

# PROJECT ALCHEMY EVALUATION REPORT APRIL 2024

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Images: (at left) artwork from Project Alchemy artist Mica Mahani's *Forest Spectacular* project undertaken with Bega Valley Shire community members (at right) photographs from Mica Mahani's *Bogong Moth* Project Alchemy project undertaken with community members and performed at the East Gippsland Winter Arts Festival.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Project Alchemy was a two-year, community-focused arts recovery project designed to support artists and regional communities across five Local Government Areas (LGAs) in New South Wales (NSW), Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Victoria (Vic) that were severely impacted by the 2019/2020 Black Summer bushfires.

Conceived and delivered by Rebus Theatre (Canberra, ACT) from 2022 – 2024, the project was funded through a Department of Industry, Science and Resources Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grant.

Project Alchemy began in April 2022 and concluded in March 2024. Over this time, a number of different project activities took place, including three artist residencies. Two of these, each five days in duration, occurred close to the beginning of the project, and the final three-day residency occurred close to the end. Five major artist-led community projects were delivered, which included a range of participatory community events, public performances and/or public exhibition outcomes across the five LGAs involved. The participating LGAs were the bushfire affected Shires of Bega Valley (NSW), Eurobodalla (NSW), East Gippsland (Vic), Queanbeyan-Palerang (NSW), and the ACT.

At the centre of this project were 15 artists who were selected by Rebus Theatre from across these five LGAs to participate, with three artists selected per LGA. Participating artists were chosen via an Expressions of Interest (EOI) application process conducted by Rebus Theatre in August 2022. This application process was designed as a creative and reflective exercise for applicants, with prompts focusing on determining the length of time artists had been living in their local areas (as evidence of their existing connections with those communities), and their experience in leading community-focused arts projects. Following [Creative Australia's](#) description, we define community-focused arts projects as collaborations between professional artists and communities that prioritise the creative process and relationships developed within those communities.

As a response to the Black Summer bushfires' effects on communities across the ACT, NSW and Victoria, this project aimed to support artists who have existing connections to their communities to work over a sustained period to deliver arts projects with and for their local communities to support social recovery and healing from the fires. Another key aim was to support the needs of the participating artists in terms of their own personal recoveries from their losses during the fires (some participating artists were directly involved in fighting the fires, and some lost their properties and/or their studios).

Thus, the project's intended aims were twofold: one aim was to create space for artists affected by the Black Summer bushfires to help them rebuild their arts practices and support their individual recoveries. The other was to allow artists to lead community projects to help their local communities repair and reconnect in the aftermath of the disasters that had such devastating impacts on their lives.

Importantly, in evaluating the artists' perspectives on their experiences of Project Alchemy, we find that these twofold aims operated in a synergistic fashion, in that the project's capacity to make space for the artists to reconnect with their creative practices, and to centre them in their communities' recovery processes, facilitated a range of leverageable and possibly ongoing impacts for these artists and their communities.

This evaluation has been primarily informed by qualitative data gathered from 15 participating artists, supported by some quantitative results derived from Project Alchemy artist participant feedback surveys, and via Rebus Theatre's creative feedback method which utilises Playback Theatre processes.

## 2. KEY FINDINGS: SUMMARY

Drawing primarily on qualitative data generated by project participants during this evaluation process, two key findings have emerged that reflect Project Alchemy's most defining impacts.

**1. The centrality of the artist: a model with shared benefits.** The way this project has centred the artists, placing them at the heart of every process, produced a compelling set of benefits that have positively impacted the lives and careers of artists themselves, and have strengthened their ongoing capacities to impact the lives of the people in their local communities.

**2. Links between sustained paid work for artists and community wellbeing.** The project's focus on employing its participating artists, and paying them for their work over a sustained period has had surprisingly strong impacts on the artists involved, and has proven important to their successfully delivering their community-focused arts projects in their bushfire affected local areas during the project.

### 2.1 The centrality of the artist: a model with shared benefits

In evaluating this project, we find that Project Alchemy's has added significant value to its participating artists' careers, specifically around their skills development and career opportunities. We find that Project Alchemy's model, which placed its 15 artist participants at the centre of all its processes over a sustained period of time, not only allowed these artists to feel more confident in themselves as arts professionals, but also empowered them to lead their community-focused arts projects in their LGAs which resulted in a range of shared benefits of these communities. In this way, we find that Project Alchemy offers one effective model to help address some current issues within the Australian arts sector around the devaluing of artists' work and the under-resourcing of effective career development opportunities for them.

We note these specific issues are acknowledged by the Australian Federal Government in the National Cultural Policy [Revive](#), published in February 2023. We see a direct connection between Project Alchemy's model and *Revive's* 'pillar three' section, 'Centrality of the Artist: Supporting the artist as worker and celebrating artists as creators'. Project Alchemy placed the artists at the core of its activities, producing myriad benefits for the artists and their communities, which is consistent with the Federal Government's contention that *'the growth and stability of Australia's cultural and creative workforce depends on continuous career development that builds confidence in creative sector careers and equips creative practitioners... to utilise their skills as both workers and artists'*. Thus, we have named our first finding in this report, 'The centrality of the artist' to signal this direct connection.

We find that in allowing its 15 participating artists (who, with a few exceptions, did not know each other prior to the project) to come together for skills-sharing and knowledge exchange residencies, Project Alchemy encouraged strong social connections and high levels of solidarity to form within this small group, which in turn allowed these artists to develop and lead their community-focused arts projects within their local communities for meaningful impacts on the local community groups involved.

Furthermore, we see high value in Project Alchemy's approach to selecting its artists based on their levels of experience working on arts projects with their local communities, and their focus on choosing artists who were already firmly embedded within those communities. A key question in Rebus Theatre's artist application was to ask the applicants whether they had any experience in leading arts projects that engage people in making art who are not professional artists. We find that, in many ways, a model that identifies artists with strong existing connections with their local communities acts as a counter measure to other recovery support initiatives for

communities that are ‘helicoptered-in’ or ‘flown-in and flown-out’. Those approaches do not build trust in community arts processes, nor in their leaders, who are not seen to be committed to a community nor appropriately aware of its contexts and needs. In contrast, Project Alchemy’s focus on selecting artists with strong existing relationships within their local communities, and placing them at the centre of a process that firstly supported them to connect with each other as a like-minded group of arts professionals, allowed them to carry out their work within their own LGAs with meaningful social impacts on those community members involved.

