

Journal of Dance Education

ISSN: 1529-0824 (Print) 2158-074X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ujod20

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To cite this article: Manisha Aggarwal, David Tod, Francesca Champ, Laura D. Swettenham & Amy Whitehead (16 Oct 2026): The Transition Gap: Dance Graduates Navigating the Path to Professional Careers, Journal of Dance Education, DOI: 10.1080/15290824.2026.2617199

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2026.2617199

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Published online: 16 Oct 2026.

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JOURNAL OF DANCE EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2026.2617199

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The Transition Gap: Dance Graduates Navigating the Path to Professional Careers

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the experiences of dance graduates seeking professional dance work, addressing a gap in the literature, which largely focuses on junior-to-senior transitions in other sports. A longitudinal qualitative study was used, with semi-structured interviews conducted with four dance graduates over four sessions from November 2021 to July 2023. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (ESM), themes were highlighted across the individual (changes in dancer identity, changes in motivation as priorities change, development of self-awareness and self-compassion); interpersonal (support systems, social comparisons to other dancers, industry experts); organizational (preparation from higher education institutions (HEIs), limited opportunities for training and booking jobs, lack of security as a professional dancer); and sociocultural (long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis) levels. These themes align with previous research, giving insight into COVID-19 and graduate life with practical implications for psychologists and dance educators.

KEYWORDS

Dance studies; higher education; qualitative research; transitions; sport psychology

Introduction

Vocational dance training courses are a pathway for aspiring professional dancers. These courses are often provided by universities or conservatoires. Typically, dancers train across various genres to learn the foundations of different styles and techniques, whilst also increasing their physical fitness. The courses are designed to develop individuals into professional dancers, to prepare them for working in the industry (Blevins et al. 2020).

Dance students can be viewed as dual-career athletes, as they face high-level stress due to physical demands, alongside balancing academic studies and personal life (McEwen and Young 2011; Wylleman and Lavallee 2004). This includes aiming for skill mastery within their dance technique (Grove, Main, and Sharp 2013), which is unsurprising as perfectionistic traits have been highlighted in dancers (Atienza et al. 2020). This recognizes some psychological demands faced by dance students during their training years. This can be enhanced when transitioning from education into the profession (Blevins et al. 2020).

Transitions have often been referred to as events or nonevents that occur in an individual's life (Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallee 2004). In sport, a transition can be starting a new sport, playing a new role, facing rejection, retirement, and so on. Final-year dance students can feel competitive, as they perceive their classmates to be their competition when auditioning for jobs once they have graduated (Blevins et al. 2020). Furthermore, as they prepare for the industry, a change in expectations was observed by the students from their teachers, whereby added pressure to be industry-ready was placed (Blevins et al. 2020). With this being experienced, Blevins et al. (2020) reported that this is linked to low confidence as dancers compared themselves to each other, knowing that job security was a source of stress, as the dance industry has been perceived to be unpredictable (Njaradi 2014). To be successful and financially stable, Higdon and Stevens (2017) found that passion and enjoyment alone are not sustainable, and so dance practitioners and universities need to develop strategies for students during and after their studies to support employment in dance.

At present, research shows it is competitive to secure a job in the dance industry (Ardrey 2009). Montgomery and Robinson (2003) found that dancers who are young, trained, and experienced are more likely to be employed. Furthermore, 61% of dance graduates rely heavily on non-dance jobs to meet financial needs (Chua 2014; Montgomery and Robinson 2003). In addition, financial support is a key factor for talent

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development to access professional training, as individuals can struggle to travel or gain access to dance classes for development, to then be employable (Bennett 2009; Greben 2002; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell 2011). Despite this, dancers are highly committed to training and looking for dance work, as their reward is suggested to be non-monetary, as the salaries of dance jobs are lower than non-dance jobs (Montgomery and Robinson 2003).

