

The Cost of Docs

Findings of the Whicker's World Foundation's 2016 Questionnaire for Documentary Makers in the UK and Europe into the current cost of making a documentary

FOREWORD

In January 2016 the Whicker's World Foundation set out to find what its top funding award of £80,000 could buy in the documentary filmmaking industry. After realising that this information wasn't readily available, we decided to conduct our own survey with the help of partners Sheffield Doc/Fest and the European Documentary Network. By compiling the responses of 191 documentary makers to 16 questions, we aim to construct a picture of the documentary filmmaking field in 2016. We hope that our statistics will prove useful in discussions about the state of documentary-making and the challenges facing filmmakers today.

The survey was conducted anonymously. Where quotations are attributed, we have obtained permission from the respondent to cite them.

You are welcome to quote this survey provided Whicker's World Foundation is accredited.



**WHICKER'S
WORLD
FOUNDATION**



**20TH
ANNIVERSARY**

ABOUT OUR RESPONDENTS

Our first few questions (1 and 2) established the level of experience among the documentary makers surveyed. Please note that for many questions respondents could tick multiple answers, so totals may not add up to 100%. The first question asked if respondents had made a documentary in the last two years. Three-quarters said they had, so can give us a very up-to-date picture of the current market.

We also asked if the documentary made in the last two years was their first: this was the case for 43 of 191 (23%). By contrast, 88 of 191 (46%) said that they had made multiple documentaries in the last two years, and 20 (10%) answered that they had made documentaries prior to January 2014. Just 4 people (2%) said that they had not yet completed their first documentary. This information shows that most of the respondents are fairly experienced and have completed at least one documentary film.

In the same question we asked if respondents if they had been closely involved in financing a documentary in the last two years: 79 respondents (41%) confirmed that they had, so documentary makers are playing multiple roles in the production process.

EXPERIENCE MAKING AND FUNDING DOCS

74.3%



Had made a documentary in the last two years

22.5%



Said the documentary they had made in the last two years was their first

41.4%



Had been closely involved in financing a documentary in the last two years

55.0%

Freelance Filmmaker

48.7%

Part of an Independent Production Company

14.1%

Student

6.8%

Part of a Broadcast Team

6.8%

Other

ROLES OF OUR RESPONDENTS

Question two asked respondents about the capacity in which they made their documentary: more than half of those surveyed (55%) chose freelance filmmaker. The second most popular answer was working as part of an independent production company, with 93 (49%). Much less common were those who made their documentary as part of a broadcast team (13 people, 7%). A small number of respondents (13) did not neatly fit into those categories.

TIME AND COST OF MAKING A DOCUMENTARY

In question three, we asked how many days of work their documentary took to complete, from research to the final cut. This question received the broadest range of answers.

Average number of days worked
(from research to final cut)



