

Funding arts and culture: Everyday experiences and organisational portfolio precarity

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Abstract

This article examines the everyday experiences of arts and cultural organisations in negotiating the UK government and cultural policy priority for funding income diversification. Identifying the challenges of declining public funding and the connected pressures for arts and cultural organisations to be accountable, this article positions income diversification in relation to New Public Managerialism. In doing so, the need to examine the everyday experiences of how arts and cultural organisations engage with and respond to the income diversification priority is established. This article then presents findings from empirical research with arts and cultural organisations under the following three themes: balancing simultaneous sources, managing timelines and working through change. The discussion develops this analysis by identifying portfolio working and precarity as prominent and significant features of organisations' experiences. Portfolio working is evident in how organisations identify and manage multiple, potential funding sources. Precarity is evident in the uncertainty and instability of managing the multiple funding sources, and in the way that organisations address operational issues of planning and working practices. To conclude, the concept of organisational portfolio precarity is proposed as a way to critically understand the everyday situations and implications of how art and cultural organisations respond to the income diversification priority.

Keywords

Arts and cultural organisations, austerity, cultural industries, cultural policy, New Public Managerialism, portfolio working, precarity

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Introduction

The financial challenges of building and maintaining an arts and cultural organisation is a long-standing issue situated within histories of arts advocacy and philanthropy (Upchurch, 2016) and 40 years of neoliberalism (Banks, 2020). This article analyses how the drive towards income diversification in UK government and cultural policy is engaged with and responded to by arts and cultural organisations. The current income diversification priority sits within an established trajectory for arts and culture funding informed by New Public Managerialism's (NPM) encouragement to cost reduction – something that has intensified in the face of ongoing austerity measures (Abdullah et al., 2018; Newsinger and Serafini, 2021).

Existing literature indicates the significance of NPM for how arts and cultural organisations operate, but there remain gaps in understanding the everyday impacts and responses. This article presents findings from interviews with arts and cultural organisations and focuses on the everyday experiences of identifying, applying to and negotiating different income sources. Findings are presented under the following three themes: balancing simultaneous sources, managing timelines and working through change. These findings give insights into the complexities encountered and negotiated by organisations that are positioned within different arts and cultural sectors, range in size and have varying capacities and expertise for addressing income diversification. Undertaking analysis across the body of findings, the discussion identifies that organisations share experiences of portfolio working and precarity. These experiences are then brought together in the concept of organisational portfolio precarity – a way to critically understand the everyday implications of how art and cultural organisations operate in response to the income diversification priority.

Funding arts and culture: NPM and the everyday experiences of arts and cultural organisations

The importance of arts and culture and the role of arts and cultural organisations have been discussed from academic, policy and practitioner perspectives. As Oakes and Oakes (2015: 738) outline, 'for successive UK governments, arts organizations have been presented as important to societal well-being, and widening arts engagement has been promoted' (see also Warwick Commission, 2015). Notwithstanding these declarations of importance and value, arts and cultural organisations face substantial challenges in generating and maintaining funding. Issues around the availability and amount of public subsidy and the scarcity of resources are well-documented (Banks, 2014, 2020; Belfiore, 2004; Gilmore, 2014; Rex, 2020). In the following, Banks (2014: 7) connects issues of funding and precarity to cultural value and accountability:

[. . .] significant public spending cuts, shrinking private finance and wider 'austerity politics' have further intensified challenges to culture's idealised status as a 'special' practice that lies beyond the grip of calculation and extrinsic accountability; like everything else, culture is being called to account, impelled to make sacrifices and urged to pay its way

Banks' (2014) analysis highlights two important aspects to expand on in this article. First, austerity and the pressures on public funding. Second, the grip of calculation and how arts and culture is being called to account.

The necessity for arts and cultural organisations to manage their income sources is not new. From cultural policy and cultural work perspectives, studies have examined external support for arts and cultural organisations (Schlesinger et al., 2015), cultural practitioners' views on funding (Jones and Warren, 2016; Jordan and Jindal, 2020; Newsinger and Green, 2016) and new modes of patronage (Swords, 2017). The contemporary funding landscape requires arts and cultural organisations to identify and understand funding opportunities and openings in relation to an ever-wider range of possible sources. As Gilmore (2014) identifies, investment in arts and culture in the United Kingdom involves a mixture of funding sources, and finance is often project-based. Gould (2019) reflects on this 'hybridisation of funding' through the experiences of the Artangel, the art commissioning agency. Referencing upheavals in British cultural policy since the 1980s, Gould (2019) outlines the practical and conceptual complexities for commissioning models that rely on public and private partnerships. In particular, Gould (2019) explains how Artangel's mixed economic model results from the encouragement by UK governments since the 1980s towards bringing together public, private and corporate funds.

