Pathways Programmes: Impact Evaluation Report

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March, 2023

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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](#_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 are they 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

# Findings in full

## Pathways Actors

Eight actors took part in this programme, which consisted of masterclasses, mentoring, and shadowing, and culminated in a Showcase at Rada Studios.

### Interviews

Three Pathways Actors took part in a one-to-one semi structured interview in April 2021, 18 months after they completed the programme. This afforded an opportunity for reflection on their experience of the programme and its impact on them. Participants were invited to comment on what they had hoped to get out of the programme, which aspects were most memorable for them, and what kind of impact it had on them professionally and personally.

The three participants had quite distinct goals and aims for this project. One actor was aiming to expand their networks and to ‘crack the London bubble’ (Actor #1), another was trying to broaden their skills beyond their existing skill set (Actor #2), and the third was particularly keen to gain experience of different theatre settings and exposure to different practitioners (Actor #3). All three participants considered that the project met their expectations and that they could attribute concrete outcomes to it. Through discussion of what these outcomes were, the following themes were prominent: learning and new skills, development of new social and professional connections, confidence and validation. Participants’ most memorable moments are also discussed.

**Learning and new skills**

A variety of workshops were run for this programme. The range of content covered probably contributed to the fact that all of the actors interviewed reported having learnt something new. They each had examples to share of skills they had learnt or new areas they had been introduced to through the programme, and ways in which they have used the skills since. One participant, who had significant stage experience prior to joining Pathways Actors, particularly valued the workshops on ‘the business of being an actor’, such as support on writing grant applications, where ‘you could learn some really practical useful stuff’ (Actor #2). Another participant also mentioned the benefit that they derived from this element of the programme, saying that they had subsequently made applications and referred back to their notes from the Extant workshops. They specifically mentioned that it ‘made me more confident to be able to make one of those applications’ (Actor #1)

On the artistic side, the programme encouraged participants to engage with areas that they had previously avoided. Contemporary dance, physical theatre and Shakespeare were all mentioned. Each participant spoke about how their knowledge developed over time as a result of the programme. For example, one actor mentioned that they had never performed any Shakespeare, ‘Whereas now it feels like, you know, if I had an audition and they said prepare a Shakespeare monologue, I would be like yeah, okay that's something I could do’ (Actor #2). The programme therefore had a clear impact on this individual’s skill set and resulting level of confidence. Similarly, another participant mentioned that they have incorporated the Alexander Technique into their practice since learning about it at the RADA workshop. They also enjoyed the work on movement and its relation with imagery, saying that it was something ‘that I could really use’ and which has informed their work since completing Pathways (Actor #3).

**New connections**

The opportunities that the programme afforded for making new social and professional connections was valued by all three interview participants. Three aspects of this were mentioned: expanding their network of contacts, friendship and mentoring.

The programme provided the actors with a core network consisting of Extant as an organisation and the cohort who took part in Pathways Actors. Each of the three interviewees specifically mentioned this as a positive outcome, and one which they have since called upon. One participant particularly appreciated the fact that Extant staff helped to facilitate social connections with others on the programme through gathering and distributing people’s contact details, saying this help was like ‘gold dust’, particularly as networking can be challenging for people with a visual impairment (Actor #1). Participants were also able to benefit from gaining access to practitioners in the wider theatre industry who contributed to workshops and other aspects of the programme.

The mentoring aspect of the programme was particularly important to one participant, who explained that their mentor met them regularly, helped guide their choice of scripts and provided advice. This relationship was clearly a strong positive influence on their Pathways experience, to the extent that they hope to provide that support for someone else in future. They described the mentor as ‘an inspiration, an inspirational figure for me in the work that I do’, saying that ‘I hope that one day I'll be able to do that for somebody else’ (Actor #3).

Finally, the impact of the Pathways network was to provide a sense of community and shared experience, which had far-reaching implications for some. As one actor put it: ‘we all actually became really close and really good friends through the process and through pathways actors and that peer support, I think, is something that's going to stay with me now for the for the rest of my life’ (Actor #3).

**Confidence and validation**

An important theme in the data was that of confidence, which was closely related to validation, or feeling that the programme helped to create a feeling of self-belief and self-worth as a visually impaired artist.

Increased feelings of confidence came about in different ways. For Actor #2, whose exploration of Shakespeare was a new and challenging area for them, this resulted in a game-changing sense of achievement: ‘I didn't feel like it was the right thing to do but I'm so glad that I did it now because else it would still be a sort of barrier that I've never breached.’ Actor #3 agreed that ‘it (the programme) has improved my confidence, no end.’ The emotions that Actor #1 expressed while reflecting on their time in Pathways were those of enthusiasm and motivation: ‘It definitely made me really eager to get out there… it also spurred me on in terms of in terms of what I do.’ The sense of drive and ambition that Pathways helped foster in this participant are likely to be linked to increases in confidence.

Pathways created an environment where participants felt a sense of validation in their developing roles as visually impaired artists. For Actor #2, the support and endorsement provided by Extant helped shape their confidence in how they would communicate their access needs in future. Rather than feeling apologetic about stating their access needs, or feeling worried that it would be interpreted as ‘making a fuss’, they now felt that they could go more confidently into a situation knowing that it is ‘okay to advocate for yourself in the arts.’ As they explained:

And Extant, Pathways, did a really excellent job of saying no, you need to say ‘I need this help - thank you for this audition - and now here's what I need to do that’. And this has given me the sort of confidence and the sort of self-regard to actually assert those needs.

The networking aspects of Pathways as described above increased confidence and self-esteem in these participants. As Actor #1 put it, there was a sense of validation in knowing they were not alone in their ambition to work as a visually impaired artist: ‘it's just nice to know there are other visually impaired professionals out there, you know working and doing their things and that's definitely something I got from Pathways’. They felt that the programme and Showcase ‘proved we can do it’ and that there is ‘a need out there for visual impaired representation in acting.’ In this sense, this participant felt that Pathways helped open up a space for them in the arts – they were not just aspiring to perform, but they were there, doing it – and this resulted in a real sense of belonging and having a place in the industry. Actor#3 shared this view: ‘And so it also gave eight actors from right across the country a bit of scope actually and a bit of - what's the word - it shone a spotlight on us, when not everybody was doing so.’

This sense of endorsement or validation, which came about through all the connections and opportunities that Pathways provided, created a tangible sense of self-worth and pride:

But now, I can say that I have been on the stage at the Globe and I can say that I've been and studied and done a filming workshop at ALRA and I've been taught by professionals that work at RADA.’ (Actor#3).

**Memories and emotional engagement**

Participants were asked what the most memorable aspects of the programme were for them. All three actors mentioned onsite experiences, with the workshop run at Shakespeare’s Globe being particularly salient for all three. Actor #1 explained that being able to perform on the stage at Shakespeare’s Globe ‘isn't something a lot of people get to do’, which made it a really ‘special’ experience. Actor #2 agreed that this was a memorable and valuable experience, as did Actor #3: ‘the workshop we did at Shakespeare's Globe – it was very wet and very cold because I think it was in December, and it was amazing. I can't really put into words what that experience was like.’ This participant went on to explain that the Pathways programme gave them access to spaces and opportunities that would otherwise have been inaccessible for them.

The formation of vivid and enduring autobiographical memories (memories for events in one’s past) is associated with moments of high emotion (Holland & Kensinger, 2010). This, unsurprisingly, came through in the description of these memories, with participants using words such as ‘special’ and ‘amazing’, and reflecting on the vividness of their memories of this time: ‘it's been two years now but I remember some of those workshops so so clearly in in my head - it was an amazing time, it really was’ (Actor#3).

**Suggestions for future improvements:**

One actor suggested that it would have been helpful had the programme been more compact, with shorter intervals between events. They also suggested having a structured peer support group to facilitate peer interaction during Pathways, rather than at the end.

**Summary**

These interviews demonstrate a range of positive and long-lasting impacts on these Pathways participants. As well as the acquisition of new skills, network development and the growth in confidence described here, participants reported concrete outcomes that furthered their careers. For example, one participant was cast in a play in a major London theatre following their involvement in Pathways. For another, through Pathways, they learnt about new paid career opportunities in corporate settings that they were previously unaware of. Actor #3 described Pathways as ‘life-changing’, saying that

Extant gave that to me, they gave me that opportunity and is something that I'll never never ever forget. I mean being taught at ALRA and and being able to go to the Guildhall school and having a workshop there, I mean 3 or 4 years ago these seemed to me like experiences that were just out of my reach… I don't think I'd be where I am now, without some of the impacts that I've had from that course, and from that journey. And it was a brilliant journey to be on.

## Pathways Directors

Fifteen Directors took part in Pathways, which consisted of masterclasses, mentoring and shadowing. The Showcase took place at the Cockpit Theatre in January 2022.

Event Evaluations  
  
October 2020: Directors’ Masterclasses

(Please note that qualitative data were collected by Extant for the October events and therefore analysed thematically by the researcher. All subsequent events were evaluated using mixed-methods questionnaires as described in [Methodology](#_Questionnaires).)

