

Dance and the Future: Sustainable Contemporary Practices for the 21st Century

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Abstract

Arts and cultural organisations today need to have relevance in order for participants and their audiences to survive economic, environmental, social and technological changes (Kaiser, 2015, p. 36). Sustainability is an important consideration for all future businesses in the context of contemporary disruptive trends, and has become increasingly integral to doing business in any industry (Bertels, Papania, & Papania, 2010, p. 8). As an interdisciplinary art form (Brannigan, 2010, p. 2) underpinned by co-creative processes that value 'reciprocity, inclusion and collaboration' (Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 1) for creators, participants and audiences, dance is well positioned to drive substantial change in 21st Century thinking and practices. Many disciplines utilise dance theories and practices to explore movement and social connections (Biehl-Missal & Springborg, 2015, p. 3), however challenges continue to be observed regarding cohesiveness, legitimacy and stability for the long-term sustainability of the arts organisation (Brannigan, 2010, p. 6). This research project explores how and to what effect the term 'sustainability' is currently being used in arts practice and organisations' business models. Three themes including sustainability, socially engaged practice, and cultural entrepreneurship underpin the research methodology which utilises a grounded theory and reflective practice approach through the lens of sustainability's three pillars model: social, economic, and environmental (Throsby, 2017, p. 135). The project is focused on discovering new ways to embed sustainability into arts practice and business models, which seek to elevate a dance organisation's resilience to internal and external changes (Clancy, 2014, p. 180).

Keywords: Dance, Sustainability, Sustainable Development

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Introduction

This practice-based research project investigates how the term sustainability is defined and used in arts practice, across individual and organisational business models, with particular focus on the dance sector. The field of dance competes with other art forms and physical activity in Australia and is often supported by those ‘in the know’ (Silby, 2011, p. 1); however, increased participation in recent years across a range of practitioner initiatives is challenging performance boundaries leading to new opportunities for the art form. The evolving shift suggests dance can be an important resource in raising awareness about sustainability to others (Waldman, 2013, p. 4), and an opportune time to explore broader authentic and cultural experiences (Cronshaw & Tullin, 2012, p. 27) that offer benefits for the sector across the many definitions of sustainability. Embedding sustainable practices into businesses that are valued, reinforced, and respect personal values while seeking to improve systematic productivity (Bertels et al., 2010, p. 10), can leverage support for using dance as a powerful resource to impact social change (Waldman, 2013, p. 6). Dance is not only considered as an art form, as it is also recognised for its broad range of social and health benefits (Biehl-Missal & Springborg, 2015, p. 1). The sector continues to show adaptability in a time of economic uncertainty, extremism and gender imbalances (Bond, 2019, p. 7) and research from the *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey Executive Summary* report, shows participation in dance across multiple dance genres has grown from 8% in 2013 to 13% in 2017 (Australia Council for the Arts, 2017, p. 17). However, the future benefits of the Australian sector may be limited to how social and economic concerns are perceived and acted on in the present (Throsby, 2017, p. 138), across Australia’s eight states.

At the 2nd Joint Dance Congress of Dance and the Child International and World Dance Alliance *Panpapanpalya* held in Adelaide in 2018, central themes identified as areas of growth for the dance sector included: sustainability, access to networks, leadership cultivation in business, and embracing activism (McGeevey-Nichols, 2018, p. 26). These themes align with this research to find new ways to embed sustainable practices into arts practice and business models for greater efficiencies, and to make dance sustainable within cultural systems. Some components of sustainable development relevant here include; “difference, valuing diversity, cultural values, people-centrism, economic value, translation, value creation, sustainability” (George, Grosser, & Gavin, 2014, p. 167). Fischhoff recognised that if many components of a sector are doing similar things then that is the likely direction for the future of the sector (Fischhoff, 2018, pp. 5-6). However, consideration of existing issues and complexity of the dance sector, may challenge that view, if new ways of embedding sustainable practices into business are identified, tested, successful, and can be adopted. One way might be to bring in movements of change to operating dance spaces (Dawson, 2018), across organisation, planning, communication and digital perspectives, that support a sustainable approach. Recent research on the Brisbane independent dance sector identified four barriers to growth ‘visibility, spaces, platforms’ and increased competition between independent dance creators and dance artists for resources and infrastructure (Vilmanis, 2017, p. 56). Other presenting issues to consider include: financial sustainability, communication, space design and access, visibility of the sector, professional development, touring costs, and ongoing sector investment (Van Ulzen, 2019, p. 1).