As one artist participant put it: *‘There is something quite radical about this project [because], we’re not turning up in people’s communities going, “This is what we’re doing”. We’re engaging with others who live in those communities, and we’re handing over resources’*. Similar feedback was received from Project Alchemy artists at different stages throughout this project. We found strong evidence that, from the artists’ perspectives, Project Alchemy was an effective way for them to strengthen their existing social and creative connections within their LGAs, which led to valuable positive outcomes for those artists and community members involved. These positive outcomes are described in more detail in sections 3.1 – 3.3 of this report.

## **2.2 Links between sustained paid work for artists and community wellbeing**

The other most significant finding to come out of this evaluation process is the extent to which the remuneration of Project Alchemy’s 15 artist participants over the project’s two-year life span directly affected the artists’ wellbeing, self-esteem and confidence in their capacities as community arts practitioners and professional artists.

In their feedback, many artists reported their increased emotional wellbeing and their sense of having greater life stability during their time as Project Alchemy artists. Importantly, in the majority of cases, Project Alchemy artists attributed this boost in wellbeing directly to the fees and payments they received. Some artists reported that the income received during this project was among the most consistent they had ever received for their creative work, and as such, it significantly increased their belief in themselves as professional arts practitioners. As one artist commented, the remuneration levels helped them *‘not to burn out’*, an experience that is widespread in the sector and noted by some participating artists as a major difference between Project Alchemy and other creative projects they had been involved in. Some artists described how previous arts work had been less well remunerated whilst also placing more intense and stressful demands upon them. This is an important point to highlight: the artists’ responses to the payment they received for Project Alchemy work links to patterns discernible within the current Australian arts landscape more broadly.

It is a well-known fact that many Australian artists find it difficult to attain secure, sustainable paid work opportunities for themselves as creative practitioners. As quoted in the Australian Government’s National Cultural Policy, *Revive*: with *‘a large number of creative practitioners undertaking short-term contracts... or performing ad hoc and seasonal work, artists are the original gig workers’*. Furthermore, when paid work opportunities do come up for artists, they are commonly on short-term projects which are so brief and poorly paid that artists have to supplement this work with other jobs undertaken concurrently with their arts work or in-between their arts work contracts. In many cases, these ‘side-jobs’ are not arts jobs and do not require these creatives to use their arts skills, expertise or training. This situation is a well-documented and long-standing reality of the Australian arts sector, as seen in [Making Art Work: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia](#) (2017).

Less well-documented, however, is the way these habitual patterns of work affect artists’ wellbeing and their belief in themselves as professional practitioners. Project Alchemy demonstrates that the wider Australian arts sector working environment – where paid work for artists commonly involves only short-

burst, high intensity project work – contributes to artists undervaluing their own professional worth, and shows how their arts career experiences to date have inclined them to view this work as unbalanced and prone to burnout.

A clear example of this came through in feedback offered by Project Alchemy artist Elise May, a professional dancer, choreographer and video artist from Eurobodalla LGA. For Elise, Project Alchemy felt like *'a blessing'* compared to her decades of working as a professional dancer where she was *'basically only guaranteed 32 weeks of work a year, and so had to be constantly trying to get other work in between that'*. While working as a Project Alchemy artist, the remuneration Elise received was *'kind of on par with this previous job [as a professional dancer]'*, but *'the demands on [her] were so much less'*. This highlights the difficult set of pressures faced by many performers within the Australian arts sector who have trained for many years, only to be offered short-term, inconsistent job opportunities that carry the risk of physical injury and/or burnout. Evidently, Project Alchemy offered Elise a different experience of life as a creative professional, working within a more stable set of conditions, including better pay and more sustained engagement with arts work. Although her Project Alchemy work was different to her work as a company dancer, her feedback shows how much it meant to her to be acknowledged and remunerated as a professional artist within a steadier and more balanced working environment.

Elise's feedback also reflected on the experience of having a baby during Project Alchemy, revealed as something that *'never in [her] former working life could [she] have considered'*. She credited her sense of life stability achieved while being part of Project Alchemy as an important factor in helping her and her partner plan for this important life event. Another related outcome Elise experienced during her time as a Project Alchemy artist was that the project allowed her to have some important surgery done without it adversely affecting her ability to work and earn income. The collaborative nature of her work with Project Alchemy meant that she could manage the timing of her work around recovery (and be paid for that work) without putting her recovering body under undue strain. This experience further contrasts with Elise's previous work as a dancer, where taking time out for surgery inevitably leads to a loss of work and income.

As researchers we were struck by these and similar examples shared by Project Alchemy artists that revealed the significant effects of the project's remuneration in relation to their self-esteem, life-stability and financial security. We find that in paying artists fairly for their time spent developing and delivering their community-focused art projects (including their time participating in the artist residencies), Project Alchemy presents an effective model in allowing mid-career and established Australian artists, who may otherwise be subject to shorter-term, more high-intensity project work, to engage in more satisfying and balanced work experiences, with important benefits for the artists themselves, but that also (and very importantly) proved to have valuable flow-on benefits for the communities engaged during these projects. These flow-on effects are detailed in section 3.2 of this report.

# 3. KEY FINDINGS: DETAILED ANALYSIS

## 3.1 Building strong artist networks across geographical divides

At the heart of Project Alchemy was an intention to position its selected artists as the drivers of the project's activities, and to support them in their creative work as community-engaged arts practitioners. This section of the report describes how this aspect of Project Alchemy's model was achieved, and how it produced distinct positive effects for the artists themselves and for members of their local communities participating in the projects the artists delivered.

As noted in section 2.1 of this report, it is clear that Project Alchemy's extended residency activities had very positive effects on its 15 participating artists in building confidence in their capacities to deliver meaningful arts-focused experiences for their communities. Activities that allowed artists simply to *'be together'* in more informal ways (rather than participating in highly structured or formal training sessions) seemed the most valuable means for them to form important peer-to-peer connections and to build supportive group networks, which greatly assisted their sense of recovery and strengthened their capacities as artists in their local communities more broadly. Specifically, many artists reported that the time they spent together while engaging in art-making and artistic skills-sharing workshops (where participating artists led workshops to share their particular art-form and associated techniques with the other artists in the group) and/or time spent with each other between the workshops *'just talking over a cup of tea'*, were the most effective ways for them to form strong bonds and share ideas. One artist described such approaches as the project's valuable *'cross-pollination effects'*.