Across observations from other sports, research has suggested that the most difficult transition is the junior-to-senior transition, where athletes are competing in more intense and demanding competitions (Stambulova et al. 2009). This transition can be physically and mentally demanding, with a further developmental transition of adolescents going into early adulthood (Wylleman and Lavallee 2004). Much of the work done in this area has looked at sport-specific contexts such as football (Morris, Tod, and Eubank 2017), equestrian sports (Alge 2008), and track and field (Hollings, Mallett, and Hume 2014). Some of the individual factors that have been associated with junior-to-senior transitions include the determination to succeed and work hard, adaptability, intrinsic motivation, athletic identity, mental strength and achieving a life balance (Drew et al. 2019). This suggests that athletes are faced with high demands and expectations, where psychological factors play a major role in this transition. Additionally, external factors have been highlighted in this transition, such as performance progression, support, change in priorities, sources of stress and greater physical demands (Drew et al. 2019). Whilst there has been extensive research into junior-to-senior transitions, there is limited knowledge in the psychological experiences dance graduates face when transitioning into their professional career.

Research has suggested that career transitions in dancers can have a psychological impact on a dancer's identity, with limited research exploring this (Griffin et al. 2019). Athletic identity refers to how individuals can tie who they are to their sport or activity, especially when invested into the specialization of the sport from a young age (Wainwright, Williams, and Turner 2005). A dancer's social identity can heighten the stress experienced throughout their career (Blevins et al. 2020), as dancers often experience a separation from dance, a sense of loss and struggles with identity (Greben 2002; Harrison and Ruddock-Hudson 2017; Milne and Neely 2022; Pickman 1987). Research suggests it is due to a lack of exposure to alternative career paths and developing life skills, as high investment is often required in dance at an early age (Greben 2002; Pickman 1987).

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences that dance graduates face as they navigate the industry. It will also explore their identity and changes throughout the transition. As seen, there are many factors contributing to a dancer's transition including early specialization, strong athletic identity, financial demands, and performance expectations. Using a longitudinal method helps explore the complexities of a dancer's transition over time.

Method

Philosophical and Biographical Positioning

The aim is to understand and provide insight into the experiences dance graduates go through when transitioning out of dance education and finding professional dance work. This can highlight the complex demands of artistic athletes, which can help practitioners and universities to provide more psychological support and better prepare dancers for their careers. This research takes a relativist ontology perspective as individual experiences at different times are captured throughout the transition, whereby motivations and self-perception vary and there is no single truth (Bernstein 1983). Many perceptions and experiences have been explored throughout each participant's journey, placing motivations and meanings onto this. The epistemology within this study is social constructivism as it explored the participants' individual experience through societal and cultural influences and observations (Gergen 1991; Raskin 2002).

The first author has experience in competing in and teaching dance. Throughout the interviews, at times participants referred to the interviewer as someone who understands some of the demands of the industry. This helped the researcher to use language commonly used by dancers and to gain a better understanding of the context in which the participants discussed dance-specific issues, in line with social constructivism (Gergen 1991). However, it is understandable that researcher bias can lead to some reservations around the interpretation of the data analysis. Whilst it is not possible for the researcher to be completely free from bias (Banister et al. 2011), the researcher kept a reflective field-note diary and made notes on their experiences, knowledge, and assumptions prior to each interview, so it is made clear that observations in the data are coming from the participants' experiences (Deggs and Hernandez 2018). This allows for co-construction between the participant and researcher and develops functional meanings (Shotter 1993).

Design

The design of this study is qualitative and longitudinal to allow for an in-depth snapshot of the participants' experiences of graduating from university throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and finding paid dance work. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted between 5 and 6 months apart across 21 months for each participant. Interviews were co-constructed between the participant and interviewer as experiences are discussed in detail, with prompts from the interviewer.

Participants

Four recent dance graduates (class of 2020 or 2021) were recruited through opportunistic sampling and social media advertisements. All participants were transitioning from education and identified as White British. Participants have a mean age of 21.5 years, with three participants identifying as women and one identifying as a man. Participants studied within the northwest of England and the Midlands. Half of the participants had a prior relationship with the interviewer through friendships, which can allow for greater depth of analysis through shared knowledge with a strong rapport being present (Nowak and Haynes 2018).

The number of years in formal dance education post-16 (which consists of gaining a Further Education and/or Higher Education Qualification through the UK's education system) ranged from two to four years. The courses focused on performance and/or choreography, studying a range of styles such as ballet, jazz, contemporary, and commercial. All students aimed to secure performance-based roles. Participants were not classmates and so were in indirect competition with each other. Prior to post-16 education, all participants engaged in private dance training at an early age, with competitive backgrounds.

