Pathways Programmes: Impact Evaluation Report

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# Background and research aims

Extant is the UK's leading professional performing arts company of visually impaired (VI) artists and theatre practitioners. From 2018 to 2023, Extant ran a flagship series of training and development programmes called *Pathways,* designed to increase opportunities for VI professionals in theatre.

Pathways consisted of

* Pathways Actors
* Pathways Directors
* Pathways Writers
* Pathways Crew and Design

Extant ran visual impairment awareness training in parallel with Pathways. Some contributors to Pathways took part in this training.

The impact evaluation sought to inform upon the following research questions:

* How did the Pathways programmes impact upon:
	+ the participants?
	+ the sector?
	+ And upon Extant as an organisation?

The evaluation took a mixed methods approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. The research participants included:

* people taking part in Pathways
* contributors to the programmes, including workshop facilitators and trainers, supporting actors and access workers
* Extant staff

# Methodology

The mixed methods approach involved collecting data through a combination of mixed methods questionnaires and in-depth semi­ structured interviews.

### Questionnaires

Questionnaires were used to evaluate delivery of the Pathways programmes (events) and the overall impact of the programmes on participants (pre/post questionnaires).

The questionnaires were made up of fixed response questions, which provide quantitative data, and free response questions, which provide qualitative data.

All questionnaires shared questions in common. Respondents were asked to:

* rate the event/programme for interest, enjoyment and usefulness
* rate how likely they would be to recommend it to others
* rate to what extent it met their expectations
* rate to what extent it made them feel motivated

They were also asked to rate their agreement with a series of statements that are tailored to the objectives for that event, for example 'the event gave me the opportunity to apply my learning about directing', or 'I have had the opportunity to form connections with other writers through these events.'

Participants provided ratings through Likert scales. The fixed response questions thus provide a quantitative summary, for each event, of the cohort's response: their levels of cognitive and emotional engagement (interest, enjoyment) and specific points of learning. Emotional and cognitive engagement are both linked to how well experiences are remembered (Conway & Pleydell Pearce, 2000; Holland & Kensinger, 2010) and to the development of professional identity (Tsybulsky & Muchnik-Rozanov, 2019).

Qualitative comments were also invited throughout the questionnaire, and these provided rich insight to support the quantitative data.

Feedback from contributors, supporting actors and access workers is also incorporated into the evaluation.

Where possible, pre/post mixed methods questionnaires were administered, for Pathways Writers and Pathways Crew & Design. The 'pre' questionnaire informs on participants' levels of confidence about various aspects of their professional practice before starting the programme. The 'post' questionnaire enables measurement of any changes in these levels of confidence.

#### Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from each Pathways programme. The questions were designed to let a conversation evolve, meaning that the interview analysis brought deep insight into the impact of the programme on the participant's personal and professional growth.

Questions invited participants to reflect on their hopes and aims when starting the programme, to what extent it met their aims, and how it impacted on them personally and professionally. They were also invited to share which were the most memorable parts of the programme for them. Exploring memories of an experience is a way to understand the lasting impact on the individual. The relationship between memorability of an experience and impact is recognised in the research literature on cultural experience (Anderson, Storksdieck & Spock, 2007; Hutchinson, Loveday & Eardley, 2020; Medved, Cupchik & Oatley, 2004)

Interviews were also conducted with Extant staff.

#### Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

The quantitative measures collected (Likert scales) were at an ordinal level of measurement, therefore the appropriate measures of central tendency and variability are the median and range. In this report, median values are given for each measure along with the minimum and maximum values from the sample.

The quantitative measures here should be interpreted with caution: the samples are small, and no inferential statistics have been conducted on

the data. The descriptive statistics presented here are intended to provide a 'snapshot' of the views of the Pathways Cohorts, to supplement the rich data provided by the interviews with a select number of individuals.

Interview Data

The transcript data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where sample sizes permitted. Otherwise, key points from the interviews were selected by the researcher, summarised and described.

#### Data Collection and terminology

The researcher's role as impact evaluator began in October 2020, when Pathways Actors was complete and Pathways Directors was underway. This means that data collection varied between the four programmes.

It is recognised that language used to describe disabilities is complex and political, with many alternatives used and preferred by different people. The terms visually impaired (VI) and blind are used in this report, in line with Extant's use of terminology.

## Key findings

##### Participants:

The evaluation established a range of impacts on the Pathways participants. Please see Findings in Full for in-depth analysis of each programme. A review of the data across programmes reveals the following key points:

* The Pathways Programmes were stimulating for the participants in terms of their emotional and cognitive engagement. Enjoyment and interest ratings across the programmes were high. This is a good predictor for lasting impact on participants
* Participants self-reported as having developed new skills. Ratings across the programmes were high for perceived usefulness of the content and events
* Participants valued the access that Pathways provided to the wider theatre industry and the opportunity to build their networks
* Mentoring and shadowing were frequently identified as highlights of the Pathways experience
* Levels of confidence increased. Many participants reported a sense of personal growth and achievement
* Participants felt the programmes offered them a sense of 'validation' as VI creatives. Pathways impacted positively on participants' sense of professional identity
* Participants across programmes would recommend Pathways to others
* Pathways was successful in helping to make participants feel motivated
* Ratings for the extent to which Pathways met the participant's expectations were lower (It met my expectations 'somewhat'). Qualitative comments indicated that participants were not always sure what to expect when joining the programme and/or they did not have fixed goals.