Another significant project aspect that strengthened the artists' capacities and assisted their wellbeing was the creation of a digital *'Messenger'* chat group established at the conclusion of the first artist residency. Artists used the platform to continue supporting each other and to share their ideas across their geographical divides, maintaining and even strengthening their social connections over the project's two-year duration. As one artist reported: *'Having the Messenger group I found was a connectivity thing. I felt like, if you had a question, you could just quickly write that and someone in the group would respond. And conversation popped up quite frequently, so it was a nice constant reminder that you were part of the network. It's not like you could ever just drop off and get lost on your own.'* Another artist reiterated the importance of the Messenger group in helping them to maintain their strong peer relationships across geographical divides by saying: *'I would go so far as to say that as a regional artist, connectivity is one of the biggest challenges. And there is a country-city divide. So, being able to connect across those borders, that has huge value, especially when it comes to going into communities [to work on an arts project]. If you already have a friend who is embedded in that community, it feels very well grounded, both socially and artistically.'*

Thus, the strong peer connections and exchanges achieved throughout the project's two-year duration, especially when viewed in combination with the artists' feelings of economic empowerment as part of the project, assisted them to overcome what one artist articulated as their feelings of *'imposter syndrome'* and of not having a firm place within a strong extended professional arts network. It is clear that the social connections and solidarity built within the core artist group during Project Alchemy were very important to bolstering the artists' professional capacities and confidence to make valuable contributions at the community level, both in their own local communities and in the neighbouring communities they now feel more inclined to work in, knowing they have trusted artist contacts within all five LGAs.

## 3.2 Multidimensional economic outcomes

As summarised in section 2.2, one of this project's most striking outcomes is the powerful effects of appropriate remuneration on the lives and attitudes towards their creative work for its 15 participating artists. This section details how these outcomes were achieved and shows how its remuneration effects had positive flow-on impacts for the artists' local communities through the projects developed and delivered with the people within their LGAs. As one artist commented, *'Having support to make so many of my creative dreams come to life has been transformative for me and truly uplifting for my community'*, indicating the profound effects achieved by Project Alchemy's financial and professional support, both for this artist as an individual and for the people engaged within their wider community.

The flow-on economic benefits achieved by Project Alchemy are well illustrated by feedback received from Lee Nickless, a digital artist, muralist and arts educator from East Gippsland LGA. Lee described the *'huge impact'* on his community due to the large numbers of attendees at the [East Gippsland Winter Festival](#), with around *'5000 attending, with maybe 70% coming from outside of the area'*, showing high level engagement from locals and surrounding LGA audiences. Alongside these strong engagement numbers, however, Lee observed something he felt was a more important though far less visible impact of the Project Alchemy activities on its attendees and its participants. The activity and engagement generated by a performance event within the festival had important flow-on effects for some of the local community members whose perspectives on their lives shifted as a result of their participation, and who may have also started to pursue new social, professional and/or education pathways after their experiences. As Lee commented: *'If you're contributing to the [participants'] mental wellbeing, then all of a sudden those people are not a burden [on the community] in other respects... All of a sudden they are employed, or they're inspired to move forward in their lives, they are now doing Fine Arts [at TAFE or university] or whatever. So, I guess that shows how what we were paid to do [in] this work is nothing compared to the value it has resulted in for our communities.'* Lee's experiences of seeing how some of the community members engaging in his project felt motivated to pursue new pathways in their personal and professional lives reveals some of the otherwise less visible flow-on effects inherent in this project model that, in Lee's case, resulted in positive social and economic changes for certain individuals with his LGA. As Lee also pointed out, these changes at the individual level also have the potential to create wider positive effects for his local LGA in terms of their potential to alleviate stresses on certain community services and resources.

In addition to the social and economic flow-on effects created by Project Alchemy's community-focused projects, we also find the project's economic impacts have relevance to another National Cultural Policy direction seen in the Federal Government's recently established [Creative Workplaces Council](#) established to promote fair, safe and respectful workplaces for Australian artists and arts workers. We find that Project Alchemy's outcomes, specifically around artist remuneration and fair and reasonable workplace experiences, align with the Council's aims for creative workplaces in Australia. It is clear that Project Alchemy reflected the Council's best practice aims of providing fair pay and working conditions that reference Australia's Fair Work employment laws, as well as safe and respectful working conditions that prioritise arts worker wellbeing at work. Among Project Alchemy artist feedback, we find no evidence that any participating artist ever felt discriminated against, bullied or harassed while engaged as arts workers on the project. Instead, many artists made a point of saying how well supported they felt by the project's mentors throughout its two-year lifespan. They reported their experiences made them feel included, acknowledged and validated for their creative work due to the support they received from the project's mentors and the other project artists, as well as through the payment received for that work. As one artist reported, *'Having financial security to be able to practice my art meant I could be far more prolific in what I created, and be more adventurous in my artistic dreams. I also felt encouraged [by Project Alchemy mentors and other artist participants] to realise these projects, which was really validating.'*



Yet on the flipside of these positive outcomes, there were also some feelings of trepidation among the artists about what would come next for them after two years of gainful employment as a Project Alchemy artist. One artist commented that they were *'worried about it stopping'*, because they knew they would be unlikely to get similarly well paid and well supported work opportunities beyond the life of this project. There was also a high awareness among the artist group that this kind of project was only made possible through a disaster recovery grant, which struck them as a painful irony. The level of funding required to properly support their work as artists within their local communities was part of the *'bushfire subsidy bubble'* that had come about only because their communities had suffered a terrible and traumatic event. That said, Project Alchemy artists also acknowledged that their work with their communities over the project's two-year lifespan produced some important longer-term economic advantages for those local areas in terms of the social wellbeing outcomes achieved.

Thus, we find the range of social and economic impacts achieved by these artist-led community projects indicate that Project Alchemy represented a high value return on investment, as evidenced by the artists' perceptions of their own increased capacities as arts practitioners, and through their perceptions of the wider flow-on effects of their Project Alchemy work for their local communities. In this way, we also find that these project outcomes align with the Australian Federal Government's National Cultural Policy aim to ensure that more artists have long-term career options through sustained periods of work in the arts. Project Alchemy offers a sound model to look to in pursuit of this aim.

