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Article

# A Comparative Analysis of the Economic Sustainability of Cultural Work in the UK since the COVID-19 Pandemic and Examination of Universal Basic Income as a Solution for Cultural Workers

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns across the world have greatly affected an already vulnerable cultural economy and the structural precarity of many cultural workers. After documenting the impacts of the pandemic in the cultural sector and the effectiveness of governmental responses in the UK and in Europe, the article focuses on the visual arts and explores calls for reforms of the cultural economy. While the UK government's recovery plan went against the country's cultural policy tradition due to the plan's interventionist and financially generous nature, it disproportionately benefitted organisations rather than individuals working in the sector, especially in England. The study, conducted on visual arts workers in the UK, shows that many were unable to access these financial recovery schemes and fell through the cracks of the complex criteria set for these funds. This article informs the current debate on measures that are potentially more economically sustainable and wellbeing protective than those currently in place for cultural workers, such as Universal Basic Income. Its applicability is explored with reference to the historic French and recent Irish examples.

**Keywords:** cultural and creative industries policy; cultural workers' precarity; COVID-19 pandemic recovery plan; visual arts; UK; Ireland; France; Europe; economic sustainability; Universal Basic Income (UBI)



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## 1. Introduction

The precarious nature of employment in the cultural sector is well known to industry insiders and is well documented. As early as 1980, a UNESCO report titled "Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist" highlighted both the uncertainties associated with artistic work and the benefits that such work brings to society, recommending mitigations against these risks. More recently, a number of measures in the world have been trialled to ensure better economic sustainability for the entire sector (Menger 2014; Roy 2018).

Aggravating this context, there is now a general acceptance that the sectors that have been the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic are the cultural and heritage ones, alongside tourism, leisure and hospitality. Such impact has been far-reaching, including risks, failing outputs, audiences and jobs losses. COVID-19 has further exposed the complexities of how individual workers generate income through freelance portfolio working and short-term contracts. In addition to freelancers, venue-based activities and related supply chains were the hardest hit. In addition to this, policies to alleviate the crisis have also been challenged by the atypical business models and forms of employment that often characterise the sector (OECD 2020; DCMS 2020; CCV 2020a, 2020b, 2022).

Additional research is needed to understand the impact of governmental emergency actions for culture, from immediate contingency support to longer term investments. This

article documents the situation in the UK, drawing on a larger context to analyse the sustainability, economic and other impacts of these actions and focuses on their capacity to limit the precarity of freelance artists and cultural workers in a context where cultural contributions to society beyond economic gains has been acknowledged again and again: “While culture and arts may not be vital to the preservation of life, they are proving increasingly vital to preserving the sense of life being lived” (Banks 2020, p. 649).

Following the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment, UBI (Universal Basic Income) has gained support in an increasing number of countries and contexts (Nettle et al. 2021), and in the cultural sector in particular, due to particularly heightened levels of financial precarity and suffering (CCV 2020b; Pratt 2020). Recently, UBI pilot programmes have been rolled out in Finland, Netherlands and Germany (Eikhof 2020). This article aims to discuss some of the current debates and schemes connected to UBI applied to the cultural sector in France, Ireland and the UK to explore how it can ensure better financial security and wellbeing for cultural workers in the UK.

After a presentation of our sources and methods (Section 2), we introduce the context of the UK cultural sector before and since the pandemic (Section 3), discuss the government’s Culture Recovery Fund (Section 4) and its challenges through a study of visual arts workers (Section 5), and lastly we examine why and how UBI mechanisms for cultural workers have regained impetus around the world and what the UK situation currently is (Section 6).

## 2. Methods, Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Our interdisciplinary article relies on methods traditionally used in cultural policy: bridging history and cultural studies with economics (Throsby 2010; Towse 2005) to analyse the political economy of the arts; drawing on sociology and communication studies to study cultural work and cultural value (Belfiore 2021; Brook et al. 2020; Banks 2017; Dubois 2015) to analyse government policy documents and other grey literature, press communications, actor networks and campaigns. The interdisciplinary approach was further enhanced by the authors’ methodological expertise, having undertaken quantitative and qualitative studies in the cultural field for over twenty years (Doustaly 2022, research webpage; Roy 2022, research webpage).

A literature review for the themes is provided in each subsection of this article. However, below, we only focus on what this scoping paper adds to the current state of the arts, with our main references, and how UBI emerged as a solution by contextualizing the pandemic’s impact on cultural work. Indeed, a contextual literature review of UBI shows the dominance of philosophical or theoretical publications and little extended studies of the few existing schemes. Consequently, the increase in the number of pilot programmes, as discussed here, may allow further explorations of the topic and therefore requires to first be put into its context.

The impact of the pandemic on the cultural sector and the governmental recovery plans around the world have currently gathered academic interest (Banks 2020; Wall-Andrews et al. 2021). Within this context, several reports, policy briefings and other grey literature have analysed the specific situation in the UK (OECD 2020; CCV 2020a, 2020b, 2022). Eikhof’s contribution dedicates a section to UBI, presented as a radical but potential solution to provide a sustainable financial model to limit inequalities in cultural work (Eikhof 2020). Few academic studies, however, have questioned the current support measures’ capacity to bring economic sustainability and explore alternative options for the future.

Going beyond the immediate analysis of the current situation, we analyse the use or emergence of UBI and similar movements as socially desirable and potentially economically viable answers to both the precarity of cultural work and the complexities of financial support mechanisms, either in times of crisis, or as a permanent status. To conduct this, we draw on a number of sources, complemented by a quantitative and qualitative study of cultural workers’ views of rescue measures and their future. We offer a comparison

with EU countries such as Ireland and France, which have a more interventionist model of cultural policy, to provide our analysis with an alternative perspective on the phenomenon.

