

# Mental Health in Dance in Australia and New Zealand

Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Report

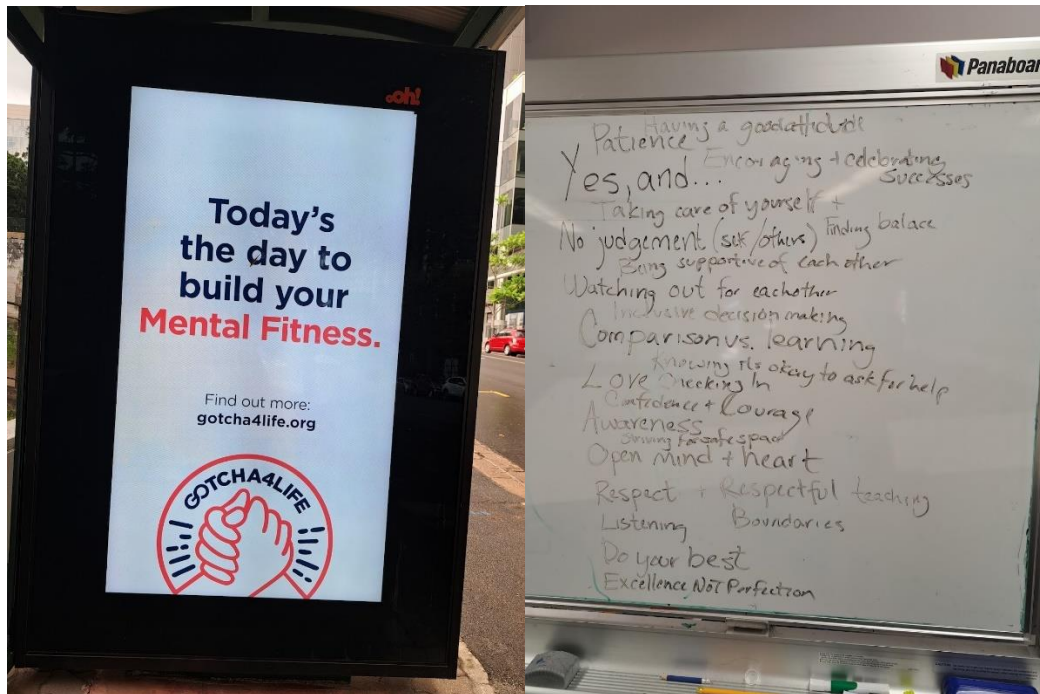
Erin Sanchez

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My name is Erin Sanchez. I am the Manager of Health, Wellbeing, and Performance at One Dance UK and the National Institute of Dance Medicine and Science, within this role I am an advocate and educator focussed on dancers' physical and mental health. I am also a PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh, investigating the nature and deployment of psychological skills in dance training. Within these roles and others, I work to develop evidence and strengths-based approaches to education, healthcare, research, and advocacy in dance settings that will ensure that all those in dance are healthy, well, and performing at their best.

## Project description

I was delighted to have been awarded a Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship (LUTSF) in 2020 for a project titled: Mental Health in Dance in Australia and New Zealand. The project aim was to gain awareness of the definitions of, barriers to, and support for mental health in dance in Australia and New Zealand, and to develop a Mental Health Charter in collaboration with those participating in the project based on their contributions. I travelled from 5<sup>th</sup> March 2023 to 11<sup>th</sup> June 2023, and visited Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney, and Perth, Australia and Wellington, New Zealand.



Caption:

Picture 1: Examples of the mental health and wellbeing messaging in the community in Brisbane.