### **3.3 An investment with leveraging value**

As described in section 3.2, the economic impacts of Project Alchemy for its 15 artist participants were significant. Despite the artists' acknowledgement that ideally, they would have liked their work with Project Alchemy to continue beyond its two-year timeframe, they also recognised how lucky they were to have an extended opportunity to have secure paid work as artists, and to have support from the project's mentors as they carried out this work. The artists' sense of life stability and their increased feelings of confidence in themselves as community engaged arts practitioners due to their work within Project Alchemy is a defining feature of the project's achievements.

While Project Alchemy officially ended in March 2024, in evaluating the project's outcomes we found that it has allowed a number of participating artists to use their work and experiences during the last two years to leverage important future opportunities for themselves as artists, including future projects within their local communities and in other contexts.

One of the most straightforward examples of this leveraging effect can be seen in feedback from one Project Alchemy artist who noted the way the project helped them compile the assets they need to then apply for other arts work and funding opportunities. As they said, *'Having the funding [during Project Alchemy] to engage a photographer and document [my work] properly – that's going to serve me further into the future and it gives me confidence to apply for more things – knowing that I've got this portfolio.'* Another artist commented on the way Project Alchemy greatly expanded their reach in their community, and that this expanded reach had direct impacts on an independent arts project they recently initiated. As they described, *'I'm now working on a new project and I've just put the word out to see who is interested in working with me... I'm getting all these different applications from people I've never worked with before. So I think this project has really broadened my reach within my community.'*

Similarly, another artist recognised the way Project Alchemy led to the creation of a new performance troupe, which has since been able to attract additional arts funding from other sources to continue their work together. This new troupe includes Project Alchemy artists Deb Cleland (multidisciplinary artist and academic

from Eurobodalla LGA), Elise May (whose Project Alchemy work is referenced in an earlier section of this report and who is also from Eurobodalla LGA), Suzannah Keebler (dancer, choreographer, educator from East Gippsland LGA), and 12 other local community members from Eurobodalla LGA. For Deb, *'[the troupe] exists as a connected group only because of Project Alchemy, and that's why we have been able to get more money to operate as a troupe beyond the end of the project... Because it exists. It exists as an ensemble now, where it didn't before'*. The troupe performed together as part of [Luminous: Celebrating Place](#), a Project Alchemy event within the Eurobodalla River of Art festival in 2023, and have since secured two grants totaling \$30,000 (awarded through Monash University's [Fire to Flourish](#) grant program) to present similar community-focused performance projects. This outcome demonstrates that the platform created by Project Alchemy allowed these artists to launch forward and pursue new opportunities using the creative work and connections they fostered during Project Alchemy. The combined projects have furthered these artists' career outcomes, with the demonstrated potential to achieve even more valuable arts engagement opportunities for their local communities.

The final example of the way Project Alchemy has resulted in powerful leveraging effects for its project artists can be seen in the work of Project Alchemy artist Lee Nickless (whose Project Alchemy work is also referred to in section 3.2). Lee is the Creative Director of [Lakes Lights](#), an annual highlight event within the East Gippsland Winter Festival occurring every June-July in East Gippsland LGA. In his role as Creative Director of *Lakes Lights*, Lee facilitates a series of lantern-making workshops with local East Gippsland residents in the weeks leading up to the festival. Once completed, lantern-making participants gather with their light-filled sculptures to participate in a moonlit walk from the East Gippsland lakes towards the ocean in a promenade performance. As well as the community lantern-makers involved, this performance event includes performing artists and musicians who join forces with community participants in a spectacular celebration of light, community and creativity. During his time as a Project Alchemy artist, Lee expanded *Lakes Lights* from a project that usually involved four or five artists to help facilitate the lantern-making workshops and choreograph the final event, to one that trained and employed ten lantern artists who, as Lee said, *'were able to facilitate the running of five additional community lantern building workshops that catered to approximately 100 to 150 people a day'*.

In addition to this expanded reach into his community, thanks to Project Alchemy, Lee was able to engage Project Alchemy artist Mica Mahani (artist, dance and theatre practitioner from Bega Valley LGA), who worked with five dancers to present a special roving performance project within *Lakes Lights* in 2023, named [Bogong Moths](#). This project allowed Mahani and five young community participants from Bega Valley to spend time developing the choreography and costuming for their three days of performing during the East Gippsland Winter Festival, where they appeared as roving performers during the festival's night-time events. Clearly, the support of Project Alchemy expanded the outcomes achieved for *Lakes Lights* during the project's two year lifespan. As Lee said, *'Having roaming performers as part of Lakes Lights had been on my wish-list for the previous two years, but I didn't have the time, money or the knowledge to pull it off'*. He also commented on the way Project Alchemy's support of *Lake Lights* meant that *'the overall experience [for the artists involved in Lakes Lights] was much more rewarding, with less burnout'*, and that the events' audience numbers grew by approximately 2000 people in 2023 (from a total audience of 4000 in 2022 to 6000 in 2023). Lee reported that *'other factors would have played into this [increased number of attendees], but festival-goers' satisfaction was up significantly on the previous year, and I am sure that will reflect on [attendance in] 2024'*.

Looking to the future in this way offers additional evidence of Project Alchemy's leveraging effects for Lee as an artist and creative director in his community, specifically in relation to the *Lakes Lights* project. At the conclusion of Project Alchemy, and as part of his feedback on the project, Lee signaled that he has started work on *Lakes Lights* for 2024, with plans to work again with Mica Mahani, as well as with Project Alchemy artist Deb Cleland, intending to grow *Lakes Lights* with more roaming and circus style performance. Project Alchemy effectively opened new doors for *Lakes Lights* to continue to flourish and be strengthened into the future. Lee has also recently started a *'school of art'* in the East Gippsland LGA and he has designed the first term curriculum around lantern-making for the East Gippsland Winter Arts Festival. He commented that he is

*'hoping to engage a range of artists, including Rebus [Theatre] artists, to assist in the delivery of these community art projects',* which indicates an additional level of engagement flowing on from Project Alchemy.

### **3.4 Potential to refine model for greater impacts in some areas**

As described in sections 3.1 – 3.3, Project Alchemy has resulted in a number of important positive outcomes for its 15 participating artists and for community members within the LGAs involved. There were also certain aspects of the project that some participating artists raised concerns about, and as such, these elements and experiences warrant inclusion in this evaluation.

