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Design: Mariella Gaudiosi
Photographer credits: Rachel Cherry, Amalia Garcia & Mariella Gaudiosi
The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of independent dancers. We set out to gain a descriptive and analytical understanding of working life in the sector. We examined specific psychological factors such as motivation and self-definitions, and how these helped dancers in their careers. The term ‘independent dancer’ is commonly used within the UK dance industry to describe practitioners who work in multiple roles on freelance contracts (1-3). This approach to work enables dancers to engage with a range of dance communities, develop and apply diverse skills, and collaborate with multiple partners. Throughout this document we refer to such individuals as dancers or dance artists to represent those working in a range of roles and at a variety of levels. The independent dance sector is supported by an infrastructure of dance agencies that operate across the country to provide development opportunities and resources for independent dancers. It is estimated that around 40,000 people work in the UK dance industry, but the varied and ad hoc nature of their roles makes it challenging to quantify and describe the workforce accurately (4). In the past there have been several independent reports published about the sector (1, 5) as well as published interviews with renowned independent dancers (6) that provide an insight into working conditions, rates of pay, infrastructures and funding, however with the industry developing so rapidly these sources are no longer current. More recently, doctoral research located within the independent sector has provided further insight into specific aspects of the dancers’ role. This, however, has focused specifically on artistic and choreographic concerns (2, 3) or is situated within a different geographical location (7). As a result, there is a lack of up to date knowledge about the UK independent dance sector meaning that this dynamic and mobile force still ‘works in relative invisibility’ (1). Furthermore, academic research in the fields of professional practice, psychology and dance science has neglected to examine this important and continually developing part of the UK dance sector. Therefore, this research appears timely in order to provide current information about independent dancers and how they negotiate such a varied and challenging career. Although this research project has been disseminated in academic forums, the aim of this report is to inform dance artists, teachers and students of the findings in an accessible format. If you are interested in the academic papers that have resulted from this project, please see the reference list (8, 9).
The participants identified themselves as independent dancers or artists and volunteered to take part in the project after responding to a web call-out hosted by Independent Dance. The dancers signed consent forms in order to take part, and were assured of their anonymity and the ability to speak freely and honestly throughout the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, meaning that each participant was asked the same set of questions, but that flexibility was possible in following up particularly interesting experiences or ideas spontaneously. The interviews included questions about the participants’ pathways into the profession, advantages and disadvantages of working independently, and their motivation to work in a freelance capacity. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and content analysed using qualitative analysis software. Content analysis involves coding information and organising it into logical structures. A number of themes emerged from the findings which informed our understanding of the sector, its demands, and how dancers cope with these demands. In the next section we discuss our findings in detail with quotes from the dancers themselves.

Taken together, the dancers’ backgrounds suggest that there is no established or pre-determined route into the independent dance sector.
What is the role of an independent dancer?

The dancers described themselves as having ‘portfolio’ careers or ‘wearing different hats’. They took on numerous roles which often included teaching, performing, managing and choreography, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes at different times in a year. For example:

“I’m the director of a community dance organisation... I do a lot of education work for the company. I also freelance for other organisations as a choreographer or as a teacher. And then I’m doing my MA as well.”

The dance artists worked in a range of roles with different people and organisations. The variety of work involved in an independent portfolio career appeared to be broken down into formal roles that the participants identified as a specific part of their work, and less formal activities that still contributed to their careers, but usually took place outside of paid work time:

Formal roles included:
- Arts management
- Choreographing
- Examining
- Facilitating projects
- Rehearsal directing
- Performing
- Teaching
- Non dance-related roles such as bar work

Informal roles included:
- Administration
- Advertising
- Auditioning
- Budgeting and accounting
- Continued training and physical conditioning
- Planning
- Evaluating and/or marking
- Finding and applying for work and/or funding opportunities
- Networking

Working patterns

Within any of their different work contexts the dancers worked very long hours, both within their formal contracted roles, and in their informal capacities outside of these: “So if I’m teaching from 9 to 6 or whatever, I’ll get up at 6am and work from 6.30 til 8 to get my own personal job searching, admin, tax return, emails done, or 6 til 7 at the other end.”