Extant ran five Masterclasses as part of the Pathways Directors delivery on 20-23rd October 2020, via the Zoom platform.

1. Maria Oshodi, Extant: Visual Impairment and Physical Theatre  
2. Matthew Xia, artistic director of Actors Touring Company, and Grace Smart, freelance designer: The Art of Collaboration: Director and Designer  
3. Jatinder Verma and Claudia Mayer, Jatinder Verma Productions: Collaboration – at the heart of the theatre-making process  
4. Justin Audibert, artistic director of Unicorn Theatre: Textural analysis: Interpretation of Shakespeare – from a traditional perspective  
5. Shamira Turner and Eugenie Pastor from She Goat: Gig Theatre with She Goat: sound and music on stage as meaning-making

These classes were designed to support participants’ continued professional development as directors by building skills, introducing them to different aspects of a director’s work, and broadening their networks.

Following the sessions, thirteen participants completed the evaluation. Their responses were coded thematically, providing insight on the following themes: emotion, cognitive engagement, social interaction and practicalities (delivery and preparation).

Overall, the participants found the workshops engaging and enjoyable. They described learning new skills and gaining knowledge, indicating that the sessions were stimulating and informative. Some participants also reported feeling more confident.

For future Zoom delivery, Extant could consider spacing sessions out to reduce fatigue and working with facilitators to ensure full accessibility of all tasks, and optimal management of the workshop space and time.

**Discussion of themes: Emotion and cognitive engagement**

All participants expressed positive emotions about the Masterclasses. The most commonly expressed emotions were enjoyment and having fun. Participants enjoyed the tasks, the material (‘great to look at something different’), the delivery style of the facilitators, and the interactions with each other. Some participants also reported feeling an increase in their confidence, and feeling inspired.

Where negative emotions were expressed, it was usually related to the delivery of the workshop, due to fatigue, occasional lack of accessibility (‘I felt left behind’) and or in one case due to the delivery style of the facilitator (‘I felt patronised’).

Responses from all participants showed evidence of cognitive engagement with the Masterclasses; the most frequent words used were ‘informative’ and ‘interesting.’ They also reported learning new skills: ‘I felt that I learnt things about pulling things from the text to inform my staging decisions’; ‘the exercises we undertook helped me to get a better understanding of how to communicate my ideas to a designer and how to negotiate a mutually agreeable result.’ Others reported acquiring new analysis skills and practical tools to use in future. Some thoughts recorded in the evaluations demonstrated how the Masterclasses could be transformative in opening up understanding and opportunities for the participants: ‘It opened up a whole side of creativity I had not thought about or experienced. I feel I had just touched the top of the iceberg with this.’ In the words of another participant: ‘they brought something that I hadn’t considered before.’ Another participant found the sessions ‘thought-provoking’ and ‘enlightening.’

Cognitive engagement was also apparent from future plans and aspirations that were expressed: ‘I have an idea of an adaptation of HG Wells The Country of the Blind and would like to know how to approach it’; ‘I will follow She Goat as I am interested in finding out more about the work they produce’; ‘I would really like to work on directing for devised theatre.’ Another participant expressed the desire to work with children’s theatre in future following Justin Audibert’s workshop. This suggests that for some participants, the Masterclasses had a direct impact on their ideas and future plans.

**Social Interaction**

Participants also enjoyed the social interaction with the facilitators and with each other. Participants specifically asked for ways to increase the group interaction in future, e.g. through a WhatsApp group or Zoom networking, and others asked for more group work. They reported being inspired by and learning from each other: ‘it was interesting to...hear how others would approach the text and the setting/blocking of the piece.’ The group gave some participants a sense of belonging and togetherness. One participant remarked that ‘we are each other’s network’, and another mentioned ‘we are all going through the same thing.’

**Practicalities: Delivery and Preparation**

Participants recognised the constraints of Zoom delivery and were keen to congratulate Extant on making the best of a difficult situation (these events took place as organisations were adapting to online delivery in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic). Many expressed the desire for face-to-face interaction once this is possible again. There were some comments about delivery that could be taken into account for future events. Fatigue was a problem for some people, and it was felt that the events could have been spaced out more to reduce this. Some comments emphasised that facilitation of the workshop space, in particular introductions, and planning breaks, needed to be more tightly time managed. Movement exercises in the final workshop were not accessible to one participant and more AD of the activity was needed. One person commented on the success of the use of breakout rooms, saying ‘you felt like you were there.’

Participants had varying views on the pre workshop preparation, many found it overly lengthy. It was also suggested that the number of emails could be reduced, with everything summarised in one document.

#### March 2021: Directors’ Labs

Two **Directors’ Labs** were run on Zoom a week apart, with the explicit aim of giving the Pathways Directors a safe space in which to try out their ideas. The sessions were facilitated by the director and poet Anastasia Osei-Kuffour, who was Associate Director at Theatre 503 at the time of delivery.

Each Pathways Director had two actors work with. In breakout rooms, they worked on a script extract before returning to perform in front of the group. The Guest Director provided feedback after each mini performance.

**Participant Evaluation**

5 Pathways Directors responded to a post-event evaluation, which they completed after the second event. They were asked to rate a series of statements or factors on various Likert scales. These included agreement scales (‘today’s event made me feel motivated/increased my confidence/increased my practical skills/I could apply my learning/I learnt something new’: ‘strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree’); probability scales (‘how likely would you be to recommend today’s event to others?’ definitely, probably, not sure, probably not, definitely not); or measures of the extent to which the sessions were useful, interesting or enjoyable (‘not at all, very little, somewhat, a great deal, extremely’). The responses were given a corresponding value of 1-5 where 5 was the most positive response possible and 1 was the least positive response possible. The responses are summarised below.

Table 1: Participants’ Evaluation of Directors’ Labs 8th and 15th March (median, min-max) where lowest possible value=1 and highest 5. *N=5*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Median response |
| Enjoyment | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| Interest | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| Usefulness | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| How likely to recommend | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Made me feel motivated | 4 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Increased my confidence | 4 (min = 1, max = 5) |
| Increased my practical skills | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| Helped me apply my learning | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| I learnt something new | 4 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Event met my expectations | 3 (min = 3, max = 4) |

Table 1 demonstrates that the Directors Labs events were generally well received, with median enjoyment and interest values of 4 (‘a great deal’). Pathways Directors rated the practical learning aspects highly, with the usefulness, increase in practical skills, and application of learning all returning a median rating of 4.

The Pathways Directors agreed that the sessions increased their confidence, with a median rating of 4 (where 4=agree); 4 out of 5 people gave a value of 4 or above. One person who provided a lower rating for confidence, enjoyment, interest and usefulness commented that the Zoom environment made it challenging for them to receive sufficient feedback and that this reduced the learning for them as a result.

Participants agreed with the statement that the sessions made them feel motivated (median score 4, where 4=agree). They also agreed that they learnt something new in the sessions.

When asked, ‘how likely would you be to recommend the event to others?’, Directors gave a median response of 4 (where 4=probably and 5=definitely). Again, the majority of responses recorded were 4 or 5.

Participants made some observations in the spaces provided for comments. One person commented on the positive atmosphere achieved in the ‘Zoom room’ and how it set them at ease: ‘I felt very nervous to start with. However the people I worked with were very open and were happy to share their thoughts, feelings and ideas.  I feel the communication between us was very good.’ Suggestions for future sessions included making space for actors to give feedback to their Director about how they found the experience of working with them and increasing the opportunity for interaction between the Directors and Guest Director. This was subsequently implemented for the next event. It was clear that despite the challenges that Zoom posed for some participants, the Labs were still able to offer a positive learning experience, with direct impacts on confidence. As one participant put it: ‘Over the two labs I feel I had a creative experience. My confidence has become better. It was also very interesting to see the other directors’ choices.’ This also emphasises the importance of the social aspect and having access to peers.

**Contributors (Supporting Actors) Evaluation**

Nine actors returned a post-event evaluation. The questionnaire that they received was similar to the version Pathways Directors, as it used Likert scales to ask them about their levels of enjoyment and interest, whether they would recommend the events, whether they learnt something new, whether the events made them feel motivated, and whether they met their expectations. Participants were also invited to comment on their perception of Extant, and any suggestions for future delivery of such events. Results were as follows:

Table 2: Contributors’ Evaluation of Directors’ Labs 8th and 15th March (median, min-max) where lowest possible value=1 and highest 5. *N=9*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Median response |
| Enjoyment | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Interest | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| How likely to recommend | 5 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Made me feel motivated | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| I learnt something new | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| Event met my expectations | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |

The data presented in Table 2 indicate that the actors also found these events enjoyable and interesting with responses returning a median value of 4 (‘a great deal’). They agreed that the events made them feel motivated, and were positive about how likely they would be to recommend such events (where 5=definitely).

The supporting actors group provided some additional comments, which reflected their enjoyment of and interest in the event, which they considered well organised. Contributors commented that the events led to a greater appreciation of how work can be carried out in accessible ways: ‘really interesting to see how it was possible to make work accessible without compromising on anything else’; ‘wonderful to be able to work in a truly accessible way.’ They were also excited about their exposure to new Directors and new ways of working: ‘there are some great new directors around’.

