New Beginnings

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Early Career Theatre Workers

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all levels of the UK theatre industry, creating a series of wide-ranging impacts on the theatre workforce, affecting livelihoods, working practices, and support networks. More than four years after the start of the first national lockdown in the UK, this project provides an urgent snapshot of how the pandemic has affected the experience of young people who entered (or attempted to enter) the performing arts industry after March 2020.

Contents

This research aims to consider how ways of working and the nature of opportunities predominantly aimed at young people (such as entry-level jobs, professional development programmes, and training) should be adapted to respond to the specific needs of this cohort, acknowledging they may be different to those of pre-COVID theatre workers. Since the onset of the pandemic, industry figures have underscored the risk of a 'lost generation' of young and emerging theatre workers whose training and career progression have been put at risk by successive national lockdowns and theatre closures.[1] We want to use the evidence we have gathered and consulted to re-think how training programmes and funding for early-career workers in theatre and performance are framed, who they are appealing to, and how they can be more inclusive and innovative in the forms they take.

This study focuses specifically on arts administration workers in the theatre industry, meaning that the focal point of our research included young people working in administration roles in, but not limited to, education, finance, communications, production, and human resources. This decision was made because while attention is often paid to young people entering the industry as artists, there is less focus on those in administration positions. While these roles are typically salaried rather than freelance and offer greater job security, it is also important to investigate this cohort because many will progress to more senior leadership positions within the industry in the future.

- 90% of young people we interviewed reported experiencing a lack of career progression and employment opportunities as they tried to establish themselves within the industry

- 68% felt that it had taken them longer to secure permanent arts administration positions as a result of COVID, meaning that they had taken additional work in traditionally low-income front-of-house roles, such as bar staff, box office, or ushers, to remain financially stable.

- 88% identified the cost-of-living crisis as the single biggest threat to them being able to build a viable future within the theatre industry.

- 50% of respondents told us that they did not feel that they had a long-term future in the industry.

- 73% of the young people we interviewed stated that being part of peer-to-peer support networks was important for their mental health and well-being.

- Changes in patterns of audience behaviour have created a fear that this will impact the job market and career development, especially for early career workers.

- The pandemic has made young people feel as if they have missed out on key experiences to build their careers and feel pressured to achieve career goals more quickly than past cohorts.

- Young people are excited about the prospect of developing more diverse working practices and the possibility of creating a more dynamic workforce in the future.

- Artistic innovation and creating new ways of working is a priority for young people entering the industry in arts administration roles since the pandemic.

A series of broad policy recommendations, alongside a list of practical recommendations for employers are contained at the back of this report.

---

[1] Georgia Snow, 'European theatres warn generation of talent could be lost by Covid', *The Stage*, February 17, 2021, https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/european-theatres-warn-generation-of-talent-could-be-lost-by-covid, (accessed April 26, 2024).

Background

The work is a collaboration between Tonic and The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. For over a decade, Tonic has been at the forefront of influencing strategic change within arts and culture. Our focus is on developing the workforce in the arts to be more diverse, resilient, and adaptable. We do this through a broad programme of cross-sector change projects, research, events, training and one-to-one support for arts organisations. Tonic is an independent charity with a UK-wide and international reach.

Together, we recognise that today's cohort of young adults (defined as under 28 years old for our research) have faced a highly unusual and complex set of circumstances in recent years due to COVID, the cost of living crisis, and wider societal shifts. The research has been undertaken to provide employers and policymakers with practical insights and recommendations in relation to the particular circumstances young people are experiencing, and what could be put in place for equitable access to jobs in the arts.

This report presents the findings of original research into the experiences of young people who have recently entered the theatre industry in arts administration roles during, or in the period after, the COVID pandemic. It examines what has helped or hindered them since the start of the pandemic, as well as their response to the challenges that have faced them entering the industry during a time of sustained industry turmoil. It will also shed light on how new forms of hybrid and remote working have impacted early-career workers in the sector who have started their careers in the last four years, including the potential loss of soft networking and the informal gathering of knowledge. In doing so, this research responds to the specific concerns and priorities of early career theatre workers and produces findings on the role of theatre institutions in creating new job opportunities and supporting young people entering the industry.

Methodology

For this project, we conducted a series of interviews and focus groups with young people who had either recently entered the theatre industry in arts administration positions or were currently undertaking training programmes to do so. The interviews and focus groups were conducted on Zoom and in person between August 2023 and January 2024. On average, they lasted around one hour and took a semi-structured approach. Within the framework of the sessions, we designed our questions to be open to interpretation. The purpose of these questions was to prompt participants to articulate their experiences of navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic as young people aiming to enter the theatre industry and reflect on how their wider outlook on the sector has shifted since March 2020. Our participants were primarily based in London. This decision to focus on London based workers was driven by the unique economic challenges of living in London, especially the affordability of housing and travel. We recognise though that much of what the London-based research participants are experiencing will be shared with their peers across the country.