Several national reports (Bazalgette, 2017; Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), 2016; Harvey, 2016) highlight the prevailing government and cultural sector policy direction towards encouraging organisations to diversify income. Most recently, Arts Council England (ACE) published its 10-year strategy, *Let's Create*. In setting out their investment principles, ACE (2020a: 49) stated that cultural organisations will 'develop business models that help them maximise income, reduce costs and become more financially resilient'. Rex (2020) however questions the extent to which ACE and *Let's Create* are able or willing to critique the politics and discourses of austerity. The policy emphasis on income diversification needs examining not just as a potential plan for the future, but as emerging from and continuing to operate within current socio-political contexts and circumstances. Moreover, income diversification as a plan for the future has implications for the present. This issue of policy implications is clear in Newsinger and Serafini's (2021) analysis of how cultural policy mobilises individual resilience into the resilience of organisations. In developing this analysis, Newsinger and Serafini (2021) also identify a gap around the everyday lived reality of resilience discourse.

Banks' (2014) second point on the 'grip of calculation' closely relates to *how* income diversification manifests in policy contexts and what this means for arts and cultural organisations. Belfiore (2004: 199) identifies how in the face of funding challenges, 'the arts world is left with the need to make its own case in favour of public arts funding convincingly'. Studies examining the relationship between government and cultural policy, and the management and funding of art and cultural organisations, are particularly significant for understanding this (Belfiore, 2004; Lindqvist, 2012; Oakes and Oakes, 2015). In examining the use of instrumental justifications for UK arts funding, Belfiore (2004: 199) references the impact of NPM on changes in public management style and policymaking. Lewandowska (2017) also identifies how NPM has been widely described in arts and culture contexts in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia and, while moderate in nature, across Continental Europe. Gamble's (1994: 135) definition of NPM as 'a set of ideas for managing all institutions in the public sector and involving devices such as internal markets, contracting out, tendering and financial incentives' has found

wide engagement within cultural policy studies (Hadley, 2021; McGuigan, 2004). Specifically addressing policymaking in the United Kingdom, O'Brien (2014) explores how NPM was 'refined and remade' to focus less on how the state facilitates the market and more on questions of management, motivation and effectiveness. This approach remains explicitly relevant with ACE's (2020a) *Let's Create* strategy in which NPM solutions of maximising income and reducing cost are bound up with changes in organisational culture and an emphasis on resilience.

Given the importance of this shift to issues of management and operation, it is of particular note that there is a 'dearth of literature regarding the workings of accounting and business models in the arts sector at the micro level' (Oakes and Oakes, 2015: 740; see also Lindqvist, 2012, noting gaps in researching organisations' responses to NPM). Oakes and Oakes (2015) have taken important steps to examine the significant impacts of NPM on the aims and operations of arts and cultural organisations (see also Abdullah et al., 2018; Belfiore, 2004; Lindqvist, 2012; Oakes and Oakes, 2015). Specifically, Oakes and Oakes (2015: 740) engage with Belfiore's (2004) analysis to address how 'NPM was used in arts organisations in the 1980s to encourage cost reduction and increased efficiency in a climate of apparent fiscal crisis and, arguably, to support a neo-liberal agenda of privatising the public sector'. Oakes and Oakes (2015) show in their own study, employing new materialist perspectives, how policy reports triggered a narrative that accounting and business models are the solution, that then flowed through organisations. Oakes and Oakes (2015) give a helpful insight into both the nature of solutions (accounting and business models) and how these can be encountered and enacted by organisations (through sector reports).

The formulation of 'solutions' to issues of funding for arts and cultural organisations have also been examined by Belfiore (2004) and Rex et al. (2019), who identify how the emphasis on resilience is identifiable in the specifics of funding, business models and income-generation. They also highlight the shifting emphasis for the responsibility of financial viability onto arts and cultural organisations, but question policymakers' efforts to align business models, understood as a way to generate income, with the capacity of arts and cultural organisations to build resilience.

Returning to the opening of this section, two points were highlighted by Banks (2014) – pressures on public funding, and how arts and culture is being called to account. While a prevailing direction to income diversification can be identified, it is important to consider how NPM from the 1980s is related to, but not the same as, the austerity policies associated with UK governments from 2010 onwards (a coalition between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties from 2010 to 2015 and a Conservative government from 2015 onwards). Gould (2019) outlines how the Conservative UK government of the 1980s set the conditions for a mixed economic model of funding arts and culture. As Hesmondhalgh et al. (2015) highlight, the cultural policies of the UK New Labour government from 1997 to 2010 can be explored in relation to cuts in public subsidy, cultural institutions being operated as private businesses and a shift in cultural policy rationale to economic and social goals. They then distinguish between New Labour (1997–2010) and Conservative (2010 onwards) government approaches and draw attention to how socio-cultural factors affect policymaking and varying periods and directions of policy. Focusing on local authority spending from 2009 to 2019, Rex and Campbell

(2021: 41) also provide a nuanced approach to understanding cuts to arts and funding within specific contexts, identifying austerity as ‘a national government mandate that has deleterious, but nevertheless different configurations in each place as it is implemented by local authorities operating in different political, economic, social and historical contexts’. These perspectives help in identifying continuities since the 1980s in the drive for income diversification and the differences in policy and context specificities. Understanding the experiences of arts and culture organisations in the mid-2010s requires addressing and connecting ongoing austerity cultures and the increasing urgency of income diversification facing arts and cultural organisations with the continued investment in NPM solutions.