UBI is a centuries-old idea originating in Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (1516), which has been promoted in later years by a series of philosophers, social reformers and civic leaders in Europe and all over the world. Most contemporary definitions of UBI identify similar foundational concepts: an unconditional basic income that is not reliant on employment activation, household, relationship status or means-testing and guarantees a minimum income level below which no one should fall (RSA 2015, 2020a, 2020b; Social Justice Ireland 2021a, 2021b). Public support for UBI and how a country's context would be able to actually introduce it are not always aligned. The implementation of UBI in Western Europe has always implied significant changes to current systems in place, which along with the administrative, fiscal and economic feasibility of UBI-related schemes have been the object of studies. De Wispelaere produced a theoretical framework on the political dimension of UBI in the 2010s underlining its complexity and the importance of analysing four kinds of feasibilities: institutional, strategic, psychological and behavioural. Another main question theorised is around its social and economic impacts: will beneficiaries continue working (as the few studies show) or would UBI deter from work? The question of the how has sometimes eluded the question of the why, i.e., what are the political, social and administrative objectives (social justice and equality, wellbeing, administrative savings and simplifications) (De Wispelaere and Noguera 2012, p. 21).

The current debate on UBI for all has now reached political agendas in the EU. Wellbeing objectives for society, as well as a simplification of procedures allowing some public administration savings, are the reasons put forward by the European Citizens' Initiative whose online petition to "start Unconditional Basic Incomes throughout the EU" was launched in 2022. To be debated, the petition needs to reach 1 million support declarations and minimal thresholds in seven member countries. It has gathered 187,000 signatures by 1 April 2022 and has until 26 June 2022 to reach the objectives, which seems unlikely, also because of the Ukrainian war and associated economic consequences. Three countries constitute over 80% of votes (Slovenia, Germany and Spain), with France stalling at 20% (ECI 2022).

For artists and cultural workers, campaigns for a basic income have been active in the world during the 19th century (RSA 2020a). Some radical proponents of cultural UBI see it as a way of protecting the art world from the market, considering that having access to a basic income will "allow artists to escape the so-called 'arts industry' which, for artists, is a mirage, a problematic construction driven by a comparatively well-paid, managerialist class that fetishizes the artist and cannibalizes their need to create" (Pledger 2017, p. 55). Most of the arguments traditionally opposed to public funding for the arts also apply to UBI, i.e., that it would create a class of "state artists" or artists cut off from society, whose privilege would hinder them from creating free and relevant art and whose activity would distort the free market (Throsby 2010; Towse 2005).

This liberal approach is contradicted by specific systems developed to ensure financial stability for cultural workers, such as the "intermittence", which was first introduced in France in the 1930s. During the pandemic, "intermittence" support was eventually granted to live art worker recipients without the minimum threshold of 507 h of work, allowing artists to continue creating and rehearsing, alleviating stress and reducing opting out. Interviews were carried out to substantiate the grey literature (MC/MTEI 2021), which focuses on the financial framework without investigating the protective impact of this system on the live arts compared with other arts professions, such as the visual arts, or other countries, such as the UK (Doustaly 2022).

The case study on visual arts workers in the UK presented in Section 5, whose research director (V. Roy) is also the co-author of this paper, draws on a two-phased primary research study conducted through online surveys made available in English and Welsh by the consultancy Earthen Lamp.<sup>1</sup> The surveys were circulated in the UK to visual arts workers living and working in the country through established visual arts networks part of

the Visual Arts Alliance (VAA).<sup>2</sup> Phase 1 of the study was carried out in April 2020 and received 1045 completed responses, while Phase 2 in August 2021 achieved 674 completed responses from eligible respondents (Earthen Lamp 2020). Phase 1 of the study (delivered in April 2020) was a rapid action tool to understand the immediate take up and impact of the support measures announced by the UK government and related bodies to support visual arts workers. The second phase of the study, which was just over a year after the first phase was delivered in August 2021, looked at how these support measures were received to understand their impact on supporting artistic practice and livelihoods of visual arts workers (Earthen Lamp 2021).

In disseminating the research tools, a convenience sampling approach was initially adopted. However, in the sample for both surveys, the VAA member organisations assisted in ensuring that a fair geographic spread of responses was achieved as they disseminated the surveys through social media channels, newsletters, visual arts networks and email marketing. Although it is not possible to estimate the population of visual arts workers in the UK during the time of the study, the responses received for both phases were noted as fair samples for analysis. The analytical strategy adopted ensured that all responses were anonymised, which was essential given the sensitive nature of some of the responses received. Although the data offered some opportunities for longitudinal analysis, to respect the anonymity of respondents such a strategy was not implemented, and the total dataset was analysed as a composite rather than by case.

### 3. The UK Cultural Sector Context Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

#### 3.1. The UK's Mixed Cultural Economy: Sizeable, Expanding, but Vulnerable

In 2016, the cultural sector (excl. tourism) was fast-growing in the UK, representing about 1.5% of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) (+27.1% since 2010), 2% of its workforce (+25% since 2011) and around 3.1% of total UK exports (90% driven by cinema, audio-visual and music). By 2018, the last year without COVID-19, the cultural sector contributed GBP 32.3 billion to the UK economy and accounted for 1.7% of the UK's GVA (Growth Value Added), rising faster than average and an increase of 21.9% in real terms from 2010. The creative industries, which contribute indirectly to the cultural sector's development, contributed GBP 111.7 billion or 5.8% of GVA to the UK economy (an increase of 43.2% in real terms since 2010) (DCMS 2018, pp. 1, 7–24; 2020).

The UK model of cultural policy is traditionally influenced by liberal economics. The country adopted a mixed model for culture where the role of voluntary and private funding is key, and where public funding for culture has traditionally been lower than in continental Europe. Within models of cultural policy, France and continental Europe were identified as “architect” states, working through ministries to steer more interventionist programmes, while the UK was categorised as relying on a “patron state” (similar to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Nordic countries), consisting of funding excellence indirectly through expert arm's-length bodies, such as the Arts Councils or English Heritage. However, these models have gradually hybridised: the UK experiencing a period of convergence with more interventionist and generous policies during the Blair–Brown Labour governments (1997–2010), approaching the model adopted in France (Doustaly 2007; Doustaly and Gray 2010).