Some specific suggestions for improvement in delivery included increasing the time for feedback to be given, to try to condense the information shared in the run up to fewer emails, and to assign parts to learn ahead of time to make the session easier on the day. Many comments recognised the challenges of delivery online.

The actors were also asked about their perception of Extant as an organisation. The comments were entirely positive, with much endorsement of the work they do to support VI artists: ‘My perception of Extant hasn’t changed but I still feel very strongly that the work that Extant are doing to support VI creatives is brilliant.  The way in which it is done and the opportunities given is something I think that is needed more within the creative industry.’ One actor mentioned that their involvement in these events was their first contact with Extant, and that they had learnt something new as a result: ‘I’ve never come into contact with Extant before and I have learnt a lot through doing so and it is a company I have and will continue to recommend to people.’

#### June 2021: Directors’ Lab

Extant brought together 14 Pathways Directors, 28 VI or disabled actors and access workers for a further **Directors Lab** on 14th June. This session was led by Guest Director Carole Pluckrose. The Guest Director ran the half-day Directors’ Lab and delivered follow up 1-2-1 feedback sessions with the Directors for two weeks subsequently.

The session was delivered on Zoom, with each Director working in a breakout room with 2 actors. The Guest Director divided their time across the breakout rooms, attending each one to give feedback. Each group then performed to all attendees, and actors had the opportunity to give their feedback on the process. The event was captioned and BSL interpreted.

**Participant Evaluation**

6 Pathways Directors responded to a post-event evaluation. They were asked to rate a series of statements or factors on various Likert scales. These included agreement scales (‘today’s event made me feel motivated/increased my confidence/increased my practical skills/I could apply my learning/I learnt something new’: ‘strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree.’); probability scales (‘how likely would you be to recommend today’s event to others?’ definitely, probably, not sure, probably not, definitely not); or measures of the extent to which the sessions were useful, interesting or enjoyable (‘not at all, very little, somewhat, a great deal, extremely.’). The responses were given a corresponding value of 1-5 where 5 was the most positive response possible and 1 was the least positive response possible. The responses are summarised below:

Table 3: Participants’ Evaluation of Directors’ Lab 14th June (median, min-max) where lowest possible value=1 and highest 5. *N=6*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Median response |
| Enjoyment | 5 (min =4, max = 5) |
| Interest | 5 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Usefulness | 4 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| How likely to recommend | 5 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Made me feel motivated | 4 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Increased my confidence | 5 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Increased my practical skills | 4.5 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Helped me apply my learning | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| I learnt something new | 4.5 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Event met my expectations | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |

These data show that the event was very well received by the Pathways Directors who responded to the evaluation. The quantitative data present a positive picture.

All participants selected a minimum value of 4, meaning ‘a great deal’, when asked to what extent they enjoyed the event, and found it useful and interesting. Agreement was very high that the event made participants feel motivated. Agreement that the event ‘increased my confidence’ was also high, with a median rating of 5 with all participants selecting ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’. Furthermore, all participants ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the event increased their practical skills. Feedback on the statement ‘it helped me apply my learning’ was also favourable, with 5 out of 6 selecting ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’. Participants mentioned some specific skills gained in the previous Masterclasses that they were able to practise in this setting: ‘I was able to start testing out different ways of adding AD and sound to a script and experimenting with soundscapes. These were both areas I enjoyed learning about in the Masterclasses.’ Participants all agreed or strongly agreed that they had learnt something new during this event.

Qualitative comments reflected all of these aspects. The Directors were clearly excited by the opportunity to work with actors and put their learning into practice: ‘it was great to exercise the creative muscles again’. One participant’s comments demonstrated how the event gave them the opportunity to engage fully in a creative process from idea development to implementation, which they found particularly satisfying:

It was exciting to prepare for the event and develop and present a scene where I was solely in control of the process and idea. The fact I ended up creating something I was pleased with (though it needed more work) was exciting and rewarding!

Participants clearly found the engagement with actors very motivating: ‘I thoroughly enjoyed working with the 2 actors. It was fantastic playing around the text with them and I particularly enjoyed making suggestions to stimulate their performances.’ Similarly, another Director commented that they really appreciated the work actors had done in advance to engage with their work, meaning that they could see their ideas come to fruition.

Aspects of the event that participants particularly referenced with regards to building confidence were the one-on-one feedback sessions with the Guest Director in the fortnight that followed. Also, for one Director, the sense that the actors had had a good experience was important for their confidence: ‘I believe my actors achieved this *(taking something away from the project)*, which increases my confidence, not just in myself, but also in what I’m doing.’

It was clear from the qualitative comments that participants enjoyed the experience and felt they had taken concrete learning away from these sessions that would have long-lasting impact, as demonstrated by this comment: ‘I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the lab and found it incredibly beneficial in furthering my career.’

Directors were also very positive about their subsequent interactions with the Guest Director. Words used to describe her feedback were ‘useful’, ‘interesting’, ‘reassuring’ and ‘inspiring’. The one-on-one sessions also gave the Guest Director time and space to really focus on the Directors as individuals, as demonstrated here: ‘We had an interesting discussion about how the scene could be potentially developed and she seemed genuinely interested in my processes and in discussing techniques. Email contact was always prompt and she met my Access needs by providing a recording, which was much appreciated.’ One person commented that the feedback would be more useful delivered in person (which was not possible at the time due to Covid-19 restrictions).

Some suggestions from participants were to split the group of Pathways Directors in two, next time, and to have more than one Guest Director. This would have facilitated more time and feedback for the individual Directors.

**Access workers and actors’ evaluation**

Access workers (4) who attended the Directors’ Lab had a positive experience and viewed the event as a success. They made some additional observations, including the following: that the session might have been better run over two days and that that Zoom delivery had its positive aspects (consistent with feedback from the participants).

Twenty-eight actors supported this event, 26 of whom submitted an evaluation in response to a list of qualitative questions about the event. The questions, devised by Extant, invited them to comment on their expectations of the project and whether or not they were met, highlights or positive impacts that they experienced, and possible future changes and improvements.

In line with feedback from participant and access workers, the main point of consistency in feedback from almost all actors was that more time was needed for this event. Several actors commented that the time given to Directors to showcase their work was too short, meaning that they were cut off and unable to present as much material as they were expecting to. Practical suggestions for the future included a) allowing more time for the event, even running it over the course of a week; b) increasing the number of Guest Directors; c) providing the actors with shorter sections to work on so that a higher proportion of the material prepared could be showcased.

Other practical suggestions from actors included scheduling more breaks, allowing more time in the run-up for preparation, sending scripts out earlier.

They highlighted many positive aspects of the experience. Several actors commented that this was a valued opportunity to socialise and network, and to meet other VI/disabled artists. Actors also mentioned specific points of learning, such as becoming familiar with new devising games, learning around improvisation, furthering their knowledge about AD integration and soundscapes, and gaining new insights into methods of character development.

### Pathways Directors: Showcase

Extant held the Directors’ Showcase at the Cockpit theatre in January 2022. Each Director presented a five minute directed piece, including the concept behind their work.

16 audience members completed a follow-up evaluation. The respondents had a variety of reasons for attending, as follows:

Actors in one of the Showcase pieces: 2 people

Contributor to the Pathways Programme (mentor, masterclass facilitator): 4 people

Friends and family: 6 people

Have an existing relationship with Extant: 6 people

Interested member of the public: 2 people

(please note some respondents selected more than one answer)

The participants were asked to provide 3-5 words that they would use if describing the showcase evening to a friend. Below are the most commonly used words, with the number of times the word was selected given in brackets:

Entertaining (6)  
Inclusive (4)  
Thought provoking (4)  
Varied (4)  
Diverse (3)  
Engaging (3)  
Informative (3)  
Interesting (3)  
Accessible (2)  
Fun (2)  
Innovative (2)  
Relevant (2)

Extant collected anecdotal feedback from 9 professionals who supported the event as BSL interpreters, actors, access workers and technicians. Many reported positive impacts of their involvement, such as learning about working with VI directors and networking with other artists and industry professionals. Some suggestions for future improvements were as follows:

* To reduce the number of emails in the build up to the event
* To book BSL interpreters well ahead of time and share the format of the day so they can advise how much interpretation is needed
* To bring BSL interpreters in at the rehearsal stage so that they can explain their requirements about script preparation and leaving sufficient time for this
* To create opportunities for in person rehearsals over Zoom rehearsals whenever possible
* To run tech rehearsals over two days rather than one
* To introduce a deadline for script changes (for the benefit of technicians and BSL interpreters)
* To consider increasing the time given to showcase the work from 5 minutes to 15-20
* For Extant to publicise their work amongst local community groups

### Pathways Directors: Interviews

Four Pathways Directors took part in a semi structured interview about their experience of Pathways. Interviews took place in March 2022, following the live Showcase in January and the online version in March. As before, participants were invited to comment on what they had hoped to get out of the programme, which aspects were most memorable for them, what kind of impact it had on them professionally and personally, and their plans for the future. They were also asked to comment on their experience of Extant and any suggestions they might have about Pathways.

