



# THEMES

## MOVING THE

# CIRCUS SECTOR





**01**

Professionalisation

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**02**

International work

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**03**

Safety

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The Landscape Sketch Circus addresses six knowledge themes: professionalisation, international work, space and infrastructure, safety, inclusion and ecology. In this chapter, we chose to zoom in on three themes we considered most relevant for an international audience: professionalisation, international work, and safety. Each theme identifies some crucial evolutions and challenges facing the circus sector. Since this is the first circus landscape sketch, we made some conscious choices in the selection of themes. We chose topics that tell enough about the uniqueness of the sector and what is going on there. The selection of these themes was based on discussions with the sector and was fine-tuned during the June 2022 Sector Day.

The themes were developed based on existing research, internal Circuscentrum knowledge and targeted focus groups. In the spring of 2024, Circuscentrum organised a focus group for each theme with professionals from the sector, in which we reviewed the initial findings and conclusions from the earlier research. The purpose of the focus groups was not to reach a consensus, but to expose the diverse views within the sector. In the theme texts, we interpret the various perspectives and visions prevalent in the sector.

Each theme text begins with a brief introduction explaining the definition of the theme and the reason for the choice. We then discuss the trends and evolutions by subtheme, and conclude with the main overarching challenges. However, the structure of each theme text differs. This is a conscious choice because the subthemes are different for each theme. For example, for safety, we started from the different forms of safety (physical, technical, psychosocial); for space and infrastructure, we chose a classification by function (creation, presentation, etc.).

The theme texts provide a starting point and a basis for further research and reflection. For several knowledge topics, there is currently little or no research available, so it was not always possible to work in-depth. Circuscentrum will draw up a concrete research agenda that will allow for more focused efforts to further deepen the various themes in the coming years.

This landscape sketch does not include a concrete research agenda, but at the end of each theme, we do formulate some 'suggestions for further research'. The suggestions for further research focus on challenges arising from a knowledge gap. They are broadly formulated and offer numerous opportunities for partial studies. These suggestions serve as inspiration for anyone wishing to engage in circus research.

## 01 PROFESSIONALISATION

In terms of professionalisation, the dynamic world of circus in Flanders is undergoing a fascinating evolution. Partly under the influence of the Circus Decree, the sector has grown significantly, and at the same time the Decree has brought about some shifts in the composition and dynamics within the sector. In addition to the effects of the Decree, the circus sector is evolving under the influence of the broader cultural policy framework, movements in the broader (international) arts field and general societal shifts. This presents some opportunities, but also brings some challenges and questions for organisations and individuals in all parts and layers of the sector.

Within the professionalisation section, we look at these evolutions from a business and economic perspective. We use the term professionalisation to refer to the degree to which individuals and organisations can make a living based on their circus practice, with a sustainable view towards the future.

### *Why this theme?*

The challenges in terms of professionalisation in the circus sector are great. These include the development of sustainable careers, sound compensation systems and fair pay, diverse funding models for organisations, varied organisational types, flow within the sector and effective framing of circus professionals and semi-professionals.

Professionalisation in the circus sector is a complex theme. It means something different to a youth circus, a workshop, a young creator or an established company. In addition, professionalisation from the perspective of an organisation is different from that of an individual. The position partly determines choices relating to personnel policies and various compensation systems. We take into account the different perspectives and look at professionalisation from the point of view of an individual in the first part, for various profiles, and in the second part from the perspective of an organisation. Finally, we list the main challenges within this theme.

### PROFESSIONALISATION FROM AN INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

Circus professionals assume various roles as performers, teachers, technicians, programmers, coordinators and business leaders, often in different statuses. Many circus professionals combine multiple roles within (and outside) the circus sector, making for a dynamic and versatile career, but this comes with many challenges.

### CIRCUS CAREERS

#### **The basis and training opportunities**

Many circus professionals first encounter circus in a youth circus, since circus is (virtually) absent from DKO or formal education (see chapter Description of the Circus Sector).

According to the Circus-Career Survey, 43.1% of the performers surveyed took classes at a youth circus.<sup>59</sup> Youth circuses deliberately focus on the broader development of young people and not just on learning techniques. They also offer initial stage opportunities through production groups, and organise specialist classes, intensive pathways, workshops and guest lectures. Besides technical, personal and artistic development, several youth circuses are committed to the pedagogical development of interested young people by leading them towards the existing training offering as circus entertainers and/or teachers. Several youth circuses allow young people to start as assistants, giving them the opportunity to gain experience, and to stay involved in the organisation on a voluntary basis.

A youth circus is not the starting point for everyone; some young people move on from hobbies with a similar technical basis, such as gymnastics or parkour. There are also those who are self-taught, who come into contact with circus through friends or the Internet and may or may not go on to further training. Within traditional circuses, young people are often trained from an early age by their own families and/or travelling performers, learning not only artistic skills, but also business, framing and technical skills, such as erecting and dismantling tents, building sets, welding and woodworking and promotion. Skills needed to run a circus themselves later on.

Young people looking to pursue an artistic career can apply for the young talent internship in preparation for circus college auditions. According to the Circus-Career Survey, students choose a programme based on the school's vision, their own circus discipline, the teachers present and financial considerations, among other things. Many performers audition at different schools and eventually end up at the school where they are admitted. (see Description of the Circus Sector chapter)

According to the Circus-Career Survey, 41.3% of respondents did not take a higher circus or performing arts course, although they often took classes at a youth circus. This usually refers to an older generation of performers – circus colleges used to be less well-known and accessible. In addition, some of the performers surveyed deliberately chose not to pursue higher education, e.g. because they want to focus on making street shows. Lateral entrants with other (artistic) profiles are often a little older and may not always be able to study at a circus college, given that several youth circuses have an age limit or discourage older students from starting studies.<sup>60</sup>

Also, for other jobs within the circus sector, the supply of formal circus-specific training is limited or non-existent, hence broader training combined with experience within the circus sector. Within dramaturgy courses, the focus is often on theatre and dance; circus dramaturges combine this training with circus training or experience. Technicians often have different backgrounds too, such as training in stage techniques. And circus teachers sometimes combine other pedagogical training with training within the field (Youth Entertainer Course, BIC, FP) and experience. For business profiles too, there is little focus on circus as a specific sector within the Cultural Management course, for example.