The most notable concern raised by some artist-participants in Project Alchemy relates to an experience in the project's initial stages, during the first artist residency. Part of this residency involved all artists participating in what was designed to be an instructive and educational trauma-informed care workshop to assist Project Alchemy artists in planning for scenarios they might encounter while delivering arts projects with community members who might still be dealing with bushfire-related trauma. However, for some artists this workshop felt like a *'freedfall into trauma'* and *'a bit insensitive'* to their own experiences of bushfire-related trauma, and did not acknowledge where they were personally in terms of their own healing and emotional recovery processes from the fires. Additionally, some artists reported that while Project Alchemy artist residencies contained *'a lot of talk'* around being sensitive to people's needs around trauma and included trigger warnings at certain points in the process, these processes did not feel well enough realised by mentors. This resulted in approaches committed to trauma-informed care producing unintended negative effects on some artists' wellbeing and sense of safety within the project.

The other notable concern raised by some Project Alchemy artists was that, although the project was felt by all participants to be highly inclusive and supportive of the 15 artists involved, there was also a feeling that the artists selected for the project were not as culturally diverse as they could have been. As researchers, we acknowledge that the project's recruitment process and its choice of artists was directed largely by the need for its participating artists to have a proven track record of working as community engaged practitioners within their local communities, and in this case, most of the artists with this necessary experience who applied for this opportunity were not from culturally diverse backgrounds. As noted by a member of Project Alchemy's artist recruitment team, an impediment to increasing the reach of the project's EOI call-out process and a consequent barrier faced in broadening the diversity of the artists involved was the challenge *'to get word into more marginalised communities, and to find ways of explaining what [Project Alchemy] was [to them]'*. They added that, *'that process would have taken more time than [they] had'*.

Further, a participating artist who has expertise in working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, while not from a CALD background themselves, noted how Project Alchemy's artist EOI process *'suited a really particular way of thinking that isn't necessarily culturally inclusive'*. They added that, *'a lot of the really great work [they have seen] in a culturally diverse context doesn't have that separation between the individual from the community, and that's not an easy concept to get your head around if it's not a familiar way of working'*. Thus, the consensus thinking around the project's lack of cultural diversity was that its recruitment processes tended to reproduce the same sorts of artists Rebus Theatre would usually reach, and was not well equipped to reach into new and diverse spaces. Both the participating artists and the project team noted that the project's reliance on Local Government Area (LGA) networks to spread the word about the project during its EOI call-out process was not a sufficient strategy to allow it to attract a culturally diverse range of artists. A Project Alchemy mentor commented, *'it takes very careful thinking through and more relationship building to actually get a more inclusive group of people applying for this project opportunity'*, indicating that in addition to more time, a greater investment in relationship building

with communities and artists outside of Rebus Theatre's known and existing network may have helped increase the diversity of participating artists. The nature of this bushfire recovery project – part of the *'bushfire subsidy bubble'* rather than ongoing investment and support – did not allow for this kind of *'careful thinking'* and slow relationship development to happen in the lead up to the project's artist recruitment process.

Finally, on the flipside of this issue, we would like to acknowledge that some Project Alchemy artists had positive things to say about the way the project allowed entirely new relationships to form between themselves as artists and culturally diverse and/or minority groups within their local communities. (A substantial example is presented in section 4.4.4 below.) Some artists reported how, as their community-focused arts projects unfolded, new connections were formed thanks to the artists' ability simply to be there and *'hang out'* with people for an extended period of time. As one artist commented, *'fly-in-fly-out government projects are standard fare in remote communities and people get tired of that style of engagement. Sometimes the way to be in a community is to start small and to just hang out with people and dwell... There's definitely a learning in the 'inclusion' area to come out of this entire project, which is about the value of dwelling and building rapport'*.

# 4. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 Evaluation methodology: overview

Evaluation of Project Alchemy was undertaken in three phases.

**Phase 1 (October 2022):** Phase 1 of the project evaluation comprised two co-design workshops that occurred in Canberra in October 2022. These workshops involved the lead evaluation researcher Dr Vahri McKenzie (now WAAPA, Edith Cowan University) and Simone Penkethman (University of Canberra), as well as three Rebus Theatre practitioners. The co-design workshops allowed the evaluation researchers to develop the key themes and priority concepts that would inform their approach to evaluating the project's 15 participating artists' experiences of Project Alchemy.

**Phase 2 (November 2022 – March 2023):** In Phase 2, evaluation tools (a survey and a focus group / interview guide) that were developed by the evaluation researchers following the co-design workshop process were used to capture artists' and mentors' perspectives of Project Alchemy, up to that point in the project. This feedback was gathered after the project's two artist residencies which took place in November-December 2022 and February 2023.

**Phase 3 (April 2023 – March 2024):** Phase 3 was the project's final evaluation stage, where evaluation tools were used to capture artists' experiences and perspectives of Project Alchemy at the conclusion of the project. An additional evaluation approach, Playback Theatre, was added in this phase too (see section 4.4). Feedback received from participating artists during Phase 3 focused on artists' experiences and perspectives of the whole project, including their perceptions of the ways their local communities engaged with their community-focused arts projects and the effects of these projects on their local communities.

## 4.2 Outcomes of the co-design process

As outlined above, the methods used to evaluate Project Alchemy artists' experiences of the project, and their perceptions of the impacts their Project Alchemy community-focused art projects have had on their communities, have been informed by a co-design process.

As a result of the initial co-design workshops, three priority concepts (each with sub-concepts attached to them) were arrived at by the co-design workshop participants. These priority concepts (and their sub-concepts) were used by the researchers to inform the tools and approaches deployed to gather feedback from the artists to evaluate their experiences of the project.

These priority concepts are as follows:

- **Social impact concepts:**
  - Safety
  - Connection
  - Wellbeing
  - Remuneration (this sub-concept was added following Phase 2; see 4.3)
  
- **Equity concepts:**
  - Inclusion
  - Access

- **Experience concepts:**
  - Creativity
  - Feeling moved
  - Making a discovery

### 4.3 Rationale behind the priority evaluation concepts

The priority concepts outlined in section 4.2 form the basis of the evaluation tools and methods used to evaluate this project. (See Appendix A for a one-page graphic representation of the evaluation framework). As outlined in section 4.2, these priority concepts were selected as a result of the co-design workshop process. They were regarded by the workshop participants as highly relevant to the project as well as to Rebus Theatre's broader values and goals. They were also seen as rigorous concepts that are recognisable beyond Rebus Theatre, referencing, for example, ACT's Wellbeing Framework. They are also concepts that will be understood with ease by a broad group of stakeholders.