Several of the participants described their ideal weeks as comprising of some regular, fixed work and some independent, more flexible activity: “I guess the ideal for me now has become that I will be employed 2 or 3 days a week and freelance 2 or 3 days a week so a kind of guaranteed income of work half the time but then flexibility the other time to do what I want and pick up projects and have different experiences.” However, in reality the dancers’ patterns of work were very complex, comprising of both extremely busy periods and very quiet ones. When they were extremely busy, the dancers had to juggle multiple roles and overlapping projects. The participants often felt guilty that they did not have time to adequately prepare for their work, and worried about how they could sufficiently fulfil so many roles. For example, one dancer described, “feeling that I spread myself so thinly over many different things and I can’t really commit to one thing. And the feeling of always being behind with work.” In contrast, there were also quiet periods where dancers had very little work. This increased the dancers’ anxiety and stress, and could reduce their confidence and motivation:

“...the gaps and the not knowing and the anxiety of not knowing where you are going. Or perhaps because you don’t have that full structure maybe you lose motivation at times, or confidence... it’s a constant wave, a massive rollercoaster.”
Positively, most participants were able to reflect back and see patterns that emerged in their work: “Everything seems like a logical progression from everything else. In retrospect everything is very linked and everything has informed another thing, even if it’s not immediately obvious”. For example, some commented upon how their work revolved around educational calendars while others reflected upon national events that had created particularly busy periods for them: “I mean it does seem to work that a lot of projects come up at the same time... it tends to be kind of around events I suppose; like in 2012 there were quite a lot of cultural Olympic events, so quite a lot of bits and bobs going on.”

Furthermore, while many of the participants explained that “no week is ever the same”, some actively created a sense of structure and consistency by doing their administration on the same evening each week or deciding a time that they would stop working each evening. This helped the dancers to feel more in control over their careers and more able to find a satisfactory work-life balance.

Networks and relationships
The dancers explained that networks and relationships were crucial to finding work, developing their practice and meeting like-minded individuals. Dance organisations and agencies provided formalised opportunities for professional development and networking in addition to less formal mentorships and relationships: “coming here [dance organisation] is also very useful for a sense of continuity and just coming into contact with other freelancers. Gill Clarke, who obviously who worked here, started here, she taught me at [vocational school] and after I graduated would invite me into a couple of different kind of opportunities for young artists and I felt like she was very supportive of me.”

In addition, dancers often created their own networks for support: “I’ll quite often get together with a network of people who are in a similar position, and we might just come together in the studio and play for a couple of hours. Or we might just chat, or we might just go for a coffee.” These relationships were vital in enabling dancers to share experiences and also to combat the sense of isolation that some participants described when working independently.
What challenges do independent dancers face?

When discussing their roles, the participants raised a number of common concerns or challenges that they faced:

Lack of structure
The varying work patterns described by the participants made it difficult for them to manage their time effectively. They aimed to ensure that jobs or projects followed on from each other, otherwise they were left with periods of unemployment without pay. However, this constant search for work meant that they were reluctant to take time off: “You’re scared if you book a holiday and an audition comes up.”

Pay
Most of the dancers mentioned the financial difficulties that came with their work. They were often expected to work for free, particularly when they were starting out, and even paid contracts tended to be short-term and poorly remunerated. The unpredictable working patterns exacerbated some dancers’ feelings that they had to stay busy and keep working in order to pay for essential costs like bills and travel.

Work-life balance
Many dancers noted that maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance and social life was often very difficult. Many of the dancers’ friends and family did not understand the demands of the profession, and they missed out on events like birthdays and weddings because of work.