<sup>59</sup> Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 32.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 35.

## Career start and networking

After graduation, circus artists go to work as creators (creating artists) or performing artists; according to the Circus-Career Survey, most starting artists combine both options (52.2%), but 11.9% of artists surveyed work exclusively as creators at the start of their careers. According to the Circus-Career Survey, young artists start as creators with their own production out of necessity, to create some visibility in the field.<sup>61</sup> Later in their careers, the relationships between the roles of creator and performing artist shift. Although most artists continue to combine work as creators and performers (59.8%), there is a larger proportion who identify only as creators (19.6%).

In addition to bringing out artistic work with their own company or with another company, some artists are also active as street performers or within event agencies. Within the courses, the focus is on creating short acts, but Flanders has few places where these acts can be presented. Some performers therefore work abroad during the winter season, in cabarets or variety theatres, and tour around with shows in the summer. Within traditional circus, touring families hire acts seasonally. Connections arise within a closed community, often by word of mouth or through specialist websites. The Circus-Career Survey shows limited overlap between performers working within contemporary circus or traditional circus – 7.8% of the performers surveyed work in both.<sup>62</sup>

A good network proves crucial to building a career (artistic and otherwise). The Circus-Career Survey shows that contact with friends and other circus professionals is especially important in this regard. Circus professionals find much support from their network, and can turn to other professionals for questions. The Professionalisation focus group also cited that the distance between amateurs and professional artists is very small. At the same time, as a newcomer, it is not easy to find a place (as a professional) in the sector and that building up your own network with the right contacts takes a lot of time and effort.

Specifically, the challenge is great for graduate students, since they are often drawn abroad for their studies. The youth circus where they took classes themselves proves to be an important starting point for building up a network in their own country. This also applies to performers who first work abroad after graduation, with or without (their own) company, and only return to Belgium later in their career.

Several organisations are committed to supporting (young) performers, including giving them access to their networks. Festivals, creation spaces, arts and culture centres, Circuscentrum, etc. Through residencies, advice, networking opportunities, consultation platforms, etc., these performers and other circus professionals connect.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>62</sup> Within the career survey, only two performers from traditional circus could be surveyed; figures on distribution may therefore not be representative.

## Further development

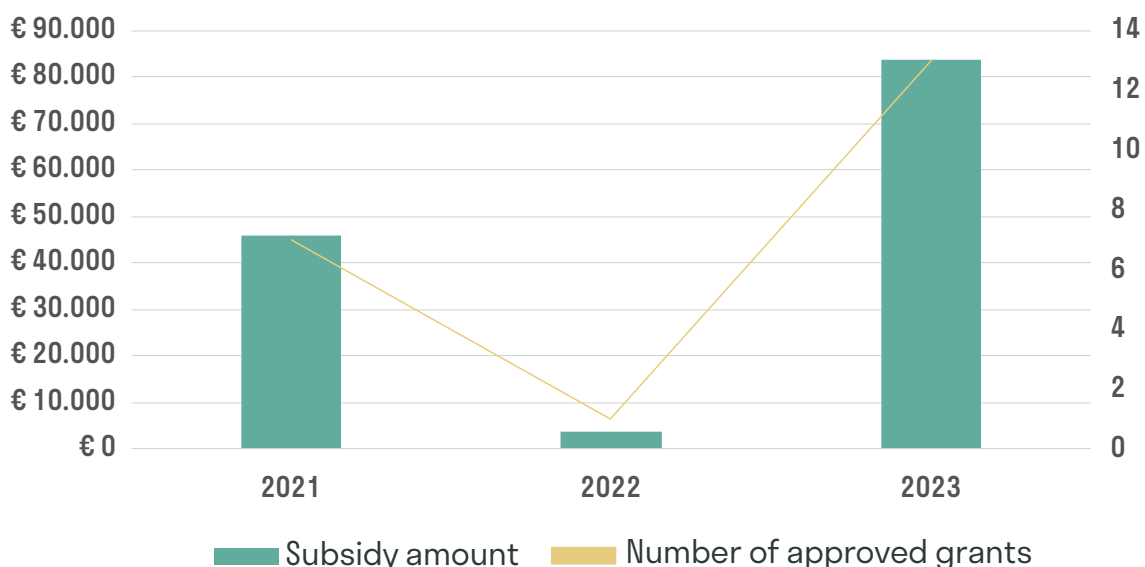
It is important that circus professionals can continue to educate themselves throughout their careers. There is a range of master classes, workshops and longer continuing education courses in the artistic, technical and business fields. One comment often heard is that these offerings are limited, especially for training and education programmes that offer circus-specific knowledge – a challenge made greater by the growth of the sector. In addition, making use of existing offerings is not always feasible, both in terms of budget and practicality.

Existing offerings are primarily developed and provided by organisations within the circus sector itself, while in other arts disciplines, some of the offerings are provided both in leisure time and formal pathways by educational partners. Often, only temporary project resources are available for the creation of concrete training, making it impossible to make a sustained commitment to competence enhancement. Within the circus education field, for example, Circuscentrum organises continuing education in specific disciplines or target groups twice a year, an offering developed in consultation with the sector. Some youth circuses provide in-house continuing education for their own teachers. At the same time, there is much knowledge transfer through informal contacts and on-the-job experience.

Within the Circus Decree, it is possible to apply for a 'Developmental grant for individual circus performers'. The grant serves to make (financial) room for artistic experimentation and continuing education. This may be interpreted broadly – courses focused on circus technique, dramaturgy and pedagogy also qualify.<sup>63</sup> The Description of the Circus Sector chapter went into greater detail about the grants awarded and their distribution.

Since 2021, the grant has been awarded 21 times. In 2022, however, significantly fewer grants were granted owing to the corona epidemic. (Chart 25)

### DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIPS FOR INDIVIDUAL CIRCUS PERFORMERS



**Chart 5 • Data DCYM – Subsidy figures – Kiosk fields – Developmental grants for individual circus performers (2021-2023)**

<sup>63</sup> "Developmental scholarships for individual circus performers."

