base: n=370

Gender



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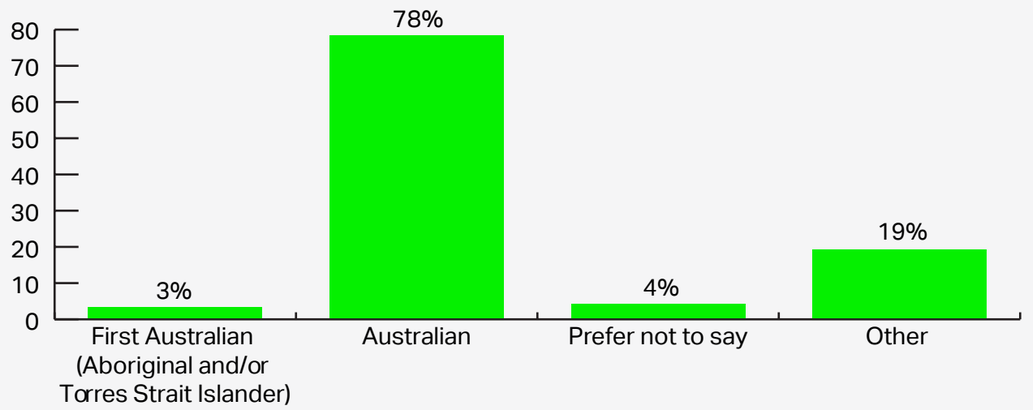

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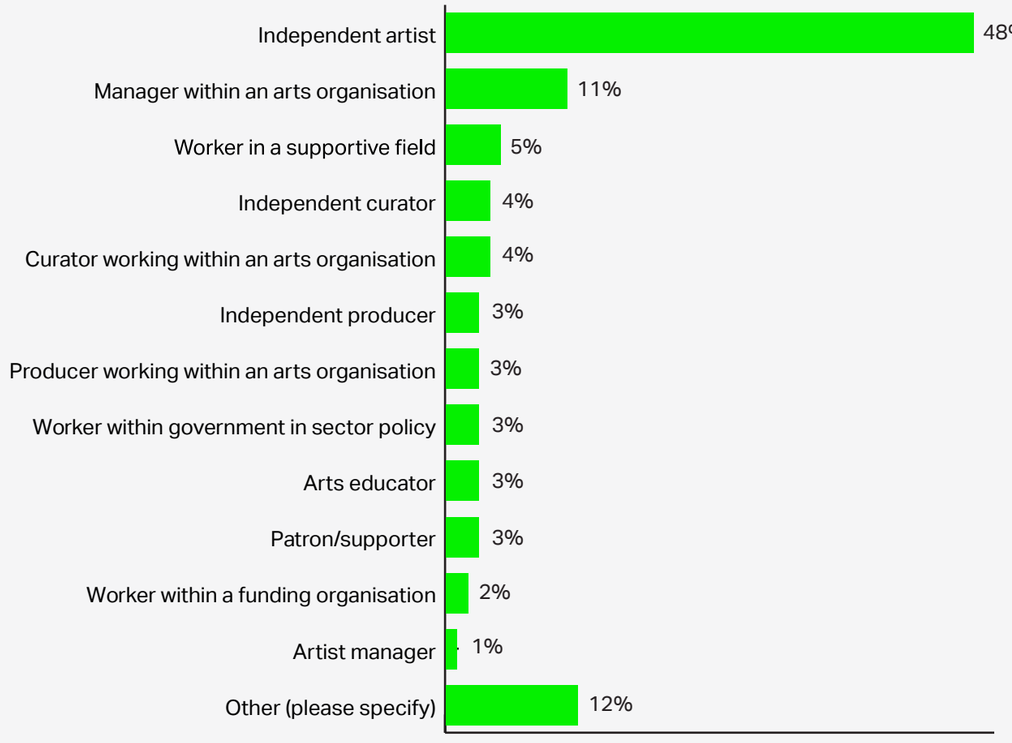
Appendix B: Key survey results (cont.)

