



Fact Sheet:

# Participation Pathways for Australian Dancers

# Preface

## The Australian Ballet

We would like to extend our gratitude to all of those who have contributed so generously to this research. To all the dance teachers across the country who tirelessly commit themselves to training the next generation of artists, and to the dedicated parents and guardians who support their children's love of the art form. Because of your effort, the entire dance community is rewarded with exceptional Australian trained dancers performing at the highest level.

Through this research together, we have taken steps towards a greater and more diverse participation in dance. Your insights are an invaluable asset to our company, and to the future of dance in Australia.

### **David Hallberg**

Artistic Director  
The Australian Ballet

## The Australian Ballet School

Students and young dancers are the lifeblood of our art form; fostering a love of dance through participation benefits every aspect of our ecosystem, ensuring a bright and vibrant future for dance in Australia. Whether that participation leads to a healthier lifestyle, an engaged and passionate audience member, a teacher of future generations of dance lovers, or a professional dance career, it is only through active and diverse participation that we will secure this future.

We are incredibly grateful to all who contributed to the research. The generosity of feedback provided through this research has offered invaluable insight into the role we all play in fostering participation. It has highlighted how we can strengthen our contributions and has generated many ideas for consideration, reflecting the passion and commitment of our broad dance community.

### **Lisa Pavane**

Director  
The Australian Ballet School

### **Kirsty Ritchie**

Executive Director  
The Australian Ballet School

## Introduction

In 2023, The Australian Ballet (TAB) and The Australian Ballet School (ABS) commissioned research agency Patternmakers to conduct research into participation pathways for Australian dancers. The research was designed to collect data on three related topics:

- ▶ **Post-pandemic participation pathways:** understanding the pathways dancers take to progress into professional ballet and dance careers, and the strength of these pathways after the pandemic.
- ▶ **Barriers for diverse dancers:** analysing to what extent the dancers progressing towards ballet careers reflect the diversity of Australia, in terms of gender, First Nations representation and cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD).
- ▶ **Areas of opportunity:** exploring how the dance sector can work together to improve participation pathways, particularly for diverse students.

## Method

TAB, ABS and Patternmakers designed a methodology for collecting data from owners of private dance studios in Australia, dance teachers, past and current students and their parents/caregivers, and people working in the dance sector.

Data was ultimately collected from 560 research participants via a combination of stakeholder interviews, discussion groups, secondary analysis of available data, and an online survey of 544 people. The survey was administered with assistance from AusDance and the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD).

## Acknowledgements

TAB, ABS and Patternmakers would like to acknowledge the participants in this research, who took their time to contribute to this study, and the organisations involved.

The authors respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which Australians learn and dance today. They also acknowledge the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia, including Elders past, present and future.

Front cover image: The Australian Ballet's dancers, sourced from <https://australianballet.com.au/our-dancers>

# Key findings

## Introduction

**560 stakeholders, including dance teachers, studio owners, students and parents of students, participated in this project, and many expressed support for change in the dance industry**

- ▶ This research heard from 560 teachers, owners, students and parents of dance school students, and other dance industry stakeholders, who shared their own experiences, views and perceptions on ballet and dance in Australia.
- ▶ This extract of the findings is being shared to contribute new data points to conversations about diversity in dance.
- ▶ There is a clear desire among stakeholders to see initiatives that aim to understand and improve participation pathways for diverse dancers – and many applauded this research as an important resource to inform action.

## Professional pathways

**Each year, around 80 dancers are employed at TAB and around 100 students train at ABS, with most emerging from one of the 4,000 private dance studios operating in Australia**

- ▶ At TAB, around 80 dancers are employed each year – and around 8 in 10 current TAB dancers trained at ABS.
- ▶ An average of 727 people audition for a place at ABS annually, and an average of 95 are accepted into full-time training (approximately 13%). A further 420 students participate in ABS' Intra/Interstate & International Training Program (ITP) annually.
- ▶ Based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' issue of [Arts and Culture in Australia: A Statistical Overview, 2010](#), Ausdance Victoria's 2020 [Victorian Dance Studio Owner COVID-19 Business Impact Survey Report](#), and Ausplay's [Dancing \(Recreational\) State of Play Report](#) (April 2019), there are estimated to be roughly 4,000 private dance studios in Australia, with around 800,000 students aged 0-18 years currently enrolled.