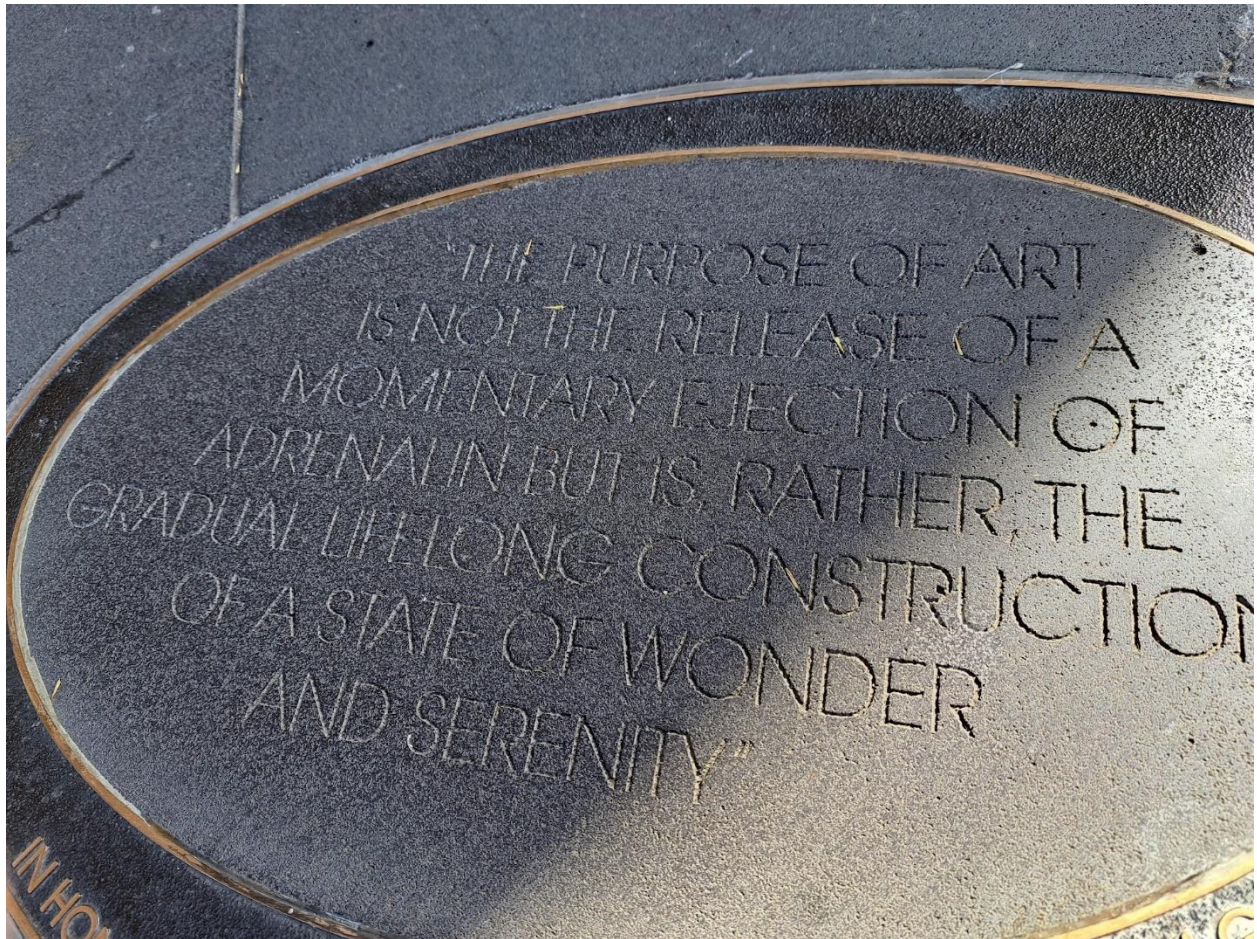
Picture 2: An example of a set of agreements made between a dance leader and a group of dancers setting an outline of how they want to work together.