Main role in the arts



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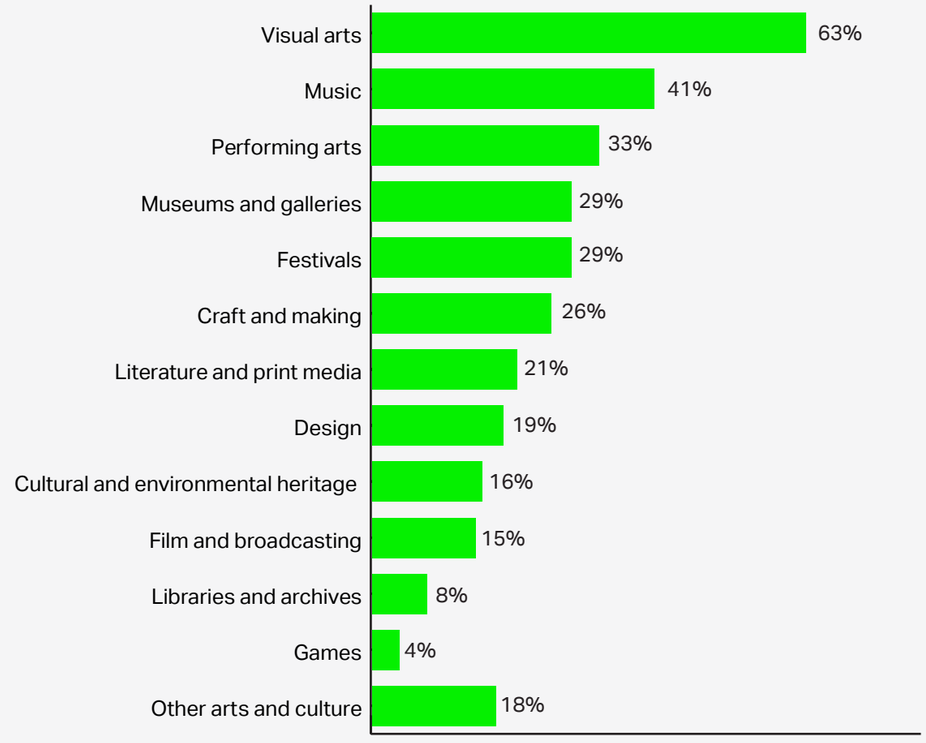
Area of the arts



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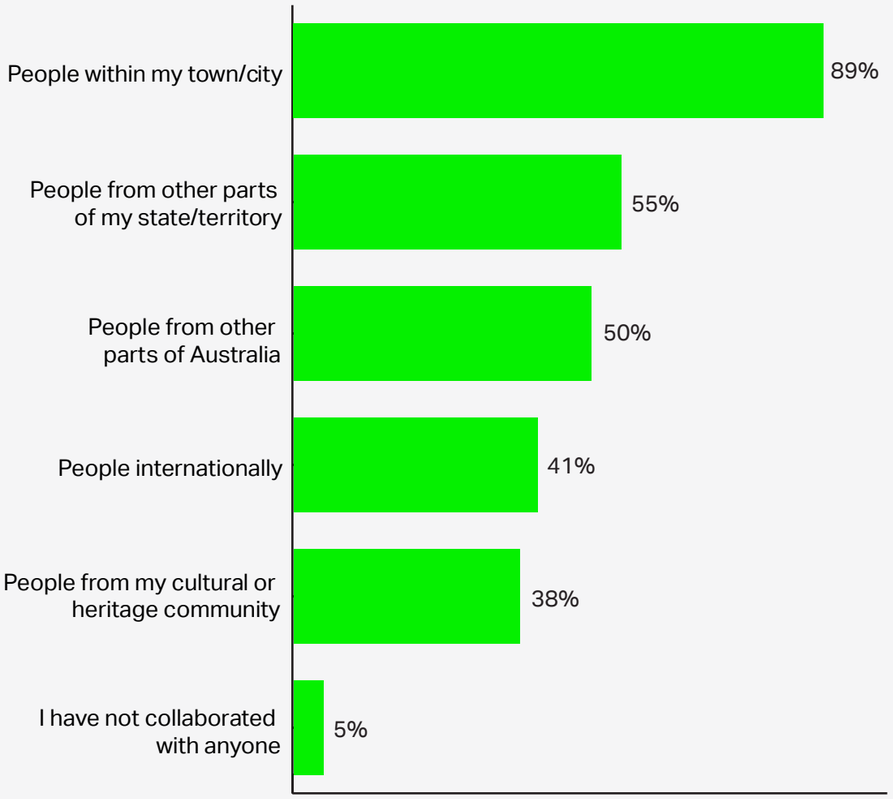
Appendix B: Key survey results (cont.)