## Career end

The outflow as a performer from the field happens for various reasons, and sometimes is temporary. Within the Circus-Career Survey, several reasons come to mind: lack of financial security, the impact of the corona pandemic, injuries, inadequate performance opportunities, unawarded grants, an unsustainable work-life balance, too many non-artistic duties, and emotional strain. Life on tour is especially difficult to combine with a family life.<sup>64</sup> These factors can also lead to a final exit as a performer. The outflow partly depends on the discipline chosen; some disciplines are more physically demanding and lead to an earlier exit.

Reorientation to other jobs within the circus sector is a possibility, such as teaching, coaching, taking artistic direction of a company, or working within a circus organisation. However, the contemporary circus field is still a relatively young field; the first performers are only now reaching retirement age. As a result, many trends around the end of the career will not be evident until later on.

The Circus-Career Survey shows that in traditional circus, the older generation of performers used to receive support from the new generation. However, this support is becoming increasingly difficult financially, forcing artists to seek other work outside the sector.

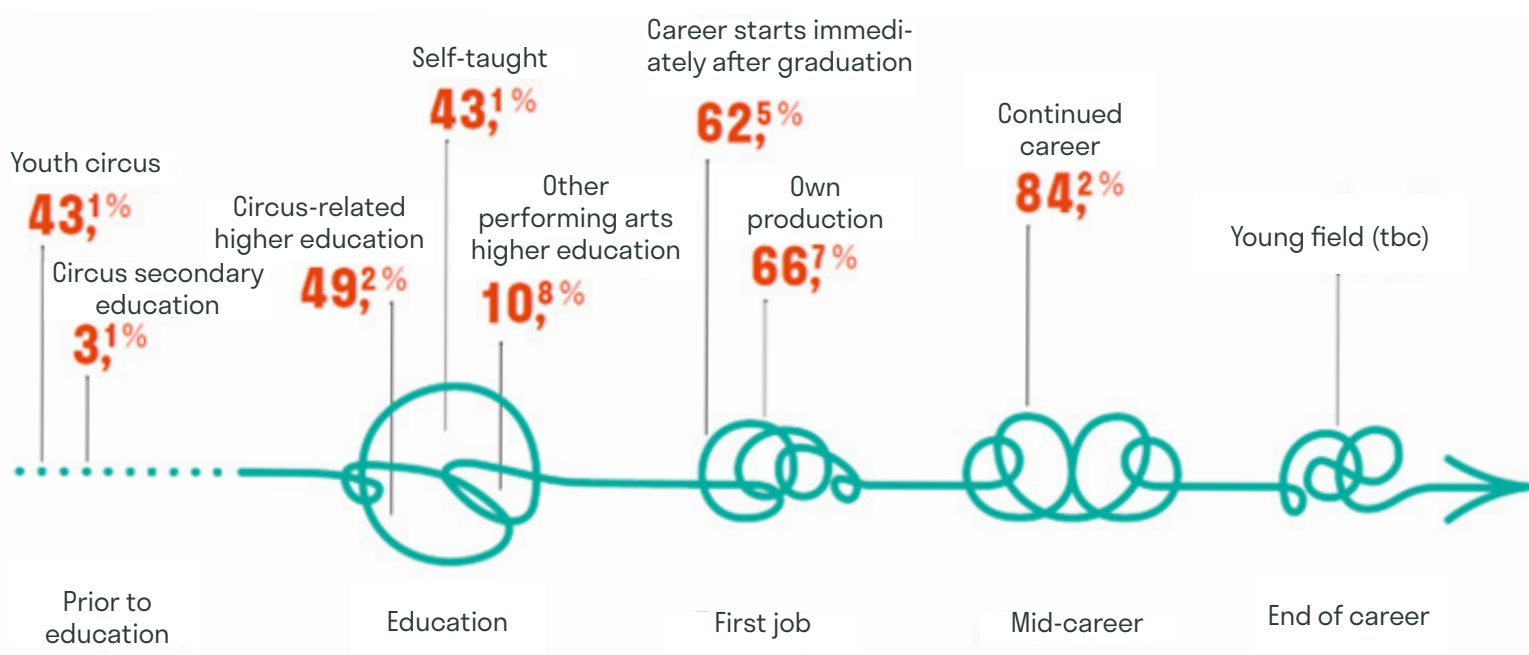


Chart 6 • Career Survey Visualisation – Career

<sup>64</sup> Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 51.



## EMPLOYMENT

### Statutes and compensation systems

Professionals within the performing arts sector can be compensated or earn an income in a variety of ways.<sup>65</sup>

- **Pay for (in)definite duration**
- **Invoicing for (artistic) performances**
- **'Article 1a' of scheme:** exception to the social security scheme that allows artists to be considered employees when performing a task without an employment contract. Previously, this required an artist visa; now, an artist certificate is sufficient.
- **Small Compensation Scheme for Artists (KVR), now Amateur Arts Compensation:** the KVR is a flat-rate expense allowance awarded for providing artistic performance / producing artistic works on behalf of a client.
- **Grants**
- **Volunteers allowance**
- **Copyrights:** this is infrequent within the circus sector.
- **Compensation within association work**

Since artists often have a fluctuating income pattern with limited accrual of social security, this is why some exceptions exist within social security.<sup>66</sup>

- **Artwork allowance:** unemployment benefit with application of the specific rules for arts workers.
- **Primostarters scheme:** allows for paying 8 quarters of reduced social contribution when possessing a self-employment certificate for self-employed beginners.

