

# **Understanding Arts Council England's reputation as an employer**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# Institute for Employment Studies

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Institute for Employment Studies  
City Gate  
185 Dyke Road  
Brighton BN3 1TL  
UK

Telephone: +44 (0)1273 763400  
Email: [askies@employment-studies.co.uk](mailto:askies@employment-studies.co.uk)  
Website: [www.employment-studies.co.uk](http://www.employment-studies.co.uk)

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## Research aims

Current evidence from the UK arts and cultural sector suggests that Arts Council England (ACE) jobs are not taken up representatively and that arts careers are more difficult for some people in the population to access than others. ACE has commissioned research by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to build insight into the perceptions and career motivations of potential job seekers, in order to inform future strategy and practice in attracting and recruiting the best, most diverse talent to ACE and to enable the organisation to provide leadership on workforce diversity and inclusion across the Arts and Cultural Sector.

## Methodology and participation

Research participants included recent successful and unsuccessful applicants for arts-facing ACE vacancies, higher education arts students and potential employees in mid-career drawn from across the arts and cultural sector via arts networks and institutions. A variety of research methodologies were used including focus groups, in-depth, semi-structured interviews and four separate online consultations.

Participants selected themselves into the research and were diverse however women and those under forty five were slightly over-represented. There was representation from non-white populations (20%) and between 7% and 13% across consultations described themselves as having a disability. The socio-economic background of respondents was mixed, however a disproportionately high number of respondents had attended either selective or independent schools.

## Key findings

**As a potential employer ACE is perceived as influential, prestigious and the employer of choice by some, yet bureaucratic, exclusive and out of reach by others.**

The research indicates that ACE is high profile for those already working in the sector but is considerably less well known by those in higher education. Seen by many respondents as a prestigious, sector-leading organisation doing influential and important work, others, particularly those currently underrepresented in the ACE workforce, perceive ACE as somewhat bureaucratic and exclusive, and consequently inaccessible in terms of career opportunities.

**Passion for the arts and a sense of vocation attract job seekers to the sector while determination, arts-connected networks and the capacity to work for free facilitate successful applications and career progression**

People are drawn to the sector and the organisation by a passion for arts and a powerful sense of vocation, often including a desire to be part of the transformative power and social value of the arts and a drive to make arts accessible and transformational in others' lives. The sector can seem impenetrable and mysterious to people without prior knowledge or insider contacts, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or who feel otherwise that they don't 'fit the mould'.

Early experience of the sector is influential in arts career journeys along with early careers advice, which variously inspires and encourages arts career choices or dissuades people from attempting to enter the arts job market.

Carving a career in the sector requires not only luck but a combination of dogged determination, compromise, the ability to work for low or no pay, a confidence around the language and culture of the arts and, probably most importantly, a carefully nurtured network of 'insider' contacts. Respondents report that opportunities at all career points are enormously influenced by 'who you know' and being in the right place at the right time, which can impact negatively on career deciders who are not already well-connected to existing sector workers.

**Stable salary, tenure and good benefits draw sector job seekers to ACE, in addition to the opportunity to have impact through influencing, promoting and supporting the sector. Perceptions of bureaucracy, homogeneity of workforce and uncreative roles deter sector job seekers from applying to ACE**

Sector workers seek out job opportunities where they will find challenging work, creative freedom and the opportunity to work with like-minded creative people who share the drive to educate, reach out to communities or use art for social transformation. Unless seeking self-employment as many do out of choice or necessity, workers want a living wage and job security, plus flexible working and a range of employment benefits.

Career progression, personal development and an attractive ethos and inspirational and supportive leadership also appeals to job seekers, with a few actively searching for organisations with cultures where diversity and employee wellbeing are clearly valued.

ACE job seekers often search widely, considering broader public sector and education roles alongside administrative, management and creative roles with smaller sector employers and opportunities for freelance work or postgraduate qualifications. In this job market ACE is seen as offering financially competitive arts-facing roles, in combination with stable and reliable incomes and associated benefits uncommon in the sector.