Austerity measures demand arts and cultural organisations address issues of funding and NPM sets out how to do this through income diversification and organisational cultures of accountability and resilience. The efficacy and implications of the NPM solution of income diversification, however, requires greater scrutiny. There are gaps and tensions between NPM solutions for income diversification and the actual aims, capacities and resources of arts and cultural organisations that require further examination. Engaging with the critical interventions and perspectives outlined earlier, this article examines the everyday experiences of arts and cultural organisations to understand the implications of the NPM income diversification solution to funding that is increasingly established within UK government and cultural policy.

Methodology

This article presents findings from a research project with arts and cultural organisations, examining their approaches to and experiences of generating funding income. Focusing on a range of arts and cultural organisations in the South West area of England area as defined by ACE (2016), the project was designed as a form of intensive research aiming to ‘investigate how processes work in a small number of cases, seeking explanation of the production of certain objects, events and experiences’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 15). This approach aligns well with other research projects that also focus on the everyday lived experiences of arts and cultural organisations. In particular, Gould’s (2019) research into Artangel shows the importance of connecting organisational histories and stories with wider trends and directions in cultural policy. Similarly, research projects using qualitative methods including interviews and focus groups have enabled researchers to connect practitioner perspectives with issues of cultural value (Jordan and Jindal, 2020; Newsinger and Green, 2016), austerity politics and privatisation (Kolbe, 2021), and austerity and resilience (Newsinger and Serafini, 2021). The research project examined in this article was undertaken by the author and combines document analysis of relevant policy contexts with interviews with those working in arts and cultural organisations (referred to as ‘organisations’ in the findings) to create new understandings at and between macro, meso and micro scales.

At the macro scale, document analysis (Bowen, 2009) of cultural sector reports and policy (ACE, 2020a; Baeck et al., 2017; Bazalgette, 2017; Cauldwell-French and Lydford, 2019; DCMS, 2016; Harvey, 2016; Warwick Commission, 2015) was undertaken before, alongside and after interviews with organisations. Bowen (2009: 27)

summarises how documents can be understood as ‘social facts [. . .] produced, shared and used in socially organized ways’, – an approach that resonates with cultural policy research. Documents were used for this research project for the purposes of context, asking questions and verifying findings generated through the meso- and micro-scale research.

The meso and micro scale involved a series of research visits with 11 organisations. The organisations participating in this project had histories dating back over 50 years, with the most recently established organisation being approximately 10 years old. Taken together, the historical insights into the changing landscape of funding were considerable and included reflections on the establishment and operation of national bodies, local politics and council funding, and the development of different funding models. The research took place between February 2017 and August 2018 and overlapped with the application and decision stages for the ACE National Portfolio Organization (NPO) 2018–2022 funding round. The status of all participating organisations was established with reference to ACE’s NPO scheme. The sample included currently funded ($n=6$) and first-time funded ($n=3$) NPO organisations, and organisations that had been unsuccessful ($n=1$) or that had not applied ($n=1$). The sample involved variety in terms of different disciplines: literature, music, theatre, visual arts and combined arts. The sample also involved a range of funding levels established with reference to ACE (n.d.) NPO bandings. For the 2018–2022 round, NPOs were organised into three funding bands (£40,000–£250,000, £250,000–£1,000,000, over £1,000,000) and this research project includes organisations from band 1 and band 2 – the lowest funding amount being approximately £45,000 and the highest funding amount being £600,000 (not including one organisation which was a sector support organisation receiving approximately £1,500,000 per year for the 2015–2018 and 2018–2022 rounds). This sample ensured that different organisational structures and dynamics could be examined.

For each participating organisation, there was a research visit consisting of the following two parts: the career biography interview (Gill, 2009) and the object interview (Woodward, 2016). The 13 interview participants included a mix of the following: creative director/chief executive for established organisations (5/13), creative director/chief executive that founded the organisation (4/13), and specialist fundraising/development managers (4/13). There were seven participants that identified as men and six participants that identified as women. There were 12 ‘white’ participants and one ‘Black Minority Ethnic’ participant (following the terminology and demographic categories used by ACE). The composition of the sample reflects wider issues around diversity in the cultural and creative industries (Saha, 2018) and within cultural organisations (ACE, 2020b). Future research extending the sample (geographic area and the cultural organisations within this) could open up the possibilities for a much fuller intersectional analysis.

The career biography interview was a semi-structured interview addressing: career background, current role, organisational context, wider sector and policy context, and arts funding experiences and practices. The object interview was a semi-structured interview using a range of funding application forms/proposals as discussion prompts. The funding application forms/proposals were sent in advance by participants allowing the author to annotate and develop some specific questions. During the interview, the forms/proposals were displayed on a computer screen visible to both researcher and participant.