Who respondents are collaborating with



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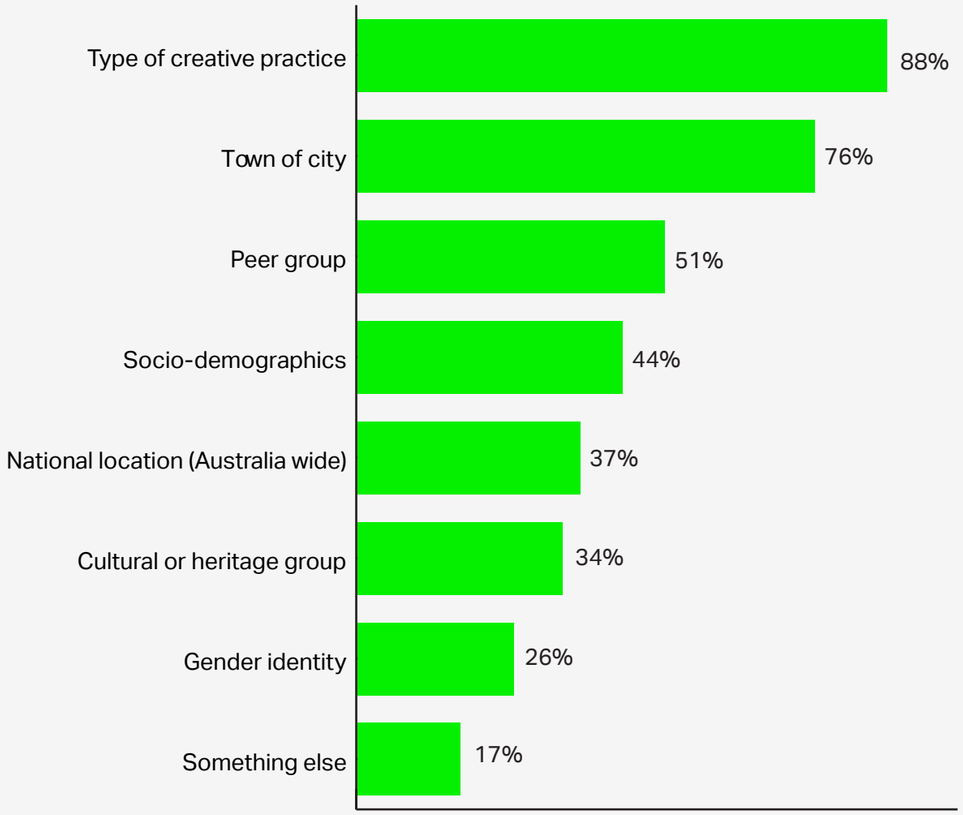
What shapes respondent's creative communities