Dani graduated from a course with the aim of preparing her to apply for grants and perform her own work. However, limited guidance was provided on how to write granting applications. By the end of the research, Dani focused on full-time unrelated dance work, but her skills were transferable from her degree. For example, being a confident public speaker and to develop and deliver creative activities for young people. Despite this, she hopes to return to making dance work in the future.

Tia graduated from a course focusing on performance and commercial dance with the aim of becoming a professional commercial dancer. Throughout the course, mock auditions and techniques were offered to support her career. Tia was successful in ad-hoc performance work, but in a less preferred environment and unpaid opportunities, whilst working in retail for financial security.

Mya graduated from a commercial dance course focusing on booking commercial dance roles, integrating various dance styles. Career support and professional advice were offered, such as hearing from alumni about their experiences. By the end, Mya secured ad-hoc performance dance roles, whilst being creative and working in content creation for financial stability.

Leo graduated from a dance course preparing him for jobs such as cruise work, in musical theater, and commercial roles. Professional advice and guidance were limited to mock auditions. Whilst Leo did not secure any paid dance work, he focused on exploring his skills more broadly across the performing arts, aiming for a more diverse role encompassing dancing, singing, modeling and acting.

Interview Guide

The interview schedule was developed to explore and observe any changes to participants' behaviors, identity, and attitudes as they transition from full-time dance education to work. The schedule was based on existing literature on transitions (Drew et al. 2019) and dance talent development (Chua 2014). The schedule included pre-established questions and additional prompts for participants to elaborate. A pilot interview was conducted with a dancer who met the inclusion criteria to ensure that the questions were relevant and came across with clarity. For example, asking participants about the online dance community pre-COVID-19 and the use and growth of social media due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This enhanced the quality of the study as it helped to contextualize these experiences with advances in technology and the sociocultural changes participants were experiencing. Some example questions include: "What is your experience of finding dance work?" with follow up questions such as "How has this impacted on your love for dance?"

In-between interview rounds, data analysis was conducted to help inform the interview schedule for the next interview (see data analysis section for further details). Some specific questions were asked as a follow-up to previous events that were disclosed in the last interview. This included asking the outcome of an audition or the progress of a project that was aforementioned. Moreover, the same questions were asked at each interview round so comparisons could be made on how the participants' behaviors, attitudes, and experiences developed. For example, asking participants to describe their passion, confidence, and motivation in relation to pursuing a dance career. As interviews

progressed, the researcher challenged participants, as discrepancies were observed as one participant accepted a role they previously said they wouldn't go for; and so the career goals were explored for justification as to why certain decisions were made.

Procedure

This study was granted institutional ethical approval. Most participants were recruited through opportunistic sampling as the researcher knew participants through friendships within the dance industry and university. One participant was recruited through social media, particularly Instagram as there is a dance community on this platform. Participants who expressed an interest were sent a participant information sheet and a consent form. Once participants were satisfied to proceed, they provided written consent, and an online interview was arranged. Participants were interviewed four times (between November 2021 and July 2023) over the duration of this research. This added value to the research as it allowed participants and the researcher to reflect in-between interviews and uncover the complexities of the participants' experiences (Earthy and Cronin 2008), especially exploring a transition where a one-off interview may lack depth and true representation (Grinyer and Thomas 2012). Furthermore, this provides insights into the experiences at different points within the dance season and how participants managed this, as research describes the industry as financially insecure (Bennett 2009; Greben 2002).

Interviews were between 30 and 60 minutes (M=31 minutes), which were audio recorded. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim for data analysis, so all audio was transcribed word for word. This includes pauses, filler speech (such as "erm," "hm"), and anything that was inaudible was also noted. This process was repeated for each interview. On completion of the study, participants were debriefed where they were signposted to services should they need it, such as counseling for dancers and mental health charities, in alignment with the university's ethical guidelines.