The co-design process also afforded opportunities to review and revise concepts, with the goal of responding to changes so that evaluated concepts remained the most relevant and valuable to the project and to Rebus Theatre. Consequently, Phase 2 focus group conversations provided an opportunity to reflect on the suitability of the evaluated concepts themselves, suggesting they were, for the most part, readily recognised and understood.

Nonetheless, Phase 2 focus group participants spent some time unpacking 'Wellbeing', as this concept displayed significant standard deviation in survey responses (see section 4.4.1). Some participants voiced reservations about the term, considering it to be an ambiguous buzzword. However, analysis of the focus group conversations aligned with the survey results and accounted for the highly deviating survey responses. Participants reported a wide range of positive and negative feelings and experiences that impacted their sense of wellbeing. Researchers concluded that 'wellbeing' remains a useful concept to evaluate, particularly when mixed methods are used, as in the quantitative survey and qualitative focus group conversations used here. Using more than one evaluation method enabled nuanced discussion of aspects of Project Alchemy that were experienced differently.

Two changes were made to evaluation sub-concepts and are addressed here.

As indicated at 4.2 above, an additional sub-concept, 'Remuneration', was added to the social impact concepts following Phase 2. This change was made in response to a key finding arising from analysis of Phase 2 data. For artists and mentors alike, paying artists for their work during the project had a striking impact on their wellbeing and sense of self-worth. Thus, 'Remuneration' was added as an explicit sub-concept to better understand the relationship between remuneration and wellbeing across the whole project.

During the co-design workshops there was careful and considered discussion around finding an inclusive way of asking about people's emotional and embodied responses to Project Alchemy, captured in the Experience concepts. A minor change was made between Phases 2 and 3 to ask about 'creative experiences', rather than 'fun creative experiences', in recognition of experiences that were valuable, even if they weren't felt to be fun. In Phase 3, 'Creativity', 'Feeling moved', and 'Making a discovery' reflect a range of positive and negative responses that appropriately captured fun and pleasurable experiences as well as difficult yet valuable experiences.

## 4.4 Evaluation methodology: detailed view

Participation in this research and evaluation, and the data collection tools and methods developed by the evaluation researchers, have been guided by a managed and approved ethical research protocol that aligns with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*. (Phases 1 and 2 were managed and approved by University of Canberra; Phase 3 was managed and approved by WAAPA, Edith Cowan University. See Appendix B for a complete list of the survey and focus group prompts.)

Specifically, the methods used to evaluate Project Alchemy were:

- 9-question sliding scale surveys
- Focus group conversations
- A Playback Theatre performance event

To give a snapshot overview of how these methods were utilised during the project's evaluation stages:

- Surveys were distributed to Project Alchemy's participating artists during evaluation Phase 2, following the first artist residency, and during Phase 3, prior to the third and final residency, with two thirds (average 66%) of the cohort participating.
- Focus group conversations occurred during Phase 2, after the second residency, and during the third and final residency (Phase 3). There was a higher uptake for the focus groups than for the survey, with an average 85% participation rate. Additional phone interviews were conducted for those unable to attend focus groups.
- A Playback Theatre performance occurred during the third and final residency, just prior to the focus group conversation.

An indication of the participation rates in these evaluation methods is presented in the table below:

Data collection method	Numbers of participants	Numbers canvassed	Response rate
Survey 1 (artists and mentors)	12	20	60%
Survey 2 (artists)	11	15	73%
Surveys mean			66%
Mentor Focus Group	5	5	100%
Artist Focus Group 1	10	15	67%
Artist Focus Group 2	13	15	87%
Focus groups mean			85%
Playback Theatre (mentors and artists)	18	20	90%

Table 1: participation rates for evaluation methods

#### 4.4.1 The 9-question sliding scale survey (design and outcomes)

As shown in Table 1 above, there were two 9-question feedback surveys sent to Project Alchemy artists as part of the evaluation process. Surveys were distributed via a digital link to artists and mentors in Phase 2 and to artists only in Phase 3. As outlined in section 4.4, the first of these surveys was sent after the artists had completed their first residency (in December 2022 – January 2023), enabling the researchers to provide rapid-response feedback for mentors. The second survey was sent to artists prior to the third and final residency (in February 2024), enabling a broad view of the two-year project timeframe.

Both surveys were designed as 9-question 5-point sliding scale surveys developed using Qualtrics software. Survey questions are framed as statements to which respondents are asked to indicate their level of agreement, from '0 = not at all to 5 = a great deal', with variation allowed to one decimal place (see Appendix A, Evaluation Framework).

The survey was designed to be suitable for all stakeholders – mentors, artists, and participants in artists' projects – though the scope of this evaluation focused on mentors and artists in Phase 2, and artists in Phase 3. (Artists were invited to apply or adapt the survey for use in their own community projects if they wished.) Responses were overwhelmingly positive, with a total mean agreement with the concept statements of 4.51. That is, the average overall response out of 5 for all survey questions was 4.51, where 5.0 indicates a great deal of agreement.

The question about 'wellbeing' displayed the greatest variation in responses across Phases 2 and 3 (as shown in Table 2). Phase 2's survey results for the statement 'My wellbeing improved participating in Project Alchemy' produced a standard deviation of 1.31. (Standard deviation is a measure of how dispersed the data are in relation to the mean, where a number less than 1 is low, showing relatively consistent responses.) Interpretations of this rather high deviation in responses are offered in 4.3, addressing some mixed interpretations of the term itself, and in 3.4, regarding varying experiences of Project Alchemy's provision of trauma-informed care training. However, Phase 3's standard deviation result for the wellbeing question was much more consistent, being 0.6. Yet the 'wellbeing' concept still displayed the highest deviation overall, with a combined standard deviation of 1.08 (as shown in Table 2).