The research seeks to discover insights about sustainability from leaders and artists across dance and arts organisations, and compare this with the discourse around sustainability, introduced over two decades ago (Throsby, 2017, p. 136), and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals which "are a universal call to action to end poverty, the planet, and to ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity" (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). The insights gained will compliment efforts to enhance tools and approaches to embedding sustainable practices into business and opening up opportunities. This may challenge accepted norms, and open up ways to communicate sustainability in a more visible and accessible way for the dance organisation (Robertson, 2019, p. 7), in addition to encouraging refreshed responsible citizenship (Cronshaw & Tullin, 2012, p. 36). The Network for Business Sustainability's 2010 report identified 59 practical strategies for embedding sustainability into the business through formal, non-formal, innovative, and fulfilling practices (Bertels et al., 2010, p. 12), which supports investigating how the dance sector approaches, plans, and embeds sustainability into daily practices. A working definition of sustainability is; "Sustainability means enduring into the long-term future. It refers to systems and processes that are able to operate and persist on their own over long periods of time" (Robertson, 2019, p. 4).

Although there is a body of increasing literature on sustainability in business, there is little research about how this specifically relates to the dance sector. The three pillars represent the investigative scope to discover new ways to support dance to sustain its identity (Brannigan, 2010, p. 6). Robertson states "sustainability will depend on having informed, ecologically literate citizens working toward healthy ecosystems, genuine social inclusion, and equitable distribution of resources" (Robertson, 2019, p. 5). In this context, and given the importance of integrating sustainable practices in daily operations, there remains a lack of clarity in how to define sustainability and its use with interchangeable terminology (Bertels et al., 2010, p. 9). For the dance organisation and arts practitioner, the long-term challenges are even greater given limited funding avenues for growth and high costs to make, perform, and tour work in the expansive landscape in Australia. A consequence of this may be that a dance organisation or arts practitioner is likely to some degree to be driven by external factors as influencers, rather than driving their own sustainable agenda.

There are many excellent examples of professional dance work, and dance companies around the world, and growing participation in meaningful dance experiences (Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 4), however, there are challenges in cohesiveness and stability for long term sustainability of the dance organisation (Brannigan, 2010, p. 2). Dance has been observed to struggle to sustain its identity as a discipline in a world dominated by language (Brannigan, 2010, p. 6), yet grown in popularity through a broadening of collaboration with other art forms. Many dance organisations today foster a collaborative culture offering a range of performance, education, professional development and community engagement experiences (Queensland Ballet, 2017). In addition, there are increasing pre-performance and post-performance activities for audiences designed to inform, yet also perhaps to enhance the overall watching experience (Visch, 2017, p. 48). It has been observed, however, that contemporary practice and performance focus mainly on elite performance outcomes perhaps at the expense of sustaining creativity and artistic expression (Street, 2009, p. 20). Creativity has various meanings in different contexts for dance which seek to foster

environments to ‘learn, create, play and work together towards collective action’ (Booth, 2015, p. 153). In addition, when considering participatory activities as part of the core business, it is important to recognise that they “promote particular learning skills, create outputs that are useable to others, and promote the institution as a social place” (Simon, 2010, p. 16). In this context, the study recognises the situation of practice is complex, moveable and demands an acceptance of adaptability (Schon, 1983, p. 15). In addition, personal sustainability is relevant to this study through personal inquiry of the “emotional, personal and subjective concerns” of industry leaders, arts practitioners and personal practice (Barrett & Bolt, 2007, p. 4).

Kaiser discusses how healthy organisations thrive in generating visibility for their art among audiences by communicating a clear organisation vision and mission, developing strong program and marketing campaigns, and clarity of roles and responsibilities, bringing a sense of inclusiveness in the organisation (Kaiser & Egan, 2013, p. 8). Hence, rethinking approaches to increase the visibility of the dance sector within traditional and existing platforms, will include sustainable practices that are easy to interpret and understand, and contribute to the sector’s growth for the future. In this context, the term sustainability is used in several contexts across social, environmental, and economical perspectives, with consideration of known definitions such as “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987, p. 41).