We also spoke to several senior figures at leading London theatres and cultural organisations who oversee training programmes and development schemes aimed at supporting young people who are interested in building careers in the arts. These conversations provided a wider perspective on the shifts in the working practices and expectations of young people entering theatre since the pandemic.

The interviewees were contacted through directly targeted emails and approached through the co-researchers' own networks.

'Your early twenties are really crucial, formative years. It's when you really get an idea of your career and where you are going personally. To be thrown into a complete tailspin and not have any direction needs time to heal. There's a feeling of already being behind, even though you've just started'.
– 25-year-old, Human Resources at large-scale theatre organisation, Central London.

Section 1: Employment Opportunities and Generational Shifts

The COVID-19 pandemic forced an unprecedented disruption to education at all levels across the UK. In March 2020, the abrupt closure of schools and universities resulted in a turbulent shift to remote learning.

A cautious re-opening period at the start of the 2020/2021 academic year, was hindered by further enforced periods of closure for students throughout the winter due to rising COVID cases across the country. A final staggered return occurred in February and March 2021, even though social distancing regulations and hybrid learning remained in place in most universities and drama schools until September 2021. This inconsistent and fragmented return to in-person teaching in the education sector, as well as the necessity for socially distanced study after the return to in-person learning and engagement, proved particularly disruptive for drama education and training due to the necessity of physical, hands-on, and playful approaches to learning.

Simultaneously, the pandemic entrenched hierarchical institutional practices in the theatre sector and exacerbated the pre-existing precarity experienced by the workforce - in particular, emerging artists, freelancers[2], and Black, Asian and ethnically diverse theatre workers[3]. Many theatre artists and freelancers faced a financial crisis due to loss of work, particularly if they fell through the gaps of government aid initiatives such as the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) grant. Successive national lockdowns and the stop/start nature of pandemic restrictions imposed on theatres in the UK between 2020 and 2022 further destabilized working conditions, with 30% of workers in the performing and visual arts sectors losing their jobs in the first six months of the pandemic[4].

---

[2] Holly Maples et al., *Freelancers in the Dark: The Economic, Cultural, and Social Impact of Covid-19 on Theatre Freelancers* (University of Essex, 2022), https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/publications/freelancers-in-the-dark-the-economic-cultural-and-social-impact-o (accessed 27 April 2024).

[3] Roaa Ali, Stephanie Guirand, Bridget Byrne, Anamik Saha and Harry Taylor, *The impact of Covid-19 and BLM on Black, Asian andethnically diverse creatives and cultural workers* (University of Manchester, 2022), https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/212029276/Impact_of_covid_and_blm_on_ethnically_diverse_creatives_and_cultural_workers_report.pdf (accessed 27 April 2024).

[4] See, Dave O'Brien, Gwilym Owen, Mark Taylor, and Siobhan McAndrew, *The impact of Covid-19 on jobs in the cultural sector – part 2* (Leeds: Centre for Cultural Value, 2021), https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-jobs-in-thecultural-sector-part-2/ (accessed 27 April 2024).

'The thing I've really benefitted from is artist development schemes. I don't remember a moment in the last 9 years where I've not been involved in one. I've really benefited from these structured developed phases that have helped me turbocharge my career in a way that I probably wouldn't have done had I taken a more job-to-job trajectory. I really recognise this in my practice as being so important as you're constantly in a process of learning and reflection'. **– 26-year-old, freelance arts producer, London. Former participant in the Roundhouse's Future Producers programme.**

As other studies have found, this disruption has continued to have a profound, long-term impact on theatre and performance that has left the industry in a state of deep and sustained crisis[5].

Young people's experiences since COVID

Against this backdrop of endemic sector instability, we aimed to identify how the level and nature of employment and opportunities for young people who entered the theatre sector during, or in the period after, the pandemic has varied from those experienced by comparable cohorts who joined the industry at other times. Our interviews and focus groups with young people working in the industry included questions on how they perceived opportunities for career progression, as well as the wider job market within the theatre sector. We wanted to know if they felt supported by their employers as they attempted to find their place in the theatre workforce? In what ways had the pandemic disrupted their careers and training? Had they lost important opportunities to develop their professional skills due to COVID? Did they feel optimistic about achieving their long-term ambitions within the industry?

90% of our interviewees reported experiencing a lack of career progression and employment opportunities as they tried to establish themselves within the industry. Although they recognised that they were lucky to have secured employment within theatre,

they also emphasised that there were limited opportunities to progress within their organisations or build on their existing experiences and skill set. As a result, many reported that they felt they would have to move jobs within the sector to achieve more responsibility. Those still in training also expressed concern over the potential of finding entry-level jobs in the field once they finished their studies. As one 22-year-old interviewee stated: 'there appears to be a gap in roles between interning and becoming a producer, with few junior producer roles ever being advertised. When these roles do come up they are always just 3 to 6 months fixed term, so with no stability or security'.