People who want a higher salary, or think the opportunities are insufficiently creative or the organisation bureaucratic, rigid and civil service-like, don't apply. Others are deterred by beliefs that they wouldn't be seen as the right type of applicant or who, rightly or wrongly, judge their own skillset to be a barrier to employment at ACE. A small number report negative experiences of contact with ACE, for example in the recruitment process, and rule out further applications.

**Connections, personal and professional networks and unpaid work are particularly influential in securing work in the sector, and with ACE**

Finding work in the sector is arduous and opportunistic for many: people make good use of the internet and formally advertised vacancies but most acknowledge that personal and professional networks in particular are invaluable in finding and creating work opportunities. Those already well connected who have early educational or (generally unpaid) work experience are best placed to take up the many 'hidden' jobs in the sector and then to use them as a springboard for other, more visible, paid and later career work in the sector. There are likely to be those who, despite potential, fail to move onto the first step of an arts career

ladder because they have no sector network contacts to offer career or personal support and encouragement, or because they need to be financially self-sufficient or as a result of lower self-confidence in the sector.

**Perceptions about ACE recruitment is variable with some perceiving it as a barrier to employment and others experiencing it as straightforward, clear, simple, user-friendly and manageable**

The small number of less positive applicants who had experienced recruitment with ACE critiqued the length, comfort and transparency of the process. The existence of both successful and unsuccessful applicants with positive and negative perceptions lends both perspectives validity, but no systematic basis for the differences emerged from the research, so the further research planned around ACE recruitment will be valuable. In the wider sector there is a perception that elements of recruitment may be limiting the pace of progress towards increased diversity of the workforce. Issues raised included a feeling that educational requirements for basic entry level jobs were unduly high and again that having sector contacts skews both the initial decision to apply and also interview success. Notably there does appear to be a common perception that there is a 'right type' for ACE in terms of stereotypical demographics which may be making the organisation seem inaccessible and deterring those from diverse demographic groups in the population from making the decision to apply to ACE, considering themselves as unlikely to be successful.

**Diversity and inclusion in ACE and the sector is viewed by a few who are well-represented already as progressive and acceptable but by most, particularly underrepresented groups, as offering significant opportunities to develop and improve**

Feelings varied on progress on diversity and inclusion with some noting ACE's proactive steps to promote diversity in the sector and the organisation, but a greater number of others, particularly from currently underrepresented groups, feeling that progress was slow, limited and that rhetoric was disconnected from the needed action and results. Many people commented on the noticeably gendered profile of the ACE workforce, in which there is a high proportion of women in intermediary and middle-management roles, with a high proportion of men at more senior levels. The arts and cultural sector in general is perceived as relatively homogenous and 'something of a monoculture' of white, middle-class, able-bodied and socioeconomically advantaged employees (and wider participants) and, correspondingly, the archetypal middle management employee at ACE is perceived as white, middle class, middle-aged, able-bodied and female, with very similar male incumbents populating the senior leadership positions in the organisation. This widely-held perception underpins a belief that ACE tends to hire in its own image and a perception held by people from under-represented groups, that the power-holders in the sector, who are strongly homogenous, define the field and may systemically and unconsciously exclude people and art which fall outside of current pre-existing paradigms, thereby also sustaining the demographic homogeneity of the workforce. Some highlighted the recent appointment of a new white, middle-aged, male chair of ACE as epitomising this permeating influence.

Perhaps not unrelated to this, it is notable that in contrast to the prevailing perception, a small number of predominantly white men with established careers in the arts and cultural sector and a proportion of white women who had applied to ACE largely from reasonably advantaged

social backgrounds, held an alternate view that diversity is appropriately represented and supported in the arts and there is no significant work that needs to be done in increasing efforts to promote or engage a diverse workforce.

There is a perception that BAME creative workers experience particular difficulty in gaining equal recognition for their work and continue to face significant barriers to appointment to influential positions in the sector. With white, middle-class and socioeconomically advantaged people holding most formal and informal power positions in the sector, ACE's gatekeeping and agenda setting position is considered by some as reinforcing existing stereotypes and power differentials. The particularly strong, pervasive and exclusive culture and language of the arts sector and ACE is also perceived as contributing to continued homogeneity.