Lack of formality
Concerns around pay and work-life balance were made worse by the lack of formality at times in terms of contracts and pay, and also a perception that some artists and choreographers were reluctant to talk about money. It could be very difficult for the dancers to ask about pay and hours due to unspoken ideas that discussing these subjects might compromise the artistic integrity of a project or artist:

“no one likes talking about money ...I think there’s this notion that it’s about producing your art, so it’s about your artistic identity and the fulfilment of the project.”
What motivates independent dancers?

In the face of such challenges we wanted to know why the dancers continued pursuing this demanding and unpredictable career. Importantly, the dancers felt that the benefits and satisfaction they derived from their work far outweighed the difficulties. The dancers were incredibly passionate about dancing and their work in the independent sector. Fulfilling multiple roles gave them variety in their daily lives, introduced them to new areas and disciplines, and enabled them to grow artistically. The dance artists also appreciated the autonomy they gained from their work. Being independent enabled dancers to pursue their own artistic visions and practices, to decide when and how to work, and which projects to pursue. For example, one dancer explained: “I had a perfectly fine job at the theatre and everything is taken care of, but … It’s very much restrictive in terms of what you can do…as a freelance dancer, or artist in general you can basically have your own vision and I think that’s the biggest difference in terms of fulfilment.”

The dancers enjoyed meeting and collaborating with other artists and practitioners in their multifaceted careers. Such collaborations both facilitated the development of the dancers’ practice, and helped them to build networks and relationships. They also sought to make a contribution to their field and often to wider society: whether with audience members, workshop participants or fellow artists, many dancers were motivated by a desire to share their love of dance. As one participant explained: “...trying to get people to connect with that, whether or not they are watching dance or participating or the joy of creating a dance, so I think it’s trying to be – I kind of joke a bit that I’m a dance missionary trying to spread the word of dance.”
How do independent dancers’ careers change and develop?

