

Submission to the National Arts and Disability Strategy for 2019

Submission by Aaron Wakem

A. ABOUT ME

I have worked in media and entertainment since 2009. I have worked in the corporate media space since 2012 and have managed a number of large projects for government organisations. I have taught film production at university. I have a Master in Fine Arts and I have almost completed a Bachelor of Law (Honours). I have also lived with a severe psychological disability for 15 years. I am also a disability advocate. In the past few years I have been troubled by how I have seen disability, in particular psychological disability, spoken about, thought about, and treated. This is especially evident in the government funding opportunities for artists with a disability.

I would like to relay my thoughts on disability and the arts, with a specific focus on the film, television and the digital video space. I have years of interactions with State funding organisations, Screen Australia, production companies (big and small, local and international), and external funding and grant bodies.

B. COMMENTARY ABOUT PSYCHOLOGICAL DISABILITY

I would just like to start by flagging some broader issues that aren't only directed to the arts. Psychological disability gets much less attention and discussion than other forms of disability. If it is discussed it is often via *mental health*. While they are clearly related, the impacts of psychological disability are very rarely discussed. Additionally, the discussion around mental health is often on ways to prevent, recover from, or alleviate the effects of the conditions. This is obviously entirely antithetical to the notion of a disability.

Psychological disability is commonly considered a *hidden disability*, that is it is difficult to notice. Hidden here doesn't just mean unnoticeable in public. I use it here to also mean not visible due to social isolation. The shame, embarrassment and stigma experienced means often they are purposefully hidden. People with psychological disabilities often chose not to be present physically.

These conditions are hard to quantify, understand and study. They lack a general relatability that some other disabilities have, which can make them much more difficult to be accepted as actual problems. I have heard from very successful CEOs: 'are you sure you are disabled?', 'you don't look disabled' and most troubling I have been told: 'it's more difficult to be a woman than it is to be disabled'. A number of these CEOs were running organisations with a strong focus on diversity.

As a final note on this, psychological disability is often ignored or discussed less in disability advocacy or academic writing on disability.

C. CONTRIBUTORY ISSUES

There are a great number of varying issues intrinsically related to each person's disability. These will change per person and per disorder. There are also a vast number of related issues that are not spoken about, that can be as impactful on preventing artists from creating.

I. *Financial hardships (lack of money)*

Financial hardship can arise from a lack of ability to work, a lack of ability to work well paying jobs, and a reliance on government pension. This is often a very serious barrier to create and is especially prohibitive into the film space. Productions can be expensive, even if you have people who can assist for free and access to equipment to create. This means there is a strong reliance on funding and grant opportunities or financial support from family and friends.

II. *Lack of time*

The amount of functional time that people with disabilities have can be very limited. When combined with the financial hardships this often means decisions to take paying work instead of pursuing artistic endeavours. This limit on time to create is a serious barrier to creating art.

III. *Self-worth issues*

Stigma and a lack of 'being normal' has a very serious impact on the mental wellbeing and self-worth of people with disabilities. This can deter and demotivate people from creating art, as well as negatively impacting self-value and relationships with others.

IV. *Some other factors*

The above issues can cause stress and anxiety which impact both health and ability to make art. Society and family pressures to perform a certain way as a member of society or a family also have an impact, especially given the reliance on both for support. Guilt and shame from being reliant on both government pensions, family and others is also a factor.

D. CURRENT ISSUES WITH FUNDING AND GRANTS

As addressed above, there is a strong reliance for artists with a disability on funding and grants. In the screen fields there has been a severe lack of opportunities generally, that is even worse when looking at opportunities specifically for artists with a disability.

I. *Lack of opportunities – being just another diversity group*

There is a distinct lack of opportunities for funding that is specifically focused on supporting artists with a disability. Generally, disability is treated as a just another *diversity group*. This is very troubling as it gives the impression that the needs of artists with a disability are no different than other diversity groups. While these other groups are predicated on the notion that they are no different than everyone else, this is the opposite for those with a disability. As much as I would love to pretend that my disability doesn't impact me and I'm normal, that notion alone won't change anything. If these funding organisations are genuine about wanting to support artists with disability, they need to take meaningful steps to supporting and assisting them, not just slapping 'and disability' on a long list of diversity groups that are encouraged to apply to opportunities.