## Dance school challenges

### **Dance schools play a vital role for families, communities and Australia's professional dance sector, but the pandemic has impacted their work**

- ▶ Trends seen in dance schools across the country suggest a decline in enrolments and increased pressures on families in terms of cost of living. In the years to come, these issues could impact on the size and diversity of the talent pool, especially in terms of those most affected by financial barriers.
- ▶ 45% of dance studios had lower or significantly lower enrolments in 2023 compared to 2019, and owners say that reduced enrolments, higher business costs and changes in dancers' ability and behaviour are taking their toll. Meanwhile, 22% said their 2023 enrolments were similar to 2019, and 28% said their enrolments were higher or significantly higher in 2023 compared to 2019.
- ▶ One dance school owner from regional NSW shared: *'Our 12-year-olds currently are really weak. The 5/6 years performance program class is smaller with only 12 students. It impacts my income. The talent and ability [of students] is missing; the numbers for lower levels is frightening due to the financial environment and there being less kids due to COVID.'*

### **Recruiting teachers is a challenge for private dance schools and it may be impacting the pipeline of talent**

- ▶ Teachers are instrumental in nurturing the talent pool of dancers. However, teaching approaches and studio accessibility varies from school to school. Around two-thirds (68%) of teachers surveyed are formally qualified to teach, and around half (48%) have experience as a professional dancer.
- ▶ Stephen Heathcote, Principal Repetiteur & National Touring Associate at TAB said: *'Teachers are everything. That's why it's so important that this country is not just developing great dancers but teachers. They're going to be the ones that are custodians of the next generation of super talented dancers so the artform can continue to grow.'*
- ▶ Half of dance school owners and teachers said recruiting talented or qualified (52%) teachers is 'very' or 'somewhat' difficult – and this is particularly a challenge for dance schools in regional areas, with 63% saying it is somewhat or very difficult to recruit qualified or talented teachers, compared to 48% in metropolitan areas.
- ▶ Dance school owners and teachers are eager for professional development opportunities, but cost, time commitment, and availability of opportunities are barriers to engaging.

## Motivations and barriers

### **Most children enrol in classes for their love of dance – but outside of major cities, opportunities to see professional dance are slim**

- ▶ Most children enrol in dance classes simply for their love of dance, as indicated by 85% of parents/caregivers and past/current dance students, and 68% of dance school owners/teachers.
- ▶ However, there are suggestions that not all children can develop this interest without an entry point, making professional performances, tours, workshops and programs critically important. Stephen Heathcote said he started ballet 'because of a school performance.' He shared: *'I was 9 years old and I had never seen it. Unless you have the experience that triggers it, you're never going to begin.'*
- ▶ Lisa Clark, owner of Lisa Clark Dance Centre in Canberra shared that one of her main goals is *'...trying to develop a love of dance and music and the magic of it all, rather than the bells and whistles. The love of classical music, orchestral music. You'd be amazed at how some young children fall in love with that.'*
- ▶ For survey respondents, other motivations are less common but still important, like pursuing a professional career (32%), social interactions and friendships (27%), improving physical fitness and coordination (26%), boosting confidence and self-esteem (24%), and practicing discipline and focus (24%).

### **The high costs of training for ballet prevents regional students and low-income families from enrolling, and the current cost of living pressures may be exacerbating this problem**

- ▶ Financial barriers are a significant barrier which inhibits the ability of some to discover dance, with 67% of dance teachers and 54% of parents/caregivers and past/current students seeing this as a barrier to enrolling.
- ▶ After the age of 12, working towards a professional dance career (73%), advancing skills (57%), and opportunities to perform (36%) are the top motivators said by parents/caregivers and past/current students when it comes to continuing dance classes after the age of 12.
- ▶ However, cost is a large barrier preventing students from pursuing their love of dance and continuing classes past the age of 12, with 44% of dance teachers/owners and 48% of parents/caregivers and past/current students seeing this as a key barrier.
- ▶ One parent/caregiver from regional NSW shared: *'Dance is so expensive, and we make so many sacrifices so our girls can dance. Travelling to a city, paying for accommodation, taking time off work, for a workshop is just not*





*financially possible. Even though dancing at The Australian Ballet School is my eldest daughter's "dream," we just can't cut back anymore to make it happen.'*

- ▶ Cost-related barriers may be more significant when considering those living regionally, who often have to factor in additional travel costs to attend class and engage with dance more broadly, as well as for those from low-income families.
- ▶ Currently, it appears to be up to private dance studios (where they have the means) to provide financial support for talented students, and with the current pressures schools are facing, this may not be sustainable.