The level of participation in the project's evaluation feedback survey was not as high as participation in the other evaluation methods, the in-person focus groups and the Playback Theatre session. As can be seen in Table 1, the total number of survey responses received was low (n=23).

In evaluating Project Alchemy, numerical data were used to offer quick-response snapshots that provided clues to inform in-depth focus group conversations. In the future, the survey tool may assist Rebus Theatre in benchmarking their work for longitudinal evaluation beyond Project Alchemy, with survey numerical data becoming more valuable over time. A tool that uses the same concepts across different stakeholder groups provides a rigorous approach to interpreting the perspectives of those stakeholders by enabling comparison across them, while focusing on concepts that have been identified as relevant to Rebus Theatre's broader values and goals.



The table below displays minimum, maximum and mean scores out of 5, as well as the standard deviation, for 9 concepts across the 2 surveys.

Concept	Survey 1 (January 2023) mean	Survey 2 (February 2024) mean	Combined mean	Survey 1 (January 2023) SD	Survey 2 (February 2024) SD	Combined SD
Safety	4.95	4.32	4.65	0.15	0.64	0.56
Connection	4.95	4.53	4.75	0.15	0.53	0.44
Wellbeing	4.00	4.48	4.24	1.31	0.61	1.08
Being paid for work as artists	-	4.58			0.55	
Inclusion	4.65	4.10	4.39	0.45	0.71	0.67
Access	4.60	4.14	4.38	0.66	0.86	0.82
Creativity	4.50	4.54	4.52	0.77	0.54	0.69
Feeling moved	4.90	4.77	4.84	0.20	0.44	0.35
Discovery	4.47	4.19	4.34	0.61	0.87	0.78
<b>TOTAL MEAN</b>	<b>4.63</b>	<b>4.41</b>	<b>4.51</b>	<b>0.54</b>	<b>0.64</b>	<b>0.67</b>

Table 2: Survey concept minimums, maximums, means and standard deviations

#### 4.4.2 The focus group conversations (design and outcomes)

Focus group conversations occurred during Phase 2, after the second residency, and during the third and final residency (Phase 3). Phase 2's focus groups were conducted and audio recorded using Zoom video conferencing software, with Zoom's chat function used to facilitate additional sharing, especially for those participants who experienced internet connectivity difficulties. Phase 3's focus group was conducted in person and audio recorded. Audio recordings were transcribed using otter.ai software.

As with the survey method, Phase 2's evaluation focused on mentors and artists, with separate focus groups for each cohort. Early insight into each cohort's perspectives on the project to that point enabled us, as researchers, to make some suggestions to Rebus Theatre regarding their processes and its social impacts in the light of Project Alchemy artists' perspectives. These included:

- reconsidering approaches to trauma recovery and the provision of trauma-informed care, perhaps by providing more opt-in/opt-out choices for artists;

- providing less formal programming and more time for personal reflection to increase accessibility for artists and reduce the risk of burnout for mentors.

Phase 3's evaluation focused on artists' perspectives of the whole project, including their perceptions of their projects' participants' perspectives, addressed in a single in-person focus group conversation with artists. A very positive atmosphere developed in all focus group discussions, with participants happy to give their time and perspectives for a project they appear to value highly.

#### **4.4.3 The Playback Theatre performance (design and outcomes)**

A Playback Theatre performance occurred during the third and final residency, just prior to the focus group conversation. Playback Theatre is a form of improvised theatre in which audience members tell moments or stories from their own lives, and a team of actors and musicians improvise it back on the spot, without costumes, props, script or rehearsal. Rebus Theatre mentors have expertise in this form and apply it across their projects, including the touring work that launched Project Alchemy, [\*At The End of Our Street\*](#).

The inclusion of a final Playback Theatre performance, presented by Rebus Theatre mentors and witnessed only by artists, provided an alternative approach to evaluation that focused on the emotional and affective qualities of artists' Project Alchemy experiences. The re-enactment of stories may also reveal some of what is not said when talking methods are used. Taking place in the morning before the afternoon focus group, it is possible too that the performance opened up a deeper conversation with more personal sharing during the focus group conversation that followed.

Those artists whose stories were played back were readily moved and grateful for the representations offered. A theme that emerged in the range of stories shared was the humility of the artists, expressed in forms such as imposter syndrome overcome by renewed confidence in their abilities to effect change. Deep gratitude for what Project Alchemy has provided was another theme.

#### **4.4.4 Playback Theatre case study: Breathing Space Artist Residency**

The significance of Playback Theatre to this evaluation can best be demonstrated through a short case study narrative of one shared story as follows:

From 26 September to 14 October 2023, Michele Grimston (a visual artist working predominantly with textile practices including embroidery, tapestry and sewing) was in residence at a community centre as part of Project Alchemy. The Hive is located in the suburb of Taylor in northern Canberra and has a significant migrant population. As well as working on her own creative practice during the residency, Michele hosted open studio sessions for visitors to connect with their own creative practice through communal textile-based making sessions.

On one occasion, the community development organisation with whom Michele had partnered during this residency had accidentally double booked the community centre space. But rather than cancel either booking, Michele was asked to host an English Conversation session which is typically attended by migrant men. Drawing on her dual expertise in textile arts and community engagement, Michele used embroidery techniques to transform what would have been a 'regular' English Conversation session into an art-making open studio session that also included English conversation opportunities for this migrant group.

In Rebus Theatre's Playback Theatre session, performers improvised this story back for everyone, capturing its key points:

Chris playing Michele: *Sorry, let me just get this clear. They don't speak English?*

Chips playing community development worker: *They will!*

Chris playing Michele: *Majority men, probably about 20 [people]?*

Chips playing community development worker: *Yeah, no, no. No, they don't actually want to be doing the embroidery...*

[PAUSE]

Chris playing Michele: *I've got this.*

Chips playing community development worker: *Oh, thank goodness, Michele. You're the best artist I know!*

The addition of improvised sound and music, and repeated gestures and movements, enhanced the affective power of the storytelling.

Rebus Theatre's Playback performer Chris, playing Michele, picked up on Michele's use of the phrase 'I've got this!' in the face of every challenge presented. In Chris's performance, this line was accompanied by a gesture that looked like plucking a fruit from a tree and stowing it safely in a basket.

What was most powerful as an evaluation outcome was to observe the way this line and gesture continued to reappear amongst the artists later in the day, reinforcing both Michele's experience and the experiences of those other Project Alchemy artists who shared the expression of confidence in their own abilities: 'I've got this!'