425
Days

Range of respondents' time
taken to make latest film

8
Days

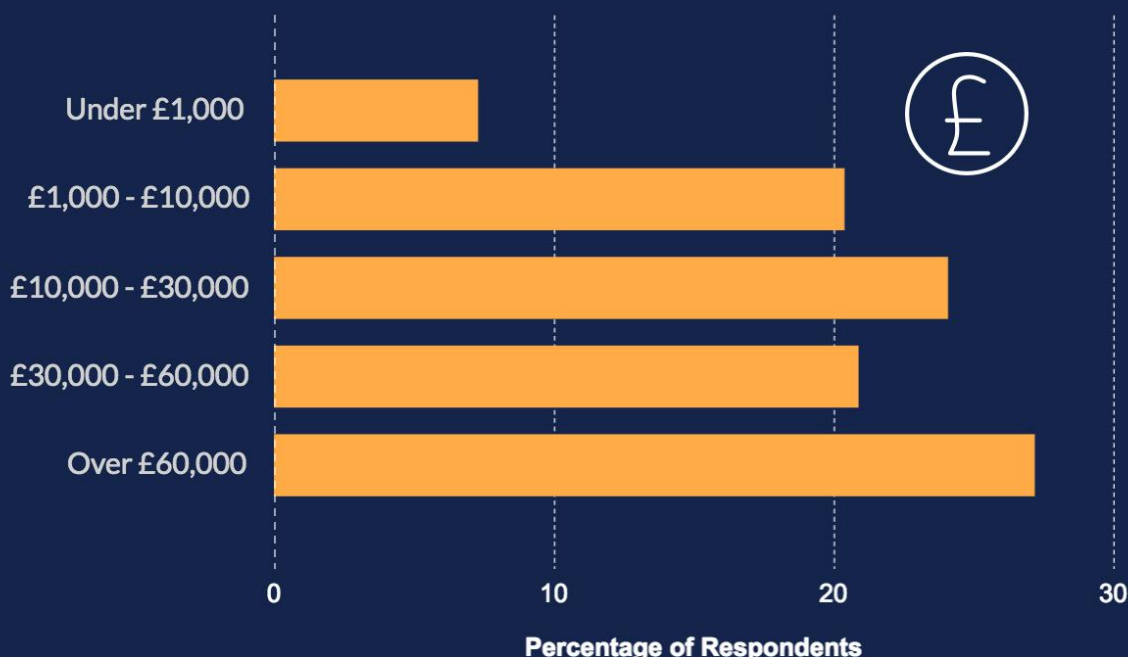


33
Years

Answers ranged from a short film that took just 8 days of work, to a cinema release which took 33 years. A significant number of respondents gave answers between 2 and 6 months, however there were also many who had spent 2 to 5 years working on their documentaries. The average length of time to make a documentary was 425 days; however this statistic represents the midpoint of the data, rather than being a common answer. There is a division between those who were able to work intensively (completing their documentary within a matter of weeks or months) and those who devoted time to their project intermittently, often across many years.

Our fourth question asked respondents to calculate how much their time would have cost if they had paid themselves fully for every day of work. Only 14 (7%) said that it would cost less than £1,000: these tended to be smaller, low-budget projects. The most common answer was those who calculated that it would cost more than £60,000 for them to be paid: this was selected by 52 documentary makers (27%). Of those surveyed, 39 (20%) gave a valuation between £1,000 and £10,000; 46 (24%) calculated somewhere between £10,000 and £30,000, and 40 (21%) said between £30,000 and 60,000. Therefore, the median valuation which our respondents gave was roughly £10,000.

If you paid yourself fully for every one of these days of work, what would your time have cost?



THE CHALLENGES FACING DOC FILMMAKERS

To follow up question four, we then asked in question five if respondents had actually received the calculated amount for their work and 167 (87%) said they had not; only 25 (13%) said they had been paid this amount. This was a common trend among both large and small productions.

To understand this issue better, question six asked respondents to tell us why they were or were not properly paid. While 54 (28%) said that they did not expect pay - instead working on the project out of love, for the experience or training - 65% did explain why they had not been paid the calculated amount. The most common reason given was that they had a 'very tight production budget' or 'could not raise adequate funding'. Many said they often sacrificed their own wages to 'keep the budget down'. Others acknowledged that in order to get a 'passion project' made, they would have to use their own money or crowd-fund.

In spite of the many challenges, the integrity and enthusiasm of documentarians is still very high, with many expressing sentiments such as: '[the] film feels important enough to contribute free time' and 'the story needed to be done at any cost'.

Were you paid this amount?