Conclusions

Sustainability is an important consideration for all future businesses in the context of disruptive trends, and a pillar of the study. Stage One, a web-based survey explored the contemporary landscape of the dance sector in Australia, connecting with individuals who are influencers and leaders across dance organisations, and knowledge experts driving innovations in their field. The emerging findings are outlined in this section with particular focus on the sustainability pillar of the research. A snapshot of Stage Two interviews is provided at the end of this paper to demonstrate to the reader where the research is heading. It is important to note that the research does not focus on the types of arts practice, or approaches to making, developing, and presenting dance work.

The web-based survey was distributed to over 110 artists, organisations, and networks with a 44% response rate. Stage Two had a 93% response rate and involved 10 face-to-face interviews. Working across a broad range of roles, 87.1% of the participants were based in Australia and 12.9% from the United Kingdom and Singapore. Over half the participants have been working in the dance, or arts industries for more than 20 years which tells a story about sustained knowledge and personal passion, and commitment overtime. Across the dance sector there are different types of business formats, ranging sizes, and resources. Of the survey participants, over 80% have between one and ten employees which is significant in showing the diversity and complex nature of businesses operating in the sector, especially in small organisations. The researcher found it challenging to identify all these organisations online with different business formats operating and varying levels of promotion and communication. This observation may present a visibility issue for people seeking to find out more about the dance sector beyond the major performing arts organisations. Hence, looking at ways to make information more collectively visible (Robertson,

2019, p. 7) across the whole system is desirable, to compliment a vibrant, creatively diverse, and healthy artistic dance sector in Australia.

The web-based survey posed 30 questions about the role, and nature of sustainability in daily business practices, and took 10 minutes to complete. Participants were asked to rate the importance of nine identified issues for the dance sector (1 low - 9 high) shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Web-Based Survey Results - Issues for Dance Organisations in the Future

Rate the following issues for dance organisations in the future		
<i>Issue Description</i>	<i>Result %</i>	<i>Issue Importance Rating¹</i>
Diversifying income streams	70.97%	9
Sustainability	61.29%	9
Government funding	54.84%	9
Cultural investment	51.61%	9
Access to space	41.94%	9
Sector interconnectedness	41.94%	9
Society changes	35.48%	9
Skills shortage	29.03%	7
Increased competition	28.81%	6

The results show that the top three issues for dance organisations in the future are: diversifying income streams 70.97%; sustainability 61.29%; and government funding 54.84%. The inclusion of sustainability as a major issue for the dance organisation in the future confirms the approach to consider the term in strategic planning across the sector, albeit in various different forms of definition, response, and action. Important to note, in addition to the top three issues, four of the nine also rated very high for importance and included: cultural investment; access to space; sector interconnectedness; and society changes. According to recent research, societal changes are continuing to impact at a fast rate, with the spread of information, and access to knowledge in the digital space, and geographical shifts in social and economic structures (Australia Council for the Arts, 2017, p. 7). Thereby, the dance organisation's responsiveness to these societal changes and any divisions that may arise, is important when considering innovations in business modelling, and may provide an advantage for the sector's sustainable growth.

Focusing upon how the term sustainability is being defined in dance organisations and by dance practitioners, the survey asked participants to consider a series of sustainability statements and describe what the term means to them. Table 2 shows the results, with participants strongly agreeing the environment must be protected. It is important to note that peoples' perceptions of sustainability generally tend to differ, however in this case, the responses indicated 90% agreement with the statement that a healthy environment, economic prosperity and social justice, will ensure well-being and quality of life for present and future generations. Furthermore, 87% of participants believe they do have time, and can contribute to sustainability in smaller businesses. The final statement also presented mixed results regarding sustainability having to come from the top, with 25.81% disagreeing, 29.03% neutral, and 45.17% agreeing. This is interesting, but not conclusive, with a number of variables to consider that might include leadership style, size and organisation resources, and business model type.

¹ Issue importance rating – 1 (very low) to 9 (very high).