As we interviewed participants with various backgrounds and experiences, we were able to identify three key stages that dancers appeared to move through during their careers. Rather than be based on specific jobs or roles, these stages represent how the dancers felt about themselves and their work. Each stage has its own characteristics, but it is important to note that regardless of their career stage or experience, all of the dancers had several ambitions for the future – there was never a sense that they had achieved all they wanted from their careers, stopped developing their ideas, or fulfilled their needs and development.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Key Characteristics</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Career</td>
<td>Feeling unprepared</td>
<td>“I was kind of learning as I went what I wanted to do... I think as a student you’re kind of in a bubble at any institution that you are at, because you are dancing all the time, and that doesn’t really happen when you graduate. I don’t think I ever knew what to expect.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Applying for everything</td>
<td>“I suppose when I first graduated I just wanted to work within, do anything, just get lots of experiences of different things, and I suppose I wasn’t as discerning about what work.”</td>
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<td>Difficulty managing time</td>
<td>“I want to get a more regular pattern perhaps... I find it really hard to switch off.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feeling pressure from others who do not understand a freelancer’s role</td>
<td>“There’s a lot of people that I think don’t understand it, like, my nan or some of my friends and they’re like, ‘Oh so you, like are you all sorted now’ and I’m like, ‘I’m never going to be completely sorted’, you know? So yeah, I guess people might not think that you’re working as hard as you are and appreciate it.”</td>
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<td>Stage</td>
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<td>Mid Career</td>
<td>Developing confidence</td>
<td>“I think my motivation is stronger the more I get used to working in this way, and find that it works, and find that I can do lots of different things. That I do have these skills and that I’m wanted I think. The first couple of years you are clawing around for work and now I have too much work, I have to turn work down. So feeling that I’m valued and wanted and I can give a really good contribution.”</td>
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<td>Having more choice over work</td>
<td>“The more experienced and in demand you are, you can make choices.”</td>
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<td>Developing ownership over work</td>
<td>“When I was younger I kind of knew I wanted to make work but not why – I just did it because I wanted to do it, whereas now I feel a responsibility to really understand why I’m doing it, and for it to really say something.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Continued challenge of managing time</td>
<td>“So the scheduling thing is still a battle. Knowing what to take up, how to balance everything together... I think keeping in touch with the industry is maybe a battle as well, especially kind of getting myself to class and to performances.”</td>
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<td>Pressure to maintain levels of success</td>
<td>“I got funding for a piece, now I’m worried that I’ve got to kind of up the bar... and I feel like the pressure’s on because, like, right now I don’t have an idea to make another piece.”</td>
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<td>Feeling pigeon-holed</td>
<td>“A lot of the dance agencies and contacts here had got used to me being a community dance practitioner and a teacher and a lecturer. And it took a long time, to kind of, get round to them that I was no longer doing that...that I was now performing and dancing professionally as a living. And even now I still have some problems.”</td>
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<td>Stage</td>
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<td>Later Career</td>
<td>Self-assurance</td>
<td>“I feel more relaxed about it now... I’m at the point where actually I judge myself by the people that I care about.”</td>
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<td>Building a positive reputation</td>
<td>“I think that we do ok because we do a good job and people know that and we got a reputation because we’ve been going for quite a long time.”</td>
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<td>Increasing sense of autonomy</td>
<td>“I feel like I’m in a very creative place and I get to choose who I work with which is a great privilege. Actually I’m in control of the venue and I have my own company, and audition people and I can select the other creatives on the team... I think the spontaneity of being able to make decisions on your own behalf is fantastic.”</td>
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<td>Wanting to support other artists</td>
<td>“Having a really happy team, that your performers are out on the road having a good time and enjoying their jobs and are being developed, being able to creatively develop the people I’m working with and up-skilling them.”</td>
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<td>Less funding available</td>
<td>“It’s hard to get the funding because there are initiatives out there to support new companies and I tend not to be offered them because I’m seen as successful.”</td>
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<td>Shift in priorities</td>
<td>“I definitely respect my family time and being that person. And that actually if I don’t give enough of myself to my family and to not working then actually my working is not going to be as good. Whereas I think when I was younger it was all about the work.”</td>
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<td>Having a family</td>
<td>“If I did have another child, I think I would have to re-think things hugely and I think I would have to look more back towards working in education or possibly doing some more creative work. And that’s where possibly the performance work and certainly the touring work would have to stop.”</td>
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What is success for an independent dancer?

The dance artists were asked how they defined success in the independent sector, and gave a range of responses indicating how success could be understood in multiple and complex ways:

- Working a lot and being busy
- Being paid for work
- Autonomy: being able to make decisions about which work to pursue, and feeling in control of one’s career
- Feeling fulfilled and achieving personal growth and development
- Achieving certain ambitions, such as making a successful funding bid, working with a particular choreographer, company or venue
- Making a contribution to the field and/or society at large:

“Leaving a legacy that increases not only your reputation but the reputation of dance practice, of movement and live performance as being a massively integral part of creative life, of anyone”.

Importantly the notion of success was dynamic and ongoing, and while the dancers recognised that financial stability was essential, personal indicators of success like autonomy and fulfilment were far more important to them. A number of factors helped the dancers to succeed and meet these varied criteria for success. These factors fell into three main categories: personal qualities and psychological characteristics; practical strategies; and support from others.

Personal qualities and psychological characteristics
The most important factors that appeared to help dancers in their careers centred around a combination of optimism, proactiveness, and being willing and open to try new things. The dancers understood that they needed to remain curious and open-minded about their field to fully engage with it, and, despite the lack of security and unpredictability of their work, were generally optimistic: “as much as I worry about things and I have doubts and insecurities, I think we all do. I try to be as positive as possible… I’m lucky to be doing this.” Another experienced dancer had a similarly positive outlook: “…often things aren’t as scary as they seem…have the confidence that you have the skills to do it”.