No
87.4%



Yes
12.6%



Adam Wakeling



Emily James

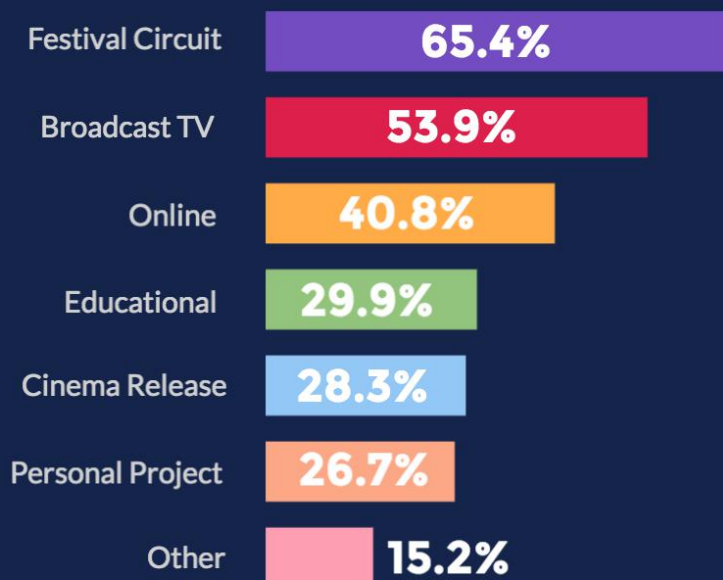
VIEWS FROM OUR RESPONDENTS

"I put every last penny I had into it, in addition to many others that I didn't. I'm still paying off the debts, four years later."

- Adam Wakeling, Director at Notion Pictures

"Documentary filmmakers often auto-exploit themselves, paying others on their crew full rates when they don't pay themselves... it makes it difficult to build a career or to make a sustainable living out of directing documentaries."

- Emily James, Documentary Director and Producer



MEDIUMS FILMS WERE MADE FOR

Question seven asked what medium(s) their documentary was made for. Over half of respondents (103) said that their documentary was made for broadcast television, while nearly two-thirds (124) made theirs for the festival circuit. Less common answers were the 53 respondents who made their film for cinema release and the 77 who released their documentary online. There were 51 filmmakers who said they made their film as a personal project, and 56 made it for educational purposes. A handful of respondents gave alternative answers such as a DVD release or for charity.

FACTORS AFFECTING COSTS

In question eight, we asked respondents if their films had involved certain factors which contributed to the cost of the film, such as international travel and access payments. Most of our respondents said they had hired equipment (134 - 72%) and that their film had involved international travel (118 - 62%). Distribution costs were also a factor for 78 (41%) respondents. Less common factors included contributor payments (58 - 30%), talent payments (48 - 25%) and access payments (43 - 23%). A fifth of respondents (38) hired a studio during the post-production of their film, while only 26 (14%) said that undercover filming was used. The least common factors were reconstructions (25 - 13%) and fixed rigs (17 - 9%).