Data Analysis

Through reflexive thematic analysis, common themes were explored within this transition (Braun and Clarke 2019). This method was chosen as it identified and organized patterns in the data in every interview round for each participant and allowed for the lead researcher to embrace her own biographical positioning. Using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step process, the data were analyzed inductively with complete immersion into all transcripts through repetition (step one). Codes were generated to capture the raw data (step two), where broader themes were generated and organized into a table (steps three and four). This process was undertaken after each interview. The themes were defined and refined to major themes and documented (steps five and six). This was conducted with fluidity and exploration with consideration of what has changed at each interview. For example, some of the codes related to self-perception and motivation were defined as identity as a theme. Following the thematic analysis, themes were discussed with coauthors, highlighting that the participants' experiences can be organized deductively into an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (ESM) to capture these experiences at different levels (Sallis, Owen, and Fisher 2015). The initial use of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ESM focused on the quality and context of a child's development, based on different settings and how this interacts. As it was evident that the complexities of a dancer's transition would be better framed through the individual, interpersonal, organizational, and sociocultural levels which interact. This helped to identify the contextual factors, as well as individual factors that could contribute to a dancer's identity throughout career transitions and the multiple levels of influence. The model has been used in contexts such as youth sport development, education, and health (Cala and Soriano 2014; Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny 2022; Krebs 2009).

Researcher Credibility

To ensure research quality was adhered to, the relevant criteria addressed were rigor, transparency, originality, uniqueness, and a significant contribution. This was a rigorous process (Johnson, Adkins, and Chauvin 2020), as a longitudinal study was undertaken with repeated interviews to gain deeper insights into the transition at multiple time points. In addition, participants' stories were checked and challenged by a team of researchers (academic researchers and qualified sport and exercise psychologists) who supported the analysis process. Moreover, participants checked this to ensure the findings were accurate with limited researcher bias, adding to the transparency of the researcher's philosophical position in the study (Tuval-Mashiach 2017). To achieve originality and uniqueness, the nature of the topic is under-researched and framed in a novel way using Bronfenbrenner's ESM (Aksnes, Langfeldt, and Wouters 2019). Furthermore, being able to maintain strong relationships with participants who continued to be interviewed, offered rich data unique to the field of dance research.

Findings

To understand the experiences that dance graduates face, using a modified version of Bronfenbrenner's ESM (Sallis, Owen, and Fisher 2015), themes were identified and how these changed or remained is discussed. This allows for further understanding of how different levels can explain individual experiences through wider organizational and contextual issues.

This section will highlight the stories and findings from participants at each level, framed using Bronfenbrenner's ESM.

Individual Level

The individual level explores how participants navigate this transition by acknowledging their personal experiences. This encompasses changes in dancer identity, motivation, priorities, and development of self-awareness and self-compassion.

Changes in Dancer Identity

The identity of the participants is subjective to how they view themselves as dancers and how this has shaped the perceptions of their experiences.

Strong dancer identity was highlighted by all participants at the beginning of the interviews, due to high investment and early specialization in dance. Consequently, when Mya faced setbacks, she experienced a lack of purpose as she wasn't sure who she was as a person. Similarly, Dani's dream to become a dancer did not feel feasible and experienced feelings of guilt due to the investment she has put into dance: "if I don't do dance for like a significant period or like [. . .] get one big significant job in it, I don't know if I will ever accept the fact that or stop feeling guilty" (Dani, interview 2).

Therefore, Dani stepped away from dance and focused on a different career path, which widened her identity without dance being her sole focus. Likewise, Leo began to broaden his identity, as he wanted to pursue singing, acting, musical theater, and modeling, where dance can be a part of that, as opposed to dance being the only thing he did.

Changes in Motivation as Priorities Change

Motivation was dynamic due to peaks and troughs that coincided with their perceived opportunities. Over time, participants had more life experience and identified different priorities.

Tia and Mya were successful as they booked freelance work, casual contracts, and unpaid performances in dance, which increased their motivation. Moreover, promised opportunities that fell through motivated Tia: "it's kind of like set a fire in me to make me think like no I do want to like I need to like push harder and work hard to try and get to do that because like the opportunities don't just come like that" (Tia, interview 2).

Mya moved back to the city that she trained in, which allowed her to engage in dance regularly, performing at shows and events. However, Mya went through peaks and troughs and considered quitting dance as a career; "I'm at the point now where I'm like, do I really want to do this as a career? Like, is it wise? Because I–I think it's not . . . there's so many factors other than working hard and being a good dancer [. . .] it just feels out of my control" (Mya, interview 3).