Table 2

Participant Responses to Sustainability Statements

Which sustainability statements do you agree with?					
	<i>Strong Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
Goods and services should not be produced in ways that do not use resources that cannot be replaced and do not damage the environment.	3.23% 1 ²	0% 0	25.81% 8	35.48% 11	35.48% 11
Sustainability does not pay back in business.	32.26% 10	29.03% 9	29.03% 9	9.68% 3	0% 0
The ability to continue activities for a certain period of time.	3.23% 1	3.23% 1	35.48% 11	35.48% 11	22.58% 7
The environment must be protected.	3.23% 1	0% 0	0% 0	25.48% 11	61.29% 19
Small organisations don't have time to worry about sustainability.	45.16% 14	38.71% 12	6.45% 2	9.68% 3	0% 0
A healthy environment, economic prosperity and social justice ensure well-being and quality of life for present and future generations.	3.23% 1	0% 0	6.45% 2	29.03% 9	61.29% 19
Sustainability has to come from the top.	16.13% 16.13%	9.68% 3	29.03% 9	19.36% 6	25.81% 8

The dance sector's advantage here could be its alignment, relevance, and activism, as long as the work being produced is in response to demand from society. Research shows the value of arts for people in Australia is increasingly acknowledged to have a positive impact on wellbeing, personal expression, and creativity (Australia Council for the Arts, 2017, p. 9); thereby, helping the dance sector to leverage practical efforts, and be socially sustainable.

Other findings demonstrate that the majority agree that sustainability is the ability to continue activities for a certain period of time (58.06% agree, 35.48% neutral), the environment needs to be protected (87% agree), and goods and services must be produced using sustainable resources that do not negatively impact on the environment (70.96% agree). This shows broad acceptance of the various interpretations of the term sustainability for the individual participant. Participants were also asked to describe what sustainability means to them in the context of their work, and personal view. The responses reflect a growing awareness in the importance of sustainability, as not only an underlying consideration across daily life choices, but an area that warrants more attention, respect, and meaningful action. A selection of participant descriptions of sustainability is shown in Table 3 and emerging words that the participants used in response to this question provided in Figure 1, showing connectivity in thinking across social, economic, and environmental perspectives.

² Number represents participant number response for each indicator.



Figure 1. Participant Sustainability Words

The purposeful intention was to seek participant commentary on the interpretation and practice of sustainability in their business, to ascertain insights, and to enable knowledge consolidation around sustainability as it relates to dance. The result supports a foundation for developing a defining statement for sustainability, as it relates to the individual working in the dance sector, and more broadly across the arts eco system.

Table 3

Participant Descriptions of Sustainability from Web-Based Survey

Describe what does the term sustainability means to you?
Vision, strategy and long-term planning to maintain and increase an ability to “get things done”.
The ability to thrive now and into the future within a welcoming community that is resilient to the ebb and flow of change.
Longevity. Being able to continue working, living, producing, and consuming in the long-term. It should encompass environmental, social, business, and personal wellbeing.
Being able to continue the organisation into the future, socially, financially and ethically.
Initiatives that have significant duration.
To be able to continue and progress with a holistic vision, caring for each other and the environment.
Sustainability of artistic practice and resources – sustainability of career.
Practices that are kind to the environment. Practices that sustain longevity of the body and mind.
In my work it means two things. Legacy, making sure things are left behind for future users. And replenishment – being able to constantly replenish the pool of dance workers and artists – being on top of future changes.
Sustainability is the ability to continue to exist.

Waldman suggests that “dance cultivates body, knowledge, connection and communication, and in these ways is a crucial resource in the struggle for

sustainability” (Waldman, 2013, p. 4). As such, the dance art form is well positioned to consider new approaches to embedding sustainability in business, through the adoption of sustainable practices that; affect values and behaviours, establish rules and procedures, move the organisation forward in a sustainable way, and deliver on sustainable commitments (Bertels et al., 2010, p. 14).

Discussing the practical benefits of embedding sustainable practices into business, the survey asked participants to comment on a range of approaches across, social, economic, and environmental perspectives. Eleven sustainable approaches were identified: heating and cooling, equipment, lighting, waste, staff involvement, staff volunteering, recruitment and retaining staff, donation to community, social and environmental activity, communication, and selling products. The results, shown in Table 4, highlight various levels of action across respective approaches, with over 50% of participants taking action across waste, staff involvement, communication with internal and external groups, and donating to the community. Split between action and minimal action, the participants identified heating and cooling, equipment, lighting, and staff volunteering. Selling creative products that are socially and environmentally responsible was the weakest response on no action, suggesting either the product does not align with social and environmentally responsible perspectives, or, the communication strategy doesn’t include this focus. Having said this, an equal number of participants indicated action on this area, so further inquiry into how dance organisations and practitioners are selling their products, may be useful.