61.8%

Of films involved international travel



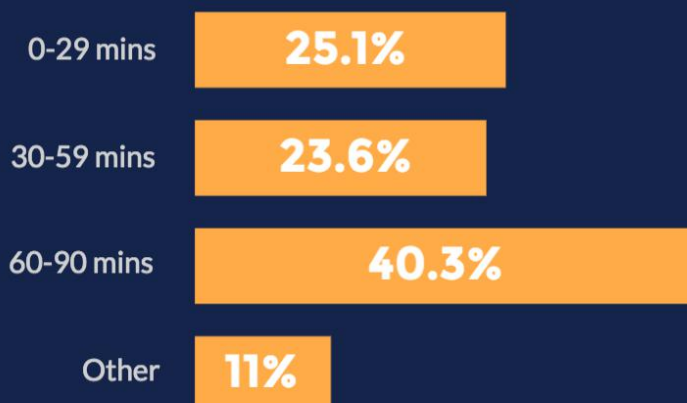
71.7%

Involved equipment hire



30.4%

Involved contributor payments



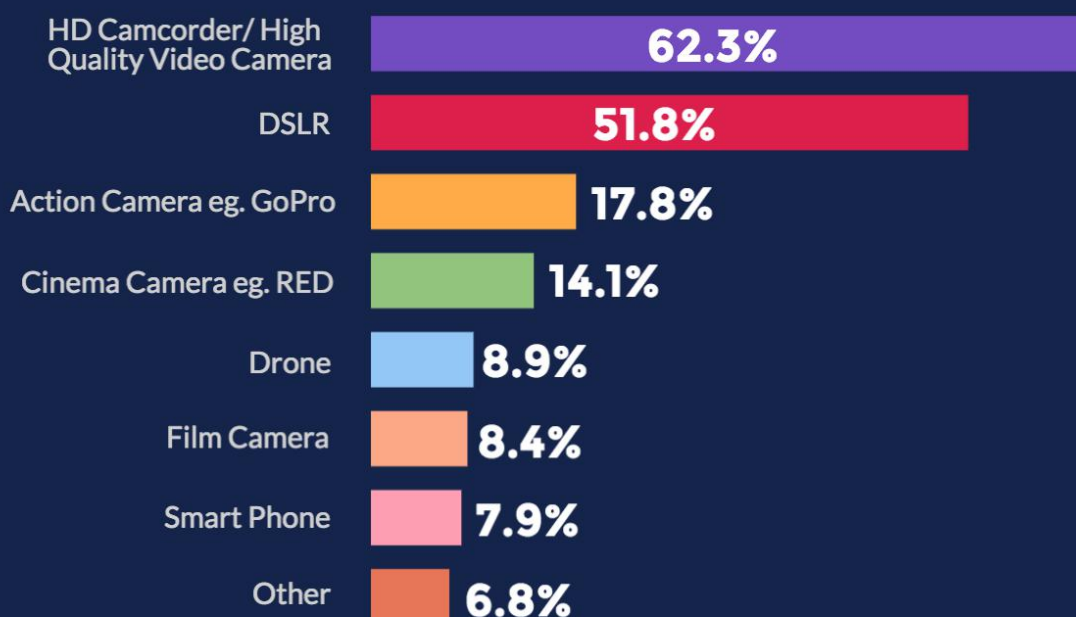
LENGTH OF FILMS

Question 10 asked about the duration of our respondents' documentaries. Just under half of all films were an hour or shorter, with these split almost evenly between the 0-29 minute bracket and 30-59 minute bracket. Over 40% of films were between 60 and 90 minutes. The remaining 11% of films were either longer than 90 minutes or a series of multiple films.

EQUIPMENT USED IN DOCUMENTARY FILM

We were also interested to know what cameras are currently being used by documentary filmmakers, and so question nine asked what cameras respondents had used. The most popular option is an HD camcorder or high quality video camera, selected by 119 (62%) of those surveyed. The other frequently chosen option was a Digital Single Lens Reflex (DSLR) camera, used by 99 (52%) of respondents. Other types of cameras used by a small number of filmmakers were Cinema Cameras (27 respondents - 14%) and Film Cameras (16 - 8%). An indication of changing technology is that

almost the same number of filmmakers used a Smart Phone to shoot their latest film (15 – 8%) as used Film Cameras. In addition to making filmmaking more accessible than ever before, new technologies have enabled documentary makers to film their subject from different perspectives. This can be seen from the growing number of filmmakers who have incorporated footage from Action Cameras (34 – 18%) as well as those who used drones (17 – 9%). Of the 'other' category, respondents specified using DV cameras, iPads and undercover cameras.