This encouraged participants to recall and share specific experiences of applying for funding. This enabled specific insights into the status and priorities of the organisation (i.e. why a capital project or organisational development application at a particular point in time), the aims and purposes of applications (e.g. starting a new project, follow on funding), the motivations for applying to specific funders and the particularities of working within the features and constraints of the form/proposal (e.g. using online portals, word and characters limits, page lengths, using appendices, standard questions in forms compared to free-form information in letters and proposals). The main limitation with the object interview method as employed in this research was only static forms/proposals were accessed (Word Document or Portable Document Format) meaning the interactive and embodied experiences that comes across so vividly in the oral accounts could not be adequately engaged with and considered by the researcher. In total, 41 applications from 21 funding sources were reviewed. Alongside the funding forms, a variety of other materials were introduced in an ad hoc way by participants. These included programme brochures, organisational diagrams, financial spreadsheets, partner letters, funding letters, evaluation reports and project activity books.

For presenting findings in this article, each *organisation* has an identifying code (i.e. O1 to O11) and each *participant* from that organisation is given an identifying code (i.e. P1 or P2). As the selection of pseudonyms was not discussed with participants, the more general identifying code 'P' for participant was deemed more appropriate than creating and exchanging names (see Allen and Wiles, 2016). For both types of interviews conducted during the research visit, data were recorded using a digital recording device. Thematic analysis was used for all the methods employed (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The codes developed from the document analysis were a point of reference in the coding of the interviews (Bowen, 2009). Reoccurring talking points included issues of equality, diversity and inclusion, and access and participation. While these appear throughout the data and cannot be separated from the material presented here, the focus for this discussion is on the other (but related) reoccurring discussion points – austerity, cuts and steps to survive and become financially sustainable. The following themes were identified in coding for the document analysis and research visits with organisations: Contexts, Roles and responsibilities, Working practices, Application processes, Relationships with funders and sources of funding, and Relationships with audiences and beneficiaries.

Findings

In the following, three themes are used to present findings exploring how organisations engage with and respond to the UK government and cultural policy priority of income diversification.

Simultaneous sources: 'imagining relationships with money'

The ability to generate income from a range of sources is essential to the viability of an arts and cultural organisation. This theme explores how a consistent response to the income diversification priority by organisations is to find and balance multiple income

sources. The funding landscape as described by participants in this research project included applications for funding bodies (ACE, trusts and foundations), corporate sponsors and private donors, and the development of new income streams through training provision and hospitality activities. Increasing the number of possible sources of income creates opportunities to increase overall income and thereby continue and extend an organisation's work. Flexibility was discussed as part of the appeal of increasing funding sources. Funding from ACE and trusts and foundations would be attached to specific spending, but other income, for example, from private giving, could be used flexibly. This might mean supporting specific projects or contributing to core organisational costs. For a participant (O8; P1) discussing matched funding that brings together different sources, 'it's all about different ways of imagining relationships with money'.

The object interviews were a particularly effective method for enabling participants to share experiences of how they engaged with a diversity of sources and the methods for applying to funding schemes that they encountered. On one level, there is a 'universal funding bid structure [. . .] with very little difference' (O9; P1) and the application forms are boring: 'they're bloody boring. They're boring to fill out. They're boring to read' (O8; P1). Across the range of interviews and participants, there were, though, considerable differences in approaches and experiences. The issue of experience and familiarity was concisely expressed by this participant (O2; P2): 'it's a different kind of skill that unless you're doing it all the time, I think it can be quite daunting'. This participant (O2; P2) had a dedicated development role, undertook informal mentoring of other development managers, and had been working at this organisation (O2) for 3 years with several years of experience and employment at other organisations prior to this post. This comment makes explicit that completing funding application forms is a specific skill that requires support and development. A similar issue of familiarity was made by a participant (O9; P1), whose management and leadership role also encompassed application funding activities, when explaining experiences of applying to ACE: 'looking back, they weren't particularly complicated forms, but it was something very different to what I'd ever done before'. These comments resonate with those above on 'doing it all time' (O2; P2) and highlight the significance of time, training and experience that emerge clearly from participants' accounts.

Having the time and resources for training in funding, and the time to work on a variety of funding forms from a diversity of funding sources, are essential for building up the experience and expertise to engage with the income diversification priority set out earlier. Even so, there were many instances of experienced participants outlining new or ongoing challenges. For participants with experience of applying to ACE, there remained the need to 'go back to the Arts Council and say, "can you clarify this?"' (O6; P1). These comments related to the Grantium application system and interviews with several participants feature some of the well-documented challenges of Grantium (Ashton, 2017; Romer, 2016) alongside more widely experienced issues with funding forms. These include the disjuncture between the order of questions and what makes sense for the project (O1; P1), limitations on including supporting documents (O6; P1), character and word limits and the impact on how a project is communicated (O8; P1), the need to complete a section of the form with financial information to meet a cut-off date but not being able to go back and edit it (O9; P1), and developing techniques to work outside of the

platform and then encountering differences in character counts (O9; P1). Each of these points indicates the impact and implications for organisations. The issue of workload comes across most clearly in these comments from a creative director/chief executive for an established organisation:

it is so frustrating because you have to do it in date order when, in fact, what you think about is the strands of work and the dates within that. I suppose it makes you think slightly differently about balance, but the workload involved in putting that template together was extraordinary. Extraordinary. (O3; P1)

The thread flows here from a seemingly minor point about funding templates to an overarching issue of capacity in being able to engage with the specifics of a multitude of funding sources.