In 2018, just before the pandemic, the budget of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) constituted less than 0.5% of UK government funding (0.2% for culture as defined as arts and heritage) while the same sectors received 1% in France (sports excluded). Indeed, the conservative governments in place in the UK since 2010 have implemented austerity measures in all public sectors. The cultural sector lost 17% of public funding since 2010, leading to a decrease of 35% in investment per capita between 2008 and 2018 (national, local and lottery), while local government funding fell by 43%.<sup>3</sup> During the same period, earned income increased by 47% (box office sales, venues hires and catering), creative and cultural GVA by 15% and cultural employment by 21%. Financial support from business sponsorship was down 39% between 2008 and 2013, while philanthropy



increased by 38% between 2014 and 2018 (NCA 2018). This context, with relative success in receding public funding, also explains why the government contemplated several times to scrap the DCMS budget, which would have led to cultural work being treated similarly to that of other economic sectors.

### 3.2. A Cultural Sector Already Affected by Brexit

A 2016 survey illustrated that 90% of creative professionals opposed Brexit for personal, professional and financial reasons and campaigned against it and afterwards against its negative impacts through the petition “Britain stronger in Europe” (Creative Industries Federation 2016). Even though Brexit was voted on in 2016, the withdrawal agreement, signed after much delay and complex last-minute negotiations, did not come into force until February 2020. The agreement, however, has not solved all regulatory issues that are now expected to take years to settle.<sup>4</sup> With the pandemic hitting in 2020, the full consequences of Brexit, on the cultural sector in particular, have not yet been fully measured.

That said, the financial loss for the sector can be estimated by quoting the level of direct and indirect investment received through the EU. Between 2007 and 2016, the UK CCIs received EUR 345 million in direct EU support, including about a third for the arts (EUR 118.6 m). Between 2014 and 2018, Creative Europe in the UK was given EUR 89.5 million including EUR 22.3 million for culture—distributed to 150 organisations and 144 projects for setting up both cooperation projects (EUR 18.6 m) and European platforms (EUR 3.2 m). Even after the Brexit vote, the UK was twice as successful as the average EU country in accessing such funds and was part of 44% of Europe Creative projects. It should be added that some of the EUR 5.8 billion in the 2014–2020 period from the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) for strategic investment, notably in culture, was mainly from outside London. The EU’s role was not just about redistributing funds, but also investing in capacity building, networks and the testing of models for the sector to become more economically sustainable (Creative Europe Desk UK 2017; HC 365 2018). In October 2019, after yet another lobbying campaign from the cultural and creative sector and a Parliamentary commission, a EUR 250 million investment fund was created to mitigate the impact of Brexit—a sum that was still insufficient according to creative organisations, which continued to lobby to remain part of the Europe Creative programme post Brexit (NCA 2018; Creative Industries Federation 2016).

### 3.3. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the UK Cultural Sector

After the hospitality sector, the cultural sector in the UK (here defined as arts, entertainment and recreation) was the second hardest hit by the pandemic: GDP decreased by 44.5% between April–June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. Initially, workers reacted with creativity and patience, trying to reach audiences online often for free or for a small fee and continuing work on their projects, some with the financial support of the Arts Council England (ACE) or English Heritage. As time went by, anguish increased among the cultural professional, with some changing occupation or intending to do so (OECD 2020).

The CCV (Centre for Cultural Value)<sup>5</sup> carried out research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cultural organisations, the cultural sector workforce and audiences. Its conclusions were comprehensive in that they analysed the financial, artistic, social inequalities and workers’ wellbeing consequences. They concluded that:

- “The pandemic held a mirror up to a deeply unequal cultural sector;
- Its impact was not experienced evenly across the sector, with younger workers, women and workers from ethnically diverse backgrounds among the hardest hit in terms of losing work and income;
- For freelancers, who make up a significant part of the cultural workforce, the impact was major and sometimes devastating. Freelancers constituted 62% of the core-creative workforce before the pandemic and only 52% by the end of 2020;
- The most dramatic decline in the cultural industries workforce was observed in music, performing and visual arts, where the professional workforce fell by around a quarter

between March and June 2020, with no signs of significant recovery by the end of 2020, in comparison with other sectors.” (CCV 2022).

These statistics reflect the beginning of the pandemic’s impacts, and we now analyse how the UK government’s support mechanisms were refined and extended (Section 4). We then provide information on visual arts workers’ experiences of these mechanisms (Section 5) and lastly explore the debate around UBI as a way forward (Section 6).

#### 4. The UK Governmental Culture Recovery Plan to Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic

##### 4.1. The Culture Recovery Plan Framework

The UK government departed from its traditional noninterventionist approach and devised an ambitious funding plan, which has now materialised in three “culture recovery funding rounds” on top of general support which could be accessed by freelancers and companies (see next section).

In July 2020, the UK government announced the creation of a “culture recovery fund” of GBP 1.57 billion (about EUR 1.7 billion) until the end of January 2021. It was described as a “rescue package” for arts, culture and heritage industries. For a similar national population, this is about half the support granted by France over the same period (EUR 3.3 billion). However, it was the highest funding allocated to the cultural sector (music, dance, theatres, museums, festivals and heritage) in the history of the UK, even though the distribution was slow and took until October 2021.

The plan was presented by Oliver Dowden, UK Minister for Culture, along the traditional lines of conservative cultural policy priorities: maintain the UK as a “cultural superpower”, rescue cultural icons, allocating, however, 70% outside the capital. Out of the GBP 880 million allocated to cultural bodies, Arts Council England (or ACE, responsible for the live arts, museum and galleries) received GBP 257 million to redistribute to cultural organisations. ACE announced its policy to suspend delivery targets in order to focus on the most vulnerable and reorient some funds towards education and civic value. Cultural organisations were also informed that honouring ongoing or promised contracts with artists and freelancers would be taken into account to access support. The Museums and Heritage bodies obtained GBP 100 million. The package also included stimulus investment of up to GBP 120 million (half of which for ACE) to carry out urgent cultural building construction and restoration projects, using the opportunity of closed venues to invest economic sustainability in the cultural sector whilst also kickstarting the construction sector. Although the plan was welcomed, it favoured organisations over workers, especially in England. Questions were also raised over the funding of private firms which were not facing liquidity issues, mainly in the creative industries, such as the Collective or Pop Brixton (creative premises) (DCMS 2020; ACE 2020; CCV 2022).