The four Pathways Directors had a variety of aims for their participation in the programme, according to their prior experience. One participant, who had many years’ experience as a performer, was keen to learn more about the activities and collaborations that take place outside the rehearsal room (Director #3). Hands on experience was also important (Director #1). Another participant wished to expand their knowledge of the work of creatives, to see where they could ‘fit in’ (Director #4). Knowledge development, networking and, ultimately, employment were key aims for Director #2. Three out of four participants said that the programme fully met their expectations. Director #3 felt their expectations were partially met. They would have appreciated more focus on the activity of directors outside rehearsals; for example budgeting, applying for funding, or casting.

Through the course of the interviews, all 4 participants mentioned their enjoyment of the programme and interest in its content.

Coding and analysis of the data yielded two key themes: growing in confidence, and development and leadership.

**Growing in confidence**

The impact of the programme on the participants’ levels of confidence was an important narrative throughout these interviews. The hands-on nature of the work was important for developing this confidence, as it ‘proved’ to participants that they could do it. As one participant put it:

knowing that I can do it… both producing something and also the process into creating something. Like, I am able to. So that, that itself, is just a huge, huge, confidence boost (Director #1)

The Showcase in particular helped develop the Directors’ confidence as it gave them a palpable sense of achievement and validation. Feedback from peers and the wider community, including members of the public, particularly enhanced this, as expressed by Director #2:

..just to get that experience and to have that showcase piece and to have that recorded… and to have had the feedback that I've had from people in the industry, from my peers, from my mentors that have been working with me, and just some people from the public have come along and watched - it’s reassurance, it's confidence building. It's knowing that I'm thinking in the right direction and I think I needed that for sure (Director #2).

Relationships with mentors and the shadowing process were instrumental in building confidence. The regular contact with the ‘host’ creative team helped to build a relationship of trust, which fostered creative development and grew confidence: ‘(I was) literally was in every rehearsal. Went to every performance. Was there for the whole thing… I felt part of the team and was able to not just observe, but give across some opinions and stuff.’ (Director #3). Another participant noted that their confidence had grown as the programme progressed. The relationship with their mentor enabled them to recognise the progress that they had made in terms of confidence:

at the beginning, I wasn’t quite sure if it was for me…I felt quite like an imposter - didn't think I could probably do it. And even she said that towards the end, she felt like my confidence had grown. Which I think it has (Director #4).

The gains in confidence helped build a sense of momentum and purpose: ‘And I just want to keep going on. I don't really want to like, slow down or stop right now. I just want to keep trying new things.’ (Director #1).

**Development and leadership**

The growth in confidence described above most likely stemmed at least in part from developing leadership skills, which was another theme in the interviews.

Participants talked about how the programme had taught them to work with other people: ‘this process has taught me a lot about just how to work with people, how to keep things going’ (#Director 1). Another participant described how they had learnt to work with different people, and how to listen. They went on to describe their developing leadership skills as follows:

Learning what that role is as the director and how to kind of manage those relationships. And yeah, how to be quite, you know, diplomatic about your vision and people in the room and how you kind of get over those hurdles I suppose (Director #4)

Again, the mentoring element was instrumental for some participants, who specifically mentioned noting their mentor’s people handling skills and ability to remain calm even when problems occurred.

For one participant, the programme provided them with an opportunity to expand their creative work and fulfil the potential that they knew they had: ‘I've always seen myself as somebody with an ability to actually, you know, do multiple roles in theatre and I feel like I've been vindicated somewhat.’ (Director #2)

Developing these leadership skills has resulted in a shift change for some participants in terms of their future aspirations and prospects. As Director #1 put it:

So now, I feel like I can definitely go on to apply for more opportunities or, if I'm in a group, or in a company, or working with other people, I feel like I can take up that role (*of director*) now.

For this participant, the programme helped to develop a new sense of professional identity:

Now I feel like I can more confidently say, yeah, I'm interested in directing and I think I am a director. I feel like I can now more or less call myself a director.

Similarly, Director #3 said: ‘It's made me feel like I can do it’, and Director #2 described the programme as ‘life-changing.’

**Memories and emotional engagement**

Unsurprisingly, the moments that the Pathways Directors identified as being the most memorable were often those where learning occurred. These moments were often associated with intense interest or emotion. Director #2, for example, mentioned a particular masterclass about Indian theatre, which focused on multisensory elements. For this participant, the masterclass ignited a new and keen interest in designing. Director #3 felt that the shadowing had been the most memorable aspect of the programme: ‘the shadowing opportunity was really where I learnt most.’ Putting their developing leadership skills to use was particularly memorable for the other participants. Director 4# said that their most memorable moment was taking the lead as Director with their actors on Zoom for the first time ‘probably when the responsibility was put on us…I think that was yeah, kind of memorable because it was a little scary!’ Similarly, Director #1 described the anticipation and nerves associated with meeting their actors on Zoom for the first time. They described games that they used as ice breakers and their enjoyment and satisfaction at successfully building rapport, ahead of the creative work. What the memories have in common is a shared sense of developing confidence and identity in their practice.

**Participants’ suggestions for future improvements**

As mentioned, one suggestion for future developments of Pathways Directors would be to incorporate more information about budgeting and funding, as well as where to look for directors’ jobs (Director #3). Having a more formally set out curriculum would have been welcomed.

With full recognition of the challenges of Covid, Director #2 would have valued more opportunities for social interaction with the other Pathways Directors.

Finally, one participant felt that the Showcase was somewhat limited in terms of truly reflecting the work of a Director: ‘there was no scope to work with a lighting designer, or a set designer or a costume designer, or anything like that. To play with your ideas and stuff.’ While recognising the practical difficulties, they would have valued more autonomy in casting and other creative decisions.

**Impressions of Extant**

All four participants expressed their appreciation for Extant and their work. It is clear that for them, Extant is an organisation who has facilitated their professional development and had a positive impact on their lives: ‘And coming into Extant, helped me find other ways of doing things. Helped me to adapt and stuff’ (Director# 3); ‘until that time of really getting involved with Extant , it had felt very isolating and I had felt really alone….I feel like certainly without Extant. I would not be, I certainly couldn't be in the position I am’ (Director #2).

One aspect of working with Extant that participants particularly value is the fact that they understand access needs of VI people. This means that access is in place, and they can then focus on the creative work, without the additional burden of having to explain or fight for their access needs to be met.

Two participants expressed their wish for Extant to expand their reach to work with other parts of the UK.

**Summary**

These interviews indicate that the Pathways programme created learning opportunities for all four participants. All of them seemed to have gained, in terms of their confidence, their leadership skills and their sense of professional identity. For some participants, this introduction to directing and the hands-on experience it afforded may have been enough at this early stage of their creative development. For others, some gaps remain and Extant could consider further targeted training for participants seeking to establish themselves as directors in the short term.

### Pathways Directors: Reflections

In March 2022, Extant ran a feedback session with the Pathways Directors on Zoom, to discuss their experiences of Pathways Directors and their ambitions for the future. Seven Pathways directors joined the Programme Director and Artistic Director of Extant for the discussion.

The first part of the session addressed their thoughts and feedback on the programme as a whole. It was clear that all seven participants had enjoyed and benefited from their engagement with Extant, and many participants wished to congratulate Extant on their delivery of the programme throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Examples of the positive feedback were as follows:

‘ I want to be a multi-faceted theatre maker, so this has been a gift as far as I’m concerned.’

‘We got to speak to so many different people from so many different theatres.’

‘I enjoyed working with my mentor, she gave me loads of information and loads of feedback.’

‘The Showcase was great – I’m proud of everybody. I’m proud of myself as well.’

**Future Improvements**

The participants had some suggestions for future improvements. Several participants mentioned that they would have liked more rehearsal time for the showcase, or if this wasn’t possible due to budgetary constraints, for the rehearsals to be spread out more to allow more time for development. More face to face rehearsal time would also have been appreciated. This extra time would have facilitated spending more time on aspects such as creative Audio Description.

One participant mentioned that a lot of material had been covered in the Masterclasses that they were not able to put to use in the Showcase. For example, collaborative working, casting and design were major focuses in the classes but they didn’t have the opportunity to run this aspects for their own Showcase. They suggested that knowing some of the parameters of the Showcase earlier on would have been useful, to help guide their decisions. They also emphasised that they would have found it beneficial to have access to a designer during the process, in order to speak to them and perhaps create models or drawings, even if practical design work needed to be limited. Another participant suggested that more opportunities for peer interaction in the run up to the Showcase would have been helpful for idea generation and support.

The mentoring process had clearly been a highlight of the programme for the participants ,and they suggested that more knowledge sharing could take place, for mentor input and advice that would be applicable to the entire cohort.

It was also suggested that a database containing contact information for all the artists involved in Pathways Directors could be created and shared.

**Future disabled leadership in the arts sector**

The Extant team asked the participants for their views on the importance of Extant developing future disabled leadership in the arts. There was overwhelming agreement and support that this will continue to be crucial, with comments such as:

‘Employment and opportunities are not always in an obvious place, or easy to find.’

‘Extant helps us grow and be the best artists we can be.’