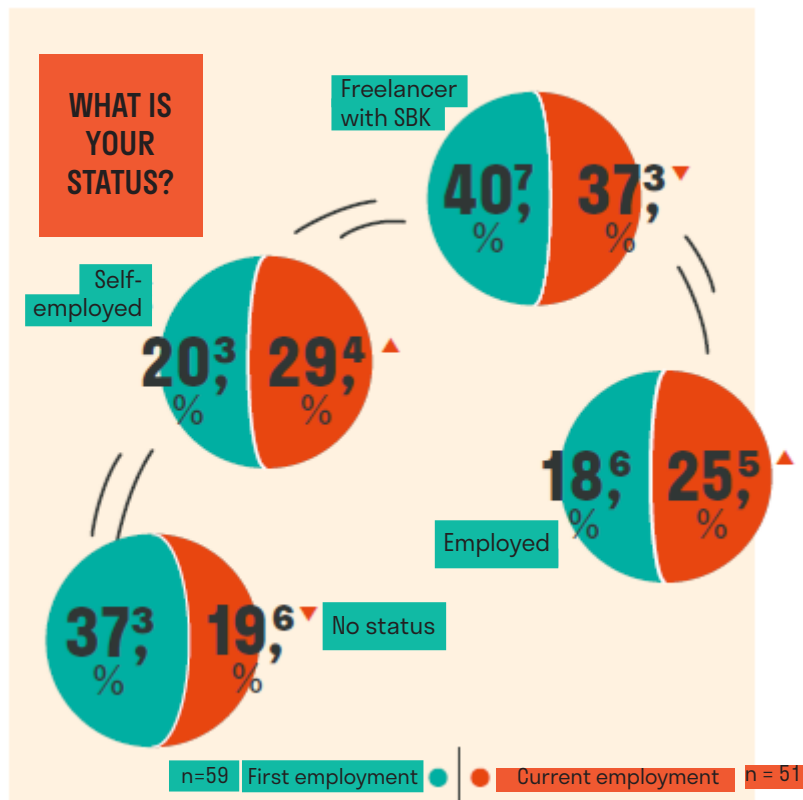
Professionals in the performing arts sector can be employed in different ways: as employees for a fixed or indefinite period of time, through a Social Bureau for Artists (SBK), or as self-employed (in a secondary occupation). Working through an SBK allows artists to work as freelancers under employee status, allowing them to accrue social rights.

The Circus-Career Survey shows that circus performers at the beginning of their careers mainly work through an SBK (40.7%) or without status (37.3%); 18.6% work directly with an organisation in employment, and these are mainly short-term contracts. These ratios shift later in the career, when the proportion of self-employed (in secondary employment) and performers directly employed increases. Full-time employment is almost exclusively possible with the larger companies with (structural) subsidies at home or abroad.<sup>67</sup> (Chart 27)

<sup>65</sup> "Vergoed worden voor opdrachten," *Kunstwerkt*, August 19, 2024.

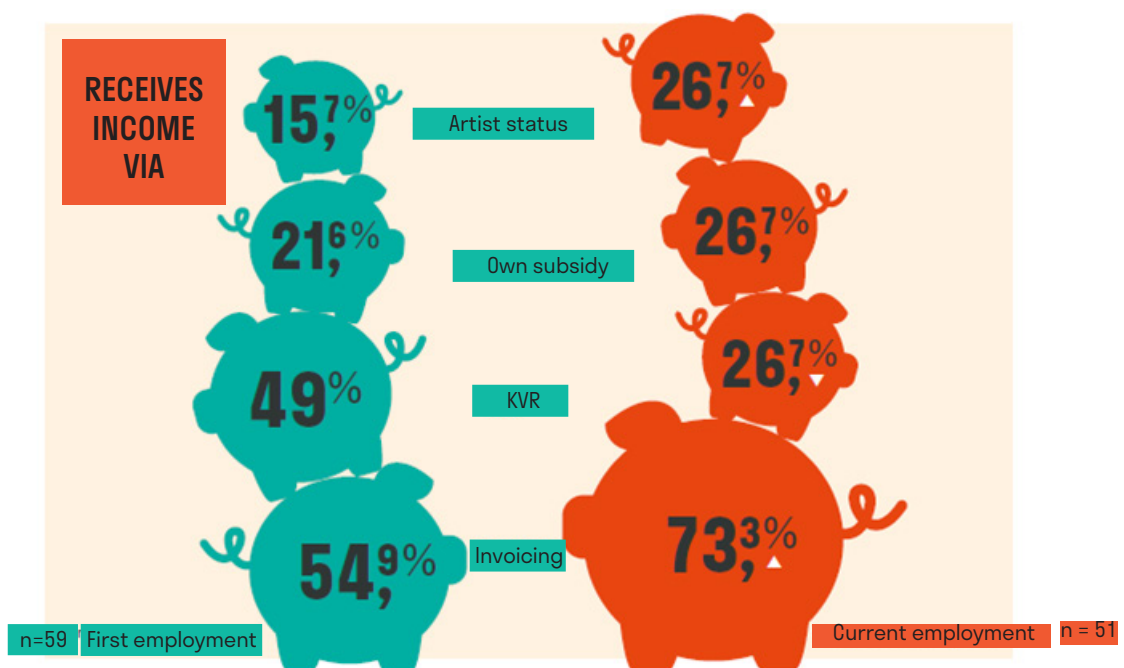
<sup>66</sup> "Voordelen met het Kunstwerkattest," *Working in the arts*, n.d.

<sup>67</sup> Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 42.



**Chart 7 • Career Survey Visualisation – Status**

The Circus-Career Survey shows that start-ups are primarily compensated through invoicing (including buyouts) (54.9%) and KVR (49%). Later in the career, this ratio shifts towards invoicing (73.3%). First-time performers were less likely to have artist status (15.7%) than performers later in their careers (26.7%). Since 74.1% of starters combine the job as a circus performer with another job, it is often difficult to obtain a sufficient number of days of artistic work to qualify for artist status.<sup>68</sup> (Chart 28)



**Chart 8 • Career Survey Visualisation – Compensation**

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 45.

Due to the varying patterns of income and compensation, circus performers are not always adequately protected. Several of these compensation systems do not contribute to the accrual of social security. Performers who drop out due to illness or injury and are compensated through an SBK, for example, will not receive compensation until the performer has worked for seven consecutive days. There is also no social security accrual through KVR; thus, start-ups accrue less social security. In an opinion piece in *Circusmagazine*, Bert Berg testifies about the choices young performers often need to make. "Time for a choice: 150 euros in the pocket from unrecognised work (KVR) or an interim contract with 57 euros real pay? Also imagine having seven of these assignments to make ends meet for a month."<sup>69</sup>

Teachers also have irregular income patterns. Several youth circuses invoke the scheme concerning association work to reimburse assistants and teachers. In 2022, the regulations surrounding association work were amended and included in Article 17 of the NSSO Act RD. The old 25-day scheme is now covered by the additional work scheme. Within this scheme, individuals can be compensated through an employment contract for up to 300 hours per year, with a maximum of 100 hours per quarter. Under this scheme, there is an exception to paying social security contributions and a more advantageous tax rate, which reduces the wage cost for the employer.<sup>70</sup> However, individuals working under this scheme therefore do not accrue social and holiday rights either. Under the previous scheme, organisations could compensate employees if they were not an employer; this is no longer possible under the new scheme. Especially for non-structurally subsidised youth circuses, it is not always possible to become an employer and bear the associated administrative burden. Teachers and assistants sometimes volunteer their time and receive only an expense allowance.