Dani was offered to showcase a dance piece that she applied for, but this was no longer something that aligned with her goals. Therefore, motivation and perception of success varied between participants.

Development of Self-awareness and Self-compassion

Participants developed self-awareness and noticed a difference in self-perception. This allowed them to accept the expected and unexpected changes and become kinder to themselves.

For example, Tia accepted that she wouldn't be the same dancer as she was whilst she was training, as she could not dedicate the same amount of time to fitness training. This highlighted that she wouldn't have the same fitness levels and technical ability as she was no longer in full-time training, and so she had to adjust.

During this journey, participants developed a refreshed sense of self and the ability to recognize themselves in new situations away from dance by alleviating some pressures from other people. This allowed Leo to grow at his own pace, saying "you can't rely on someone else's expectation because you might get led down a career path that you don't wanna do" (Leo, interview 4).

For Dani, this allowed her to grasp a better understanding of herself as she learned about her triggers and how she manages this. Having this self-awareness helped her to navigate these challenges and reflect on the person she is becoming.

Overall, participants have enhanced self-awareness of their capabilities, emotions, and expectations, allowing for clarity and acceptance of what they can and can't control, resulting in self-compassion.

Interpersonal Level

The interpersonal level highlights the social-relational influences on the participants and how this contributes to their development and transition. This level focuses

on support systems, social comparison to other dancers, and industry experts.

Support Systems

All participants received social and emotional support from friends, family, and external sources.

Tia became confident and resilient with the support from ex-classmates, as they're "literally on the same journey so we all understand what it is so we're all trying to support each other as much as we can like sending each other like auditions and like going down to train in [. . .] together and stuff" (Tia, interview 3).

Comparably, Dani experienced this with her colleague, who faced difficulties breaking into the dance industry and found that they were able to confide in each other.

Moreover, participants received parental support. This was important for Leo, who states: "When you've got that kind of support system that can help pick you up, when you're down and [. . .] to know that you've like made someone in your like family or your friends proud is, is a really really good feeling" (Leo, interview 3).

Overall, the support that participants received, maintained throughout this transition.

Social Comparison to Other Dancers

Participants compared themselves to others, particularly younger dancers who were successful.

Leo described an increase in pressure as "you see a lot of young people doing it and so you feel like you have to" (Leo, interview 4). The pressure was instilled through social comparisons as participants felt behind when they were not achieving their goals. This contributed to Mya's low self-confidence as she highlighted that the year group below her, did not have their final year of training disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, so they had a smoother transitional experience as "they still have training leftover, which I didn't get to go back to that" (Mya, interview 4).

Therefore, participants compared themselves to younger dancers, which is emphasized by wider circumstances, external to the individual's control.

Industry Experts (Dance Teachers, Choreographers, Agents)

Industry experts are individuals working in the dance industry who may have contributed to the participants' development.

Participants were no longer surrounded by the same teachers and choreographers, so they sought support from experts in different contexts to find training opportunities. For example, Tia and Mya attended dance camps and company training days to connect with industry experts and to find a sense of community. Mya benefited from this after attending a dance intensive:

> It's nice to have that space to like not genuinely not have to care, what you look like, you know that there's no judgment in that room and I'm not there to make a connection, or to hopefully get a job out of it, it's not an audition but it's just a nice, like, supportive space and I like that it's more than just training, like, it's also like meditation and journaling. (Mya, interview 3)

This emphasized the importance of participants having a community to connect with others, in an open, pressure-free environment. Similarly, Leo and Tia tried to find a new agency representation for more opportunities and auditions.

All participants mentioned that it's important knowing the right people: "if you go into an audition, with someone who knows someone on the panel, you know they're gonna get the job just because they know them" (Tia, interview 2). This suggests that the industry relies on the right connections to become successful, and without them it's difficult to get booked onto jobs. As seen with Dani, she missed out on networking opportunities and the chance to collaborate with other dancers to create a dance piece.

Organizational Level

The organizational level considers how certain issues are normalized within dance due to the discipline. This will focus on the preparation from higher education institutions (HEIs), the limited opportunities for training and jobs, and the lack of security as a professional dancer.

Preparation from HEIs

The HEIs that participants attended influenced their perceptions about the industry and how prepared they were for the realities of post-graduate life.