‘working with Extant was the first time I had the experience of working with people who understood me, and understood how I needed to work.’

‘I’m more confident now because of this course, and because of Extant.’

Participants also made the point that Extant has a crucial role to play in inspiring other VI people to join the industry.

**Future career aspirations**

The Extant team asked the participants to think about their career aspirations over the next 2, 5 and 10 years.

In the short term (2 years), many participants shared the common goal of building up their experience through additional professional development and shadowing experiences in order to develop their CVs.

By the 2-5 year time frame, many participants hoped to have worked in a number of assistant director roles.

Participants found it harder to answer what they would like to be doing in 10 years’ time. For some, directing their own work (their own shows, or work they had written themselves) was the ultimate goal. They found it easier to discuss short-mid term goals, which is consistent with their early career stage in terms of directing.

**Further learning**

Participants expressed the desire to learn more about the ‘business’ side of directing; arts management, accountancy, finance, funding and developing their online presence as directors. All participants expressed interest in future courses to address skills for artistic directing knowledge.

## Pathways Writers

16 writers took part in Pathways, which consisted of masterclasses, mentoring, and shadowing. The Showcase took place at Brixton House in June 2022, with a digital screening a month later for anyone unable to attend.

### Pre-programme questionnaire

The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire before starting Pathways Writers. It contained a combination of fixed and free text questions asking about their hopes and expectations and their feelings about their work as a writer before starting.

Eleven participants responded to the survey. Three described themselves as beginners/just starting out on their writing career. Eight described themselves as a part-time writer, four of whom were unpaid, three with occasional income from writing and one with a steady income from writing.

Participants were asked to rate their confidence levels from 1-10 for a list of aspects to do with their careers:

* Understanding how writers can work with theatre professionals
* Their future job prospects as a writer
* Their ability to develop their network
* The strength of their network currently
* Their next steps to develop their careers

Data are presented in Table 4.

Participants were additionally asked to comment on how confident they felt about their ‘writer’s voice’, their expectations for the programme, specific skills or outcomes they were hoping for, and what impact they hoped it would have on them and their work.

Table 4: Pre programme questionnaire: confidence levels about various aspects of writing for performance (median, min-max) where lowest possible value =1 (I do not feel at all confident about it) and highest is 10 (I feel extremely confident about it). *N=11*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| How confident do you feel about… | Median response |
| Taking the next steps to develop your career | 4 (min =1, max=7) |
| The strength of your current network | 4 (min = 1, max = 6) |
| Your ability to develop your networks | 4 (min = 1, max = 8) |
| Your future job prospects as a writer | 5 (min = 1, max = 7) |
| Understanding how writers can work with other theatre professionals | 5 (min = 1, max = 9) |

Table 4 shows that the confidence levels were relatively low for these factors, although there was a lot of variability in the group.

Participants felt more confident overall about their writer’s voice, although often with mixed feelings: ‘When it comes to prose, I feel quite confident about voice. But I’m less sure about writing for performance’; or wishing to increase their confidence: ‘I am fairly confident with my writers voice but wanting to build this confidence’.

Various expectations for Pathways Writers were expressed. Many mentioned acquiring practical skills, such as new technical skills, networking, engaging in R&D, pitching to theatres, or applying for funding. Others were seeking help with applying their existing writing skills to the stage. Others were hoping to grow in confidence, to develop their identity as a writer, and for social interaction with ‘like-minded people.’

Participants also expressed various hopes for the impact that the programme might have on them and their work. Some people hoped for concrete opportunities developing as a result of the programme, through enhanced knowledge, skills and networks: ‘I am hoping this training will open doors for future commissions and work’; ‘I would like to have a thorough knowledge of the industry and a portfolio of work that will stand me in excellent stead for the future.’ Seven out of the eleven participants specifically mentioned hoping their confidence would improve as a result of Pathways; others were also seeking ‘inspiration’ and ‘motivation’. For some participants, Pathways was not just about increasing their confidence, but about developing their own sense of identity, whether on a personal level: ‘I hope this will give me time, space, and ideas to help me consider my direction as a writer’, or indeed their identity as a VI writer in wider society: ‘As a visually impaired person/actor my voice is not represented in the media at all - want to tap in to that.’ All the comments left by participants demonstrated a sense of excitement and new beginnings, perhaps best typified by this person’s hope for impact: ‘I wonder what ways ahead the experience will reveal, what new relationships will be formed and where I’ll find myself at the end of the journey.’

### Event Evaluations

#### March 2021: Pathways Writers Launch Event

Pathways Writers was launched with an online event introduced by Extant CEO, Maria Oshodi, with guest speakers Guleraana Mir, Athena Stevens and Amy Bethan-Evans. There was a Q&A session after talks about writing from each of the guest speakers. The event integrated audio description. Live captions and BSL interpreting were also in use.

After the event, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which followed the same format as the questionnaire used in the Pathways Directors programme, asking them to rate enjoyment, interest and usefulness, likelihood to recommend, extent to which the event met their expectations, made them feel motivated, or they learnt something new. Participants were additionally asked to what extent they agreed that the event made them feel excited to start the programme. As before, practical suggestion for future changes or improvements were invited, as were any additional thoughts or comments. Nine participants responded to the questionnaire and the results are presented below in table 5:

Table 5: Participants’ Evaluation of Pathways Writers Launch 1st March 2021: (median, min-max) where lowest possible value=1 and highest 5. *N=9*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Median response |
| Enjoyment | 4 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Interest | 4.5 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Usefulness | 4 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| How likely to recommend | 5 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Made me feel motivated | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Made me feel excited to start the programme | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| I learnt something new | 5 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Event met my expectations | 3 (min = 3, max = 5) |

Table 5 suggests that this event was well received by participants in terms of how much they enjoyed it, and found it interesting and useful, with median responses between 4 (a great deal) and 5 (extremely). These ratings were supported by the qualitative comments, such as ‘it was interesting to hear everyone’s point of view especially as they came from different areas’; ‘I enjoyed the contributions of others very much... I found the contributions of others very interesting and stimulating.’ These comments also suggest that a primary driver of enjoyment/interest was the access that the event gave participants to external experts. The fact that some participants could relate to the external speakers in terms of their disability and shared experience also had an impact: ‘I was inspired by the guest writers who have a similar disability to mine. Their experiences and tips were very helpful.’

The importance of building social connections through these events was again evident: ‘It was lovely to meet the Extant pathway members and hope to work with them in the future.’

Agreement was high with the statement ‘I learnt something new’, (5=strongly agree). The qualitative comments suggested that the event seeded new knowledge, awareness and thoughts about the future. For example, one participant said ‘I didn't realise that there was so much support for VI access by a director, that makes things feel so much more promising’, suggesting that the event gave them hope for the future. Similarly, another participant reflected that they had learnt ‘to respect and nurture the people that I come across on my writing journey and that it may take some time before I get the benefits of my labour.’

The only aspect where ratings were somewhat lower were regarding to what extent the event met participants’ expectations (median rating=3, where 3= somewhat). Based on the qualitative comments, these ratings were probably reduced by the fact that several of the participants were not entirely sure what to expect from this first session. Some participants were expecting more specific information about Pathways – the regularity of masterclasses and mentoring, for example.

When asked about suggestions for future events, several participants took the opportunity to praise Extant’s use of the online platform Zoom, saying, for example, that it was ‘successful and dealt with in a professional and friendly way.’ Participants also valued the inclusivity of the event. One participant suggested that social media profiles for each course and its members would be beneficial. Finally, some participants would have appreciated more time for Q&A with the guest speakers.

#### March 2021: Roundtable Event: Access to Scripts

Extant brought together Guest Speakers and Pathways Directors to discuss the issue of access to scripts for visually impaired people. The panel was formed of guest speakers Samuel Brewer, a visually impaired actor and theatre maker; Catherine Alexander, course leader at the Central School of Drama and theatre director; Matt Applewhite, Managing Director and commissioning editor at Nick Hern Books; David Bellwood, Access Manager at Shakespeare’s Globe and trustee of a deaf-led theatre company; Karina Jones, a visually impaired actor and aerialist; and Lisa Stirling, Artistic Director of Theatres 503.

The panel shared their thoughts and experiences on access to scripts, followed by a practical and forward-looking discussion, for example, what 5 key commitments could be implemented within the next 3 months? What can I or my organisation do differently? What is the first priority for access to script partnerships? Who should be in these partnerships?

Five Pathways Writers attendees submitted a post event evaluation. As before, the questionnaire asked about levels of enjoyment/interest/usefulness, to what extent the event met their expectations/made them feel motivated, and how likely they would be to recommend it. Participants also rated their agreement with the statement: ‘through today’s event, I gained new insight about script accessibility’ where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. In addition, the questionnaire invited qualitative comments on a) whether/how the event might influence the respondent’s work in future, with regards to access to scripts, and b) suggestions for Extant on future delivery of similar events. Finally, the questionnaire invited respondents to suggest three actions for Extant to take next. The responses are summarised in table 6 below:

Table 6: Attendees’ Evaluation of Access to Scripts Roundtable (Pathways Writers) March 2021: (median, min-max) where lowest possible value=1 and highest 5. *N=5*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Median response |
| Enjoyment | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Interest | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Usefulness | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| How likely to recommend | 5 (min = 4, max = 5) |
| Made me feel motivated | 5 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| I gained new insight about script accessibility | 5 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Event met my expectations | 3.5 (min = 2, max = 5) |

The first three measures demonstrate that the event was well received by participants with the median rating of 4 (‘a great deal’) for enjoyment/interest and usefulness. Agreement was high that the event made them feel motivated, that they gained new insight about script accessibility, and that they would recommend such events to others (5=strongly agree).