'I've been in this job for 2 and a half years now and I've had the same role and the same job title the entire time. Obviously, my skills have massively developed during this period, but the only real place I feel I can go is a lateral move into another company'. **– 25-Year-Old, Training & Development Assistant, Central London.**

'There are no structures or support to guide you on career progression. It is very self-led and you have to have the initiative to seek it out. You have to be very vocal about what you want and fight tooth and nail to get it Once you're in your role the progression is quite stunted and there is no clear strategy in the organisation to get you to the next level'. **– 25-year-old, Studio Administrator, Central London.**

While precarious working conditions in UK theatre are not new and have been a prevalent trend since the 2008 global financial crisis and the austerity politics implemented by the coalition government after the 2010 election[6], our participants underscored that job insecurity and redundancies in the sector during the pandemic had specifically triggered these concerns. 68% felt that it had taken them longer to secure permanent arts administration positions as a result of the COVID crisis, meaning that they had taken additional work in traditionally low-income front-of-house roles, such as bar staff, box office, or ushers, to remain financially stable. For example, one 26-year-old who had returned to full-time education to study for an MA in creative producing told us that 'Although I had already graduated by COVID, the disruption of the pandemic meant that it took me much longer to establish myself and go back into training. So I've had to spend much longer [3 years] than I planned in a front-of-house job in a theatre for stability both financially and career wise. This was originally only meant to be a short stepping stone'. Others expressed a key anxiety that they had missed out on crucial networking opportunities in the early stages of their career due to pandemic restrictions. This included the ability to make new connections with their peers and other early career theatre workers, as well as those in leadership positions and senior management roles.

Conversely, some of our interviewees suggested that the pandemic presented a unique moment that opened up opportunities to progress in their careers. For example, one 26-year-old freelance producer explained that despite being one of the theatre workers who fell through the cracks of government support at the start of the pandemic, they had used their time during the lockdowns to work on their bid writing skills and make new connections with artists. For them, the pandemic did not represent a time of 'rest and reflection', but rather a moment when they started to 'ramp up' their career and grow

within the industry. They went on to mention that in their view: 'I've been able to climb the career ladder so quickly because there is a real churn in senior management positions post-pandemic, which has allowed me to move into a leadership role much quicker than normally expected'.

'The idea that the pandemic was a moment of rest and reflection does not resonate with me. Instead, it was a time when I started to ramp up my career, build my networks, and grow within the industry' **– 26-year-old, freelance arts producer, London.**

Importantly, it was also reported by a number of our interviewees that the disruption caused to theatre and live performance, as well as the more general state of the labour market in the wake of the pandemic, meant that they enrolled in postgraduate training courses before entering the industry. One 24-year-old programme officer described this career deferment: 'When I graduated [from my undergraduate degree] I was set that being a producer was what I wanted to do. And then the pandemic hit and I didn't feel confident about leaving university and going out into a workforce where there weren't a lot of opportunities so I decided to do an MA in producing straight after I graduated. It was definitely not the choice I would have made without COVID'. The majority of our respondents further highlighted that the practical experience they received during their training and education through work placements and engagement with external industry figures provided vital stepping-stones that allowed them vital hands-on experience, guidance, and networking opportunities in the theatre industry. They also felt that practical placements and guidance focused them on how to forge a career in the industry and helped them understand more about the realities of how the sector works: 'Being in an office just by osmosis you pick up things and learn so much about the industry and how it works'.

---

[5] Ben Walmsley et al., *Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here* (Leeds: Centre for Cultural Value, 2021), https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2022/01/Culture_in_Crisis.pdf (accessed 27 April 2024).

[6] Roberta Comunian and Lauren England, 'Creative and cultural work without filters: Covid-19 and exposed precarity in the creative economy' *Cultural Trends 29,* no. 2 (2020) 112-128 (114-115).

'We hear over and over again from the young people we are working with that they want to build their networks and integrate themselves within creative communities'.
– Associate Director of Young People, Performing Arts Venue, North London.

Future Pathways and Development

We additionally asked the senior figures that oversee professional development programmes that we interviewed if they had noticed any changes in patterns from recruits since the start of the pandemic. We further asked them if the backgrounds of those applying to their programmes and development schemes had changed. We also wanted to know if the expectations of the young people participating in their programmes had changed since the outbreak of COVID-19 and if their working practices had shifted.

One of the most interesting shifts reported by the representatives we spoke to was that young people entering the industry since the pandemic were now much more focused on their career goals compared to before the pandemic. In particular, they observed that this centred around being much more demanding about what they want from their work environment, including having the opportunity to shape projects and be involved in co-creation. In other words, this new cohort is much more vocal about their needs and interests in the workplace.

In addition, the representatives mentioned that this cohort is much more focused on career goals and wanted to see clear career development paths in their chosen fields. Linked to this, it was also observed that the young people currently entering these professional development programmes are increasingly focused on pursuing freelance career paths, as despite their precarity, they are seen as offering quicker opportunities for career progression, as well as the ability to 'be their own boss' and 'build their own brand'.