### **Other barriers mentioned related to time and scheduling conflicts, and having other priorities – and parents/caregivers and past/current students also mentioned body changes and burnout**

- ▶ Other significant barriers to enrolling in dance classes mentioned were scheduling conflicts (cited by 68% of dance school teachers/owners and 36% of parents/caregivers and past/current students), time commitment (62% of dance school teachers/owners and 27% of parents/caregivers and past/current students), and the location of dance studios (23% of parents/caregivers and past/current students).
- ▶ In terms of continuing dance after the age of 12, key barriers mentioned by dance school owners/teachers were time commitment (67%) and prioritising something else (59%), with school/study (93%) and sport (63%) the main activities prioritised.
- ▶ For parents/caregivers and past/current students, time commitment involved (39%), adolescent body changes (24%), and burnout (18%) are top barriers to continuing dance after age 12.



**"Dance is so expensive, and we make so many sacrifices so our girls can dance...**

**Even though dancing at The Australian Ballet School is my eldest daughter's dream, we just can't cut back anymore to make it happen."**

Parent/caregiver, regional NSW





## Diversity in dance

### 95% of respondents believe dance should be accessible for people of all backgrounds, and there is strong support to continue the momentum towards representation in dance

- ▶ 95% of all respondents believe dance should be accessible for people of all backgrounds – while a smaller number (56%) agree that dance in Australia celebrates diversity.
- ▶ Survey responses indicate growing recognition of diversity as a worthwhile goal, and something that the sector should work together on. Many people recognised the complex sociocultural barriers at play, and that change requires resources.
- ▶ Data collated for this study suggest that diversity in dance is moving closer to population benchmarks (Table 1), with room to continue making progress.
- ▶ One parent/caregiver from regional NSW shared, *‘The diversity of The Company [TAB] has increased in recent years under the new Artistic Director. I now view The Company [TAB] as being more inclusive than it was. The repertoire is also more interesting and not just the usual traditional fare. This will attract more diverse audiences and keep ballet relevant. The fact that the issue of diversity is actually being looked at is a positive.’*

Table 1 – Estimated proportion of dancers from diverse backgrounds, private dance studios, ABS, TAB and general population (%)

|   | Private dance schools | ABS    | TAB    | General population |
|---|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------------------|
| Proportion male or gender diverse                   | 6%                    | 35-38% | 42-46% | 49%                |
| Proportion Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander | 2%                    | 1%     | 1%     | 3%                 |
| Proportion CALD                                     | 26%                   | 16%    | 8-23%* | 22-29%**           |

\* Note that estimated proportion of CALD dancers at TAB includes international dancers. Excluding international dancers, the figure is estimated at 8%.

\*\* The proportion of CALD people in the general population has been estimated above as the % speaking another language at home (22%) and the % born overseas (29%); however, neither definition is likely to provide a complete picture of CALD people in Australia.

## **The traditions and expectations of ballet are interpreted in a range of ways, in some cases creating barriers and impacting upon cultural safety for First Nations dancers**

- ▶ Approximately 2% of students in private dance schools are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 1% of dancers at TAB and ABS are identifying as First Nations.
- ▶ In addition to economic barriers, the traditions and expectations of ballet can create barriers to culturally safe pathways for First Nations dancers. First Nations dancers succeeding in dance are often taking less traditional pathways – and there are calls for more flexibility and accessibility in opportunities available.
- ▶ Graduate of ABS and current Head of First Nations Programming at QPAC, Bradley Chatfield (Kamilaroi) shared his view that being the only First Nations student in a school, as well as unsafe environments in many schools, can lead to many dropping out. He said: *'First Nations students often end up leaving dance schools because they're the only one there... what support are they getting? It's not always safe environment and schools don't always know that these students need more support and encouragement.'*

## **Barriers also exist related to cost, location and limited access to opportunities, and there is value in grassroots engagement of First Nations dancers and communities**