The qualitative comments suggested that the event would have a longer-term impact on some participants in terms of their future practice. One person explained how it had directed their attention to things they had not previously considered: ‘I admit this is not something I have really thought about previously and was unaware of the enormous challenges around accessing scripts for VI creatives.  I would hope that anything I write would be accessible.’ Some specific actions suggested for Extant were as follows:

* to talk with writers and publishers about accessible formats
* apply for funding for people to read text and record as audio
* Extant to take on an advisory role in terms of different types of technology that might help those they support
* For Extant to meet with the Writers Guild, with playwright agents, publishers, theatres and drama schools, then to bring the outcomes of these conversations together

#### May to July 2021: Masterclasses

From May to July 2021, Extant ran a series of Masterclasses for Pathways Writers:

* Annalisa D’innella, a visually impaired writer of original screenplay and radio plays, discussed her work in TV and radio, focusing on the craft of monologues for both media, being part of the Writers Access Group and Writers Room at the BBC, and on getting commissions.
* Daisy Higman, a visually impaired theatre maker, ran the second masterclass entitled: Dreams and Dissociations: Creative Approaches to Autobiography. Her session considered aspects such as: writing from a physical and experimental perspective, writing processes for non-linear writers, guidelines for self-care when writing autobiography, taking creative approaches to form and borrowing techniques from devised theatre.
* Eve Leigh ran a masterclass on how game design can help with writing for performance: character, plot, form and structure. Eve is a writer for performance working between theatre, screen, games, installation, and digital art
* Mandy Redvers-Rowe, an Edinburgh TV Festival nominated writer, hosted a masterclass which shared her varied experience across television, radio and stage.
* Darren Rapier’s session: ‘What’s the big idea?’ focused on developing an idea into a story in TV and radio, considering elements such as using key elements of Aristotle’s narrative structure, character development, structure and plot, plus expectations of writers in the industry. Darren is an experienced writer whose work includes large scale casts, fringe theatre, community plays and writing for Eastenders, Doctors and Silver Street.
* Athena Stevens: ‘Events versus exposition’. This masterclass explored ways to avoid saying what you want the audience to know. Athena is an acclaimed writer, performer director and social activist. She is the Artistic Director of Aegis Productions Ltd, writer on attachment at the Finborough Theatre and Creative Council member and Associate Artist at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre. Athena was born with athetoid cerebral palsy.
* Steve Harper, literary manager from Theatre 503. My Work & The World: Engaging with theatres and finding opportunities. This session looked specifically at the working of the Theatre503 Literary Department and the development of writers.
* Amy Bethan Evans, masterclass on ‘navigating the industry’: advice on approaching organisations with confidence, developing and maintaining relationships, dealing with smaller organisations when you have access needs, and how to get pastoral support. Amy is a disabled playwright, dramaturg and disability activist.
* Hannah Ringham: ‘Writing and devising for site specific and immersive theatre’. Hannah Ringham is co-founder of the award winning, pioneering immersive theatre collective SHUNT and a prolific theatre maker, writer and performer
* RoughHewn Masterclass. This session was designed to facilitate the Pathways Writers Mentors and Writers to share a common dramaturgical language. Mentors and mentees worked together in breakout rooms to discuss various aspects of the Pathways Writers current practice, experience and aspirations. RoughHewn was founded by dramaturgs and directors Tamar Saphra and Tommo Fowler.

Participant evaluation:

These masterclasses were run weekly, and so evaluation was conducted at the end, to avoid overloading the participants with requests for feedback. The questionnaire asked participants to rate various aspects of the masterclasses while considering them as a whole series, with opportunities provided for them to comment on their views of specific events or differences between events.

Pathways Writers were asked to rate a series of statements or factors on various Likert scales. These included measures of the extent to which the sessions were useful, interesting or enjoyable (‘not at all, very little, somewhat, a great deal, extremely’); probability scales (‘how likely would you be to recommend today’s event to others?’ definitely, probably, not sure, probably not, definitely not); agreement scales (‘the events made me feel motivated/increased my confidence/increased my practical skills in writing for performance/gave me the opportunity to apply my learning about writing/I learnt something new in these events/ I have had the opportunity to form connections with other writer through these events/ these events have helped me feel connected to the industry)’: ‘strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree’). The responses were given a corresponding value of 1-5 where 5 was the most positive response possible and 1 was the least positive response possible. The responses are summarised below:

Table 7: Participants’ Evaluation of Masterclass Series for Pathways Writers, May-July 2021: (median, min-max) where lowest possible value=1 and highest 5. *N=10*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Median response |
| Enjoyment | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| Interest | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Usefulness | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| How likely to recommend | 5 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Made me feel motivated | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |
| Masterclasses increased my confidence | 4.5 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| Masterclasses increased my practical skills in writing for performance | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| Opportunity to apply my learning about writing | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| I learnt something new | 5 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| Helped me form connections with other writers | 4.5 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| Helped me feel connected to the industry | 4 (min = 2, max = 5) |
| Events met my expectations | 4 (min = 3, max = 5) |

The quantitative summary presented here in Table 7 suggests the Masterclass series was broadly regarded as enjoyable, interesting and useful to the majority of participants although it is worth noting the variability in the responses (as demonstrated by the min/max values). The qualitative comments help to explain the range of opinions expressed in the quantitative ratings. This may be due to the range of ability and experience in the group, which was a point of frustration for some. One participant said ‘I would separate out the experienced writers from the new/inexperienced ones.’

Some participants expressed frustration with the time taken online to go through participant and facilitator introductions, and felt that this reduced the time available to hear from or work with the guest writers. One suggestion for future improvements was that participants could send a short bio or personal statement to the facilitators ahead of each session to save time.

Some of the lower ratings for the practical and applied nature of the learning opportunities may reflect the fact that there was less new content for experienced writers, and that the Masterclasses were less ‘hands on’ than some participants would have liked, as expressed here: ‘In some of the masterclasses I attended there were opportunities to write but in others there were no practical or experiential activities. I felt I got much more out of the masterclasses with such activities.’

However, other comments emphasised that the Masterclasses increased participants’ confidence and motivation: ‘I felt more confident as time went on and I found myself becoming more involved’; ‘The masterclasses gave me motivation to write.  I also learnt a lot about the process of writing for theatre and the potential pitfalls.  Overall it was a positive experience and I really enjoyed it.’

For some participants, the Masterclasses enhanced their practical ‘toolkit’ and left them with memorable guiding principles for the future: ‘one of the things that has really stuck with me is 'make everything an action' This will really help me keep my writing on focus.’

The opportunity to network and connect with peers was mentioned in the comments, with references to a monthly zoom meet up for Pathways Writers, which was deemed ‘really supportive’. The course was regarded by one participant as a valuable entry point to writing for performance for VI writers: I would recommend this course as it is difficult for visually impaired and blind writers to break into the industry and sometimes, it is hard regarding which is the best place to start from.’

Overall, the qualitative comments demonstrate a range of ways in which the Masterclasses impacted positively on participants, notwithstanding the challenges of online delivery and a group that had diverse prior levels of experience. Most people seemed to find something useful and memorable to take away, as demonstrated by the following summary:

They (*the Masterclasses*) featured a wide range of experienced writers and practitioners, and I feel like I’ve come away with many new ideas for subjects and themes for performance writing, as well as a broader, richer perspective on writing for theatre, tv and film. I also feel engaged with UK performance scene in a way that I was not before the masterclasses, and far more aware of the possibilities for and experiences of writers with visual impairments than I had been.

### Pathways Writers: Showcase

Extant held the Writers’ Showcase at Brixton House in June 2022. Each Writer presented a five-minute directed piece, including the concept behind their work. As training for those involved, Extant’s Artistic Director provided a masterclass on Audio Description.

6 audience members completed a follow-up evaluation. The respondents had a variety of reasons for attending, as follows:

Contributor to the Pathways Programme (mentor, masterclass facilitator): 2 people

Friends and family: 2 people

Have an existing relationship with Extant: 4 people

(please note some respondents selected more than one answer)

The participants were asked to provide 3-5 words that they would use if describing the showcase evening to a friend. Below are the most common words provided, with the number of times the word was selected given in brackets:

Thought provoking (3)

Varied (3)

Accessible (2)

Fun (2)

Emotional (2)

Extant collected anecdotal feedback from professionals who supported the event as BSL interpreters, actors, access workers and technicians. The majority of the feedback received was positive, demonstrating that participants enjoyed the project and appreciated the opportunity to expand their networks. Generally, participants felt the process was well organised, one person reporting that it was ‘a gold-standard project’. There was also appreciation for the AD masterclass, and one person mentioned it could be valuable to expand this in future.