Timelines: 'chasing cash' and 'can we make this work?'

The complexity of managing *possible* income streams impacts upon how organisations are able to manage their activities, events and projects. Closely linked to the above theme around simultaneous sources is the challenge of planning and negotiating speculative activities and timelines. As the following examples from participants show, the possibilities for income diversification require constant attention and may do little to mitigate against the uncertainty in knowing what income is coming in and when.

One way in which uncertainty around diverse income generation is experienced by organisations involves working on a project funded by one source while simultaneously planning for a new/different project and undertaking steps to fund this. There are then variations on this scenario of identifying and balancing funding for potential projects. For example, these potential projects might be planned by an arts and cultural organisation or be projects initiated by a funder in which organisations are invited to respond and apply. The requirements in time and focus of managing these different scenarios and possibilities for funding are significant. This was described in the following by a development manager as a balance between the speculative activities in generating funding and undertaking the actual projects: 'You always want to get funding which is incredibly hard work. You'll be sacrificing the activity for just chasing cash which I think it's an inevitable thing for many, many people' (O2; P2). The following comments from a small organisation give an example of maintaining and sustaining plans when income from multiple sources comes together:

It was something we projected that we were going to have, and it didn't come through. But through other stuff that had come through for you, other kinds of work like working with [xxx], there was [£xxxx] I could draw in. All we're looking to do is to balance. (O8; P1)

These comments show how income diversification goes beyond identifying and securing funds from a variety of sources to complex decision-making about the ongoing balancing of sources with impacts that extend beyond the organisation to audiences, beneficiaries and project freelancers. Whether bringing together a range of sources for a larger project

or matched funding for a smaller project, there is a pressure on organisations to manage the complexities of what is possible. Working simultaneously with several possible funding sources *may* lead to increased income, but this approach requires considerable planning and decision-making capacity and is still wrought with uncertainty.

In the following, a participant (O4; P1) describes tensions between funding application and decision timelines, and securing project partners, and then having to return to, and often reassess, those plans sometime later when funding is confirmed. Part of the discussion here is knowing what can go ahead and when:

The decision-making process is so late that you know you have to take a bit of a gamble on things and say, can we make this work? Are we doing well enough in another area which means that we can just about cover the cost on things? (O4; P1)

The increase in the number of funding sources can mean that funds are constantly being allocated and reallocated. For one participant (O9; P1), it was a case of cash flow and waiting for drop down of funds. For another (O7; P1), this included instances of procuring services or developing a project, but only receiving the associated funding at a later date. The diversification of income might 'solve' income generation challenges, but the contingency of a project that is underpinned by several sources creates complexities related to working with freelancers, partners and beneficiaries, and in accounting and project evaluation.

Working through change: 'what is the future going to be?'

The everyday activity of generating funding income requires organisations to understand and adapt not only to the different requirements of multiple income sources, but also the wider policy and sector changes. This theme explores the experiences of organisations in undertaking their core aims and activities in times of socio-economic change and in sync with policy directions. It considers both the specific challenges of operating an arts and cultural organisation under conditions of change and uncertainty and the broader point that change itself is a process and set of circumstances that makes demands and requires capacity to work through.

Drawing the link between income diversification and the wider financial and political context of the global economic recession and austerity, the following comments from the creative director/chief executive for a well-established organisation (30 years) highlights the significance of new ways of working and the uncertainty of navigating this:

Everyone is having to look at a whole new way of working, new models of working in this new world that we're now living in post-banking corruption and cuts. I think it's had a massive effect on everything and we're now trying to find our future. What is the future going to be? (O6; P1)

The importance of adapting to changing circumstances is evident through the training courses and workshops developed to offer guidance on identifying different sources and understanding the different approaches and competencies required (see Walmsley and

Harrop, 2015). The implications of adapting to funding sources are explored in the following:

There is a challenge to have to take onboard new information in order to access funds. It changed the game a little bit. The stuff I'm thinking about doing is having multiple funding applications on the go, if I can. If I can orient myself properly I'll have three live funding applications, that I'll add to when I have the information, to build multiple grants at the same time rather than just having one grant. (O8; P1)

There was no blanket reluctance or stubbornness on the part of the participants within this research project to develop new ways of working or address the call to diversify income. Rather, there are issues of information overload and the changing parameters in being able to be familiarised with existing and new funding opportunities. The challenge lies in developing understanding and expertise of a multiplicity of funding opportunities when organisations are already stretched in terms of capacity.