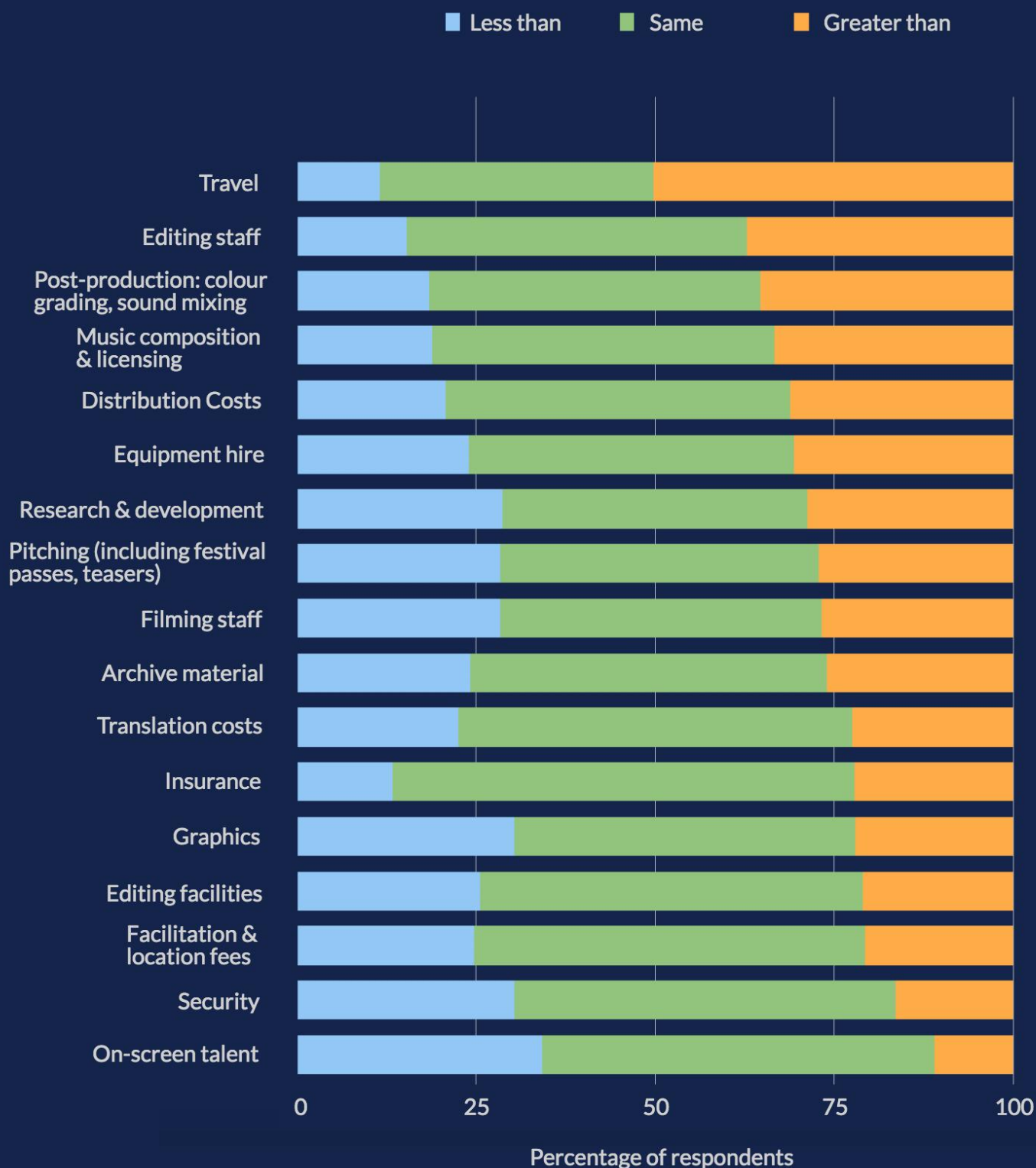
DOCUMENTARY FILM BUDGETS

In question 11 we asked respondents to give an estimated budget for their latest documentary and, like our previous question about time taken to complete their film, we received a huge range of answers (often in multiple currencies). At the low end of the scale is a short student project that cost £200; at the top end, a television documentary over an hour long with a budget of €1 million (£800,000). Whilst these two figures are exceptional, there is no single figure which one can say is a "typical documentary budget". For small scale documentaries, budgets tended to be between £500 and £5000. In these instances the cost of a single

element (such as travelling abroad) could take up a significant percentage of the budget and filmmakers are less likely to pay themselves properly. Larger productions for television or cinema release required higher budgets, often between £100,000 and £350,000, but in some cases more. There were also some medium-sized budgets which do not neatly fit into either of these categories: they allow filmmakers to be more ambitious than they would on a shoestring budget, but not necessarily at the level of a major documentary production. Ultimately, all filmmakers are limited in their options by what their budget can fund and often have to make compromises (including not being fully paid) in order to make the film they want.