##### Extant and the wider industry:

Analysis of the data collection from participants and contributors to Pathways reveals that Extant is regarded as the 'gold standard' in the

sector for supporting VI creatives, with the following points being particularly salient:

* For participants, Extant is a community and a place to grow creatively. The Extant community is also a place to find work opportunities and future collaborations
* Participants feel they can turn to Extant for advice
* Extant is a source of learning for the wider sector. Actors, access workers, technicians, BSL interpretations and theatre professionals who engaged with Pathways reported learning about accessibility, new creative methods and developing a deeper understanding of working with VI professionals

# Conclusions and Recommendations

The research findings suggest a number of recommendations, across the following domains: set-up, administration and day-to-day running of Pathways, development of content, the participant experience, training and legacy.

Set-up, administration and day-to-day running of Pathways:

* Considering the importance of Extant as the leading organisation for VI theatre professionals, the recruitment strategy should continue to welcome everyone, allowing Extant to continue to expand their reach and impact
* The day-to day running of Pathways would benefit from management and input from two distinct job functions: 1) the Programme Manager, who focuses on developing the programme content, working with the participants to understand their goals, and liaising with the wider industry to organise Masterclasses, mentoring and shadowing and 2) an administrative role to support the Programme Manager and to be the primary contact for participants if support is needed with access to documentation, travel, reimbursement of expenses and so on.
* Extant should continue to investigate how best to manage access to materials for participants. Numerous emails proved difficult to navigate for many. SharePoint is a promising option, but consultation is needed in terms of its accessibility and optimal use of it.
* Guidelines for Zoom delivery should be developed and circulated, to make it as efficient and enjoyable as possible. Zoom delivery is likely to continue to be used, as it opens up opportunities to participants UK wide. Consultation with VI participants would usefully feed into understanding on how to manage introductions, fatigue and to maximise time when participants are actively contributing.

Development of Pathways content:

* The inclusive recruitment strategy means that participants will have a broad range of skills and experience. Pathways should be as customised for the participants as possible
* Mentoring and shadowing are key to achieving this aim
* Participants could be more involved in designing the content for Pathways -what arethey hoping to get out of it? What would they like to learn or practice through Masterclasses? Which key skills would they like to acquire?
* Pathways content will be diverse, as it will come from multiple industry partners. Extant is the unifying voice that brings this together. For example, by providing an introduction to each event (e.g. Masterclass), explaining to participants what will be covered and what they can hope to take away from it by the end
* Participants would like the content to include as much hands-on, practical work as possible
* They would like more content on the business side of being a theatre professional (writing funding applications, managing budgets, developing an online profile)

The participant experience

* In recognition of the fact that each Pathways cohort will vary in terms of their prior skills and experience, Extant should gather information about the participants in advance, specifically about their hopes and expectations for the course. They could consider writing a set of learning or desired professional outcomes with each individual, which could be reviewed with the Programme Manager half way through (are we on track?) and at the end (did this provide what you hoped it would?)
* Where provision of scripts and access to other professionals (actors, directors) are needed for development of the Showcase, these should be put in place as early as possible
* Many participants would have liked more time to present their work in the Showcase. Extant should explore options for this for the future.

For example, could one Showcase event cover all three programmes, by showcasing the work of multidisciplinary teams (for example a Pathways Director working with Pathways Actors, and Crew & Design, on a script written by a Pathways Writer), thereby allowing each piece to run for longer?

* Extant should explore funding for Pathways participants to allow them to be paid for their time on the course, thereby reducing/removing the potential conflict with needing to focus on their paid work

Training

* Extant will continue to develop VI awareness training and this should form part of the induction for all new starters at Extant as they join the organisation
* It should also be strongly encouraged for theatre professionals supporting Extant with Pathways, and mandatory for mentors
* VI awareness training should incorporate advice and information regarding how to optimise online delivery with a VI audience

Legacy

* Extant has an Artist Development Manager in place and this role will be crucial to the ongoing impact of Pathways
* The Artist Development Manager should support continued networking to help build and foster a growing community for Pathways participants - for example, by developing an Pathways Alumni network, with dedicated online spaces
* Mentoring and shadowing is customised, but there is an opportunity for knowledge sharing to maximise the benefit to participants.
* Extant has a key role to play in continuing to evaluate the accessibility of the various products and services associated with the wider theatre industry (access to scripts, specialist software) and in calling for change