Others proposed some suggestions for future improvements, as follows:

- to manage the process around script alterations and cuts efficiently, so that actors do not have to learn and re-learn lines, and so that responsibilities for edits and adaptions are clear up front

- to work with writers to understand how to manage the 5 minute time limits – one director mentioned that a 5 minute dialogue could end up being an 8-10 minute piece on stage

- to minimise Zoom rehearsals and to rehearse in person as much as possible

- explaining tech roles and requirements upfront to help sessions to run to time

- to create an interaction platform where scripts and notes could be stored, to facilitate less reliance on email

- including BSL interpreters in the technical discussions, including a pre-event discussion about lighting arrangements, position of seating for deaf attendees, and placement of interpreter on stage (the latter could also help the Director to make them part of the story)

- hiring Pathways Directors to direct the pieces to allow for continued professional development

- to create a cross-disciplinary Pathways Connect group to help people make contact across the programmes

- encourage Access Workers to help orient VI actors within the space, so that Directors can ensure they spend time with all actors

It is worth noting that there were conflicting needs regarding timelines of this project. Generally, actors and tech support expressed the view that they would prefer to avoid short rehearsals spread over a long period of time, as this reduces the possibilities to take on other work. Conversely, one actor did say they would prefer the dress rehearsal and performance to take place on different days. However, one Director mentioned that a longer, more drawn-out time frame would allowed more time to liaise with writers about script alterations.

### Pathways Writers: post programme questionnaire

Nine Pathways Writers responded to a post programme questionnaire. Using Likert scales from 1 to 5, the questionnaire asked them to rate the programme for enjoyment, interest and usefulness, and to rate to what extent it a) met their expectations and b) they would recommend it to others.

The responses are summarised below in Table 8:

Table 8 : Post programme questionnaire: ratings for enjoyment, interest, usefulness (median, min-max) where lowest possible value =1 (not at all) and highest is 5 (extremely); extent to which expectations were met, where lowest possible value =1 (not at all) and highest is 5 (completely), and likelihood of recommending the programme to others, where 1=definitely not and 5=definitely. *N=9*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Mean (range) |
| Enjoyment | 5 (min=3, max=5) |
| Interest | 4 (min 3, max=5) |
| Usefulness | 5 (min=3, max=5) |
| How likely to recommend | 5 (min=3, max=5) |
| Met expectations | 4 (min=3, max=5) |

Table 8 suggests that enjoyment, interest and usefulness scores were all high (‘a great deal’ –‘extremely’). The median response for how likely participants were to recommend the programme was 5 (‘definitely’). The programme broadly met expectations, with a median value of 4 (‘a great deal’).

Following the pre-programme questionnaire, participants were then asked to rate their confidence levels from 1-10 for the same list of aspects to do with their careers.

Table 9: Pre programme questionnaire: confidence levels about various aspects of writing for performance (median, min-max) where lowest possible value =1 (I do not feel at all confident about it) and highest is 10 (I feel extremely confident about it). *N=9*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| How confident do you feel about… | median response |
| Taking the next steps to develop your career | 7 (min =5, max=8) |
| The strength of your current network | 7 (min = 1, max = 9) |
| Your ability to develop your networks | 7 (min = 3, max = 9) |
| Your future job prospects as a writer | 6 (min = 3, max = 8) |
| Understanding how writers can work with other theatre professionals | 8 (min = 5, max = 10) |

Table 9 suggests higher confidence levels across all these factors for the cohort of writers upon completion of the programme (please see p. 38-40 for the pre-programme data). However, some participants completed the pre-programme questionnaire and not the post-programme questionnaire, and vice versa. Data from a sub-set of participants (*N*=6) who completed both questionnaires were analysed, in order to understand the gains or losses in confidence across the five aspects of writing listed in table 9. This analysis revealed that one respondent felt marginally less confident about the strength of their current networks rating dropped by a value of 1). Otherwise, participants’ confidence remained stable (3 values) or increased (26 values). On average, the 6 participants’ levels of confidence increased by a value of 2.64 (min=1, max=3.4).

Further questions asked participants to rate their confidence about their writer’s voice, the extent to which the programme impacted on them and their work, their confidence about their future job prospects as a writer, and to what extent the programme influenced their future plans or aspirations. Free text spaces allowed for comments throughout.

Analysis showed that confidence was high about their writer’s voice: median=8 (min=7, max=8). The perceived impact of the programme on the writers and on their work was also relatively high, although with a little more variability: median=8 (min=5, max=10), as was the extent to which the programme influenced their plans and aspirations; median= 7.5 (min=5, max=10).

Qualitative comments reflected on a range of benefits of the programme and its impact on participants. Several participants commented that the Masterclasses were useful and interesting, and provided opportunities to network, although networking was an area where participants felt they would benefit from further support from Extant. The writers valued the opportunity to work with a variety of theatre professionals and the benefits of the mentoring aspect was mentioned by the majority. Concrete outcomes of the programme included gains in confidence: ‘I do feel much more confident about my writing career now than when I did at the beginning of the programme’, ‘being less afraid to share my work’; clarity on next steps: ‘I think Pathways has demystified this industry for me in many ways, but particularly in terms of what I do next’, and new opportunities: ‘I am now much more interested in pursuing writing for theatre, and writing for radio, which is not something I had considered much before’, ‘ I now have ideas for plays which wouldn’t have existed without the Pathways programme.’ One participant commented that Pathways had ‘changed my thought process as a writer.’

Suggestions were made for future improvements. One participant suggested restructuring the format to allow for a masterclass to be followed by a period of writing, then mentor feedback. Another mentioned that it would be good to plan for the Showcase to be watched live, in case of last-minute unplanned absence. A final suggestion was to provide handouts at the end of the masterclasses with details of the key points.

### Pathways Writers: Interviews

Four Pathways Directors took part in an in-depth semi structured interview about their experience of Pathways, following the same methodology and procedure as the interviews for Pathways Actors and Directors. Interviews took place in July 2022, following the live Showcase. As before, participants were invited to comment on what they had hoped to get out of the programme, which aspects were most memorable for them, what kind of impact it had on them professionally and personally, and their plans for the future. They were also asked to comment on their experience of Extant and any suggestions they might have about Pathways.

Participants brought with them a variety of writing experience (see p. 38) but they shared similar aims for the Pathways programme. Having a structure to work within and deadlines to meet was an important element for Writers 1 and 3. Writer 2 was looking for an opportunity to kickstart their writing career and writer 4 was hoping to get exposure to a variety of writing skills to draw upon. Having the opportunity to have their work showcased and to build a relationship with the Extant network was also mentioned as important reasons for joining (Writer #3).

Three of the writers felt the programme met their expectations, writer #4 felt that it did for the most part, but they had some specific suggestions about improvements to Zoom delivery (see ‘Suggestions’, below). Some participants mentioned that they did not have a clear idea of the structure of the programme before starting, e.g. ‘In truth I wasn't 100% sure what to automatically expect in terms of the scale or the structure of it’ (Writer #1), but they were prepared to go into it with an open mind, and with the expectation of simply exploring their writing.

Coding and analysis of the data yielded key themes ‘expanding horizons’ and ‘collaborating and networking,’ with the sub theme of ‘the Extant community.’

Expanding horizons

This theme captured the sense of professional and personal growth experienced by the writers. All of the writers seemed to have moved on in terms of their identity as a writer for performance. This came through when they spoke about their confidence to try new things: ‘I think it's probably made me a bit more confident and do other things and to explore my writing a lot more’ (Writer # 2). It was also apparent when writers talked about the subject matter and writing styles that they might now consider engaging with:

I think it's expanded my horizons in terms of the themes and subjects I would consider writing about. And also the ways that they may be presented on stage - I guess the style of theatre that I might consider working in, and that that's due to exposure to lots of different styles and different kinds of writers in the master classes (Writer #3)

For some participants, this sense of professional growth has contributed to their sense of identity. For example, Writer #4 explained that they were now confident to include writing in their portfolio of competencies:

Two years ago I would never have said I was a writer … I'm an actor. But I can also write and I can do whatever. But there's this narrative that I think is really toxic, which is you can only ever be one thing. And so I always felt like under qualified to deem myself a writer, but, during Extant … I've realised, you can be more than one thing.

Writer #4 made a similar observation, commenting that they now felt their identity as a writer could allow for working across different aspects of writing:

I could think of myself both as somebody who writes novels and short stories, and someone who works with performance writing. I considered them to be directly opposed to each other, or specialisations, which, if I try and do both, I will end up being a jack of all trades. I don't consider that to be the case anymore, as a result of Pathways.

The programme had clearly ignited interest in the participants, which Writer #2 expressed as a new appetite for learning: ‘I listen to podcasts now and read up on different blog posts. I actually kind of try and take it in now, rather than just skimming it. … I just maybe wanna learn more about writing than I did before.’

Writer #3 also commented that the diversity of participants on the programme was enriching:

Also exposure to all the different people who were taking part in the programme as participants, their backgrounds. I think it's really expanded that horizon, made me sort of look up from the page a bit… it felt as if Extant very consciously attempted to recruit from as wide a base as possible. And I thought that was such a strength of the programme.