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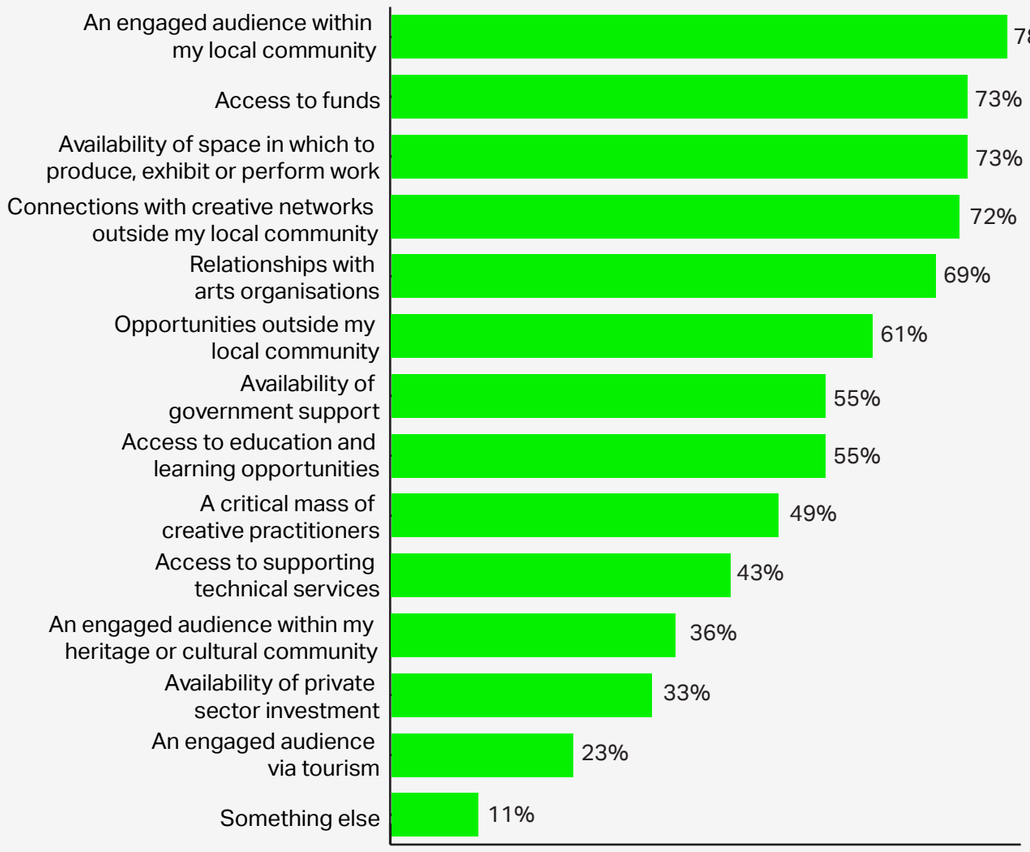
Appendix B: Key survey results (cont.)

Critical success factors



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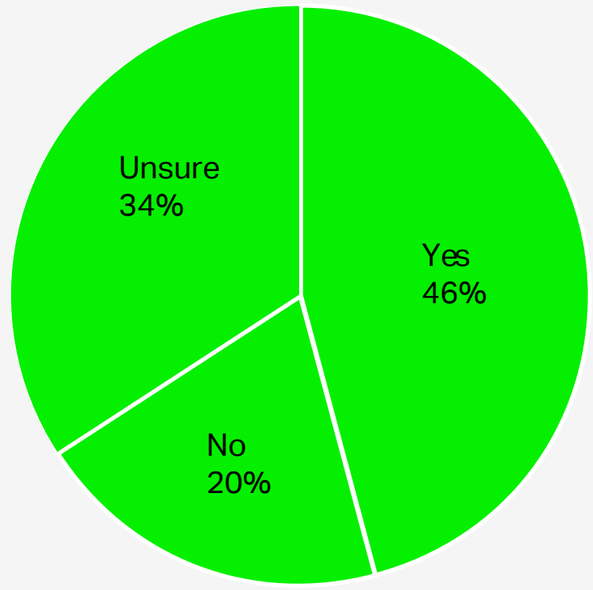
Respondent's perception of whether their creative community was thriving or not



Appendix B: Key survey results (cont.)

Of the respondents who felt they were part of a thriving creative communities:

- 81% felt they had access to good opportunities locally (60% regionally, 42% nationally and 16% internationally)
- 72% identified relationships with other members of the arts community as important
- 75% acknowledged audience engagement and development as important
- 81% felt could not do their work without the support of their creative community
- 78% felt artists were supported to take risks
- 63% felt they could access the resources they needed
- 45% felt their work was viable in the long term
- 57% would not move to further their career
- 66% felt there were lots of opportunities to grow their practice
- 73% felt like valuable members of society

Of the respondents who felt they weren't part of thriving creative communities:

- 38% felt there was a lack of access to opportunities (54% regionally, 60% nationally and 69% internationally)
- 48% relied on income generated outside of the arts
- 58% did not see audience engagement as important
- 32% disagreed that support from their creative communities was critical to their work
- 48% did not feel supported to take risks
- 44% could not access the resources they needed
- 37% felt their work was not viable in the long term
- 50% have considered relocating to further their career
- Only 19% felt their work was seen as valuable by the wider community

Appendix C: Reviewed literature

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