## **Background**

In preparation for applying to LUTSF for this project in 2019, I audited mental health activities in dance internationally, revealing a concentration of innovative projects in Australia including national scale mental health research and a range of support and education activities available for dancers and creative industry professionals. I made contact with nine dance organisations, one independent dance professional, and one independent mental health professional willing to support the project by providing insights into

- research into mental health issues in the entertainment industry as well as mental health training
- mental health support and resources provided to Australian performing arts workers
- mental health support and enhancement projects in ballet
- dancers' mental health, the dance education provision and psychology in Australia,
- the challenges of making psychological education for young dancers relevant, accessible, and applied to their needs and setting
- psychological services provided in a higher education dance program, and dance related research projects

I was delighted and honoured to be successful in my LUTSF application in 2020, however, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of the borders in New Zealand on 19th March and Australia on 20th March 2020. I maintained contact with the organisations proposed in the original project, and began reaching out to others at the suggestion of the original project collaborators. In February 2021, I interviewed individuals from dance organisations about their experiences during the pandemic and the impacts on dancers' mental health in their areas. These organisations included large private dance schools, higher education training organisations, and secondary schools with dance programmes, organisations advocating for mental health in the creative industries, vocational training institutions, and peak bodies (the Australian title for advocacy or trade bodies). These interviews revealed significant challenges posed by the pandemic to mental health.



*Caption: The quote 'The purpose of art is not the release of a momentary ejection of adrenaline, but is rather, the gradual lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity.' This paving stone sits outside the Arts Centre Melbourne, and is a fitting consideration in the light of the challenges of the pandemic.*

International borders opened on Feb 21, 2022, in Australia, and on 31st July 2022 in New Zealand. I started to reconnect with those who had suggested they may be interested in the project in 2019, as well as those that I had interviewed in 2021. Delightfully, all of these organisations indicated their continued interest and willingness to host me for the project.

### **What has been achieved**

The project has achieved the aim of gaining awareness meeting with 107 people and formally interviewing 73 people for the research report. These contributions are currently being drawn together into a report highlighting definitions of, barriers to, and support for mental health in dance in Australia and New Zealand to be shared with collaborators as well as with key dance organisations, including companies, schools, and representative bodies in Australia and New Zealand. This report will form a basis for conversations and the development of best-practice in other countries, but particularly the UK. In the coming months, an online meeting will be held to launch the report and to bring collaborators together to determine what actions need to be taken forward. Following this, I hope to progress this work through this network and expand it to other countries.

## Supporters

This project, Mental Health in Dance in Australia and New Zealand, was primarily supported by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship (LUTSF), One Dance UK and the National Institute of Dance Medicine and Science (NIDMS), the University of Melbourne, and the University of Edinburgh. LUTSF provided funds to cover flight costs. One Dance UK and NIDMS provided support in kind by allowing me to work flexibly. Many thanks to the senior management team, specifically Andrew Hurst, CEO, and Jazlyn Pinckney, Head of Workforce Development, for their support of me and this project, and enormous gratitude to Jess Lowe for covering aspects of my role with care, expertise, and immense skill. The University of Melbourne covered costs for one of two visas, the University of Edinburgh covered costs for travel insurance and one of two visas.