II. Expectations from funding organisations when disability is the focus

There is commonly an expectation from organisations when they do offer opportunities for artists with disability, that the artist exposes themselves and their disability. Often these opportunities are linked to disability and seek their personal story. For many smaller grants or financial support there is a need to show financial records and to have specific supporting evidence of the impact of the persons condition; all while there is a very real chance that the person will not be successful. While it is understandable in many circumstances to ask for this information, we must also acknowledge that this is asking vulnerable people to expose themselves to pursue their passion.

There is also often an expectation that the projects proposed by the artists is 'new and unique' or something to that affect. This is a high bar for abled bodied people.

III. Examples of high-quality previous work

In the screen space there is also a requirement to show examples of prior work, with an expectation that it will be high-quality either explicitly or implicitly. This is especially relevant when the grant or funding opportunity is for that broader diversity group. Here the artists with disability are asked to compete against able bodied people; usually women, LGBT, and indigenous people. With the lack of money and time, as well as the impact of their disability it is very difficult to have competitive examples of what the artist is capable of. This is reinforced by the lack of early career support. Again, often if those opportunities exist, they are competing against able-bodied people.

IV. Formal requirements of submissions

The submissions for the grants and funding also have strict formats for submission, usually without flexibility. They also have strict time frames. These are clearly issues for many artists whose disability makes it difficult to conform to those requirements. Additionally, if the artist doesn't have any developed ideas that meet the submission criteria, they have to rapidly develop ideas that meet the submission within that short time frame. Given the lack of functional time, and other daily struggles, this can be quite an issue.

V. Other issues

As touched on above there is a serious lack of early career support. There is also the time cost associated to creating and submitting applications. These can be very time consuming for time poor people. It is also diverting functioning time away from actively pursuing creating art, improving their skills, or other activities.

E. RECOMMENDATIONS – WHAT IS NEEDED

There is a very strong need for specific programs designed to support artists with disabilities. These need a strong focus on supporting early career and emerging artists. They should include providing support to access training, workshops, and mentors to improve their skills and knowledge.

Funding to create should be unhindered by requirements related to disability. The artists should be empowered to tell the stories they want to tell, to create the projects they want to create. If they choose to tell a story about their disability then that should be their choice, not a requirement for receiving the funding.

Funding organisations should also seek guidance and advice from advocates or organisations as they create programs for people with disabilities. This will ensure that the programs will address real needs, have requirements that are inclusive, and have flexibility with their formal requirements.

Beyond the funding and grant opportunities for artists, more representation is needed in front and behind the camera. This to both tell more stories about disability and to tell more stories featuring people with disabilities. A key note here: *this is in addition to supporting artists with disabilities making art – this is not a replacement for supporting artists.* We need to both change public understanding and attitudes, as well as supporting artists with disabilities. We can do both and should.

1. An example program

I will end by providing an example of a type of program for the screen space that would be very beneficial. A short film program for early career artists with a disability. The program would include both funding to create 3 short films, and a mentor to provide support and guidance throughout the program. The program would run for at least a year. The artists would create one film at a time, with the films screened to receive feedback which can be applied on the next film. The program would have a focus on growth and development of the artist.

F. RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Here is a summary of my recommendations:

- Programs specifically to fund artists with disabilities
- Early career and emerging artist as a strong focus
- Support access to training and workshops
- Support access to mentors
- Funding not tied to requirements to tell stories about disability
- Seek guidance from advocates and organisations while creating programs
- More representation onscreen and behind – but not at the expense of supporting artists

Thank you running this consultation, and for seeking to improve the national strategy for arts and disability.

I am more than happy to discuss anything I have addressed, or any other queries or issues relating to disability and the arts,

Aaron Wakem