

From social mobility to social justice: reflections on Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries 2020-2022

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Introduction

This short paper reflects on the changing context for the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries (WJCB) programme 2020-22. In doing so, it foregrounds the programme's shift of focus from individual mobility into artistic and cultural jobs to organisational and structural transformations. This shift reflects learning from previous iterations of WJCB, and more general changes in cultural policy and cultural practice in the UK.

The changing context for WJCB

It is now somewhat of a cliché to reflect on the changing context for the arts following the pandemic of 2020 and its ongoing social and economic impacts. The WJCB programme was, as with the rest of the sector, forced to adapt to a very different set of circumstances for organisations and for creative workers than those envisaged during the planning phase for the programme. Research on the impact of the pandemic has highlighted the specific impacts for early-career creative workers (Walmsley et al 2022). Whilst almost every worker in the performing and visual arts was negatively affected by the necessary public health interventions of 2020-22, data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggested younger workers, most likely at the beginning of their careers in the arts, were more likely to be losing work.

At the same time, the pandemic accentuated the longstanding issues of inequality in both the arts workforce and the arts audience. Data from 2020 and 2021 suggested a slower than expected return of in-person core audiences (Walmsley et al 2022) and little evidence of new audiences developed by digital innovations during lockdown (Feder et al 2022). This raises questions for those organisations dependent on both ticket sales and in-person spending for their revenue.

These broader impacts are coupled with a cost-of-living crisis in the UK that has seen real incomes falling against a background of higher inflation (Corlett and Try 2022, Brewer et al 2023). The causes of this cost-of-living crisis are multiple, and its effects are unevenly distributed. Cost-of-living, of course, raises worries as to the level of discretionary spending within the arts audience. It also raises issues for WJCB's work with early-career creatives. The Resolution Foundation's most recent Intergenerational Audit suggests that younger workers confront the cost-of-living crisis with 'low levels of financial resilience' (Broome et al 2022). This more general trend is important as it is likely to increase inequality in the arts workforce. We know from existing research that those with economic, social, and cultural resources are much more likely to be able to sustain the low pay and insecure working practices that characterise early-career creative occupations (Brook et al 2020). At the same time, labour market data suggests there has not been a strong recovery in numbers of artistic and cultural jobs since 2020, with evidence of longer working hours for existing workers rather than new jobs being created (O'Brien et al 2023).

Policy interventions have also contributed to the emergence of a very different set of cultural policy circumstances to those of 2019. Central government's 'Levelling Up' agenda, which seemingly focused on funding suburban regions of England for the purposes of regeneration

(Jennings et al 2021), has been all but abandoned with the end of the Johnson administration and the financial crisis under Liz Truss. Whilst there were signs of culture-focused funding as part of 'Levelling Up', the agenda stalled in the face of persistent structural inequalities in arts funding and the arts sector in England (DCMS Select Committee 2022). Scotland, although neither subject to the same type of arts policy regime as England, nor the focus on 'Levelling Up', saw constraints and cuts to the cultural budget in the 2022 spending round.

In the English context this agenda translated into instructions from one of 2022's Secretary of States for Culture that Arts Council England (ACE) shift some of its funding away from London. That instruction was realised in the 2022 National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) decisions in November 2022. These saw some of the larger, city-based organisations lose all funding, and many receive standstill (and thus real-term reductions given the rate of inflation) or reduced funding settlements, whilst a range of smaller, regionally based organisations joined the portfolio for the first time.

These funding decisions reflected both financial constraints and the emergence of a new 10-year strategy for ACE, *Let's Create*. The strategy aims at three outcomes for individuals, communities and the nations creativity, delivered through a framework of four investment principles: ambition and quality; dynamism; environmental responsibility; and inclusivity and relevance (ACE 2020, ACE 2021). The debates over the 2022 NPO round, and more generally over *Let's Create* are still ongoing. The strategy and attendant funding decisions mark a shift from the previous *Great Art and Culture for Everyone* 10-year strategy, although the majority of major cultural institutions in England's cities, particularly in London, have remained in the portfolio. *Let's Create* aims to give prominence to less institutionalised cultural activity. There is less emphasis on audiences and venues and more on participants and creators, of whatever form.