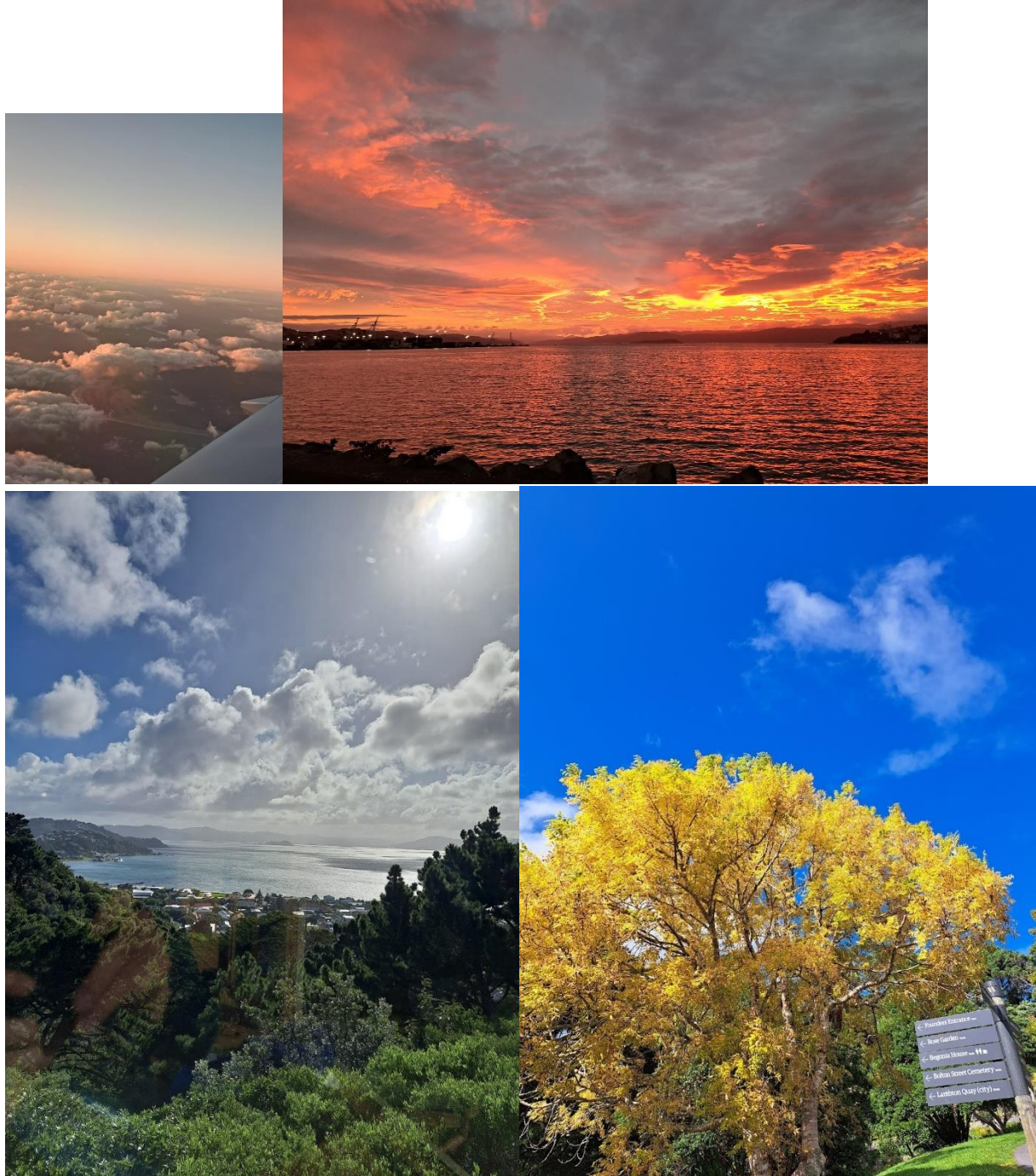
## How the Scholarship has been of value

The opportunities that the Scholarship has afforded have expanded my horizons, quite literally. I had never been to Oceania, and I was able to travel relatively broadly within this colossal, varied place. I believe that travel brings us greater awareness of the majesty and beauty of our natural world, and reminds us of how small we are in the scope of its grandeur. A unique aspect of Australia's cultural approach is their choice to acknowledge land. I had not been in the practice of doing this, but it became a part of my process during this trip, and it gave me a rich and deep sense of the land upon which I was visiting, but also the land that I come from, and where I now live. Each of these lands have shaped me, and have in turn been shaped by me and many, many others.



Caption:

Pictures 1, 2, and 3: An 80 foot tall eucalyptus tree in Melbourne, a XXX tree fanning out nearly 70 feet in diameter in Brisbane, a botanical garden in Wellington.



Caption:

Pictures 1, 2, 3, and 4: The view of the sky flying into Wellington airport, a sunrise over Oriental Bay in Wellington, a clear day looking out over Oriental Bay, the no-filter spectacular colors of Victoria Gardens in Wellington.