Despite the fact that the 45 people at Michele's spontaneous art-making / English Conversation session at the community centre were mostly men with little or no English, Michele ended her story by noting that:

*They were really proud of what they'd done and also had this lovely understanding of the work the women in their family had been doing this whole time and the value of that work. A couple of them actually came back to another session afterwards and it was really great.*

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In evaluating this project we have drawn on a range of feedback generated by its 15 core artists to identify its areas of greatest impact. Overwhelmingly, we find these impacts have had positive effects on the artists involved and on community members within the artists' LGAs who were involved in their community-led arts projects.

We find these positive effects to be both short-term in nature – such as those related to the artists' sense of wellbeing and life-stability during the two year period they involved in Project Alchemy – and longer-term, including the project's social and economic flow-on effects for the artists and their communities, which are still yielding benefits for the artists and the community members they work with.

Another prominent yet somewhat unexpected finding was the impact of the project's support for its artists as professionals, both in terms of the payments the artists received for their work, and in relation to the project's working conditions. This support had profound effects on the artists' sense of self-worth and confidence to continue their community engaged arts practice, and contributed a lot to the artists' motivation to continue in their work and to achieve meaningful results for their communities. As we show throughout this report, these outcomes exhibit important links to the Federal Government's National Cultural Policy *Revive*, and in the stated aims of its Creative Workplaces Council. We find that Project Alchemy's model has been especially effective in addressing current issues around artists' skills and career development, in its capacity to provide its 15 core artists with opportunities to build a range of new skills and develop some powerful new professional networks which have empowered them with new levels of self-confidence and allowed them to feel that they are part of something beyond their individual creative practices. These qualities – of solidarity, sharing, bonding and peer-support – are crucial to building a more sustainable arts sector overall, and to ensuring our professional practicing artists feel valued for the important social and economic contributions they make to their audiences and communities through their work.

Such strong outcomes also indirectly illuminate the vulnerabilities of the arts sector, particularly in bushfire affected regional communities. The experiences shared by Project Alchemy artists in relation to the support they received during the project reveal how undervalued and under-recognised they have felt outside of their Project Alchemy work in a sector which has not been able to offer them the kind of meaningful career development opportunities that Project Alchemy has been able to. The artists' profoundly positive responses to the 'rare' professional and financial support they received during their two years as Project Alchemy artists demonstrates the value of creating more sustained work opportunities for these and other community-engaged artists. These opportunities have helped these artists achieve a greater sense of stability in their lives overall, and helped them dedicate more time and focus to important aspects of their community-engaged arts practices. Evidently, the increased time and energy these artists were able to devote to these areas of their arts practice during Project Alchemy has, in many cases, led to their projects facilitating a range of important social benefits for the local communities involved.

# APPENDIX A: EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

This one-page reference document offers an at-a-glance view of Project Alchemy’s evaluation framework, including the survey and focus group questions, the concepts that informed them, and those concepts’ relations to external reference points.

It also notes the three principles – rigour, relevance and ease – that informed the framework.

Artists may apply the evaluation framework or use this quick reference to adapt for use in their own community projects.

Principles	Key reference		Concept ‘family’	Survey statements / focus group questions
<b>Rigour:</b> it’s reliable and relates to recognisable concepts and methods beyond Rebus Theatre	ACT Wellbeing Framework	Cultural Development Network’s Measurable Outcomes Schema		
	Safety	Sense of safety and security increased	Social impact concepts	I felt <b>safe</b> and secure when participating in Project Alchemy
	Social connection	Social connectedness enhanced		I felt <b>connected</b> to a shared experience through Project Alchemy
	Health	Wellbeing (physical and/or mental) improved		My <b>wellbeing</b> improved after participating in Project Alchemy
	Economy	Individual economic wellbeing increased		I experienced positive <b>economic</b> impacts as a result of Project Alchemy
<b>Ease:</b> it’s easy for mentors, artists, and community participants to use and understand, in keeping with equity concepts	Identity and belonging	Diversity of cultural expression appreciated	Equity concepts	I felt that Project Alchemy was <b>inclusive</b>
	Access and connectivity	CDN’s Outcomes are not easy to understand		I felt that Project Alchemy was <b>accessible</b>
<b>Relevance:</b> it centres concepts that are meaningful to arts and cultural spaces and people	ACT Wellbeing Framework neglects creative experiences	Creativity stimulated	Creative experience concepts	I had a <b>creative</b> experience
		Aesthetic enrichment experienced		I was <b>moved</b> by what I experienced
		Knowledge, ideas and insight gained		I <b>discovered</b> something new

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY & FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

This survey was designed and delivered via ECU's licensed software Qualtrics and accessed via an electronic link provided in an email.

*Based on your experience of participating in Project Alchemy, please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements, where 0 = not at all and 5 = a great deal.*

1. I felt safe and secure when participating in Project Alchemy.
2. I felt connected to a shared experience through Project Alchemy.
3. My wellbeing improved after participating in Project Alchemy.
4. I experienced positive economic impacts as a result of Project Alchemy
5. I felt that Project Alchemy was inclusive.
6. I felt that Project Alchemy was accessible.
7. I had a creative experience.
8. I was moved by what I experienced.
9. I discovered something new.
10. Is there anything you'd like to say about your Project Alchemy experience? [open text response]

This Focus Group guide adopts the same framework as the survey, with the freedom for participants to unpack questions further in the context of a facilitated group conversation. Follow up questions asked by the facilitator investigated the duration of any impacts, the extent of the impacts, and the value of the concepts themselves.

1. Did you feel safe and secure when participating in Project Alchemy? Always? Why or why not?
2. Did you feel connected to a shared experience through Project Alchemy? To what extent? Why or why not?
3. Did your wellbeing improve after participating in Project Alchemy? To what extent? Why or why not?
4. Did you experience positive economic impacts as a result of Project Alchemy? To what extent? Why or why not?
5. Did you feel that Project Alchemy was inclusive? For whom, and in which ways?
6. Did you feel that Project Alchemy was accessible? For whom, and in which ways?
7. Did you have a creative experience? To what extent? Why or why not?
8. Were you moved by what you experienced? To what extent? Why or why not?
9. Did you discover anything new? To what extent? Why or why not?