The demands of generating and diversifying funding income within this policy and sector context impacts on working practices and conditions. This comes across clearly in the following comments from a creative director/chief executive where the organisation's funding applications and income generating activities were mainly situated with them but also undertaken across the team:

There was probably 12 months or so, when every single day I barely did anything else apart from write funding applications. It's the grant cycle, isn't it? You got to have the conversation; you got to write the bid. That takes some time. Anything I had to do was with writing bids. I did early morning and evenings and occasionally weekends to try to kind of pick off everything outside the fundraising that wasn't really important or a priority in terms of the organization and development stuff, and just write bids. (O7; P1)

Funding is described as continual and episodic: Continual in terms of always writing funding applications, and episodic in terms of the specific life cycles of applications and decision-makers. The work of generating funding income involves a complicated pattern of identifying, responding to and revising funding applications for multiple projects at different stages. These comments direct attention to the issues around when and how work would take place (evenings and weekends) and, perhaps more tellingly, how this emerged as an encompassing and defining state of being. This is expressed by a different participant through an analogy of nurturing:

But the feeling there of intense concentration and focus is entirely like a broody hen. And when you take them away, you take them out of the hen house and put them on the ground to cool down, they're really bad-tempered. There's something about doing a funding application that requires that level of commitment and concentration and focus. And, uh, broody hen was the nearest I could come to describing what it might be like. (O3; P1)

If organisations are to be directed to a menu of funding possibilities, then understanding the excitements, concerns, implications and tensions of these funding options in these

personally meaningful ways is significant. For another participant, it was an issue of working in different ways between their artistic practice and their organisational role:

It's a massive challenge in terms of maintaining your practice and doing this work. It's entirely a different part of my brain, left brain, right brain. The organizational side of things, I can't have my practice head on to do that. It [practice head] has to be light. It has to be in a particularly relaxed way in order to make the associations that I want to be making. Whereas if you've got a logic and a rationale head on, that's not doing the same job. It's really not. And I find I can't do them both at the same time. So, it's almost like I have to take two-weeks holiday or whatever in order to be the [artist]. I'm not likely to get very much done here [referring to office premises] if it's going to be smooth stuff. It's got to be strategy. It's not going to be developmental. It's just going to be ticking the boxes and doing the things that need to happen (O8; P1)

This participant addresses the pressures of continually working between their artistic practice and their work as the founder/director in keeping the organisation running. A resounding concern from research project participants is the increasing, different demands placed on those working in organisations and their capacities to respond to these organisational and funding demands.

In the following, the issue of time and feeling stretched was directly linked to calls for resilience and sustainability:

Resilience and the sustainability is about having an enterprise, but at the moment, you know, there are lots of us [. . .] working far too many hours. We're finding it far more difficult to deliver our programs because we're working with less support. Again, that's not particularly sustainable, but that's basically what we're being told we have to do. (O6; P1)

These comments come from the creative director/chief executive for an established organisation that has consistently applied for and been awarded ACE NPO funding. A tension again emerges here between maintaining core activities (including artistic projects and practice) and operational matters (such as funding), and the further demands of income diversification. The issue of working too many hours in the attempt to deliver programmes of activity also had implications for how the organisations and employees could develop. The backdrop to this research project of the 2018–2022 round of NPO decisions is evident as participants assess the importance of regular (or core) funding used for staffing and running costs compared to funding for specific projects. This was most explicit for the creative director/chief executive of a small, relatively recently founded organisation: 'it's always a challenge – not having core funding – to make sure that we'll always have some of us to be able to continue to develop. It means that it can be quite a precarious situation' (O9; P1). These comments help to pinpoint the tension and trade-off between addressing income diversification, and being able to engage with other issues of staff and organisational development.

Discussion: organisational portfolio precarity

The findings presented show that the income diversification solution (i.e. reducing the reliance on public funding) put forth in UK government and cultural policy can translate

for arts and cultural organisations into continued uncertainty and precarity. The findings explored under ‘working with change’ resonate with extant studies on organisational demands (Jones and Warren, 2016) and the requirements and pressures of developing relevant skills (Schlesinger et al., 2015). Swords’ (2017) findings on balancing artistic practice also feature in this research as an issue of balancing artistic programmes and events in relation to funding and organisational demands. The findings explored under ‘simultaneous sources’ connect with Swords’ (2017: 69) evaluation of the crowd-patronage model and artists’ efforts ‘to focus on their practice, rather than one-off projects in an all-or-nothing model’. Within the policy context of income diversification, avoiding the ‘all-or-nothing’ situation sees organisations pursue multiple income sources to carry out one-off projects and to continue programmes of activity and established relationships. Findings on ‘simultaneous sources’ and those explored under ‘timelines’ also add further empirical insight to existing discussions of projectification (Lindqvist, 2012) and the uncertainties that come with short-term, project-based funding (Belfiore, 2021; Gilmore, 2014; Hope, 2015; Jones and Warren, 2016).

These findings empirically detail how the ways arts cultural organisation operate are impacted on by cuts to public funding, the emphasis on income diversification and the prevalence of NPM priorities and solutions. More specifically, the three themes examined above are all connected by conditions, constraints and challenges of portfolio working and precarity. Policy aimed at encouraging and supporting funding diversification might address precarity when understood as financial security. However, the experiences presented earlier show how this policy facilitates precarity when understood in terms of instability and uncertainty. This policy might seek to bolster financial resilience, but it also places many more demands on an organisation’s capacity and operations. In moving between and bringing together funding sources to maintain an income, organisations are undertaking a form of *portfolio working*. This way of operating is *precarious* in terms of the uncertainty in securing funds and the instability in sustaining activities, events, relationships and, at times, the organisation itself. Using the concepts of portfolio working and precarity, the following critically reflects on the everyday experiences of arts and cultural organisations as discussed under the themes of simultaneously balancing applications to funding sources, managing complex timelines, and working through socio-political and policy change.