A second and third round of the plan followed, where stimulus investment and public procurement complemented immediate rescue measures more and more. By the end of June 2021, circa GBP 2 billion pounds (0.5% of the GBP 400 billion of the COVID-19 UK recovery plan) were made available as part of the Culture Recovery Fund. Overall, by January 2021 ACE had received GBP 500 million from the Culture Recovery Fund and GBP 165 million in Culture Recovery Fund payable finance (UK Government 2021). As a comparison, France planned EUR 2 billion for culture as part of the EUR 100 billion “France relance” national programme (including EUR 40 billion received from the EU) (MC 2020).

##### 4.2. Support Mechanisms for Visual Arts Workers

During COVID-19, inequalities increased in the UK society and in the cultural sector, as access to support was not evenly spread. A number of UK economic sustainability programmes were accessible to cultural workers, most of which were not specifically targeting cultural work, hence their inherent limitations. Extended as part of the two recovery plans, the main schemes of financial support for UK workers and organisations included loans, grants, repayments and VAT (Value Added Tax) reduction:

- The Bounce Back Loan Scheme offered businesses loans of up to GBP 50,000 or 25% of turnover (April 2020–March 2021);
- The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme allowed employers to apply for a grant that covered 80 percent of an employee’s monthly wage (up to GBP 2500 a month) (March 2020–September 2021);
- The Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) allocated taxable grants worth 80% of someone’s average monthly trading profit, for a three-month period (March 2020–September 2021);
- New, sector-specific tax reliefs as well as a temporary VAT reduction (notably for theatres, cinemas, associations, trusts and foundations);
- Partial repayment of debts (GBP 270 million in 2020–2021) ([UK Government 2020, 2021](#); [UK Parliament 2021](#)).

The other measures that supported financial sustainability and risk mitigation were:

- An extension to the furlough scheme for affected businesses until mass gatherings were permitted under the government’s and devolved administrations’ COVID-19 guidelines;
- Continued workforce support measures, including enhanced measures for freelancers and small companies;
- Clear, if conditional, timelines for when they will be able to reopen, and technological solutions to enable audiences to return without social distancing;
- Public investment in an uncertain economic climate ([UK Parliament 2021](#)).

A number of organisations regretted that the spread of support was uneven on the territory and that many could not demonstrate an immediate short-term financial threat to their organisation and were therefore excluded from relief funding. ACE, and a report ordered by the UK opposition leader, showed that women were more likely than men to lose their jobs and that BAME (Black, Asian and other minority ethnic) workers faced more social barriers, struggled more to access emergency funding grants and received less. Moreover, some individuals could not access both generic and cultural UK government assistance schemes: specific grants for cultural workers and artists who were ineligible for both the furlough scheme for employees (later the scheme for self-employed workers) could only be accessed from ACE with the same eligibility criteria: 50% of income had to come through self-employment ([Lawrence 2020](#); [CCV 2020a](#)).

The pandemic therefore exposed in a broader light the underlying challenges connected to the complexity of some categories of cultural work, portfolio and career paths. The usefulness, but also the limitations of the overall governmental measures, appeared gradually through professional associations, the media, social media and direct exchanges. These included: strict qualifying conditions as seen above but also a lack of understanding of portfolio working arrangements and of clarity about application procedures and timelines. To address this, the VAA decided to commission a report into visual arts workers, the results of which are analysed in the part below.

## 5. Case Study on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Visual Arts Workers and Their Views on Support Measures

To support cultural workers, the VAA commissioned a UK wide quantitative and qualitative study to better understand the way the governmental pandemic rescue schemes were applied and appropriated in the visual arts. The study was delivered by independent cultural research consultancy Earthen Lamp and was carried out in 2020 and repeated in 2021 to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related lockdowns on the livelihoods,<sup>6</sup> work conditions and production of visual arts workers in the UK. The co-author of this paper (V. Roy), as research director of Earthen Lamp, was instrumental in designing and delivering both phases of the VAA study, and this paper builds on this earlier work. Phase 1 of the study into livelihoods of visual arts workers was delivered at the start of the pandemic and the first lockdown in May 2020. Just over a year on, Phase 2 of the study in August 2021 examined the realities in comparison with the anxieties expressed



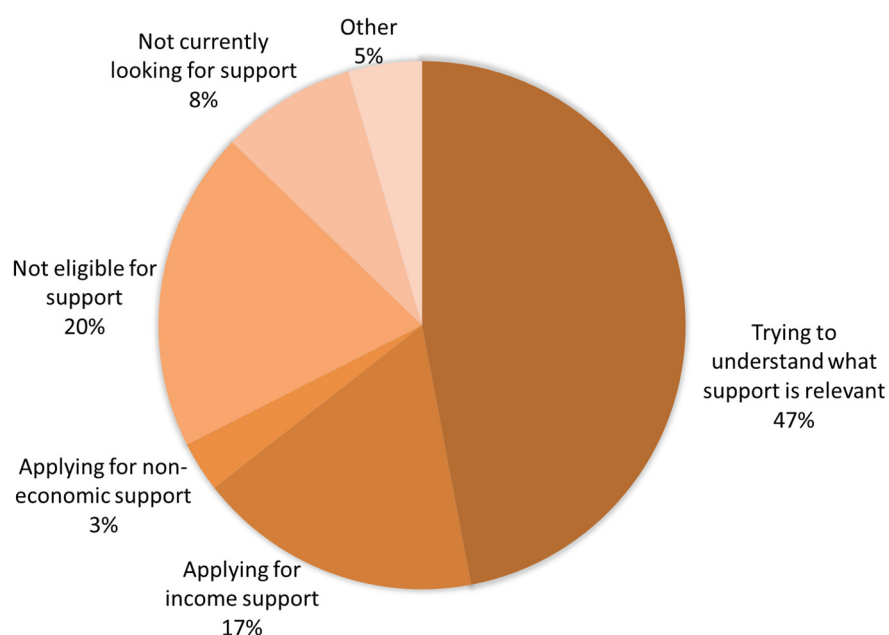
in Phase 1 and the perception of the level of usefulness of the support measures announced in May 2020.