The representatives of professional development programmes we interviewed also made it clear that another shift in the focus of those currently entering the industry compared to previous cohorts before the pandemic is their expectations of working in inclusive and welcoming work environments. They also value holistic working practices and collaboration with those with different experiences and backgrounds. Alongside this, they are keen to collaborate with their peers and prioritize networking, connectivity, and community engagement within their work. This can potentially be explained by the isolating nature of the pandemic and the disruption to the education of this cohort, resulting in an important shift towards industry focused peer-to-peer support networks, skill sharing, and collaboration.

There were, however, representatives we spoke to who highlighted negative shifts they had observed in young people entering the workforce since the pandemic. Notably, this included their short-term career planning, which has resulted in many dropping out of apprenticeships and development schemes before giving themselves a chance to cement themselves in their career. The representatives we spoke to saw this detrimental shift had been drastically accelerated by the pandemic because emerging theatre workers sense that they have lost time in their lives, both in their careers and experiences more generally, and want to make up for this.

'I think there's a lot of pressure, especially on young people from underrepresented backgrounds, who take a risk to go and work in the creative and cultural sector. Especially when they feel like they have lost time due to the pandemic'. **– Creative & Cultural Consultant. Formerly Head of Learning and Skills, Arts Organisation, Central London.**

Our results suggest that the new light shed on the parlous working conditions and economic insecurity experienced by young people since the start of the pandemic in the UK has generated a significant shift in attitude towards career planning. Young people are now more likely to prioritise career progression and what it takes to 'get ahead' in the theatre industry. Conversely, however, they also feel

that there are several barriers to establishing themselves within the industry and are willing to change roles and even career trajectories if needed: 'For me the pandemic just made me realise life is too short to be unhappy and if I'm unhappy in a role I'll just find another one. With the redundancies made over COVID it made me realise companies don't have loyalty to us, so why should we be loyal to them?' This, combined with a more static labour market since the pandemic, has resulted in less opportunities for professional development for young people working in arts administration.

'There is a harmful over-empowerment of young people since the pandemic. There has to be realism among young people of the skills and experiences they need to enter the industry or else we are setting up a load of people to leave training programmes and not be able to take the next step in their careers'.
– Creative & Cultural Consultant. Formerly Head of Learning and Skills, Arts Organisation, Central London.

Section 2: Financial Security, the Cost of Living, and Precarity

Our study occurs at a time of pronounced urban transformation in London. Accelerated by the pandemic, this has affected the relationship between live performance, theatre workers, and the city, reflecting the chaotic, fragmented, and ever-changing way that urban space is experienced and lived in.

The unprecedented suspension of cultural events across the United Kingdom in March 2020 had a profound impact on theatre and the performing arts, as well as on the everyday urban fabric of London. The pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis have further entrenched wealth disparities in the city, leading a recent article in Bloomberg UK to state that: 'London has become a better city - for the rich'.[7]

The Cost of Living Crisis

For this reason, one of the key questions we wanted to ask was the manner and extent to which the practicalities of life in the UK since 2020 have impacted these young people's ability to establish their careers in the theatre industry. Keeping their diverse range of experience and training in mind during our interviews, we asked our participants how the ongoing challenges of the cost of living crisis had impacted their professional lives. We enquired if additional financial pressures such as the price of housing/rent and student loan re-payments threatened their ability to remain working in the London theatre industry against a wider backdrop of inflation and fiscal instability in the country. We also wanted to know what financial support

their employers offered them and if this had changed since the outbreak of COVID. Finally, we also asked what they felt they needed practically from their places of work or training to navigate the wide-ranging challenges of the cost of living crisis as early career workers.

88% of our interviewees and focus group participants identified the cost of living crisis as the single biggest threat to them being able to build a viable future within the theatre industry. As one 24-year-old finance and admin assistant told us: 'Right now, after rent and travel, I find I have to do other freelance work to make the numbers add up [...] I know lots of people who have full-time roles and if they didn't do freelance work on the side they couldn't make their bills'. Another early career arts administration professional confirmed this, stating that she had considered leaving the field owing to the financial stress caused by the cost of living crisis. She described feeling like a hamster on a treadmill, who is both 'overworked and unpaid' in her current role.

'Finances will probably be the sticking point of whether I stay or leave the industry. With inflation, my salary just feels stagnant'. **– 27-year-old, Communications Coordinator, South London.**

The majority of our participants specifically underscored that they felt the current cost of living is exacerbated by the need to live and work in London.[8] As one 22-year-old interviewee told us: 'Opportunities [for employment] in the regions are low, while nearly all jobs are based in London and often with salaries that don't allow for commuting from outside the city'. The high cost of housing and transport were both frequently cited as barriers to sustaining a career in London's theatre sector, with an alarming 50% of respondents telling us that they did not feel that they had a long-term future in the industry: 'With my role, I don't have a work from home option when most of my colleagues do. In an ideal world, I'd like my organisation to recognise how much it costs me to commute in and out of central London each day and maybe get involved in the cycle to work scheme for example'.