This open and optimistic outlook was complemented by a strong work ethic. The dancers explained that they needed to be determined, to work hard, and to persevere. They understood that establishing themselves would take time, and that patience and tenacity would help them to persist and succeed in the sector. Importantly, self-confidence helped the dancers to present themselves in the best possible light, to make new contacts, and to continue taking risks. Two of the skills that helped the dancers to enhance their self-confidence were self-awareness and self-reflection: having an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses allowed dancers to evaluate which projects to apply for, while reflecting on their work enabled them to grow both artistically and as people. One dancer noted: “you can really get to discover your own capabilities and then challenge yourself accordingly.”

Practical strategies
The dancers commented that establishing networks and building relationships with other artists was important for enabling them to find and manage their work. Some participants also commented on geographical location as an important factor when establishing networks to seek employment. Many felt that living in London provided them with a vital network to engage with in order to build working relationships: “There’s a motivation to be engaged in the cultural scene of London as well. I feel like that’s important and part of my work.” However others contrasted this by explaining that they were able to build effective professional networks in other cities or smaller communities: “Once I moved home [Derbyshire] and started to get back into contact with people involved in dance regionally and involved in community dance and dance in education, I started to realise that actually, there were lots of great things going on in the arts”.

Building relationships within these networks generally happened informally through casual communication and word of mouth. Several participants spoke about how they would actively attend events in order to network and find opportunities:

“I get all my work and most of my enjoyment as well, just from talking to people, finding out what’s going on.”
Within these networks, the dance artists had to manage, support and represent themselves. As such a number of non dance-related skills, which we termed career management skills, emerged as being critical in the success of the dancers’ careers. These career management skills included time management, organisation, communication, administration, and presentation skills. Not all dancers felt they had developed these sufficiently, or that they had been adequately addressed during their training, yet they were aware of how important they were. Therefore, many participants tried to actively develop in these areas, for example actively enhancing their time management by creating a weekly structure: “I did try to give myself some kind of routine, even if it was just “right I’ll going for a run every Tuesday morning”, “I’ll make plans every Thursday evening”, “I’ll do my administration on a Friday”.

Time management appeared particularly important as it also helped dancers to achieve a good work-life balance, which was important both for their general health and for the success of their work. The dance artists recognised that rest and having breaks allowed them space to think, reflect and plan: “having the space and the time to step back and...not always be rushing round. I think that’s the time I get most of my ideas, the kind of new ideas that excite me”.

In terms of the other career management skills, some dancers described attending business seminars and events to upskill themselves, while others noted that these skills had improved alongside their developing careers and experience. A related point is that portable laptops or tablets were deemed essential for dancers without an office base or regular working schedule, and that holding a driving license and owning a car were crucial when dancers had several jobs in different areas.

Support from others
While the dancers discussed how they created and maintained social networks within the dance sector, social support outside of dance was equally important and often entailed both emotional and financial help. For example, some dancers explained that their partners helped to provide a degree of financial security that enabled them to pursue their interests; some younger dancers lived with their parents to remove the financial burden of paying for accommodation. However, these relationships also offered emotional support and in some instances modelling of work ethics: “There’s a sense of nurturing in my home environment that’s made me succeed or work hard”. In general, dancers who felt they had achieved a satisfactory work-life balance explained that meeting their partners had certainly helped with this: “when I met my husband, I kind of got a reality check, that actually work is not your life”. As well as shaping the way the participants engaged with their work, the support that friends and families provided also extended to particular skills that were helpful for their careers. Some participants spoke about instances where friends or family members had advised them on issues such as finance, business and organisational skills.
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**Implicit hierarchies**

During discussions of how the dancers defined success, several interesting findings emerged regarding how the participants perceived themselves, other dancers, and the work they were doing. Aspects including training, location, types of work, and employers all appeared to sit within tacit hierarchies that indicated how successful an independent dancer was. These hierarchies appeared to pervade the profession and did not necessarily coincide with the dancers’ own notions of success. The image below represents one of the most common unspoken hierarchies the dancers perceived in the profession in terms of success:

Some dancers also felt that where people had trained, and where they were based, formed another hierarchy, with certain vocational schools perceived as ‘better’ than others (or better than university training). Being based in London was often perceived as being ‘better’ than living in other locations in the UK. However, many of the dancers in this study had established themselves successfully and found numerous opportunities in areas outside of London, and had trained at various institutions, suggesting that these perceptions or beliefs were somewhat unfounded.
Challenging the hierarchies

While these hierarchies seemed to exist, many dancers were quick to point out that they themselves did not endorse them. We have used quotes from the dance artists to indicate why the most pervading hierarchy represented on the previous page is at worst incorrect, or at best fluid and dynamic:

From the analysis of our data and discussions with dance artists during the project, we have come to consider how these pervading hierarchies can be questioned and challenged based on what the participants expressed. For them, fulfilment and enjoyment were among the most critical criteria for success, and being autonomous was also seen as being hugely important. These findings are supported by mainstream psychology literature around well-being which indicates that people are at their happiest, most satisfied, and most productive when they feel autonomous, competent, and related to others in various social environments (10, 11). Individuals flourish when they are able to meet new challenges and grow accordingly, and when they feel that they have something to offer to society (12). Importantly, each of these factors or needs can be satisfied through any of the work an independent dancer undertakes, be it community projects, touring performances or teaching the next generation of artists.

Therefore we propose that the ultimate goals for independent dancers in any role are fulfilment, autonomy, and an optimal work-life balance.
To summarise, independent dancers work in complex and multiple roles. They take on a variety of formal and informal work, often in collaboration with other artists and organisations. Patterns of work are inconsistent and at times unpredictable, and financial security remains a concern for many dancers. However, the challenges of the role are outweighed by the positive experiences and benefits the dancers gain from their work, such as increased autonomy, fulfilment and development. The dance artists’ passion for what they do helps them to persist and overcome the difficulties of the career, as do particular psychological characteristics like optimism and self-confidence, support from others both within and outside of the dance industry, and the development of career management skills.

Our key recommendations for the support of independent dancers and the continued development of the sector include:

- More formal mentorship and networking opportunities
- Access to funding that supports dancers’ needs in various roles (e.g. as performers), not just dance makers
- Training in psychological characteristics and skills (e.g. self-confidence, self-reflection) and career management skills during and after formal dance training
- Continued discussion and questioning of established but unfounded hierarchies

We advocate that independent dancers be supported in all stages of their careers and in all of the work that they do, rather than assume that dancers want to or should aim to work their way up any pre-determined career ‘ladder’ or hierarchy. Doing so will ensure that the diversity and impact of the independent dance sector continues to grow and flourish.
References


Acknowledgements

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Author biographies

Imogen Aujla is a Senior Lecturer in Dance and Course Coordinator of the MSc Dance Science at the University of Bedfordshire. She originally trained as a dancer before specialising in dance science and later dance psychology. Her research interests cover both the optimisation of performance among elite dancers, and the impact of recreational dance on the health and well-being of non-dancers. She has a particular interest in the psychological factors that drive participation in dance. Imogen sits on the Publications Committee of the International Association for Dance Medicine and Science, and has published and presented her research internationally.

Rachel Farrer is a Lecturer in Dance at the University of Bedfordshire. Prior to this, she worked as an independent dance artist based in the Midlands, undertaking freelance projects with artists and organisations including Akram Khan, Katie Green, and Dance4, and working as a visiting lecturer at De Montfort University and the University Of Lincoln. Rachel is currently undertaking her PhD which explores tacit aspects of the independent dance performer’s relationship to choreography. She is a board member for DanceHE and chairs their Early Careers group coordinating advice and mentorship to other early career dance academics.