The commissioning body VAA is made up of UK-based visual arts sector support and professional organisations. This research acted as a rapid action tool to understand primarily the position of the freelance creative workforce in the country in the visual arts sector. In addition to the impact of the lockdown, the study also investigated the response of the sector to emergency sector support measures announced by Arts Councils and Her Majesty’s Treasury. The definition of “visual arts workers” in this context includes a range of individuals who work in the visual arts sector—from artists, makers, technicians, fabricators and curators to consultants (Earthen Lamp 2020, 2021).

Phase 1 of the study was carried out in 2020, during the initial stages of the pandemic and when support measures had only recently been announced. Its results show (see Figure 1 below) that about 20% of visual arts workers found themselves ineligible for financial support packages announced thus far. It is inferred from the data that the key reasons for this ineligibility was the diversity in forms of employment and complex income sources of these individuals:

*“Two thirds of the way through the 2018/2019 tax year I went fully self-employed. Even though I have now been fully self-employed (sole trader) for 16 months I do not qualify for the scheme due to the cut-off date and the percentage of my income from employment for those years being taken into account. I also do not qualify for Universal Credit due to savings.”*

The study found that many respondents earned less than half of their income through their artistic practice, while others did not qualify for the support measures as they had only recently started their practice or become self-employed. Other forms of income such as pensions, income from another job, or income received by the respondents’ partners made them ineligible to apply towards these financial measures, many of which had fixed criteria for qualification based on previous levels of income. Where previous income levels were not a disqualifying criterion, some respondents were still ineligible due to their form of employment, e.g., being self-employed, running as a limited company, or having some form of savings.



**Figure 1.** Study 1—visual arts workers accessing sector support measures in April 2020 (Earthen Lamp).

Overall, 74% of the visual arts workers consulted during the initial stages of the pandemic declared that they were unhappy with the level of financial measures announced

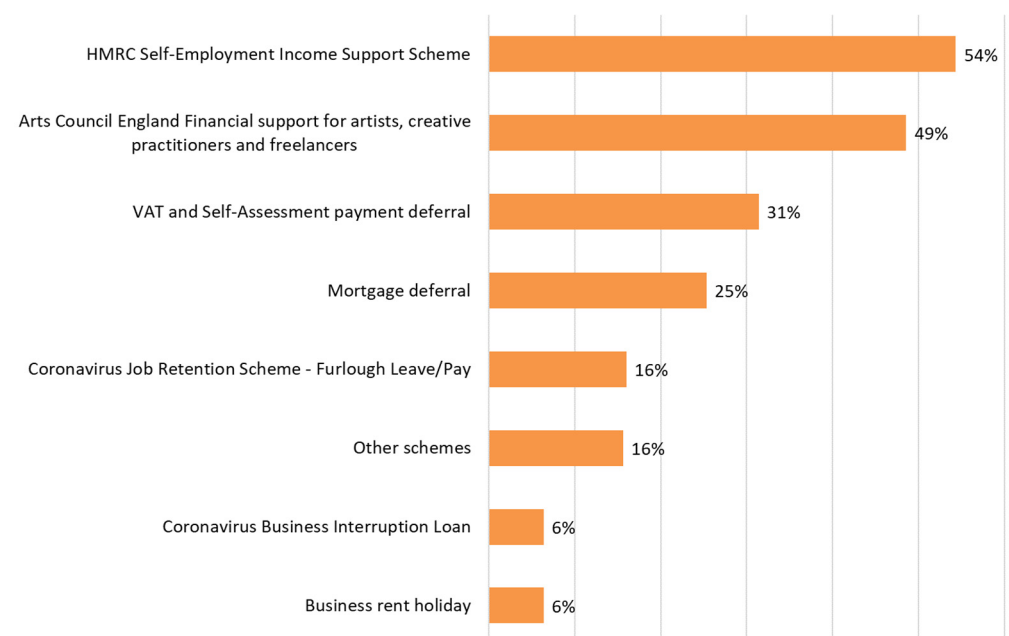
by the government and professional bodies whose role they saw was to support the work and income of cultural workers. As the pandemic progressed, the level of satisfaction with the range of support measures made available by the government increased, with 66% of the respondents in 2021 (as compared with 74% of respondents in 2020) requesting other types of support measures.

In March 2020, the UK government announced that the income of self-employed workers in the UK would be supported through a cash grant of 80% of their profits, up to GBP 2500 per month for three months. Known as the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Self-employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), it was subsequently rolled out in four waves from March 2020 to September 2021.

During the initial stages of the VAA study, it was noted that in addition to the support awarded specifically for cultural workers, many visual arts workers were waiting to access SEISS. The study found that over half (54%) of visual arts workers accessed SEISS to support their income, which also highlights the prominent level of self-employment in this sector. Although specialist support offered through cultural bodies such as ACE and other sector support organisations was seen as a first port of call for cultural workers, this type of funding was extremely competitive to access, and many visual arts workers were not successful.

*“I find it very demoralising being in such a competitive market, putting creatives up against each other. Many of us in the main work very individually . . . isolated. Also a proven track record working in [the] public sector is divisive too, is demeaning and excludes those who strive to find alternative ways/own backing to normally make projects happen.”*

These individuals accessed other schemes to supplement their income, such as mortgage deferral (25%), VAT and self-assessment tax deferrals (31%), business interruption loans (6%) and business rent holiday (6%) (see Figure 2 below).



**Figure 2.** Study 1—awareness of economic support measures in April 2020 (Earthen Lamp).

Additionally, even in the initial stages of the pandemic, circa 2% of visual arts workers had already received governmental support through Universal Credit. When the study was repeated in 2021, it was found that at least 3% of the sample had either received Universal Credit or had applied for it, many for the first time in their careers.