Throughout Mya's time at university, teachers and alumni would be open about the competitiveness of the industry, despite dancers posting their successes on social media and universities sharing alumni success stories. Leo found that whilst his university held mock auditions, there was minimal transparency of expectations of booking jobs straight out of university. To overcome this, Leo suggested someone who "knew how to talk to you and knew erm, you know everything that was going on erm, with your subjects, you know the future with that subject and your career and stuff then that would be very helpful" (Leo, interview 4).

This implies that having a holistic and empathetic approach during Leo's training years could have helped him to manage the industry from a career perspective.

In contrast, Dani noticed her development as a person since graduating from university, even if she did not pursue dance. Dani started to accept that completing a dance degree was not wasted; "I literally spent thousands of pounds on a dance degree, why am I not dancing, no [Dani] you spent thousands of pounds to like live away from home, learn how to cook for yourself, get transferable skills, become social, meet new people" (Dani interview 2).

Limited Opportunities for Training and Booking Jobs

The lack of opportunities for participants to regularly train was identified, alongside the lack of job opportunities and auditions.

Participants felt most opportunities were either in the cities they trained in or in London. There were few opportunities when participants graduated into lockdown due to national restrictions. When things settled, the industry returned to what participants considered as normal, with minimal impact from the pandemic.

However, due to this disruption in their final year of university, participants missed out on networking opportunities and couldn't put themselves out there. Consequently, Tia felt "the same dancers being used and I feel like there's not been nothing new" (Tia, interview 2). Therefore, the lack of opportunities made the transition difficult, highlighting the pandemic's impact on participants' career prospects.

Lack of Security as a Professional Dancer

All participants expressed concerns that a dance career has a lack of financial security as paid work is not guaranteed.

Tia shared her worries on the longevity and the stability of being a professional dancer: "When do you just call it a day [chuckles] because obviously you want like a house, you want like all this and all that and obviously dance isn't . . . financially the best career to being able to afford all of that" (Tia, interview 3).

This was similar across participants, as long-term life goals such as buying a house and starting a family did not align with the lifestyle and culture of the industry. Therefore, the longer Tia went on without a big dance job, questions were raised as to whether this career is something that was able to provide the security she wanted.

Moreover, participants worked other jobs to afford auditions, classes, and living costs and found this exhausting as "you need to get money so you can afford to do this, but I don't want to then become like, obsessed with working to the point where it's like, I'm not dancing" (Tia, interview 1).

Dani was in a full-time job that she enjoyed and the passion for dance remained; however, she would only pursue a dance career if it met her financial needs.

Sociocultural Level

The sociocultural level highlights the norms and values in society and how this can influence the dance profession. This will explore the long-term impact of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis.

Long-term Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Participants finished their training amongst the COVID-19 pandemic, which had short-term and long-term effects on breaking into the dance industry.

Tia found that:

> because of Covid, I don't have them connections and then because I've never been able to do auditions or be on a job my name isn't there to be put forward for this other job. Auditions are like, you need an agent only to be invited, but then there's no open auditions to get an agent anymore. (Tia, interview 1)

This illustrates the difficulty of breaking into the industry, as even when the short-term changes returned to normal, the impact continued, as Tia struggled to connect with the right people. Similarly, Dani shared that "I didn't get my final third year show and I did the whole of my master's degree in COVID. I haven't worked with other dancers for like two, two-and-a-half, three years" (Dani, interview 3). This emphasized how remote learning, being distant from other dancers, and limited opportunities were a result of the pandemic, and may have altered Dani's perception, motivation, and passion to pursue a professional dance career.

Cost-of-living Crisis

The long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic led to economic challenges. For Dani, a dance career was no longer a priority and signified the importance of her current job:

> "Why would I give it up? To go to something unreliable . . . especially in the current crisis that we're in economically like, why would I, why would I try and pursue a freelance career in this?" (Dani, interview 4).

Dani recognized the financial struggles and the risk of prioritizing dance, as it does not guarantee a consistent income to cover living expenses. This tied into the worries that participants had at the organizational level. A dance career was not sustainable or accessible due to financial factors.