For teachers, it may be important whether the youth circus has recognition as a sports or cultural club. Within the sports sector, employees may work for up to 450 hours per year; in the socio-cultural sector, this is limited to 300 hours per year. For sports volunteers, flat-rate expense reimbursements are also higher than within the socio-cultural sector.

An analysis of the staffing figures provided by the structurally subsidised youth circuses shows that teachers, administrative, technical and logistical support staff are all compensated in different ways. Sometimes as volunteers, through invoice or as agency staff.<sup>71</sup>

In January 2024, several reforms were implemented regarding compensation systems and social security rules. This landscape sketch is limited to the end of 2023, so the figures collected on compensation in the circus sector refer only to the rules valid through 2023. However, regulatory changes present both challenges and opportunities for the circus sector. The first major change was the introduction of the Artwork Certificate for art workers. Art workers provide artistic, artistic-technical and artistic support work in the arts. This expansion of the type of eligible work will ensure that more circus professionals may be eligible for the Artwork Certificate. Under the previous scheme, only artists were eligible. The Artwork Certificate gives access to the primostarter scheme and the 'Article 1a' scheme.

<sup>69</sup> Bert Berg, "Over erkenning, verloning & bureaubagger," *Circusmagazine*, no. 72 (2022): 46–47.

<sup>70</sup> "Work in associations."

<sup>71</sup> DCYM data – Policy-relevant data

The Artwork Certificate Plus and Artwork Certificate Starter give access to the benefit rules in the unemployment regulations' the Artwork Certificate Starter has relaxed conditions for starters. In addition, the 'Working in the Arts' platform, which provides advice on the new scheme and where art workers and employers need to register, was established.

A second change is the reform of the Artists Committee, which was responsible for awarding the artist card. It was replaced by the Artwork Committee. Within the Artists Committee, there was ignorance of circus as a professional art form, which meant that performers' applications did not always receive approval. The new Artwork Committee is composed differently; it includes experts proposed by arts federations, trade associations and employer and self-employed organisations. In Flanders, there are no arts federations, trade associations or employer and self-employed organisations for circus, so no delegated expert with expertise on circus can sit on the committee. In Wallonia, Aires Libres is recognised as an arts federation; on the French-speaking side, however, an expert with expertise on circus can sit. It is unclear for now what effect this will have on the Artwork Committee's statements regarding circus.

A third change was the replacement of the KVR with the Amateur Arts Compensation (AKV). This is compensation for occasional, small-scale commissioned artistic work. Just as with the KVR, no taxes or social security contributions are due for this. The AKV may be used by people carrying out professional artistic work. Table 21 summarises the major differences between the two compensation schemes.



**Table 2 • Summary of differences between AKV and KVR 0**

AKV	KVR
77.22 euros + 22.06 euros / day per employer	128.93 euros / day per employer
Max. 30 days a year	Max. 30 days a year
Max. 7 consecutive days with the same employer	Max. 7 consecutive days with the same employer
Digital registration on 'Working in the Arts' (WITA)	Mandatory: Artist card
Assignment is registered by the employer on 'WITA'	Assignment is registered by its performer

## Multiple job holding

Just like many professionals in the arts sector, circus professionals often combine several jobs.

As mentioned above, 74.1% of entry-level workers combine the job as a circus performer with another job; later in the career, this is still 56.8%.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 45.

This includes other jobs within the circus sector, such as a teacher, employee at a circus organisation, technician or production worker, as well as jobs outside the circus sector. There are some performers who consider being a performer to be their main profession, while others see it as a side business. Combining different jobs often comes out of financial necessity, but sometimes out of a genuine interest in both jobs as well.

According to the Circus-Career Survey, most circus performers (84.2%) are continuously employed as circus performers; however, they are not continuously gainfully employed. These periods are usually bridged through benefits through artist status or income from another job.<sup>73</sup> In traditional circuses, performers often stay involved for their entire careers with the circus where they were born or within their own newly founded circus.

Fair pay often remains a challenge; many activities that artists perform remain unpaid, such as training, administration, networking and writing up subsidy files. In addition, performers are not only responsible for their own work, but also that of a company. As business managers, they are responsible for all associated tasks, such as planning, logistics, administration, communication and distribution. These activities become possible through the investment of one's own time and resources, such as income from another job or previous performances, since not all of these costs can be reimbursed through subsidies.

But even costs that a subsidy can reimburse are not always included. The Circus-Career Survey shows that performers sometimes engage in 'self-censorship': they chip away at their own earnings in a subsidy file in hopes of having a better chance of getting a positive response.<sup>74</sup> Sometimes, these are offset through income from presenting work. Performers do charge for their own remuneration more and more. "However, this mechanism does not work for every artistic profile within circus. For example, a circus dramaturge is usually only involved during the creation period. The dramaturge does not go on tour with the show and therefore cannot claim any part of the buyout fee."<sup>75</sup>

The youth circuses are also major players in Flanders, including as employers. Structurally subsidised youth circuses have more opportunities to take teachers on as employees. Since classes often take place in the evenings and at weekends, it is difficult to work full-time as a teacher. Many teachers combine this job with another job (for example, as a performer), sometimes within the same youth circus where they carry out administrative duties, for example.

## BUSINESS SUPPORT

In order to expand their activities, circus professionals must engage in additional (often unpaid) work, such as administration, promotion, logistics, writing up subsidy files and managing a company. Circus professionals are often not trained for these tasks – in addition, working their way through the administrative, legal and legislative tangle is very time-intensive. Some circus professionals outsource (some of) these tasks; however, this is not always financially viable.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 48.

For starting performers in particular, it proves difficult to find their way. The Circus-Career Survey cited how circus training programmes pay little attention to developing this knowledge and these skills. And since most courses are located abroad, the knowledge taught is often not applicable to the Belgian/Flemish context. Circus performers do not always appear to be aware of their rights. When entering into agreements with programmers, for example, an official contract is not always drawn up. Consequently, performers do not receive any compensation if the organiser cancels a performance.