'I'm really, really lucky that my parents live in Outer London and I can live with them, but I'd like to be able to move out and own my own home one day. I just don't feel like that's a reality at the moment with what I earn. It does make me question why I'm working in theatre'. **– 26-year-old, Production and Administrative Coordinator, Central London.**

Long-Term Anxieties

These financial anxieties also resulted in our participants identifying worries about the long-term implication of low pay in the theatre industry on their future lives. Interviewees reported that they frequently thought about the impact of having children on their careers, as well as their capacity to achieve home ownership and retire. As one recent graduate who worked for a central London theatre

stated: 'I don't feel super confident right now about my future in the industry. I think there's a lot of factors, but I'm worried about having to work into my 70s, probably never being able to own a house, and I think the rates of pay in the arts makes that feel even more unattainable'. A 26-year-old MA student in creative producing mirrored this, telling us: 'It's very disheartening. Sometimes I think about getting into film and TV and things that would make me more money to the point where I could own a property and have children maybe as it doesn't seem sustainable to just be a theatre producer'. This was often more severe for the young people we spoke to from migrant backgrounds currently studying in the UK, who must hit the minimum wage needed to qualify for a work visa to stay in the country.[9]

These experiences were corroborated by the representative of the development schemes and training programmes that we interviewed. They highlighted that not only was the cost of living crisis putting undue financial stress on young people trying to build a career in the industry, including forcing them to live with their parents into their late 20s, but also resulted in them missing out on crucial training opportunities. This included young individuals overlooking fruitful internships or development programmes in favour of paid work, necessitated by the protracted rise in the cost of living. In addition, they identified that the young people they are working with are currently fixated on day-to-day challenges rather than concentrating on more long-term career planning. This short-term thinking is proving detrimental as it results in higher numbers of young people dropping out of training programmes and entry-level jobs before they have given themselves time to cement themselves in the industry.

---

[7] Therese Raphael, 'London Has Become a Better City — for the Rich', Bloomberg, 9 March 2023, https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2023-opinion-how-livable-are-cities-three-years-after-start-of-covid/london.html (accessed 27 April 2024).

[8] London's high cost of living has been underscored in a recent report by Loughborough University's Centre for Research in Social Policy, which suggests that a decent standard of living in London costs up to 58% more compared to the rest of the UK. Matt Padley, *A Minimum Income Standard for London* (Loughborough University, 2019) https://tfl.ams3.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/A_Minimum_Income_Standard_for_London_2019.pdf (accessed 27 April 2024).

[9] Migration Observatory, 'The £30,000 salary threshold for work visas', 2019, https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/threshold-whichthreshold-how-many-non-eu-workers-actually-have-to-meet-the-30000-minimumincome-requirement/ (accessed 27 April 2024).

These results show that the impact of the cost of living crisis has contributed to additional obstacles facing the industry, as well as early career workers in the aftermath of the pandemic. This is leading to a substantial exodus from the field. Furthermore, this is particularly the case for young people from low-income and ethnically diverse backgrounds, evidenced by a report from BECTU published in December 2022. This underscores that the retention of young people entering the industry is a significant challenge for the sector to address and re-enforces the need for theatre organisations to re-think training and career opportunities aimed at the new workforce entering the industry since the start of the pandemic. A better understanding of the economic constraints that emerging theatre workers face, as well as the necessity for employers to provide viable career options, is critical for them to pursue a long-term career in the arts.

Section 3: Well-Being and Emotional Support

Our study also examined the nature of the emotions that young people in the theatre sector have been experiencing.

We inquired into whether uncertainties created by the pandemic, such as the rescheduling of work, changing regulations, and remote working practice, had resulted in stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, or the exacerbation of pre-existing mental health conditions. We additionally asked our participants if changes in their mental health and emotional well-being had impacted their ability to develop qualities often regarded as important for building a career in theatre, such as creativity, resilience, and motivation.

Post-Pandemic Mental Health

The representatives of development schemes and training programmes that we interviewed were quick to underscore that there had been a clear increase in the need for mental health support for the young people they were working with immediately following the start of the pandemic in March 2020: 'What we saw straight away was young people presenting with more acute needs, particularly around mental health and well-being, but also just navigating life and opportunities following the pandemic and then the cost of living crisis'. It was also noted that young people entering the industry were suffering from mental fatigue and 'burnout' following the pandemic. While the representatives we interviewed pointed out that this was an issue affecting workers across the sector, they identified that burnout among

more junior staff is often 'stigmatised' and 'not fully recognised'.

Numerous industry representatives reported that there have been wider shifts in young people's attitudes to mental health in the wake of COVID. This suggests that there is a real belief from young people that it is vital that mental well-being within the industry and their place of work is acknowledged. Our interviewees believe that promoting emotional well-being in the theatre industry is critical and cannot be compromised. The organisations we spoke to told us they had responded to these concerns by introducing more holistic youth centred approaches to their organisational structure, providing one-on-one support for young people in their development schemes and providing wider mental health support. However, a number of these representatives were also concerned that older generations in the profession still disregarded stress and burnout, and that theatre organisations had yet to catch up with these generational shifts in attitudes towards mental health, resulting in a culture clash in the industry.