Let's Create is partially a response to inequalities in arts and culture in England, both in the workforce and in the audience. These inequalities are longstanding (Brook et al 2020, Brook et al 2022). They were given renewed focus by scandals within arts organisations following the #MeToo movement in the 2010s, and organisations' responses, and failures to respond, to the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 (e.g. *Barbican Stories* 2021).

The social mobility agenda in the arts and cultural sector

The persistence of inequalities in the arts, and the changing socio-political circumstances, have been important to WJCB's interventions. Notably, class inequalities are now a mainstream part of cultural policy discourses (e.g. Arts Council England 2020, BFI *forthcoming*). Social class, and the associated issues of social mobility in the cultural sector were given more prominence as Arts Council England published research on understanding the class characteristics of the arts workforce (Oman 2019) and instituted a new data collection regime for NPOs.

This is partially a result of WJCB's own work to publicise these problems, for example with the *Socio-economic Diversity and Inclusion in the Arts: A Toolkit for Employers* (Jerwood Arts 2019). It also reflects the work of individual campaigning organisations in the sector (for example Arts Emergency, Museum as Muck, or the Class Festival) and more generally (e.g. Sutton Trust and The Bridge Group). These campaigns are set against a backdrop of a range of activity by policymakers and academic researchers (e.g. Brook et al 2018).

The lifespan of the current WJCB programme coincided with a wealth of research on social mobility in the cultural sector. *Culture is bad for you* (Brook et al 2020) was one of several research interventions seeking to understand social mobility and class in the cultural sector. The Arts and Humanities Research Council's Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) produced the most recent work. This research suggests class inequalities had not improved since the Office for National Statistics (ONS) started collecting data and O'Brien et al (2016) conducted the first analysis of the class composition of the cultural workforce. The longer-term nature of class inequalities demonstrated by research also suggested that programmes designed to encourage social mobility in the cultural workforce had not radically transformed the sector. The limitations of existing social mobility programmes is one reason why WJCB's approach for 2020-22 was different and distinctive, as well as being a valuable start in making structural changes.

The limits of social mobility

In 2021 the Social Mobility Commission (SMC), the non-departmental public body that monitors social mobility and advises the government on policy, published a toolkit on the creative industries (Social Mobility Commission 2021). This developed and deepened the analysis and recommendations of WJCB's 2019 toolkit, whilst also setting out current analysis on the extent of class and social mobility inequalities in creative jobs.

This was perhaps the high point for the social mobility agenda regarding class inequality in the cultural sector. Subsequent changes in leadership at SMC, coupled with a shift in focus by SMC away from mobility into the professions (including the arts), have seen relatively little from SMC to follow up its creative industries work of 2021. Indeed, two leading sociologists of social mobility, Goldthorpe and Bukodi (2022:583), have suggested that SMC's approach is now "characterised as one encouraging the working class to keep to their place, both socially and geographically". This contrasts with the previous focus on widening access to professional occupations, such as the creative industries, for those from working class social origins (see also Maslen 2022).

The decline of formal policy support for social mobility in the creative industries has been matched by the continued influence of critical voices questioning social mobility as an appropriate framework for both the cultural sector and for addressing social inequality more generally (e.g. Gamsu and Ingram 2022, Ashley 2022). Politically, this found expression in the Labour Party's 2019 rejection of social mobility and its associations with individual success coming at the cost of societal injustice. These two trends, coupled with the shift in direction (and controversy over leadership) at SMC, have marginalised social mobility within arts discourses and as a policy framework for creative industries. The benefit of this marginalisation has been to make the underpinning inequalities - those of social class - associated with social mobility much more open and prominent in arts policy and practice. Organisations are thus grappling more directly with socio-economic class inequality.