As the pandemic and lack of visual arts work progressed, it became obvious that schemes such as Universal Credit were not an adequate financial measure for visual arts workers and time and again some form of universal basic income or a living wage was sought out by a large number of respondents in the study in 2021:

*“Universal basic income please, i.e., something that allows me to survive (pay rent, eat, etc.) that is not tied to some sort of public outcome that might require completely altering my entire practice.”*

Circa 12% felt the time was right to lobby the government for such a scheme or to mirror the principles of the scheme in the support made available. Other financial support which was recommended included schemes such as the Job Retention Scheme proposed by Her Majesty’s Revenue & Customs (HMRC) (whereby at least 80% of the income of respondents are secured), business grants or emergency cash grants. Visual arts workers also requested clarity and consistency of information about grants available and that the latter be accessed more easily, in a timelier manner and, to some extent, without a sense of competition between practitioners. More nuanced understanding and support was therefore requested to assist practitioners who were not able to access any of the support measures. It was also noted that not enough support measures addressed the needs of curators, producers, fabricators, or facilitators who work in the sector (Earthen Lamp 2020, 2021).

In April 2021, the study found that 28% of respondents indicated that they have successfully applied for income support, while 32% were either unsuccessful or ineligible for support. Some other interesting trends can be seen with regards to the economic support measures announced by strategic bodies for visual arts workers. Having had the economic support in 2021, respondents found it to be more useful than they originally perceived (33% in 2021 as compared with 24% in 2020).

The pandemic had a marked impact on the income of visual arts workers, with 70% indicating a drop in their income. Although the amount of loss in income varied, 28% lost between GBP 5000 and GBP 10,000, and a further third lost more than GBP 10,000 in income over the pandemic. Using the ONS (Office of National Statistics) median income in 2020 of GBP 29,900, the findings indicate that a third of visual arts workers lost about a third of their income due to the pandemic. For many, this was a lot more and a larger percentage of loss. The study in 2021 concluded that a conservative estimate of the average loss of income for a visual arts worker over the pandemic was just over GBP 7000 (Earthen Lamp 2020, 2021).

In conclusion, there were many gaps when devising economic measures for recovery for individual visual arts workers. Many of these have led to anguish, uncertainty and reduced cultural outputs from workers (Earthen Lamp 2020, 2021). The findings clearly outline the need to find more economically and culturally sustainable ways to face periods of crisis and also to work in “normal contexts” to ensure cultural workers’ precarity is mitigated so they can focus on their activities and the physical and mental brunt of it. One of the unexpected results coming from the study emerged from the unprompted responses to the open questions included in the online survey about more effective solutions for supporting the livelihoods of visual arts workers.

*“For artists and cultural workers that are working consistently and making a contribution to the cultural sector and wider society yet are not part of the few that are recipients of a financial art market, there should be state provision that could support our practices to thrive and develop by enabling access to a basic universal income. Not just in this moment—but as standard policy. This crisis has thrown us all back onto our own resources and if you don’t have access to generational wealth, family structures of economic support, homes and studio support, it is so tough to be able to see how people that are talented but super precarious . . . how they can survive this! For example, as a self-employed artist I can’t apply for Job Seekers Allowance, I have some modest savings that has been built up over 20 years as a professional artist (I don’t have a pension) therefore I can’t apply for universal credit. This crisis at my age (when the arts support is normally so focused on 20–35 age group) is extremely anxious and depressing reality.”*

*This could really destroy everything for me, keeping an open and healthy mindset in this huge uncertainty is a daily battle. [ . . . ] Most days I'm not coping at all well."*

Around 4% of the participants (in Phase 1) referred to the idea of implementation of UBI in this context. The support of these respondents towards similar schemes was clear throughout the study. In the next section, we discuss how economic support measures related to UBI have been historically implemented, from the cultural workers in France to the more recent related scheme implemented in Ireland in 2022.

## 6. Discussion: Is Cultural UBI the Solution?

The impact of the pandemic on a structurally vulnerable sector such as the cultural one has initiated calls for sustainable economic solutions to safeguard the level of activity and the quality of life of workers (Pratt 2020; Eikhof 2020). Workers who have not left the sector, especially the younger generations, aspire to improved conditions in the future: "The personal is political. COVID has changed how we think about personal and collective space, agency and consent. How do we think radically about how we navigate cultural spaces and gather together again?" (NCA 2020, Conversation 11).

One of the most radical solutions debated for the UK is UBI, already implemented in some countries and subsectors (*intermittent* in France; *Künstersozialkasse* in Germany) or tested (in Ireland). This is explored in the next two sections followed by a discussion on a potential future for UBI in the UK's visual arts sector. UBI can either be unconditional (revenues are added) or can allow individuals to reach a minimum threshold per month or year, when revenues are insufficient. A complete system offering a 10-year guaranteed salary to artists was abandoned in the Netherlands in the 1980s for its rocketing costs (Menger 2014). However, campaigns favour minimal financial safety nets to ensure physical and mental wellbeing through reassurance and stability, allowing individuals to stay in the profession and find space for creativity (RSA 2015; Deller 2016).

### 6.1. Cultural Universal Basic Income in France

In France, UBI for all is no longer at the centre of public debate, and the pandemic only briefly relaunched the idea, contrary to other countries where it has recently blossomed. Indeed, forms of UBI were supported by several candidates in France in the previous presidential election in 2017, supported by a mixture of liberal as well as socialist arguments. However, its financial cost and fiscal implementation were found to be too risky, leading French MPs to oppose the introduction of trials, similarly to Scotland, where a project for a pilot scheme was recently put on hold. The main French lobby for UBI, the MFRB (Mouvement Français pour un Revenu de Base), continues to be active but at a lower level. Many put forward the argument that other solidarity benefits exist (RSA, Revenu de Solidarité Active) and could be improved more easily instead of introducing UBI (Golla 2022; Hyafil 2016; MFRB 2022). In terms of equity, the OECD also questioned whether UBI would not disadvantage the most vulnerable when they could access targeted support through means-tested policies (OECD 2020).