- ▶ Past TAB dancer and founder of the ELLA Foundation, Ella Havelka (Wiradjuri) shared of her own experience: *'I couldn't afford it; my mum couldn't afford it. It's ridiculous how expensive it is. I was lucky that teachers saw my potential and would waive my costs. We were living in department housing, my mum was a single mum, and ballet shoes are expensive. The only way for me to get the training I needed was to move to Melbourne together and my Mum had to apply for a scholarship. We had this brilliant teacher who reached out [to a foundation] through friends of friends' connections [...] I somehow became the foundation's only ever ballet dancer and it paid for mum and I to move to Melbourne so I could go to ABS.'*
- ▶ Engaging First Nations dancers and communities needs to happen at all stages, starting at the grassroots level. The research confirms that truly understanding and designing initiatives requires First Nations-led research and consultation. Bradley Chatfield said: *'You can't just put a general call out to schools – you have to go to the community groups, invite Elders to come in because that gets passed down and once they start feeling comfortable they can go on their own. Have lunches to welcome First Nations into the building. You need to open the door [to] listen and talk.'*



**‘First Nations students often end up leaving dance schools because they’re the only one there...**

**It's not always safe environment and schools don't always know that these students need more support and encouragement.’**

Head of First Nations Programming at QPAC, Bradley Chatfield (Kamilaroi)



## **Around a quarter of dancers in private dance studios identify as CALD, but a lack of representation is impacting how safe and accepting the dance sector is for diverse groups**

- ▶ Measuring cultural diversity is challenging, and the data points produced in this research should be viewed with caution due to the complexity of cultural identity and disclosure. Around 26% of students at private dance schools identify with a cultural background other than English/Australian, compared to around 16% at ABS and 23% at TAB.
- ▶ Representation and visibility in professional dance are important in signalling to culturally diverse dancers and their families that there are opportunities for dancers 'like them', that dance is a viable career and that these spaces will be safe and accepting.
- ▶ One parent/caregiver shared of the dance sector broadly in Australia: *'There seem to be very few women with darker skin tones in professional ballet companies and company schools in Australia. This is disheartening for young dancers as they have no role models. They begin to believe that a career in ballet in Australia is not a possibility for them. When our daughter is older, she will probably have to look to opportunities overseas if she wants to dance professionally.'*

## **Male and gender diverse dancers make up over 40% of TAB, but barriers continue to exist for boys to get involved in dance**

- ▶ When enrolling in dance, 9 in 10 (89%) male students and their parents are motivated to enrol because of a 'love of dance', and 4 in 10 (39%) aim to pursue a professional career. Working towards a professional career is also a more significant motivator to continue in dance after the age of 12 for male students, as opposed to other students – with 85% saying this was a top motivator, compared to 71% of other students.
- ▶ However, there are issues early in the pipeline for talented boys/men for ABS and TAB. With approximately 6% of dancers in schools around the country identifying as male, private dance studios are struggling to recruit and retain male dancers, despite their best efforts, as stereotypes and stigmas around male ballet dancers prevail. 25% of parents/caregivers to male students and past/current male dancers said stereotypes and stigmas are a barrier to enrolling in dance classes – compared to 10% for non-male students.
- ▶ A male dancer from TAB shared: *'I think the pathway for a male dancer is still hard, as much as society is changing... I was a shy kid in western suburbs working class Melbourne. My parents knew nothing about ballet, but once I found it, I was like, "wow, this is my place." But I think as you get older, the challenges of keeping up with society's pressure of what ballet is, is still tough.'*

## TAB and ABS have a range of education and outreach programs that are a great foundation

- ▶ The TAB Education and Outreach team's work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities provides opportunities to approach dance in a more flexible way, less 'bound by tradition' (Ella Havelka). There may be opportunities to share more of this approach and learning with the wider company; for example, having new staff and company dancers provided with the opportunity to travel with the Education team as a part of their induction.
- ▶ Regional touring is applauded by many as a vital opportunity for those living outside the major centres to see ballet performances of a high standard, as well as workshop and behind-the-scenes opportunities that can make pathways clearer and more realistic for students and families – with around 9 in 10 (87%) saying it has 'a lot' (49%) or 'somewhat' (38%) of an impact on participation pathways.
- ▶ A dance teacher from remote NT shared: *'The regional tours are of immense importance to regional/remote locations because we don't get to see dance/ballet performances of such amazing standard. It is so inspirational to our youth. It shows our students that this is what you can achieve – professional dance is something you can aim for. The masterclasses are also really valuable for our students because this is where they can get "up close and personal." It's just so exciting to see our students get such a buzz about being given these opportunities.'*

## Perceptions of dance pathways

### Broader perceptions about the importance of dance and the viability of a career in ballet may be inhibiting how dance is valued