'If you create a space that makes young people feel safe, that is integral and embedded in all the building [...] well-being is embedded in what we do. It's at the core of the organisation'. **– Senior Programmes Manager, Performing Arts Venue, North London.**

Support, Networking, and Collaborative Exchange in the Workplace

We noted that 73% of the young people we interviewed stated that being part of peer-to-peer support networks, both within the organisations they worked for and the industry more generally, was important for their mental health and well-being. They cited pastoral care and mentorship within the industry as crucial opportunities to reduce work related stress and anxiety. 'I definitely feel like I can go and speak to my boss about any mental health issues. She's actually just completed a counselling course, which means she's really up to date which is important'. The same number also stated that they saw an increasing need for communication, networking, and exchange. This suggests that there has been a shift towards more collaborative activism for mental health and well-being among those entering theatre within the sector as young people continue to navigate the precarious cultural climate and find new ways to articulate shared anxieties since the pandemic.

Respondents were asked if their employees acknowledged mental well-being in the workplace and where in the field they turned to for mental health support if they needed it. 78% said they felt they worked in a supportive environment and that their colleagues and managers were approachable and receptive to discussing emotional well-being, but also pointed out that there were no formalised structures or processes in place. This informality provided a barrier to accessing support, especially in small organisations or teams where relaxed and casual working relationships had been fostered: 'I feel like theatre is more supportive and understanding than other industries, but because there aren't formal processes to talk about it and it's quite informal it can be harder to reach out as you don't have those things in place'.

While the majority of our interviewees did not feel the pandemic had significantly contributed directly to a long-term deterioration in their mental health, they did highlight concerns over wider stress and anxiety triggered by what they perceived to be a lack of work-life balance in the industry. However, it is important to note that all of the participants who did discuss the pandemic's relation to their mental health were female. This corresponds with the findings of a recent study on the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental well-being, which has found that girls and young women experienced greater deteriorations in mental health during COVID.[10]

'A lot of people working in the arts talk about how stressful it is, so it makes me question if the level of pay is relevant to that level of stress and its impact on your mental health'. – 24-Year-Old, MA Arts Management student, Cardiff.

While our results show that the impact of the pandemic on both well-being and career development has been downplayed by our participants, it is clear that there has been a wider shift among young people entering the industry since 2020 towards prioritising better mental health in their working lives. This includes creating support groups amongst their peers both in-person and digitally. Employers in the theatre sector therefore need to recognise that many younger employees coming into theatre now have a very real demand for mental health support. Establishing mental health pathways is critical to addressing this since it will guide them to the proper degree of treatment.

[10] Jesus Montero-Marin et al., 'Young People's Mental Health Changes, Risk, and Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic', JAMA Network Open 6, no. 9 (2023) https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2809780 (accessed 27 April 2024).

Section 4: Shifting Perspective and Institutional Change

The outbreak of the pandemic in the UK in March 2020 created a series of new creative discourses centred around the complex challenges facing the theatre industry as it grappled with social distancing restrictions and began its recovery.

These debates articulated the need to reconceptualise and reshape existing working models and hierarchical structural divides in theatre organisations. Our study aimed to examine how young people in arts administration perceive the theatre industry and their role within it. In doing so, we wanted to know what motivated them to work in the sector at this moment and what excites them for the future. We also wanted to know what their biggest concerns were, what they saw as barriers to change in the industry, and what this meant for how they conducted themselves in relation to the sector.

Responses to this line of questioning were unsurprisingly varied, but there were certain patterns of note that offer important insight into how young people entering the industry since the start of the pandemic hope to see it develop. It was clear that the majority of our participants (88%) were positive that they would be able to build on their careers in arts administration to be able to shape ways of working within the industry in the future. They were especially excited about the prospect of developing more diverse working practices and the possibility of opening up the industry and creating a more dynamic workforce in the future. This was described by a 25-year-old training and development assistant working in Central London: 'What excited me is that our generation is changing things in terms of anti-racism and the climate crisis. This generation is actively making changes that will hopefully make a big difference'. In addition, they were excited about artistic innovation in the field and the potential to attract new and younger audiences with new forms of programming and work. They felt this offered new and exciting opportunities to engage with their generation and being at the forefront of these shifts and shaping the industry was cited as an important motivation for them. Others were keen to build on artistic innovation within the industry following the pandemic, especially the advances in new technology and immersive, hybrid work using AI technology. In doing so, they told us they hoped to produce new theatre that challenges the conventions of what the form can be: 'Bringing theatre to people in new ways and formats is really exciting'.

'I'm really motivated by the transformative power of what arts and culture can do. This is what drives me and I feel like most of my peers in the industry feel the same too'. – 24-year-old, Programme Officer, Central London.

'I love the vibrancy and diversity of the UK theatre scene from the fringe to the commercial theatre. The satisfaction of seeing a show start out and grow and the ability to work with theatre artists is what really motivates me'. – 23-year-old, Production Assistant, East London.