For a few years now, there have been more players focusing on supporting circus professionals, developing business skills and offering knowledge. However, demand continues to exceed supply, and not all supporting organisations have sufficient circus-specific knowledge. Circuscentrum as a support centre offers support in the form of consultations, writing tables, and information sessions on the Circus Decree, among other things. Where possible, it does this in collaboration with partners such as Cultuurloket. Here, extra attention goes to vulnerable players, such as starting performers. Some circus organisations offer business and administrative support. For example, in 2024, ECDF will launch a start-up lab where graduate students will receive mentoring within a paid internship, and where attention will be paid to the development of administrative and business knowledge.<sup>76</sup>

## PROFESSIONALISATION FROM AN ORGANISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Circus organisations take a variety of forms; here, we look at the funding and organisational models of circus organisations. In the following piece, we will be talking primarily about circus companies, although these may consist of a single performer.

### FUNDING MODELS

The circus sector in Flanders has a rich diversity of funding opportunities. While traditional sources such as ticket sales and subsidies remain crucial, there is a growing recognition of the need for stability and diversification through innovative collaborative models.

There are several funding options for circus organisations:

- Subsidies: within the Circus Decree, Arts Decree, Decree on Supralocal Culture, other forms of support from the Government of Flanders (e.g. VIA agreements), local subsidies, European subsidies
- Co-performances
- Buyouts
- Ticket revenue
- Partage (a portion of ticket revenue)
- Tax Shelter
- Revenue from the sale of food/drinks and merchandise
- Membership and class fees
- Sponsoring
- Funds and foundations
- Donations and crowdfunding

<sup>76</sup> "Start-up Labo," ECDF, n.d.



Here, we will first discuss the funding model for several types of organisations, then elaborate upon some general trends. In the chapter Description of the Circus Sector, we discussed in detail the applications for and awarding of structural and project subsidies within the Circus Decree. Here, we will discuss other funding sources and the relationship with subsidies from the Circus Decree.

### Circus companies

Circus companies often have a diverse funding mix, with both subsidies, alternative funding and their own income.

An important consideration is that circus creations often have a longer creation and playing time. The longer creation period increases the financial pressure on companies, as well as the need for sufficient residency spots and co-performances. At the same time, circus performances often play for longer, not only to fund the longer creation period, but also because performances often do not feel 'right' until they are played enough.

 **Chart 9 • Career Survey**  
Visualisation – funding



The Circus-Career Survey shows that about half of the performances in Flanders do not have any form of external funding.<sup>77</sup> (Chart 29) Performers/companies fund these performances themselves (through income from another job) or with the support of friends and family, often with the expectation of income from buyouts, which is then used to fund the next production. The other half of the performances do get funded through a mix of options – about a fifth use subsidies within the Circus Decree.

The Circus Decree is not the only option for subsidies. Some companies apply for subsidies within other Flemish decrees, such as the Arts Decree. According to the Circus-Career Survey, subsidies at the local or European level were used for about a quarter of performances. Local subsidies often involve modest amounts. In surveying for the Circus-Career Survey, there was no distinction between European or local grants. However, companies appear to apply for relatively few European subsidies because of the higher thresholds for submitting a file. (see International Working chapter)

<sup>77</sup> Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 49.

In addition to subsidies, companies fund creations with financial co-performances. Because co-production amounts are relatively limited, they often have to approach several organisations, both domestic and foreign, to obtain budgets for a creation. Coproductions often come from organisations that are themselves subsidised, whether within the Circus Decree or not. In addition, co-production can also be non-financial in nature (access to space, logistical support, etc.).

Obtaining co-performances is often an important factor in evaluating a subsidy file. Karlien De Savoye testifies about the challenges involved in an opinion piece in *Circusmagazine*. "The first tour is the begging tour. You're going to find as many 'partners' (that's a very vague term) as possible and visit creation spaces. The more gatekeepers you can enthuse for your project, the more points you get from the advisory committee."<sup>78</sup> Obtaining these partners is time-intensive and unpaid work. If the file is not approved, a performer has three choices: stop the project, postpone the project and go through all the partners once more to write up a new file, or fund the project themselves "Then the highly prized 'fair pay' pretty much irrevocably becomes 'no pay'."<sup>79</sup>

New creations and maintaining the company and staff are often funded by buyouts. However, the Circus-Career Survey shows that when it comes to pricing buyout fees, fair pay is not yet always established. There appears to be a lack of standards and transparency, which creates a wide variation in what performers charge, and there is also a risk of underpayment.<sup>80</sup> Presentation venues are less able to programme at a deficit on an annual basis due to rising costs, among other things, which puts pressure upon the pricing of buyouts.

Direct income from audiences is a less important source of income for contemporary circus companies, and responding to partage happens fairly infrequently.<sup>81</sup>

For traditional circuses, however, ticket revenue is still the main source of income, since they do not work with co-performances or on buyouts, and rarely apply for a subsidy. In addition, traditional circuses face rising costs, such as more expensive pitches, energy costs and rising labour costs.

One form of alternative financing is Tax Shelter, which is a tax incentive that encourages investors to invest in the cultural sector. Between 2019 and 2023, it involved a total of 22 performances by 15 companies with an average amount of €53,000. These are mainly larger companies, including the three structurally subsidised companies.

Some companies are additionally focusing on diversifying their funding by renting out tents, for example.

<sup>78</sup> Karlien De Savoye, "Kunst zonder subsidies," *Circusmagazine*, no. 77 (2023): 46–47.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 59.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 61.



## Youth circuses

The eight major circus festivals are structurally subsidised; from an analysis of youth circuses' revenues, these operating subsidies make up an average of 30% of their income (see Description of the Circus Sector chapter). In addition to the grants in the Circus Decree, youth circuses use other grants.