In 2018, the French visual arts sector generated a EUR 23.4 billion turnover, making it the first cultural sector before music and cinema. However, public financing is not proportional. Very small businesses and freelancers have been heavily hit by the pandemic, but only received EUR 13.1 million, or about 3% of the French creation recovery fund. In 2022, a survey of 2135 artists by the French professional visual arts associations (ADAGP) concluded that 46% of visual artists had lost more than 50% of their income compared with the same month in the previous year (a condition to access the French emergency fund).<sup>7</sup>

Created in 1936, the French *intermittent* status is today accessible to only a few subsectors of the cultural profession: live arts, cinema and audio-visual artists and technicians who have discontinuous and task-related jobs benefit from a specific status and unemployment insurance system (Pôle Emploi Spectacle). The system has been reformed to limit its potential instrumentalisation to cut salaried work. It is financially balanced and has become essential to the dynamic French live arts scene. *Intermittent* workers, oscillating

between 150,000 and 275,000, currently need to work a minimum of 507 h in the year to qualify (Menger 2014; ETUI/Casse 2020). In 2020 and 2021, because of the pandemic, the benefit was allocated unconditionally. This was deemed as unfair by visual arts workers and writers who also have intermittent revenues and faced dire situations. As a result, they formed new groups to support their integration in the *intermittent* status: a campaign (La Buse), which is a working group within the communist party and a visual arts trade union (Syndicat travailleurs artistes-auteurs STAA). For Catin, a writer and UBI campaigner, the distinction, inherited from the way professions were constructed—individual “creators” relying on the market (copyright) against “cultural workers” collectively lobbying for a public safety net—does not apply to all visual arts workers or writers (Catin 2020; Ackerman 2021).

### 6.2. The Culture UBI Pilot Scheme in Ireland

In Ireland, the Irish Culture and Arts Minister since 2020, Catherine Martin (Green party, formerly an English and music teacher), announced in October 2022 a pilot scheme for Universal Basic income as part of the next budget. EUR 25 million was allocated by the Department of Tourism, Arts, Culture, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, enough for 2000 artists and cultural workers to claim the monthly income, circa EUR 1365, in 2022 for a period of three years (Irish Government 2022).

The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce, which proposed the introduction of the scheme in Ireland identified it as “an unconditional state payment that each citizen receives” (Irish Government 2020, p. 17). The payment is designed to provide enough to cover the basic costs of living and provide a modicum of financial security. All other income would then be earned separately and be subject to taxation (Irish Government 2020). According to Healy (2021), the aim of the scheme is to impact two areas, namely the irregular level of activity and wellbeing of cultural workers. This is very close to the French *intermittent* system of complementing revenues.

The Irish UBI pilot was part of a host of other programmes announced by the minister to provide more sectoral and institutional support in 2022. Apart from the UBI pilot, the other measures are more applicable to institutions and cultural organisations (rather than being targeted at an individual level). Although at the time of the announcement the UBI pilot was met with some scepticism, as it did not offer any relief from the immediate financial stresses of artists, it eventually brought hope as a potential solution to alleviate the financial precarity of cultural workers in Ireland. That said, issues around eligibility are still being ironed out and there is some indication that the number of applicants could exceed the number of income awards possible. Currently, as issues of eligibility and the process by which recipients are selected are being decided, the ministry has indicated that there will be no means-testing and that the process will be noncompetitive. If the number of applicants exceeds the number of income awards available, selection will be randomised (DTCAGSM 2022; Solomon 2022).

### 6.3. The Case for a Cultural UBI in the UK

In the UK, the campaign for Basic Income has been led by the RSA<sup>8</sup>, which declared that “UBI is an old idea whose time has come” (RSA 2015) and presented models on how the scheme can be modelled on pilot studies in Netherlands, Finland, Germany and Canada. This movement has been supported by thinkers, economic researchers and politicians alike and much work in this area has taken place to lobby for the launch and implementation of such a scheme. In the UK context, the introduction of the scheme would imply a shift from tax credits and variable welfare benefits to a basic standard payment for all.

Following Eikhof’s (2020) argument, a UBI scheme in the visual arts could disrupt the link between project-based production and income from project-based employment and make working in the sector a more accessible and financially sustainable prospect for workers from currently under-represented groups. Eikhof found that “UBI schemes were more likely to benefit those in most financial need, whereas the support schemes



introduced by the UK Government were more likely to benefit workers on higher incomes” (Eikhof 2020 quoting RSA 2020a, 2020b, p. 242).

In a shift of emphasis from its traditional entrepreneurial model, the Arts Councils in the UK offered initial COVID-19 relief funds for individuals, which targeted freelance artists and creative practitioners to help cover their loss of income as a result of the crisis. Such measures included the Arts Council of Wales’ GBP 2 million Urgent Response Fund for Individuals (Arts Council of Wales 2020), the Arts Council England’s GBP 20 million Emergency Response Fund for Individuals (ACE 2020) and Creative Scotland’s GBP 2 million Bridging Bursary (Creative Scotland 2020). However, such emergency funds have now since closed and artists must apply to the re-deployment of project grants, signalling a movement back to the project-based, entrepreneurial model.

Since early 2021, almost a year into the pandemic and related lockdowns, the calls for such schemes to be introduced for creative workers in the UK have strengthened further. As the pandemic spotlighted the long-standing structural issues and associated precarity across the creative sectors, networks such as Equity<sup>9</sup> called for the government to take urgent action to protect its members. The body argued that the pandemic had “exposed the inability of the national welfare system and government support schemes to allow for the specific needs of creative, freelance and *intermittent* workers” (Equity 2021). Research undertaken by Equity (2021) showed that 40% of their members were unable to access the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme, while others were able to only partially access other schemes of financial support due to the unique portfolio careers of their members. The case for the introduction of such a scheme for cultural workers in the UK goes beyond providing financial security and wellbeing to such individuals. It is seen as one of the best schemes to stem the outflow of creative and cultural workers out of the sector. According to a study by Artist Union England (Monk and Gollan 2021) in the first year of the pandemic, “too many talented people are forced to abandon working in their creative field because they cannot afford to carry on.” From an inclusion perspective, Eikhof (2020), concludes that “UBI schemes’ potential to deliver better distributive justice makes them a particularly interesting intervention for rebuilding and reforming the cultural economy” (Eikhof 2020, p. 242).