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of dance graduates looking for professional work and how this changed over time. Using a longitudinal approach, changes in

athletic identity were explored, with key findings observed across Bronfenbrenner's ESM at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, and sociocultural levels. Key findings showed an increase in self-awareness in participants, which led to changes to the dancer's identity, whilst some maintained a stronger identity than others. This was influenced by dance culture and perceptions of success, consequently leading to more self-compassion when faced with adversity. Some themes were heightened by the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are explained using Bronfenbrenner's ESM and how the levels interact to make sense of the dancers' experiences.

At the individual level, participants held a strong dancer identity which continued for some participants, as a facilitator to maintain motivation. Some participants were open to new avenues of skill development and/or alternative career paths, enhanced by self-awareness and acceptance of the competitiveness of the dance industry. Participants discussed how dance was a huge part of who they are due to high investment in dance from a young age (Greben 2002; Pickman 1987). This meant that the participants' changes in their self-perception throughout this transition, either reaffirmed their passion and motivation to pursue a dance career or they accepted dance as something they love doing and a form of self-expression whilst exploring other career paths. In line with Milne and Neely's (2022) work where adversities were experienced, dancers reevaluated who they are and what they wanted. This interacts with the organizational level where the profession lacks security and financial stability leading to frustrations external to the participants' control. Consequently, experiencing setbacks manifested differently for participants, as some had a decrease in motivation toward dance, whereas some used this to push themselves further (Milne and Neely 2022). Therefore, the dance industry is competitive, yet dancers still want to pursue performance roles. To tackle this, it has been implied that dance roles that go beyond performance such as working as part of a company/organization, community practice, teaching or freelance projects should be shared more explicitly (Bennett and Bridgstock 2015; Longley and Kensington-Miller 2019). This is due to the cultural norms of what is a successful career within dance, as performance-based roles are deemed to be more valuable than the aforementioned roles. Increasing awareness of the other roles that dancers can pursue could help more graduates to secure work (Bennett and Bridgstock 2015; Longley and Kensington-Miller 2019). This means a cultural shift in what is defined as success within the dance industry is needed at the organizational level, as it begins to highlight areas that have been highly praised and invites value in other aspects. This cultural shift interacts with the individual level, as it can enhance self-awareness and self-compassion when facing setbacks. Therefore, by redefining what success is within the industry to a more dynamic and flexible approach, can help graduates to achieve dance-related work that they want to strive for, as opposed to what the culture of dance accepts as valuable.

To support a dancer's career development, self-management skills are important (Ardrey 2009; Bennett 2009; Bennett and Bridgstock 2015). This allows graduates to utilize skills to secure work as freelancers and to find their niche. Independence is important for dancers and educators to be aware of, as it can provide options for dancers to create their own businesses and develop the skills needed to be self-employed, as institutions do not prepare graduates for this (Ardrey 2009; Bennett 2009). The minimal preparation from HEIs is emphasized at the organizational level. This is because participants described being unaware of the extent to which they were going to face psychological and financial challenges when graduating. In addition, developing self-management skills would help graduates to sustain their training to retain and refine technical skills and be intrinsically self-motivated (Bennett 2009; Bennett and Bridgstock 2015; Chua 2014). However, this can be difficult to achieve due to a fast-changing industry, where there is pressure to keep up with such changes, so graduates need to be adaptable (Bennett and Bridgstock 2015). Therefore, graduates need further awareness of the multiplicity and diversity of dance roles available and to develop self-management skills. Universities should expose students to different career paths throughout their studies, broadening career prospects and identity. This can be enhanced by developing resilience and adaptability in dancers, from support systems within the institution such as lecturers, classmates, and psychologists.

At the sociocultural level, the impact of COVID-19 should not be overlooked. The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the UK's economy (resulting in the cost-of-living crisis) interacts with the other levels, particularly the organizational level. It is evident that the pandemic impacted the opportunities available for graduates, which increased the competitiveness of becoming successful dancers. This novel finding provides a stronger contribution to the difficulties that dance graduates face as highlighted by Ardrey (2009), where graduates were talented and passionate but other factors played a role in their success, external to their control. This intertwines with the interpersonal levels, as participants compared success stories with other dancers

who graduated a year later, who had minimal disruption from the pandemic. Therefore, the confidence of participants decreased due to many factors that were out of their control because of lockdown restrictions. Furthermore, Montgomery and Robinson (2003) found dancers who had more experience, who trained, and were young, were more likely to be employed. This current study emphasizes COVID-19 impact, as all participants were trained and young in this study but lacked experience. This illustrates the difficulty of obtaining work, as they lacked professional experience, decreasing their chances of being booked. This contributes to the harsh reality of the dance industry found by Bennett and Bridgstock (2015).