Less frequent but still noteworthy, there are also perceptions of barriers to sector and ACE employment and progression for less socioeconomically advantaged, lower educated, younger and also disabled workers.

Despite the challenges perceived by some respondents, others acknowledged ACE's progress in the field of diversity, noting its clear strategy for equality and diversity, backed up with initiatives to diversify the national and regional councils, positive action schemes and inclusive recruitment strategies, amongst others.

**Many opportunities for progressing diversity and inclusion in ACE and the sector emerged from direct suggestions from respondents and as a counter to currently limiting perceptions. Improving diversity visibility, outreach and recruitment practices and prioritising early intervention in the talent pipeline were all seen as key opportunities for change and improvement**

Ethnicity, disability, age and social class were seen as the key areas for future focus. The importance of increasing the visibility of diversity within the workforce with examples of opportunities was commented on by many, for example, ensuring diversity on interview panels and using the ACE website to showcase workforce diversity.

Outreach, particularly in recruitment, was a focus for participant suggestions, including; extended marketing of ACE's remit to people who are not well-networked in the sector and broadly across the UK; using innovative methods to capture the interest of a wider employment market; using plain English and more familiar terminology to attract applicants not already familiar with the sector or government administration; promotion of ACE's progressive flexible working arrangements to encourage applications from those who need them; and improving accessibility of the website for all. A robust review of job and selection criteria, candidate preparation and recruitment practices to support recognition of transferable skills and non-HE routes to employment, along with a programme to address the influence of both conscious and unconscious bias, could open up and strengthen pathways into the organisation for non-typical applicants.

The complexity and dynamics of the factors influencing people's career decisions, the strong reliance on networks and contacts for bringing people into the organisation (and the sector) and the possible influence of unconscious bias, all point to the importance of early intervention in the talent pipeline to create effective and sustainable challenge to continued structural

homogeneity. Engaging participatory, two-way, outreach programmes for school children and their advisors, particularly in areas where there are many people from groups currently under-represented in the arts, has the potential to prevent early drift away from the arts from those with no contacts or history in the sector, and increase familiarity with ACE at critical decision making points in young people's career and educational choice pathways. Higher quality and more readily available arts-relevant careers information, education, advice and guidance and workplace exposure was seen as important to strengthen and diversify the 'pipeline' of future arts and cultural sector workers. Alongside an expanded presence throughout the student lifecycle, a more focused programme of apprenticeships, mentoring, work placements and paid internships targeted at disadvantaged groups of young people was suggested to raise aspirations amongst atypical arts sector groups and build new pathways for younger, less represented applicants to reach both entry and more senior roles within the sector and ACE. Creating employment opportunities by driving turnover through the use of fixed term contracts at directorial and senior levels within the organisation and on boards was suggested by some.

Further research would help to build further insight into how to engage diverse groups early on in their career decision-making, particularly students, whose voices are limited in the current research. In addition, more research to build in-depth understanding of the deterring factors for underrepresented groups in the sector and whether there are geographical or educational 'cold spots' which do not produce current applicants could further inform strategy and practice and accelerate sustained change in representation of diverse groups in the sector and the organisation.

Finally, looking forwards, setting in place systems for continually involving and engaging people in talking about how they experience society, ACE and the sector will expedite ACE's implementation of actions which build and sustain diversity and inclusion. Evolving in line with these perceptions will enable ACE to be responsive and sensitive to the complex effects of structural inequality in society and support arts organisations in strengthening the diversity of workplaces across the sector.

## Conclusions

This illuminating research reveals a diverse and rich set of perceptions about ACE and the wider Arts and Cultural Sector as employers. The many positive perceptions shared about ACE represent strategy and practice that can continue to be strengthened and further publicised to reach the widest pool of potential job applicants. Those perceptions which indicate that, nonetheless, ACE faces perceptual and systemic barriers to attracting and recruiting the best talent from a fully diverse labour market, highlight where change is likely to have the greatest positive impact. The insightful and wide-ranging suggestions made by research participants, and the further considered implications drawn from the findings, provide a comprehensive foundation for accelerated, sector-leading progress on workforce diversity and inclusion.