So far, the UK government has taken a cautious stance towards introducing financial measures related to UBI in the UK, declaring a scheme such as this “prohibitively expensive” and likely to “create too many losers among the poorest families” (Whittaker 2020). Even in 2021, with major support for UBI-related initiatives across Europe and closer to the UK’s shores in Ireland, such a measure is not being viewed as “right for the nations of the UK”. In 2020, Basic Income Scotland published a report on the feasibility of UBI in the country and launched a soft pilot in August 2020 (Citizens’ Basic Income Feasibility Study Steering Group). The Steering Group recommended that a Scottish pilot should go ahead, but the devolution settlement did not allow for this (Basic Income Scotland 2020). In spite of the growing public interest and some level of political support, UBI for culture still does not seem imminent. More recently, the Cultural Renewal Task Force, set up as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, did not provide any recommendations in support of such an initiative to secure the livelihoods of cultural workers post pandemic (UK Government 2020).

Evaluation of UBI schemes is one way forward, as noted by the Centre for Cultural Value. Quoting Greig de Peuter’s study from 2014, it summarised the four benefits that UBI could guarantee for artists, which still apply today:

1. Bridging gaps in pay for *intermittent* workers;
2. Offering compensation for artists’ often unpaid and sometimes intangible contributions to society and the creative economy;
3. Quickly eradicating poverty, of which artists are more at risk;
4. Encouraging artists to experiment with new content, forms and models of labour organisation.” (CCV 2020b, p. 20).

Therefore, although there is no clear governmental support, the case for UBI has been made clearly and sometimes vociferously at different levels from practitioners, structural agencies and ministers alike. However, before such a scheme can be implemented, more evaluation is needed, starting from the trials being set up in a postpandemic context, not just about the impacts of the schemes but also the limitations they incorporate.

## 7. Conclusions and Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns across the world have greatly affected an already vulnerable cultural economy and the structural precarity of many cultural workers. After documenting the impacts of the pandemic in the cultural sector and the effectiveness of governmental responses in the UK and in some countries in Europe, this article focused on the visual arts and explored calls for reforms of the cultural public economy. We demonstrated that while the UK government's recovery plan went against the country's cultural policy tradition due to the plan's interventionist and financially generous nature, it disproportionately benefitted organisations rather than individuals working in the sector, especially in England. The study conducted on visual arts workers in the UK showed that many were unable to access these financial recovery schemes and fell through the cracks of the complex criteria set for these funds. To explore alternatives, this article then attempted to inform the current debate on measures that are potentially more economically sustainable and wellbeing protective for cultural workers, such as Universal Basic Income, than the current pandemic emergency measures. Their applicability was explored with reference to the historic French and recent Irish examples.

As often is the case with UBI, proponents of free markets economics and of more interventionist approaches were found on both sides of the argument. The former considered that freelancers' income will decrease as a result of adjusting to UBI as an extra financial source for cultural workers. In the case of the latter, UBI was described as follows by an attendee in a National Campaign for the Arts<sup>10</sup> conference: "Universal Basic Income is paying for the employers and not the employees. The revolution in thinking needs to criticise what the art infrastructure really is. The buildings aren't the infrastructure but the people, putting more value on the people but not on the space instead" (NCA 2020, Conversation 11). This clearly shows that the idea of instituting a UBI-based scheme as a way of safeguarding the livelihoods of individual cultural workers and from that the overall cultural (arts) infrastructure is still hotly debated. While UBI supporters lobby the government in the UK to introduce such schemes for cultural workers, it is clear that much more research into the existing pilots is needed, and we invite academics in the field to direct their research interests towards more nuanced research into the impacts of such measures.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are openly available in public reports that are cited in the bibliography.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Earthen Lamp is an independent research-led consultancy based in the UK. <https://www.earthenlamp.com/> (accessed on 20 January 2022).

- <sup>2</sup> Visual Arts Alliance (VAA) comprises the following organisations in the UK: a-n The Artist Information Company; Artquest; Axis Web; Black Curators Collective; CHEAD Council for Higher Education Art & Design; Creative Space Network; Curator Space; Nine CVAN regions; ENGAGE DACS; Guild, Easy St Arts; International Curators Forum; IXIA Public Art; Plus Tate; Migrants In Culture; SCAN Scottish Contemporary Art Network; Visual Artists Ireland; Visual Arts Group Wales; We Shall Not Be Removed; RED EYE Photography Network.
- <sup>3</sup> This is also the result of the fact that apart from libraries, the support for culture from local authorities has always been discretionary in England.
- <sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/relations-non-eu-countries/relations-united-kingdom/eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/relations-non-eu-countries/relations-united-kingdom/eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement_en) (accessed on 18 January 2022).
- <sup>5</sup> AHRC funded—academic expert Centre based at the University of Leeds. The Project was carried out in collaboration with The Audience Agency, the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre and a national consortium of academic researchers.
- <sup>6</sup> The term livelihood is used here as it is in the academic and professional cultural sector “the activities, the assets and the access that jointly determine the living gained by an individual or household” (Ellis 2000).
- <sup>7</sup> Survey conducted in January and February 2021 (over about 14,000 members). <https://www.adagp.fr/fr/actualites/publication-l-enquete-adagp-sur-les-effets-crise-sanitaire-et-les-mesures-d-aide-pour-les> (accessed on 18 January 2022).
- <sup>8</sup> The Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) has been at the forefront of significant social impact for over 260 years, thanks to “a diverse global community of over 30,000 problem-solvers that deliver solutions for lasting change”. <https://www.thersa.org/about> (accessed on 20 January 2022).
- <sup>9</sup> Equity is a Trade Union with more than 47,000 performers and creative practitioners affiliated in the UK, which supports fair terms and improved conditions in the workplace. <https://www.equity.org.uk/> (accessed on 20 January 2022).
- <sup>10</sup> The National Campaign for the Arts (NCA) campaigns for more public investment in the arts. <https://forthearts.org.uk/> (accessed on 20 January 2022).

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