As a result of the Scholarship I was able to enhance my network of professional contacts. I visited an incredible breadth of organisations during my travels, including dance companies, dance schools, theatres, advocacy and support bodies, and universities. As a professional in dancers' health, my professional network needs to include robust contacts from dance, the creative industries, healthcare, research, and vocational, HE, and private dance education settings. The individuals I met spanned a wide range of professional roles, and many had multiple roles as shown below:

Caption: A breakdown of the professional roles of the participants of the project

The Scholarship provided the means to develop my professional knowledge and practice in a variety of ways. I learnt a huge amount about the dance ecology, healthcare, dance training and careers, and psychological qualifications and professional practice in Australia and New Zealand. This knowledge allowed me to juxtapose my professional experiences in the UK with those of similar areas in Australia and New Zealand, and thus provided a clear image of both similarity and difference. Some of the challenges to mental health were striking, and hard to hear.

- From a medical professional working with professional dancers *'there is significant worry around openly acknowledging that you are struggling because of impact on opportunities in dance.'*
- From my self-reflections *'We talked about dance education and dance professionals in Australia – and the distance of them from the rest of the world, cultural sensitivity, cancel culture, and the difficulties that young people were bringing with them into the studio – a 'catching' epidemic of poor coping skills and poor mental health. We talked about the fear that this brought for teaching staff of losing their careers with a single misstep, and the pressure on them to make the students feel better, often at the cost of their own wellbeing.'*
- From an interview with a health professional, who talked about when a dancer is struggling with a mental health issue but won't get help, and there's nothing they can do. *'So basically, we all know, [but] we can't prove. And all we can do is... is provide love and support... and... and monitor [their health] at this stage and then see how we go.'*

But within all of this there were also moments of hope:

- From an interview with a dance teacher *'I've got some really, really beautiful dancers that are suffering from these mental things. And they come out in different ways. And we've got ones that you know, that do self harm, and I've got ones that do have eating disorders. There have to be more... more people who can spread, spread the word... Get, get in touch with the right people, make sure that the right people are working ...so that the power is there to change. And I'm hopeful for the future. Definitely, you know, just, that's, that's how I feel. Yeah, this week, in particular, I've a real downer because it just, I don't know, I've really just noticed how many students especially are suffering and they shouldn't be. It should be something beautiful, ballet should be something enjoyable, you know, we need to keep it like that. We need to keep a beautiful art form and not something that is going to be one day broken open and put on Netflix, and everyone's going to see these ugly scars that are out there. You know, like the gymnastics is been opened up. ...And the more, you know, people like me can talk about it, instead of hide it and say, 'Everything's fine. I had a great career, everything was great.' 'Oh, did I ever get spoken to like*

*that', 'Oh, did I ever feel like that? It was all hunky dory.' You know, it's like, we can't do that. It's no more about open. You know, exactly what goes on in this industry. Yeah, as just for me, I'm just the voice of truth in now. And I've got nothing to lose. There's no one that can take me down because of it, for sure. You know, they might not take my students because of what I say sometimes, but I'm trying to teach a generation to change. To change what's happened and, and speak up for themselves.'*

- From the WorkSafe Queensland website: *'Psychological health and safety is about protecting the psychological health of workers, in the same way that we protect their physical health. Psychosocial hazards are anything in the design or management of work that increases the risk of psychological or physical harm'* There are several examples listed, but to name a few:
  - o *'High and/or low job demands - A job can involve a combination of high and/or low physical, mental and emotional demands, which can create risks to the health and safety of workers.'*
  - o *'Poor organisational justice refers to work where there is a lack of procedural fairness (fair processes to reach decisions), informational fairness (keeping relevant people informed) or interpersonal fairness (treating people with dignity and respect).'*
  - o *'Poor environmental conditions are those where workers are exposed to unpleasant, poor quality, or hazardous physical environments or conditions that create a stress response.'*
- *'Psychological hazards and factors in the workplace can create a physical or psychological risk to workers. The Work Health and Safety Act 2011 imposes a legal duty on business operators to do what is reasonably practicable to eliminate or minimise these risks. This legislation defines 'health' to include physical and psychological health.'* ([WorkSafe Queensland](#), 2023)

Witnessing the fierceness and courage of those fighting for dancers and mental health support and resources being offered to performing arts workers, seeing the legislation that outlines psychosocial risk factors and the employers' responsibility to mitigate them, changed what I expect to be possible in my work; the UK could easily adopt the same approach.