Since the 2018 internal state reform, the provinces are no longer responsible for culture; the associated funds were transferred to the Government of Flanders and local authorities. At the same time, the need for support between the two levels remained, which is why the Supralocal Cultural Decree was introduced in 2018. As a transitional measure, there was a transitional regulation. Seven files were approved on both subsidy lines, from six youth circuses. Of these, there was only one file from a non-structurally subsidised youth circus.<sup>82</sup> For small youth circuses, it is often not possible to cope with the extra work involved in a project. In *Circusmagazine*, some small youth circuses testified, "We are happy to be able to teach our classes and it would be good if we could also get all the necessary administration in order in a timely manner. The volunteers are already running out of margins, let alone adding another project. The money from such a subsidy goes purely to the project – for the operation of your youth circus, you are only left with washed-out employees after such a project."<sup>83</sup>

In addition to Flemish subsidies, youth circuses also submit files at the European level. These are only structurally subsidised youth circuses, as these files often require time and specialist knowledge (see International Work chapter).

Before the reform of the Circus Decree, youth circuses received modest support from Circuscentrum. Since the reform, this basic support has fallen away and non-structurally subsidised youth circuses have had to rely upon local subsidies or their own funding. In an article in *Circusmagazine*, we read that this is insufficient support, "With the annual local support of – at best – 500 to 1,000 euros, it becomes difficult to survive, let alone 'grow' further and 'professionalise'."<sup>84</sup> Especially for the non-structurally subsidised youth circuses, this represented a loss. Circuscentrum additionally provided some administrative support that helped reduce costs.

Beyond subsidies, membership and class fees, along with registration fees for camps and workshops, are the main sources of income. The membership fee also includes the insurance premium for participants.

Increasing costs and an organisation that runs entirely on a volunteer basis means that many non-subsidised youth circuses are struggling to make ends meet and have little room to seek additional funding.

## Festivals and circus creation centers

The four creation spaces in Flanders are all subsidised through the Circus Decree. Based on an analysis of the income of the Circus Creation Spaces, this is on average 60% of their total income.

<sup>82</sup> "Gesubsidieerd organisaties bovenlokale cultuur", Department of Culture, Youth & Media, n.d.

<sup>83</sup> Katrijn De Bleser, "We moeten het dringend over de kleine circusateliers hebben," *Circusmagazine*, no. 70 (2022): 20–25.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

In addition, they often receive local subsidies; for example, Miramiro receives subsidies within the Gentse Feesten budget to organise Miramiro Festival. Since creation spaces often offer free performances, income from ticket sales is rather limited.

Festivals are often subsidised, either within the Circus Decree, other Flemish decrees or because the organiser – such as a workshop or cultural centre – receives subsidies. Many subsidised festivals offer (some of) their performances for free, so ticket revenue is often limited here too. For example, in an article in *Circusmagazine*, the organisers of MAD Festival and Cirque Plus indicate that their budget comes largely from subsidies, both locally and through the Circus Decree, and that ticket revenue is limited. At the same time, costs are rising. "From wages to rental materials, all the costs have increased significantly in recent years, but revenue did not increase in line with those."<sup>85</sup>

### Choice of subsidies

The purpose and operation of the organisation are important in determining how the organisation operates and its funding form. The focus groups and the Circus-Career Survey revealed that organisations sometimes consciously choose to be non-subsidised. The circus field consists of a combination of organisations, from small independent ones to large ones, working for large audiences or rather for niche audiences. The diversity in operations creates varying needs for subsidies.

Writing up a (good) subsidy file requires time and knowledge that not every circus professional has available. The lead time for a subsidy also does not fit within the 'working rhythm' for every project. Especially in artistic creations, some performers are looking for more room for experimentation. Project-based work brings challenges – for example, not all tasks, such as communication and administration, can be reimbursed from a subsidy. This, especially for organisations that run on a voluntary basis, adds to the burden.

The Professionalisation focus group revealed that working with structural subsidies has a different impact among different types of organisations. A structural subsidy can provide some breathing room for organisations to hire staff to carry out these tasks. However, the shift to being an employer also creates some administration and costs; not every organisation can manage this. Once an organisation hires staff, it reaches a 'point of no return', and can no longer scale to voluntary operations, making some level of professionalisation and funding also necessary.

For the youth circuses, a structural subsidy means life, rather than survival. It provides the opportunity to invest in a professional personnel policy, a safety policy, etc. Structural subsidies can also provide stability for circus companies. However, some companies make a conscious decision not to apply for structural subsidies because it does not fit their way of working.

<sup>85</sup> Gwendolien Sabbe, "Let's talk about the money - Cirque Plus & MAD Festival," *Circusmagazine*, no. 80 (2024): 34–38.

For example, Bram Dobbelaere explains that with their company Cie Pol & Freddy, they do not want to apply for any structural subsidies "That has to do with our project-based way of working. After playing a show for five years or so, we start to feel like doing something else."<sup>86</sup>

### *Hypothesis: the leverage of structural subsidies.*

Operating subsidies seem to create some leverage for attracting other resources. Organisations with staff can be more decisive in writing up subsidy files and other applications, and thus can combine different funding sources more easily than organisations without any operating resources.

An analysis of the financial data for the structurally subsidised organisations shows that all structurally subsidised circus organisations have received subsidies in the past policy period in addition to the operating funds from the Circus Decree. Thus, 11 of the 16 structurally subsidised organisations received Flemish funds beyond the Circus Decree, 13 received local subsidies and 5 European ones. With other forms of funding, such as Tax Shelter, non-structurally subsidised companies also make claims, although the three structurally subsidised companies were responsible for 7 of the 23 agreements. It is not possible at this time to solidify the hypothesis, since no comparison with non-structurally subsidised organisations is possible.

## ORGANISATIONAL MODELS

A range of organisational models are possible within the circus sector. In order to apply for subsidies within the Circus Decree (and for many other subsidy forms), organisations must be legal entities of a non-commercial nature, such as non-profit organisations, municipal/provincial or social purpose companies. Within the circus sector, therefore, many organisations are non-profit organisations. Some organisations are embedded in a larger structure, such as Circus Workshop Dommelhof, for example, which as a public legal entity is part of a provincial government, or CIRKLAB0, which is part of 30CC.