From individual mobility to organisational change

The shifting setting for social mobility agendas in the arts raised several questions for WJCB, not least of which was how to sustain support in the context of the pandemic, funding cuts, and critiques. Yet it is here where one of the most valuable elements of the 2020-22 programme is to be found. As the evaluation details, the programme met its targets for engagement with the 50 Fellows. In addition, the programme has changed how Host

organisations think about issues of social class and how they will recruit in future. It has also shown the need for further organisational change, as the scale of what is needed for long term change has become clear to Hosts (and from Fellows' responses). The new toolkit, (*Team Work In Practice: Collective insights, ideas, and challenges to drive socio-economic inclusivity in your organisation*, published as part of the end of the programme also demonstrates the shift of focus from individuals to the need for organisational transformation. Much of the focus is on demands for organisational change, rather than personal adaptation to the existing, often exploitative and exclusionary, working culture of the arts (cf. Ashley 2022).

We can develop this shift into a more general insight on issues of inequality in the arts, and relate it back to the setting for WJCB 2020-22, by suggesting the shift in focus provides a new perspective on social mobility in the arts. The programme's support for organisational development, along with the stress on what organisations need to do, rather than solely on how individuals need to be supported, recognises critical perspectives on social mobility. These critical perspectives argue social mobility's focus is on making individuals fit their destinations, rather than demanding systemic change to make sectors (and society) more equal and just (Ashley 2022). Moreover, in the case of the cultural sector, social mobility is often for only small numbers of individuals (Brook et al 2022). In this sense, the WJCB's reorientation towards organisational development can be seen as part of a shift away from a programme to support *social mobility* into the arts, and towards an agenda designed to create *social justice* from the cultural sector, at least in terms of the specific issue of class inequality.

The arts and social justice

Writing in 2021, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Creative Diversity challenged and demanded new, bold and visionary leadership from organisations and policymakers to support diversity in the cultural and creative workforce. At the same time, the APPG cautioned against the idea that "one neat organisational or sector change" (Wreyford et al 2021:34) would solve the inequalities underpinning the lack of equity, diversity and inclusion in the cultural sector.

We can contextualise WJCB 2020-22 here. As a single programme, even with 50 organisations and 50 Fellows, WJCB's intervention cannot be expected to solve social, cultural, and economic structural problems in the arts. At the same time, alongside the impacts detailed in the evaluation, the programme's shift of focus to include organisational development, and thus to rethink social mobility in the arts, is significant. This is especially the case against the backdrop of the social, cultural, economic and political challenges of the pandemic, and post-lockdown years.

What does this mean in the setting of future possible trends? Social mobility discourses are not alone in the shift to a wider perspective on the need for social justice. Indeed, this formulation is likely to become central to arts discourse, from struggles for equity in the work force, through applications of arts for health or social benefits, through to the regeneration of towns and cities. This is likely to continue irrespective of political changes in the coming years. The next WJCB programme faces the task of thinking where a reimagined programme of individual support and organisational change sits in this context; how can it support, but also challenge and demand, organisations to think about a social justice rather than a social mobility framework for their participation in future programmes?

These questions will be pressing in light of two other developments. ACE's *Let's Create* agenda has fixed cultural policy in the direction of more participatory forms of culture. It remains to be seen how effective this strategy will be when set against the reality of longstanding traditions in cultural practice and dominance of specific genres and organisations within England's cultural policy. Irrespective of *Let's Create*'s potential struggles and limitations, the changing orientation will have implications for how organisations are supported to bring socio-economic equity to their staff and audiences.

Finally, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) are to publish a sector vision for the creative industries in 2023. Part of this will focus on how to address the often poor working practices and working conditions that characterise several occupations in the cultural sector (Carey et al, forthcoming 2023). Creative work provides fulfilment, identity, and potentially high levels of job satisfaction. At the same time, low pay, lack of career development, precarious contractual relationships, and evidence of poor health outcomes and exploitative employer and commissioner expectations, are a blight on the sector. Making sure future WJCB programmes offer 'good' work in culture is crucial. Otherwise, the fate of WJCB will be to support individuals from working-class origins to enter a cultural sector that welcomes them as equals in a world of middle-class origin precarious workers. The task of organisational transformation is ultimately not only about inclusion for underrepresented groups; it is about a sector that is supportive and sustainable for all.

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