The Scholarship also afforded immense value to my personal and professional momentum, inspiration, and energy after COVID-19. I worked throughout the pandemic, which was a tremendous blessing, but also brought significant challenges. I was working to provide guidance on safe activity, and health and wellbeing support to dance professionals who had lost work, were struggling financially or in terms of their mental health, or felt isolated, and experienced fear about the potential that the dance world would never recover. The project I was able to undertake renewed my drive and sense of purpose and refreshed my focus.

The Scholarship also benefitted my personal development by providing an important next step in my professional qualifications and allowing me to gather novel data for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year studies of my PhD, which I aim to complete in early 2024.

## **Some highlights**

There are too many to count, but here is a brief list.

It was a pleasure visiting dance professionals across Australia, and seeing a breadth of practice and contexts.



Caption: the view from the shoes outside a dance studio

I was honoured to have been able to meet all of the authors of Ausdance's seminal research in dancers' health; Tony Geeves, author of the Safe Dance I (1990) and II (1997), Debra Crookshanks, author of the Safe Dance III (1999), and Amy Vassallo, author of Safe Dance IV (2017). These research projects were taking place alongside the Dance UK Fit to Dance research projects by Ann Bowling (1989), Peter Brinson and Fiona Dick (1996), Helen Laws (2005), and myself and Lucie Clements (2020). Australia and the UK are the only countries with national scale studies of dancers' health and injury, and from the first moment I started working at Dance UK in 2010, these reports and their impact have always been an inspiration to me.

I was also delighted to meet with Prof Gene Moyle, whose career has spanned roles as professional dancer with the Australian Ballet Dancers Company and Queensland Ballet, Sport and Exercise Psychologist to Olympic athletes and performing artists, Head of Student Health & Welfare at the Australian Ballet School, Senior Advisor Sport and Exercise Psychology at the Queensland Academy of Sport and Senior Performance Psychologist at the Australian Institute of Sport, and Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Programs) at Queensland University of Technology. Prof Moyle has been an inspiration as a dancer, leader, psychologist and researcher, and meeting with her as a part of this project was tremendous.

Meeting a range of psychological professionals working with dancers was another feature. Seeing their breadth of practice in terms of client groups (students, professionals), modalities (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, Schema therapy), and



experience (questioning my assumptions about the necessity and value of dance-specific experience in therapists) was educational and fascinating.

One final highlight was that as I travelled and shared the UK's work in providing education and support for dancers' health, wellbeing, and performance, I was regularly being told how remarkable and inspirational what we are doing was to those in Australia and New Zealand. It was an honour to be recognised in this way, and it gave me a great deal of pride in the achievements and work of dance medicine and science professionals in the UK.

### **What it was like working with LUTSF**

My experience of working with the Fund was excellent. Their flexibility in light of the challenges of COVID-19 was both unexpected and vital. I was blown away by their incredible generosity to extend access to funding until travel opened up again, as well as their regular and reassuring information over the three years between when I was funded and when I was able to travel. I was honoured by their thoughtful support for and clear awareness of the value of this professional development experience for my life.

### **Reflections**

It's difficult to summarise the wide-ranging and multiply impactful experience of this project.

- Having completed such a large, complex, detailed, and challenging project with so many partners across multiple locations, on sensitive subject matter, I have an enhanced sense of self-assurance, autonomy, and confidence.
- I experienced a widening of my community of practice within dancers' mental health, and through that, an enhanced sense of support, of being seen and heard in my experiences, and not being alone in fighting to make change.
- I am committed to and taking action on the next steps in this work – widening this project and sharing the findings to make change.
- I feel that I am not the same person I was when I left the UK in March 2023. I have a greater awareness of my personal strengths and areas for development, and a greater appreciation of the value of reflective practice.