- ▶ Nearly half (44%) 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that dance is recognised as important in Australia, and many believe sport is unfairly favoured – and this adds to the perception that dance may not be a worthwhile career.
- ▶ A dance school director from regional Victoria shared: *'The way the arts are treated in Australia – when we had COVID, it upset me that AFL was still operating with an empty stadium. No opera, no ballet, and that message goes out to our parents that that a job isn't sustainable if times get tough and we're going to prioritise schoolwork.'*
- ▶ While many agree that being a dancer in Australia is a worthwhile career (60% agree or strongly agree), 15% disagree or strongly disagree with this statement. A dance school teacher/owner shared: *'I believe dance is a beautiful career. I also believe here in Australia it is undervalued, underpaid, and we do not have enough jobs for what we are producing.'*

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## **There is a case to celebrate and promote participation pathways and diverse careers in dance, and collaborate on cross-sector initiatives**

- ▶ ABS graduates have strong career prospects at a variety of companies (including TAB), with [ABS' website](#) highlighting that 'within six months of graduating, 90% of students gain contracts. This is one of the highest employment rates of any tertiary institution in Australia.'
- ▶ However, this research revealed that perceptions vary, and one parent/caregiver said: *'As a parent that has never done dance, you have no idea about the pathways out there. You have to rely on meeting other parents to give you information.'*
- ▶ Around eight in ten agree that TAB (82%) and ABS (84%) support Australian talent, and there is support for TAB and ABS to continue leading and supporting change across the ballet and dance sectors, in partnership with organisations such as RAD, NAISDA, Blakdance, Bangarra, AusDance, state dance organisations and others.
- ▶ The data collected in this study can be used as a benchmark, against which progress can be tracked over time, in terms of participation pathways and diversity in ballet. Andrew Murphy, Artistic Teacher of Classical Dance and Ballet Master at ABS shared: *'What's good is that we [TAB and ABS] want to be leaders in that space. It's a really important time in the ballet world to have an honest conversation about this, and look at the profession and try to make a difference.'*





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## Areas of opportunity for the dance sector

This research points to the following areas of opportunity for the sector. These opportunities should be viewed in the context of the strained financial situation of many dance organisations – and the need for resourcing change.

- 1) Exploring actions that are ambitious and achievable for individual organisations. There could be a case for a long-term sector strategy to coordinate action on participation pathways. This research provides some baseline statistics that can be referenced and built on over time.
- 2) Collaboration and knowledge-sharing between dance organisations, peak bodies and private dance schools across the country, to ensure the pipeline of talent continues to be created and nurtured.
- 3) Supporting initiatives led by those with lived experience. This could include accelerating existing initiatives as well as supporting new projects; for example, projects designed and led by First Nations peoples to explore pathways for Indigenous dancers.
- 4) Investing in diverse dancers and arts-workers who are overcoming barriers and championing change. Building on existing resources and programs, more can be done to highlight career pathways for diverse dancers and support those working in different parts of the sector, including private dance studios.
- 5) Professional development for dance teachers and private dance school operators, covering wellbeing, accessibility and cultural safety, as well as tips for marketing and supporting students on professional pathways.
- 6) Addressing the financial barriers faced by promising dance students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and offering assistance for attending workshops, classes, and performances, purchasing costumes and equipment, and travel.
- 7) Programming non-traditional work, forming contemporary partnerships, and finding ways to further celebrate diversity in dance.
- 8) Refreshed brand strategies, marketing campaigns and promotional material that challenges perceptions and breaks the mould of who ballet is for and what it is, to inspire wider participation and public support.

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## Additional information

While the commissioning organisations for this research (TAB and ABS) were focused on ballet, the respondents were engaged in a variety of dance styles.

Participating dance school owners/teachers were asked what styles of dance their school offers and the results were: Ballet (94%), Contemporary (79%), Jazz (71%), Tap (52%), Musical Theatre (48%), Hip-Hop (47%), Acro (46%) & Other (27%). Students and past-students participating said they were enrolled in Ballet (99%), Contemporary (69%), Jazz (49%), Acro (24%), Tap (22%), Musical Theatre (20%), Hip-Hop (14%) & Other (14%).

Questions relating to diversity, inclusion, and access were asked about dance generally, so the findings paint a picture of the dance sector more generally. However, most participants do have a connection to ballet, and may be answering with this in mind. Organisations such as the Royal Academy of Dance and Ausdance were key in distributing the survey, ensuring we heard from a variety of people.

Participants came from across the country: VIC (31%), NSW (30%), QLD (14%), SA (9%), WA (6%), TAS (3%), ACT (2%), NT (1%) & International (4%).