Table 4

Sustainable Approaches for the Dance Organisation and/or Practitioner

Which of the following sustainable approaches applies to your practice and/or organisation?			
	<i>No Action</i>	<i>Minimal Action</i>	<i>Action</i>
Heating and cooling	22.58% 7	51.61% 16	25.81% 8
Equipment	16.13% 5	41.94% 13	41.94% 13
Lighting	12.9% 4	45.16% 14	41.94% 13
Waste	9.68% 3	38.71% 12	51.61% 16
Staff involvement (i.e. communication, workplace improvements).	12.9% 4	32.26% 10	54.84% 17
Staff volunteering support	22.58% 7	41.94% 13	35.48% 11
Recruit and retain diverse staff	22.58% 7	35.48% 11	41.94% 13
Offer and promote health and wellbeing initiatives for staff	12.9% 4	38.71% 12	48.39% 15
Donate to the community	9.68% 3	38.71% 12	51.61% 16
Communicate social and environmental activity to staff and stakeholders	9.68% 3	38/71% 12	51.61% 16
Sell ‘creations’ that are socially and environmentally responsible	88.71% 12	29.03% 9	32.26% 10

Among the participants, 77% spend between ten and forty per cent on annual sustainability planning, and 65% agree a guiding framework with a set of incentives, may support adoption of sustainable practices in dance organisations. The results also indicate other commentary on potential incentives ranging from they would not be needed if a great framework existed, to more practical concerns, that include: time and funds to be able to care; funding assessment criteria; land rights; time off to learn; training; business savings; voluntarism; and recognition as a leader in sustainability. Overall, 80.65% agree that the dance and arts industry can do more to embed sustainable approaches into business. Further investigation of the right mix of incentives for the dance sector is recommended, however, the results indicate rich insights to start building a developing framework for the dance sector to consider. The web-based survey results on sustainable planning are outlined in Table 5 for the readers' information.

Table 5

Web-Based Survey Results – Sustainability Planning and Incentives

How much time do you spend on sustainability planning each year?					
10-20%	48.39%	15			
20-40%	29.03%	9			
40-60%	9.68%	3			
60-80%	9.68%	3			
80-100%	3.23%	1			
Would access to a guiding framework incorporating incentives program support adoption of sustainable practices in your business?					
	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
	3.23%	12.9%	19.36%	51.61%	12.9%
	1	4	6	16	4
What type of incentives may support adoption of sustainable approaches in dance organisations?					
Cash bonus	45.16%	14			
Privilege rewards	19.36%	6			
Points system	6.45%	2			
Competitions	16.13%	5			
Don't know No incentives - time/funds Funding assessment criteria No incentives needed if great framework existed Land rights Time off to learn Self-motivation as opposed to competition Training as opposed to rewards Badge or logo Business savings Voluntarism	48.39%	15			

Although sustainability can mean different things to different people (MacGregor, 2012, p. ix), the survey shows there are similarities in personal expressions, and various levels of sustainable activity happening across dance organisations. However, it is clear that an accepted definition remains elusive for the dance sector, along with a clear set of coordinated sustainable practices that add value and positively impact the dance organisation and practitioner's business. Navigating a way to overcome this challenge, the existing levels of activity in dance organisations and for dance practitioners, may be enhanced if greater visibility of efforts can be achieved. In addition, advocating for a definition of sustainability for the sector, a coordinated approach to embedding sustainable practices, and ideas for measuring impact, may help towards long-term growth.