Industry Transformation and Reform

Questions about institutional and organisational structures in theatre often arose in our interviews and focus groups with young people. Most of the participants we spoke to reported confidence about the possibility of hierarchical and institutional transformation in relation to who is given visibility and whose voice is heard, acknowledged, and recognised. They identified a need to re-think the theatre ecology, by not only encouraging people to enter the sector but also to support artists and workers to remain. This was eloquently expressed by one 26-yearold freelance producer: 'I worry that we are more worried about saving institutions than embracing that change as part of how we save them, and that by the time we've saved the bricks and mortar institutions there will be no artists to left to bring them to life again'.

Interviewees also spoke about how the need to advocate for good practice in the industry was important to them, as well as being motivated by a more grassroots approach to the arts. However, many of them also pointed out that they were not confident that they would ever have the opportunity to progress to lead an organisation to be able to effectuate this change: 'I don't think that as a young woman, I will ever have the opportunity to rise up to lead an organisation. Right now I think my current opinions are often written off because of my young age'.

The majority of our interviewees also expressed unease over the precarity of freelance labour in the sector and the notion of what has become known as the 'gig economy' in the UK: 'Long-term I see myself working primarily as a freelancer, but the uncertainty in both the industry and more generally puts me off this and a PAYE job provides security and without it, I would not be able to live in London right now'. Freelancers make up the majority of the UK's theatre ecology and the sector relies on a workforce that is 88% self-employed or freelance.[11] This demonstrates the need to provide clear pathways and access to how to set yourself up as a freelancer and market yourself as one for young people entering the industry. There additionally needs to be wide policy support for self-employed theatre workers, to provide greater opportunities for those entering the industry to consider freelance careers.

Funding and Audience Figures

When asked about broader concerns they had as the industry continues to emerge from the successive shocks of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, over 75% of the young people we spoke to expressed fears that the downturn in theatre-going and fluctuating audience numbers would negatively impact on the job market and career development, especially for early career workers. They also stated that they recognised that there is a lack of job stability working in the theatre industry, which has been aggravated by both the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. As noted above in the previous section, this feeds into wider anxieties about how they will get on the property ladder and raise children when they are older, especially with current inflation and mortgage levels. For example, as one 27-year-old, Communications Coordinator told us: 'With the current state of the industry, I'm concerned about what impact having children would have on my career in the future. I worry that taking time off and then trying to return to such a volatile industry would be difficult and challenging'.

'I'm alarmed by the drop in audience numbers since COVID. Where will the audience be in 20 to 30 years time?' – 23-Year-Old, MA Arts Management student, Cardiff.

In addition, recent, high-profile cuts to arts funding were also raised as a concern, with the loss of the Bristol Old Vic's city council funding at the beginning of 2024 being cited as an example

'I sense that the industry is at threat without more recognition that it is the heart of society and is a vital support system for many during the pandemic and lockdowns'. – 27-year-old, Communications Coordinator, South London.

of this. Participants also spoke about their own difficulty receiving Arts Council England funding for projects, highlighting that they felt there has been a lack of transparency and dialogue to how funding is allocated. They suggested that ACE grants should be made more accessible to those without previous experience in grant writing. This was emphasised by a recent MA graduate: At the moment I feel you just learn through trying and failing and that there should be more national advice sessions on grant writing across the country and how to navigate funding'.

Cultural Value

Finally, many of our participants (82%) also spoke to a key cultural discourse on the value of theatre and live performance that has emerged since March 2020. They mentioned that the arts felt undervalued in schools and that there needed to more a more serious emphasis on it in the UK education system. They also addressed the fact that the cultural value of theatre had been eroded during the pandemic. Many referenced the government-backed 'Rethink. Reskill. Reboot' campaign, which suggested that theatre workers should re-train in sectors such as cyber and suggested that the Government's cultural policies were deterring young people from entering the arts. Alongside this, they underscored the feeling within the industry that nothing has changed since the pandemic, despite institutional changes being promised at the time in 2020. They also raised concerns that the theatre industry is seen as inaccessible and elitist, providing a further barrier for young people aiming to forge a career in the performing arts.

---

[11] Rebecca Florisson, Dave O'Brien, Mark Taylor, Siobhan McAndrew, and Tal Feder, *The impact of Covid-19 on Jobs in the Cultural Sector: Part 3* (Leeds: Centre for Cultural Value, 2021), https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-jobs-in-the-cultural-sector-part-3/ (accessed 26 April 2024).

Conclusion

Findings and Results

This report finds that young people entering the UK theatre industry since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 have faced several unique challenges not experienced by previous cohorts. Our data shows that early career theatre workers face significant barriers to building a long-term career in the sector, including unsustainable economic precarity, job insecurity, and burnout. This uncertainty has resulted in many young people reconsidering their future career paths and exploring new roles in divergent sectors.

The pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis generated a substantive and sustained decline in working conditions but also created a significant threat to career progression in the theatre sector. Our findings suggest organisations and public bodies need to consider strategies that focus not only on attracting young people to enter the theatre sector but also on retaining and supporting those who have already entered the industry since the pandemic. In doing so, it will allow policy to be formed around an awareness of the various anxieties and challenges articulated by young people training and working across the sector in arts administration.