The findings in this article add empirical depth to Lindqvist’s (2012) literature review survey which identified projectification as a sector-level effect impacting arts and cultural organisations. While projectification captures the often project-based nature of available funding, the concept of portfolio working more accurately accounts for the continual identification and movement between funding sources which is required by the policy priority of income diversification. While the short-term, project-based nature of funding is well-understood, portfolio working highlights the multiplicity of and movement between funding sources and processes. Lingo and Tepper (2013) describe portfolio working as a ‘patchwork of projects’ – a description that resonates with the findings in this article, showing how funding for arts and cultural organisations comes from the necessary compilation of many different sources. Portfolio working effectively describes how arts and cultural organisations will be applying for, and in receipt of, different types of funding from different sources at the same time.

Making the connection between portfolio working and precarity, Kong (2011: 56) notes the ‘uncertainty of the next project and the consequent instability of income’. Kong’s analysis connects with the everyday experiences shared by participants in this research project when it comes to organisations continually pursuing funding opportunities but dealing with the uncertainty of the outcomes. More specifically, precarity can be defined as a ‘systematic, accelerated, and chronic instability that increasingly undercuts *any* efforts to secure temporal security and continuity at work’ (Banks, 2019: 524). Banks (2019: 545–546) also emphasises how ‘ingrained precarity’ presents challenges for workers to anticipate and plan, and that decisions about work and future are shaped by the ‘immediate demands of the most urgent event’. Continuity and planning as issues of instability and precarity were certainly experienced and explained by arts and cultural organisations. The variety of funding possibilities translates into a varied and continual set of deadlines and milestones and opportunities to (not) secure funding. The move to decrease reliance on public funding connected to the exploration of potential new revenue streams is manifest not just in financial precarity as uncertainty around sustaining income, but also temporal precarity and the lack of control over planning. As an important aside, there is a gap within this research project of explicitly addressing the different experiences of different arts and cultural organisations in relation to issues of advantage and equality. Serafini and Banks (2020) have identified how precarity is experienced differently/more acutely by artists from less advantaged backgrounds. Future research should explicitly address how precarity may be experienced more acutely by arts and cultural organisations in which the staff and/or audiences and project participants might come from less-advantaged social backgrounds.

This work of generating funding might be regarded as one of possibilities and increasing opportunities for income growth in an optimistic future in which resilient arts and cultural organisations are able to strategically optimise a portfolio of funding sources to plan projects and relationships. The analysis in this article, however, shows a range of examples in which arts and cultural organisations struggle with the income diversification solution: working on existing projects while simultaneously planning new projects; managing and maintaining projects and relationships with communities and participants when expected funds do not follow through; modifying plans and the commitments of others involved in a project depending on what funding decisions are made and whether this matches the application; and issues of procurement, retrospective payments and cash flow that have implications both for the staff salaries and the employment of freelance practitioners.

Discussing precarity, Moffatt (2020: 202) positions the experiences of Sámi creative production in relation to funding and policy conditions of Norway as a host nation and argues for the need to develop a ‘convergent understanding about how precarity manifests’. This involves locating precarity at the ‘intersection of infrastructural, financial, cultural-political and legal frameworks’ (Moffatt, 2020: 202). While such analysis is a different undertaking to this article, an important intervention comes through for this discussion – the need to connect *everyday experiences* of precarity shared by arts and cultural organisations with the *policy approaches* which purport to provide solutions for issues of income generation and diversification.

The findings in this article show the need for greater scrutiny and evaluation of the NPM solutions based around business models and income generation. Rex et al. (2019: 21) argue for moving ‘beyond a reductive understanding of business models as synonymous with money-making’. Likewise, conceiving income generation not just as a ‘mixture of funding sources’ (Gilmore, 2014) and the ‘hybridisation of funding’ (Gould, 2019) but instead as portfolio working helps for more forcefully addressing what is at stake. In particular, the lens of portfolio working helps move attention from framing income diversification as a matter of choice and the selection of available sources, to instead considering the demands, complexities, and implications for arts and cultural organisations. Moreover, the lens of precarity explicitly emphasises the impact of ongoing austerity measures and the resources and capacity that arts and cultural organisations have, or not, to engage with income diversification priorities at the scale and pace being suggested. Bringing the terms and ideas of portfolio working and precarity together, this article now closes in proposing the concept of organisational portfolio precarity as a means to recognise and debate the specific circumstances and challenges of income diversification facing arts and cultural organisations.

The concept of organisational portfolio precarity explicitly identifies how portfolio funding is the dominant way in which arts and cultural organisations operate. This is more than saying that arts and cultural organisations engage in portfolio working when it comes to securing income, and that this can be precarious. As the dominant ‘solution’ set out in government and cultural policy, portfolio working is fundamentally determining how arts and cultural organisations operate. Moreover, the combination of terms in this concept makes it explicit that this income diversification/portfolio working solution is defined by precarity. Portfolio funding and precarity go hand-in-hand in shaping how arts and cultural organisations operate. Organisational portfolio precarity is a way to address how the income diversification priority, requiring arts and cultural organisations to move between and maintain multiple funding sources, is less about flexibility and adaptability (often seen as a positive of portfolio working) and more about uncertainty and precarity. Participants in this research consistently identified the implications of the portfolio approach to funding.