**Caption:**

Picture 1: the Aboriginal Proverb 'Those who lose dreaming are lost' seen on a poster in the Judith Wright Centre in Brisbane. And a reminder to me that dreaming is a necessary part of working well.

Picture 2: An electricity box painted with an image of an astronaut and a message 'You could rattle the stars'. This public art on electricity boxes was evident across Australia.

**My suggestions to future LUTSF awardees**

For future awardees, there are a few things that have been valuable learnings for me:

- Invest time before and during your travels to build relationships individuals with communities – it takes much longer than you think, and it's tempting to overschedule and try to fit lots in. Set aside time to have dinner and see a show or have a walk and a coffee with a collaborator, or spend 2 or 3 weeks with one project partner rather than trying to fit in one partner each week. Your collaboration will be richer, and you won't be plagued by the worry that you didn't have enough time to fully dive into the project. Feel confident that taking your time is worth it and will pay its dividends – people have so much beauty and richness to share. It is a shame to rush this miracle.

- o From my self reflections: *'I had an expansive dinner with two colleagues, lovely wine and good food, even better company. We talked about life; children and challenges. We talked*

*about dance, pedagogy, and our dance experiences and history. Dance is a shared place to start, and a jumping off point for a more personal connection. They seem caring, interested, generous, and self assured women.'*

- Plan for how you will manage burnout, fatigue, and being far from home. Build in time for rest, recharging, and being mindfully present in this new environment. Pay attention to your body and mind's signals that you need to slow down. Plan for time and access to physical space and engagement with specific practices for recovery (gym, somatics, meditation). Plan for high quality nutrition, sleep, exercise, and ensuring that you maintain a work-life balance. You will be out of your usual routine/schedule, and far from your comforts or normal support mechanisms.
  - o From my self-reflections: *'Hit a wall in terms of fatigue. Couldn't keep my eyes open to type on the way back on the train. Tried to work when I got back and fought with myself about whether to sleep or work. I chose sleep and felt guilty for it. It's hard to know what's important sometimes.'*
- Stay in touch with friends and family. Make time to stay in touch in the way that works for you; a call, an email, a voice note, a picture of your dinner. Share your experiences - joys, sorrows, frustrations with someone who isn't there. It's probably the case that your project will bring all of these things and more, and it helps to not be alone with all of it.
- Keep a diary – even though it feels naff or ridiculous. Make time every day to reflect with yourself about what you're experiencing, how it is influencing your thinking and practice, what surprises you or doesn't. This is the gold dust of the experience, and reflecting for yourself will keep you present to what's happening so that you can make the most of it.
  - o From my self-reflections: *'The day ended like it was all throughout. I met a close friend, the miraculous soul that is my inspiration and my hope. I'd nearly missed connecting with her in being so busy chasing my own tail. It was an unexpected pleasure to be in her presence and it served as a powerful reminder about why I am doing this work. We talked about dance, about lived experience of trauma and about the kind of troubled dance training that creates it, about mental healthcare systems that tell some people they are too sick to go home and others that they are not sick enough to get care. We talked about 'easy' jobs that don't come with hooks of accolades. Those things that burn us out, but those easy jobs where we can be with people, can make a difference, and we can have a balance. I felt nourished.'*

The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship was transformative to my professional practice and to my personal development. It enhanced both the size and range of my professional network, expanded my professional experience and developed new confidence in me. The project taught me the value of self-reflection, self-care, and rest. I made what I hope will be lifelong friends. I learned share my passion, to bring people with me, to consult with them, to connect with them and to influence and be influenced by them. I am so honoured to have been given this opportunity and I am so grateful to LUTSF for helping make this work happen. I'm committed to making this makes a difference.

WorkSafe Queensland (2023). 'Psychosocial Hazards.' [online] Accessed 12 Jul 2023. Available at <https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/safety-and-prevention/mental-health/Psychosocial-hazards>