This paper has provided an overview of the sustainability pillar of this research as it relates to the dance organisation and practitioner working in the sector. The web-based survey also sought commentary and insights on participants' societal perception of the dance sector, cultural entrepreneurship perspectives, and space considerations; however, these results are not covered in this paper. On reflection, the inclusion of more descriptive specificity for some questions relating to the term sustainability may have provided further clarity for participants understanding. Nevertheless, the range of responses provided rich insights into personal perceptions, and avenues for consideration. The primary limitation was time, to complete all the interviews and a decision was taken to prioritise 10 interviews within the study timeframe. A total of 27 participants responded who were interested in being interviewed about this subject. Overall, 71% agree that there is scope for provision of more services for a professional and non-professional mix for the dance sector. As such, the dance organisation and practitioner's focus on innovating the business model, which includes digital developments, can be considered a key area of focus. In addition, when participants were asked to comment on how they felt about the economic prospects for the dance sector over the next five years shown in Figure 2, 48.39% felt positive and 38.71% felt negative. The mixed response supports an opportunity to provide more clarity around the sector's direction and collective focus for the future.

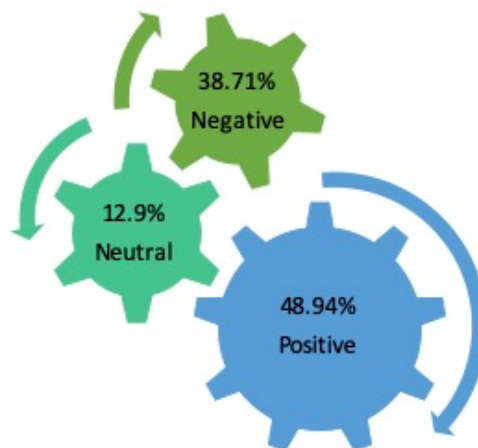


Figure 2. The Next Five Years – Dance Sector Economic Prospects

A snapshot of Stage Two emerging findings is provided in Figure 3 and shows opportunities for consideration across five key areas: organisational, planning, communication, digital, and infrastructure.

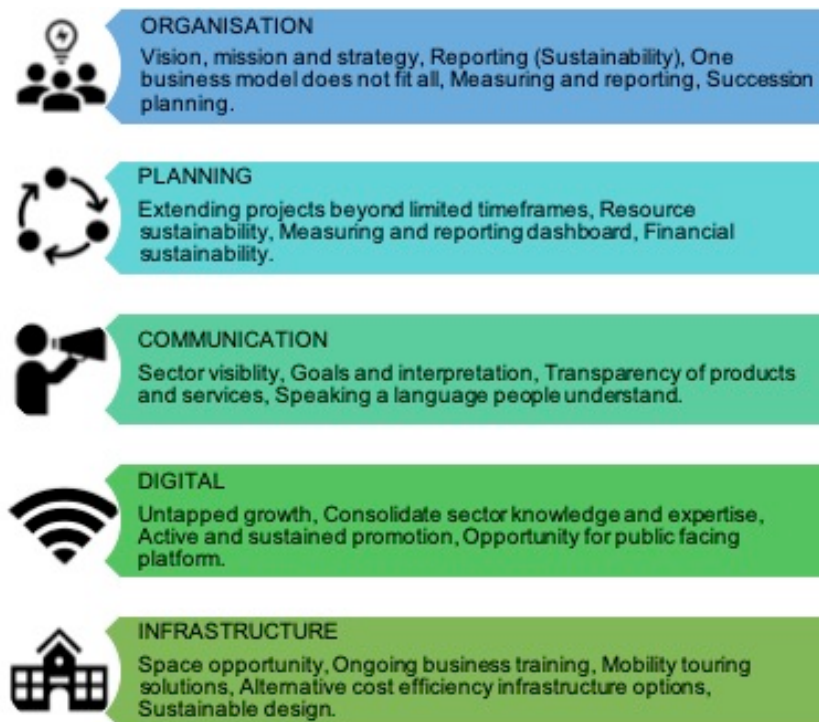


Figure 3. Snapshot of Stage Two Interviews Emerging Findings

The research continues to investigate how the term sustainability is understood and embedded into daily practices, and seeks to contribute to sector developments that strengthen the dance organisation's resilience to internal and external changes (Clancy, 2014, p. 180). Some research states that dance is often isolated in its quest to belong with other art forms, yet traditions and a rich history have fostered a climate of resilience and collaboration (Brannigan, 2010, pp. 5-9). Synthesized with commentary on sustainability's place and value within existing business models, and considering the dance sector's challenges, this positions the research as timely, relevant, and responsive to sector needs.

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