Future Practice

The long-term demands posed by the pandemic and the ongoing cost of living crisis will arguably remain at the forefront of how theatre is produced and consumed. Although it is clear that these crises have had a significant impact on theatre buildings and organisations, it is also vital that they provide clear career guidance for those entering the industry, as well as invest in mentorship schemes and opportunities for the workforce to find new and collaborative ways of peer-to-peer support. In this way, new reciprocal, dialogic, and inter-generational working models have the potential to form a crucial part of long-term industry recovery.

Policy Recommendations

- Training programmes and artist development schemes should acknowledge the impact of the pandemic and the disruption to education and training experienced by this cohort.

- The redefinition of early career and emerging artists following the disruption of the pandemic to include those under the age of 28.

- Decision-makers must assess how the arts are included in both schools and higher education so that theatre and the performing arts are presented as viable career paths.

- Career guidance for the arts should begin as early as possible. It should be standardised and devised across academic year groups so that it can speak to young people of different ages.

- Theatre institutions should consider a prolonged investment in training for young people entering the industry, including mentorship of those in entry-level positions and training schemes. This will provide a long-term investment for the industry and enhance employee retention.

- Ensure the development of new networking and peer-support opportunities for young people entering the theatre industry.

- Theatre organisations should produce a regulated set of skills required for sustained success in the industry. This will provide greater transparency on career progression and cement realistic career guidance and paths for young people entering the industry.

- The specific mental health needs of younger employees should be acknowledged following the turbulence of pandemic.

- In light of the pandemic, which has highlighted and exposed the precarity faced by theatre workers, decision-makers should re-think institutional structures and ways of working.

- Long-term institutional reform in the sector should be prioritised, as unethical working practices and conditions within the industry continue to be consistent anxieties articulated by young people entering the industry.

Practical Recommendations for Employers

- **Benchmark salaries against what it would realistically cost a young person to live independently in your area of the country.** What would their rent, travel, bills, food etc cost? Calculate these figures and then identify from there a level that salaries should not fall beneath. This may mean entry-level salaries are set at a different level to where you've previously anticipated them to be. Benchmark against the realities of the cost of living for young people today, not what you see other arts organisations paying.

- **Assess the impact of your organisation's approach to hybrid and remote working on younger members of staff.** When young people or their colleagues are working remotely, opportunities to learn by osmosis are lost. There are also fewer opportunities for building friendships within the workplace and these can be important in giving younger people a sense of belonging at work. Although many employers are now seeking to offer greater flexibility through remote and hybrid working - and there can be clear benefits to this - this must be balanced against the needs of younger people. Employers should be attentive to the risk of isolation and impaired professional development if colleagues, especially managers, are not accessible to younger colleagues.

- **Review your recruitment processes for entry-level roles.** In particular, because of pandemic-related disruption to their education and early work experience, you may need to shift your expectations of how much/what kind of experience candidates will have previously gained by this point in their lives. In job packs, be clear on the transferable skills needed for the role and design a recruitment process that enables candidates to demonstrate how they possess these, even if what is on their CV may be different to what you have traditionally been used to seeing.

- **Be transparent and detailed about opportunities for career progression.** Our research tells us younger people feel a greater pressure to advance professionally and will leave a position (sometimes prematurely) if they don't immediately feel confident it enables them to do so. Significant fears also exist about whether the performing arts provide a viable career post-covid. Employers can provide clarity and reassurance to younger colleagues by being more structured and explicit about the skills and knowledge they will develop in the role, the markers of success they can work to, and what this role could lead to, both within and beyond the organisation.

- **Work with other local arts organisations to establish peer networks for younger staff members.** Younger staff will have missed out on valuable chances to socialise and build up their professional networks. The establishment of peer networks could create chances for younger staff to forge connections with their counterparts in other local organisations, countering loneliness, facilitating peer-to-peer learning, and fostering a greater sense of belonging and resilience.

- **Ask whether wellbeing is promoted in your workplace.** Are staff able to switch off from messages at the end of the day or are they always expected to be 'on'? Is the office a pleasant, focused environment or is it one that's overwhelming and unappealing to be in? Are workloads realistic or stress-inducingly large? These are the kinds of question employers can ask themselves when considering whether they are offering staff a working environment that supports, rather than hinders, their wellbeing. Although there should also be clear mechanisms for pastoral support and signposting to mental health provision, ensuring your workplace promotes wellbeing is the foundation that underpins these things and serves an important preventative function.

- **Enable your older staff to understand what their younger colleagues may be experiencing.** Today's cohort of young people have faced an acute period of challenge and complexity. The loss of key social, educational and professional milestones will inevitably impact how they conduct themselves and relate to others, including at work. Rather than running the risk of intergenerational chasms opening up within your staff team, you can increase awareness and empathy by providing staff with the opportunity to learn about and reflect on the realities facing this unique cohort.