According to the Circus-Career Survey, the restriction for legal entities of a non-commercial nature is sometimes perceived as a limitation. "This is seen as a difficulty by performers in the 'grey zone' between profit and non-profit: some of their activities are (potentially) profitable, which in principle allows them to function as self-employed. At the same time, that step is very big for many people: this creates a great uncertainty, which complicates potential applications in the Circus Decree."<sup>87</sup>

During the Professionalisation focus group, it was noted that working within a cooperative structure can lead to economies of scale and efficiency, reducing costs and sharing difficult, non-reimbursed tasks. Collaborating with others also provides opportunities to exchange with peers. At the same time, circus organisations have a highly developed identity that they actively promote. Some organisations are afraid of losing this proprietary DNA within a cooperative structure.

<sup>86</sup> Gwendolien Sabbe, "Let's talk about the money - Bram Dobbelaere," *Circusmagazine*, no. 79 (2024): 26–29.

<sup>87</sup> Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 60.

In addition, this type of work also requires time, knowledge and communication to work well. Depending on the operation and purpose of the organisation, larger or smaller structures are more appropriate.

The youth circuses are investigating new forms of collaboration to move beyond the 10,000 participant hours limit. Some youth circuses also have partial collaborations that operate independently, but where certain business tasks, such as payroll, are shared. One example is Circus Punt in Sint-Niklaas, which falls under Circolito, yet still has its own operation.

## BUSINESS SUPPORT

Not only circus professionals, but circus organisations need greater business support and framing. Professionalisation in the management of an organisation takes place in many different areas: financial management, revenue models, privacy, integrity policies, human resources, good governance, etc. This requires complex business, tax and legal knowledge and experience.

Especially at organisations that are project-based, it is difficult to address all these issues structurally. Hiring someone to take on the business aspects is not always financially viable. But even those organisations that can do so quickly run into the limits of their knowledge. During the Professionalisation focus group, it was cited that contact with peers was important for quickly asking questions and testing out choices. However, the circus industry has a shortage of professionals with business profiles. In an article with *Circusmagazine*, two business leaders stated, "As a business leader, you're expected to know a great deal in a lot of areas, with quite a lot of responsibility. And then, I think, wages in the industry are not that tremendous. I think that just leaves us very weak as a sector."<sup>88</sup> In addition, knowledge about the field and about the functioning of the performing arts sector is expected.

The circus sector has several distribution agencies that support companies in their tour planning and promotion. Distribution agencies have expertise, knowledge of places to play and an expanded network. However, the offering for circus remains fairly limited, and there are few distribution agencies that really specialise in circus (for an overview, see the Description of the Circus Sector chapter). The Circus-Career Survey states, "A few small management agencies offer tailored support to companies. The offering remains limited and the financial picture is not easily laid out for these agencies."<sup>89</sup> With the pressure on buyout fees, it is not easy for the distribution agencies to break even.

<sup>88</sup> Ine Van Baelen, "Esther Maas en Stefan Gevaerts stellen orde op zaken," *Circusmagazine*, no. 76 (2023): 8–11.

<sup>89</sup> Goffin et al., "Circusloopbanenonderzoek," 65.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE FURTHER PROFESSIONALISATION OF THE CIRCUS SECTOR

- Within the circus sector, **financially sustainable careers** are a major challenge. Circus professionals face an uncertain and unstable income pattern, using a range of compensation systems. Many of these systems do not provide sufficient social protection. Moreover, circus professionals perform many necessary tasks that are not reimbursed. When writing up subsidy applications, circus performers consider fair pay, but risk censoring their own pay in applications. Structural subsidies have enabled some organisations to build up a professional operation and pay their employees correctly, but the proportion of structurally subsidised organisations remains limited within the sector.
- Circus organisations need a **diverse and healthy funding mix**. Circus organisations often have a diverse funding mix, a combination of subsidies, alternative forms of funding, such as Tax Shelter and their own income. For circus creations in particular, circus companies need to cobble together various sources, such as co-performances, and creations are still regularly funded by the income of performers from another job. Traditional circuses depend upon a large enough audience turnout. Non-structurally subsidised youth circuses rely primarily on their own income. All organisations face sharply rising wage and energy costs.

### Suggestion for further research:

This LST took a look at the various funding systems within the sector and the distribution of subsidies within the Circus Decree.

However, relatively little is still known about the existing business models and funding mix for circus organisations, so it was not possible to write about this in depth.

Additional research could identify the current state and key needs and challenges.

- (Structural) subsidies offer organisations the opportunity to grow and professionalise, and they can employ business staff to write up subsidy files and look for forms of alternative funding that will allow them to professionalise further. This causes a **Matthew effect** within the sector. Certainly among youth circuses, the gap is growing between the larger structurally subsidised and the smaller non-subsidised youth circuses.

- There is a **need for business expertise** within the sector. Circus professionals are often not taught business skills in their training, but face difficult administrative and legal issues. Looking for the right information takes time and knowledge. Small organisations often do not have the resources to hire someone or outsource this work (in part). Overall, there is a shortage of individuals with a business profile. There are organisations that provide business support, but they sometimes lack the necessary circus-specific knowledge.
- The circus sector forms a **close-knit, but closed network**. Circus professionals draw a lot from their network; the distance between amateur and professional is small and there is a great willingness to share, allowing individuals within their network to ask questions. At the same time, newcomers cite how it is sometimes difficult to access the network, and that this requires a major time investment.
- **Roles are often fluid** in the circus sector. Artists are often creators, performers, coaches, (business) leaders, etc. Within youth circuses too, employees are teachers, riggers, administrators, coordinators, etc. This fluidity of roles means that circus professionals are often involved in all parts of an operation; at the same time, it creates a great deal of (mental) pressure.
- There is little to no circus-specific training within formal education, which presents challenges for the sector around **entry and progression of circus professionals**. There is no college education for circus performers within Flanders. At the same time, there is room for self-taught performers to develop a professional (artistic) practice. For many other professions, such as technician, dramaturge and teacher, there are no specific circus training programmes and, within existing broader training programmes, there is often no focus on circus. The sector organises several training programmes internally to address this shortage, but these depend upon organisations within the sector and often go unrecognised. Many circus professionals have built up their knowledge through workshops, informal contacts and experience.

#### Suggestion for further research:

The sector faces several challenges regarding the advancement of interested young people into circus performers. There is no formal artistic training for circus in Flanders. An investigation into the need regarding training could reveal the bottlenecks in the current offering. One possible research avenue is a feasibility study into a Flemish master's degree programme in circus.