For some participants, income diversification was a challenge to take on and they would share examples of the kinds of resourcefulness and resilience vaunted in the policy documentation driving the income diversification priority. Notwithstanding arts and cultural organisations’ laudable track record showing ingenuity and resourcefulness in the face of austerity and declining public funding (Forkert, 2016) and in responding to emergency situations (Banks, 2020), this article identifies the implications of portfolio working and precarity for organisations as they attempt to simultaneously balance a diversity of different funding sources, manage complex timelines and deadlines, and negotiate policy change. These are pressing concerns that should come to the fore in training and development programmes relating to fundraising (see Jordan and Jindal, 2020; Walmsley and Harrop, 2015), higher education learning and teaching relating to the cultural and creative industries (Ashton and Noonan, 2013; O’Connor et al., 2019), and in debating possibilities and alternative futures for the sector in the light of COVID-19 (Banks, 2020).

The necessity for arts and cultural organisations to diversify income will most likely intensify as the demands on public funding become more pronounced. Of particular note is analysis by the Centre for Culture Value (Walmsley et al., 2022) showing the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on organisations with diverse income streams. Walmsley et al. (2022: 18) in the *Culture in Crisis* report note ‘growing evidence of a polarisation of experience between organisations with public subsidy or stable project funding and those previously heavily reliant on earned income’ (see also Rex and Campbell, 2021). Specifically, the report gives the examples of the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead where ‘for an organization reliant on 40% earned income, the loss of revenue from its café, restaurant and shop, not to mention spaces for corporate hire, public donations and so on posed a substantial threat’ (Walmsley et al., 2022: 52). These experiences related to COVID-19 demonstrate how unexpected factors can impact on the feasibility of the income diversification solution.

The experiences explored in this research project pre-date COVID-19, but in connecting with findings from the *Culture in Crisis* report it is clear that the experiences and concept of organisational portfolio precarity resonate. Walmsley et al. (2022: 9) note how with ‘much relief’ in July 2022, the DCMS announced the Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF) which saw ‘£485 million allocated to 2,214 cultural organisations’. The case studies provided by Walmsley et al. (2022: 32, 63) confirmed how ‘uncertainty was mitigated’ by the CRF which ‘sustained many cultural venues through the worst phase of the pandemic’. Walmsley et al. (2022), however, also identify issues with how recovery funding followed where arts funding had gone before and that a key task for institutions during the first UK lockdown in March 2020 was writing CRF applications. There are clear connections between the experiences noted by Walmsley et al. (2022) and the findings analysed in this article, which brought together the concept of organisational portfolio precarity. First, with organisations finding sources and developing the understanding of application processes. Second, how addressing simultaneous sources and attending to income timelines is intensive and consuming but does not mitigate uncertainty. Third, how organisations continually navigate policy and sector changes. It is clear that following COVID-19, income diversification will remain a priority and, as such, the experiences and impacts of organisational portfolio precarity require sustained, further attention.

Conclusion

This article has examined the income diversification priority set out in UK government and cultural policy and the corresponding experiences of arts and cultural organisations. This priority sits within a well-established set of NPM reforms for arts and cultural organisations around costs reduction, efficiency and auditing. This article offers new empirical insights and new theoretical interventions for academics and policymakers to evaluate the work of generating funding income undertaken by arts and cultural organisations.

The findings and analysis in this article relate to arts and cultural organisations within a specific region of England (in the United Kingdom), but the contributions from the research project participants are informed by their time across a range of national and

international organisations. In addition, the ways in which different participants' accounts connect establishes resonance and relevance. Findings examining how arts and cultural organisations engage with and respond to the income diversification priority were presented under the following three themes: balancing simultaneous sources, managing timelines and working through change. In analysing the findings under these three themes, this article identifies connections with two well-established issues relating to arts and cultural organisations and work – portfolio working and precarity.

Portfolio working is evident in how organisations identify and manage multiple, potential funding sources. Financial capacity and certainty might periodically be addressed as income is generated and comes into the organisation. The overall experience of precarity, however, remains because expanding funding opportunities does not necessarily equate with increased funding and ongoing security. Moreover, precarity extends beyond issues of financial security to include instability relating to the complexities of decision-making, familiarity with funding sources, capacity for organisational development, and relationships with audiences and freelancers. Rather than equating income diversification as the route to resilience and sustainability, experiences of arts and cultural organisations discussed in this article highlight the complexities and uncertainties. The NPM policy approach emphasising income diversification purports to give solutions, but also establishes a state of organisational portfolio precarity. The concept of 'organisational portfolio precarity' highlights the portfolio approach to creating a patchwork of funding sources and the precarious nature of sustaining projects and organisations in this way. It makes explicit that for arts and cultural organisations, these directions to diversify income and create a portfolio of income sources is inherently linked with precarity.

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