RISING AND FALLING PRODUCTION EXPENSES

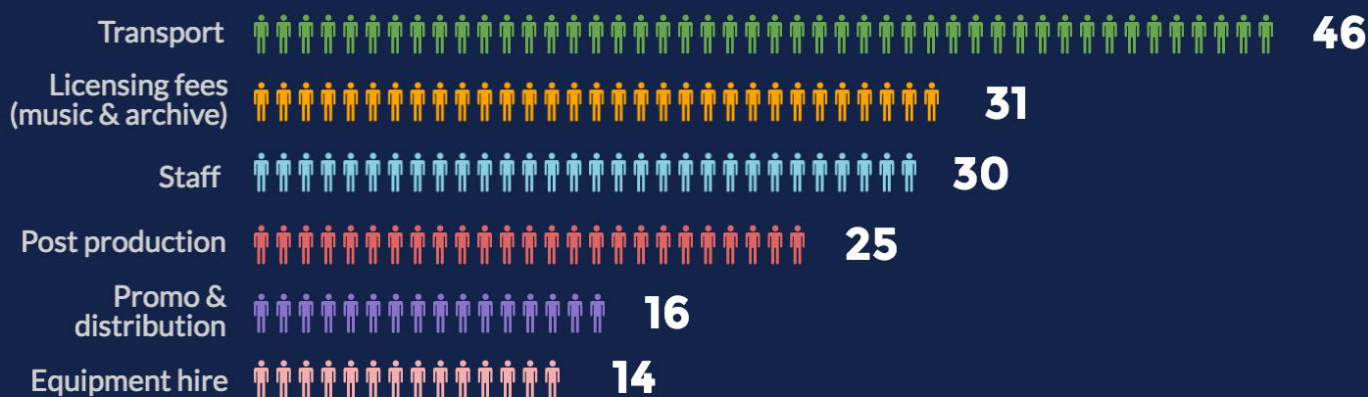
Question 12 asked filmmakers whether various expenses were greater, lesser or the same for their most recent production compared to a previous one of similar length and ambition. We did this in order to examine how the cost of documentary-making has changed in recent years, and to identify the specific areas of production that have transformed the most. The breakdown of each specific expense is shown in the graph below, arranged in descending order by the percentage of respondents who said the cost was "greater than" a previous film.



Just over half of all respondents said that they had spent more on transportation in the making of their latest documentary compared to a previous film. Transport emerged as the greatest costs increase, followed by editing staff and post-production (colour grading, sound mixing) services. Areas in which the most respondents said costs had decreased compared to previous documentary films were on-screen talent, followed by security and graphics. Meanwhile, the areas in which costs were most likely to remain the same were insurance,

translation services and facilitation & location fees. As well as asking about what costs had changed since their previous film, question 13 asked respondents what they felt their main cost hurdles were in the making of their most recent film. This was phrased as an open-ended question, intended to obtain more detailed information about commonly-cited difficulties as well as highlight any cost areas we may not have considered. We've grouped together the six cost hurdles most commonly cited in the chart below, by frequency.

What were the main cost hurdles?



Travel was the most frequently cited cost hurdle, being mentioned by almost a quarter of respondents (46 – 24%) as their biggest challenge. Responses highlighted that the transport and accommodation required to film abroad made it the most expensive element of the production. Other commonly cited hurdles included licensing fees for archive footage and music, as well as post production costs. Staff costs were another common answer, highlighting what question five revealed; filmmakers often struggle to pay everyone (particularly themselves) for every day of work on the project. Many filmmakers explained that they would often take a pay cut themselves in order to pay their staff. Other frequently cited hurdles included kit hire and promo & distribution costs. ■

For enquiries or a copy of the questionnaire/report, please email info@whickersworldfoundation.com

Text and graphic design by Curtis Gallant and Robert Pyburn, compiled by Whicker's World Foundation

RESPONDENTS' VIEWS

"Archival fees are exorbitant and cost-prohibitive"

"Staff costs are rising a bit (at last - they had stagnated for too long). Clearances cost more because we now need All Media everywhere!"

"Travel costs are going up. As my productions get higher in quality, it requires more people with skill and they are no longer one-man crews."