Once settled into post-graduation life, participants began to adapt and adjust to a different lifestyle. Arguably, dance graduates are leaving the developmental stage of full-time training, as proposed by Bloom (1985), and entering the mastery stage of talent development. However, these stages do not consider the complexities that dance graduates face. At the organizational level, it is an expectation that dancers should still consistently train (mirroring full-time training hours), be able to afford training opportunities and auditions, and maintain high fitness levels (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell 2011). However, this presents challenges as participants discussed the sacrifices required to be successful. As time went on, participants engaged in self-compassion at the individual level and sought support at the interpersonal level, with greater awareness of self-care and happiness. Overall, participants sought support from dance friends, family members, and industry professionals for emotion-focused and problem-focused solutions. Participants began to understand that they are at a different stage in life and so comparing their abilities to their pre-pandemic selves was incomparable due to the change in circumstances. This meant they were kinder to themselves by alleviating self-inflicted pressure to be successful and accepting that opportunities will come, but this does not mean they have to train full-time, as this is not accessible. This self-development can be supported by Carson et al. (2025) where dance lecturers have noticed coping strategies and psycho-behavioral skills that dancers developed throughout the pandemic. In line with Carson et al.'s (2025) work, these skills were acquired informally, meaning this was not taught throughout full-time vocational training, where participants discussed feeling unprepared by their HEIs (Ardrey 2009). Therefore, the education system and the industry have a responsibility to integrating psycho-behavioral skills in training.

Future research should explore early-career dancers in new professional roles and how prepared final year students feel for graduate life. In addition, an exploration of the dancer's identity should be explored at different transitions in greater depth, to allow for a better understanding of the psychological demands and suggested changes in self-perceptions throughout the professional career. Whilst this research only had a small sample size, it was important that building rapport early on throughout the interviews, ensured commitment from the participants to continue. Though the study took a relativist ontological stance, more can be learned through other positionalities, such as a positivist approach to conduct a large-scale study to gain further insight from more participants. Furthermore, the study does not consider a holistic assessment of graduates' experiences, graduate career sustainability rates in dance by HEIs, or dancers' contributions to the field beyond professional performance, and so future research should consider this. This includes capturing specific information such as: the type of auditions, whether they received callbacks, and outcomes regarding freelance work.

Applied Implications

The findings of the research can inform dance educators, psychologists, and sport scientists on the importance of taking various factors into consideration when supporting dance graduates and newly trained dancers. For dancers, being open to other roles can incorporate the skills learned from dance and engage in self-compassion when facing setbacks. HEIs can use this to understand how to help dancers manage their time, understand the importance of finance, have awareness on what it means to be successful, and develop effective coping strategies. For example, workshops on the administration as a freelancer, realistic expectations of day-to-day changes, and/or relieve pressure on achieving certain jobs that can be deemed as more successful than others. Such roles should have increased awareness, so graduates are prepared for roles beyond performance like dance therapist, personal trainer, or dance teacher. Moreover, HEIs can integrate sport psychologists to support dancers with this transition to develop resilience and explore their athletic identities; similarly to other sports, such as football (Feddersen, Champ, and Littlewood 2025).

Lastly, there is a lack of training opportunities for dance graduates, so stakeholders should consider creating a community targeting graduates only.

This will allow graduates to maintain dance technique and be mentored by experts to help make themselves known and credible, whilst knowing they have space to train post-university. Implementing these initiatives may improve the well-being and performance of dance graduates, supporting them in long-term, sustainable careers.

Conclusion

To conclude, dance graduates are faced with challenges as they attempt to strive for a professional dance career. Some findings related back to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on becoming successful due to limited exposure to networks, training opportunities, low self-confidence, and the lack of security as a professional dancer. Nevertheless, dancers received significant support throughout the transition from individuals in and out of the dance industry and learned to adapt to a different routine. With these findings highlighted, this can lead to further support for dance graduates when pursuing a professional dance career.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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