For others, the programme enhanced confidence, both socially: ‘it kind of made me more willing to engage with other people. It kind of brought me out of myself a little bit’ (Writer #2); and in terms of their professional identity and aspirations: ‘now I feel confident enough that I could articulate what I want to be able to achieve, which is really fantastic’ (Writer #4). Writer #1 also explained that programme gave them a sense of motivation and a way to structure their days as they emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Networking and collaborating

Perhaps because writing can be a solitary endeavour, all of the Pathways Writers were keen to comment on the importance of the social side of the programme. The group did not meet in person until the day of the Showcase, but the social aspect of this was salient in multiple interviews: ‘everyone clicked really well, and I made friendships’ (Writer #4); ‘On the day of the showcase … I met some interesting people. It’s not the thing I've done before you know - socialising at parties doesn’t always come naturally to me but there was some interesting stuff’ (Writer #1). The writers emphasised that this networking enabled them to meet a range of VI peers with shared interests, which can otherwise be difficult to achieve.

The mentoring aspect of the project provided opportunities for input and collaboration, which were highlights of the experience for all interviewees. Writer #4 described how the mentoring facilitated a step change in how they felt about their writing:

And that's the thing that I found in terms of my career, when I've been mentored by certain people, that's when I make the most change with who I am, and what I can do, and confidence. And I think Extant picked really well and for the most part mentors that suit the people involved. And I think that’s when the penny started to drop for a few of us. Well, oh, I can just do this! I can just write what I want to write.

Writer #3 described how the mentoring performed a dual function in terms of both professional and artistic development. Advice on professional development enabled them to plan concrete ways in which they could develop their career. The artistic development came through the mentor’s reading of their work and subsequent discussions. They described how the work with the mentor was a good preparation for the later interactions with the Director and actors as the work was developed for the Showcase:

I felt very supported by the mentor. And then I felt kind of there was a step, there was a change. .. The relationship I had with the actors was a slightly different kind to the mentor mentee relationship. And that felt like a very nice progression. (Writer #3)

Sub-theme: the Extant community

This theme sits within the theme of ‘networking and collaborating’, but reflects the salience of the particular community around Extant that the writers spoke about in interviews. It was clear from all four interviews that not only did Extant provide participants with a range of skills and opportunities, but also that it means something to ‘belong’, and to feel part of the Extant community. It has the potential to create a sense of identity.

Through Pathways, Extant provided the writers with a safe space in which to explore their writing. As writer #4 commented: ‘I think it gave me the space to explore and to play because there was no pressure…it was just like explore. Play.’ This also provided a sense of shared purpose: ‘You've got the hub of creatives who were all like, all trying to do the same thing.’

Writer #1 described how they felt when they listened to a speaker from the wider Extant network speaking at an event: ‘And hearing someone like them give that kind of enthusiastic fiery talk did wonders for my mood. How the power of words can help.’

There was the sense that the writers felt they had started a professional relationship with a community focused on the needs of VI creatives which would provide them with ongoing support:

They are really open like you can always chat with them. ..I feel really supported by them and I know, if in three years time, I've got a question about like audio description for example, or whatever - then I know that Extant would be there to listen and help. …it feels like someone is rooting for you (Writer #4)

Writer #2 also expressed similar thoughts about how Extant enables VI creatives to take a step that could be difficult to achieve alone: ‘there should be more organisations like this that give people like me a little step into an industry that is very hard to get into.’

Writer#3 summarised the sense of belonging and how this impacted on them as follows:

I've seen their processes. I've seen how they work. I've seen their values and practice. And so I'd say yeah, I've gone from a position of being outside to the inside. It’s a place where I'm happy to be…. feel like once you're like in with Extant like you never really leave which is nice.

Memories and emotional engagement

The most memorable moments of Pathways included the mentoring, the rehearsals and collaboration with the actors and director, the first moment that the writer heard their words performed by the actors, and the Showcase itself. In the words of writer #4: ‘it was just really an uplifting and powerful day. To be in a room full of VI creatives all making stuff.’

Suggestions for future improvements

Suggestions were as follows:

* Continuing to use Zoom in order to make the programme accessible to people nationwide, but:
* Breaking Zoom sessions down into smaller groups to increase individuals’ engagement, and to encourage all participants to have a chance to speak
* Completing writing exercises within the masterclass time, as pre-class preparation time is not necessarily feasible for all participants, who may have existing family and/or work commitments
* Providing more information upfront on the structure and content of the programme
* Reducing the number of emails and centralizing resources/key dates
* Arranging a peer group face to face meet up before the Showcase takes place
* Seeking funding to allow Pathways participants to be paid. This would create more space for them to engage on the process

### Pathways Writers: Reflections

Extant ran a feedback session with the Pathways Writers on Zoom in June 2022, shortly after the Showcase. This session was targeted at identifying opportunities for improvement and setting out Extant’s plans to offer continued support. 11 Pathways writers joined the Programme Director, the Artist Development Manager and Artistic Director of Extant for the discussion. Feedback and suggestions for improvements from the Pathways Writers were as follows:

* The mentoring was much appreciated by participants, with the mentoring sessions acting as ‘mini deadlines’ to help writers to keep progressing their work
* The opportunity to work with actors and directors helped development of their practice: ‘‘it was incredible to work with actors and directors, it taught me about how my writing was going to appear once performed.’
* Communication could be improved by findings ways to manage large numbers of emails and dates. Extant could investigate accessible online calendars
* Some suggested changes to the process: writers and directors needed a meeting to discuss the work, on Zoom would be adequate
* A workshop with actors around the midway point would help writers to hear how their draft sounds when performed
* More in person meetings would help create connections and friendships

Extant’s Artist Development Manager responded with plans for the future, including a monthly Zoom meeting for Extant’s wider network, communication of callouts for writing opportunities, and 1 to 1 support for funding applications or further development of their writing practice.

## Pathways Crew & Design

The Crew & Design Pathway brought together 8 participants from across the UK. They took part in a series of masterclasses, mentoring, and shadowing. The programme culminated in a Showcase event on 3rd February at Canada Water Theatre, in London, with a Round Table event hosted on the same evening.

Due to the smaller number of participants in Crew & Design, it was decided that the evaluation would focus on participant interviews, rather than event-specific evaluations. A brief description of the events is given below.

### Pathways Crew & Design: Events

The Crew & Design Masterclass programme ran from the Induction session on July 18th 2022 through to the end of the year. The induction session introduced the structure and content of the course and its key milestones. Participants had the opportunity to work in teams to discuss their concepts for the Showcase, as well as to have input into the topics that would be covered by the upcoming Masterclasses and Roundtable.

Subsequent sessions focused on the following areas: access, set, costume and props, stage management, production management, set design (with specific focus on the Showcase brief), sound design, and lighting design. These sessions were hosted by Extant in collaboration with industry partners.

A series of ‘consultancies’ running throughout December 2022-January 2023 gave participants the opportunity to ‘drop in’ to Zoom sessions with industry experts in order to seek advice and to develop their responses to the Showcase brief.

### Pathways Crew & Design: Pre-Questionnaire

Six participants completed the pre-programme questionnaire. As for Pathways Writers, the questionnaire contained a combination of fixed and free text questions asking about their hopes and expectations and their feelings about their work before starting.

Five out of 6 participants described a variety of existing experience within the theatre industry, ranging from writing, acting, directing, producing and sound work, working in collaboration with Extant and other theatre companies.

Table 9: Pre programme questionnaire: confidence levels about various aspects of Crew & Design (median, min-max) where lowest possible value =1 (I do not feel at all confident about it) and highest is 10 (I feel extremely confident about it). *N=6*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| How confident do you feel about… | median response |
| Taking the next steps to develop your career | 6.5 (min =3, max=10) |
| The strength of your current network | 4.5 (min = 3, max = 8) |
| Your ability to develop your networks | 5 (min = 3, max = 8) |
| Your future job prospects in theatre | 5.5 (min = 2, max = 7) |

Table 9 suggests that confidence levels were once again highly variable, as demonstrated by the minimum and maximum values, which is likely to reflect the range of experience within the group. Analysis of the qualitative comments revealed participants’ hopes that the programme would enable them to grow in confidence and experience, to attain some status within the industry, to develop contacts and opportunities for networking, and to deepen their understanding of the inner workings of theatre companies. For some participants, their hope was that this would impact on their sense of self as well as their work, such as developing their own creative and professional identity, facilitating their interactions with other theatre professionals, and feeling like an equal in the world of theatre.

Participants also mentioned specific skills that they were hoping to acquire. These included skills relating to the everyday operational management of a theatre company, such as managing budgets, PR, marketing, health and safety. Other skills mentioned were more on the creative side, such as sound design, building experience with camera work (especially accessible cameras), lighting and set design.

For the post questionnaire, insufficient responses were returned for data analysis, however insights on the participant experience of the programme are captured by the interviews and reflections session.

### Pathways Crew & Design: Interviews

Two C&D participants took part in semi-structured interviews. Certain points of commonality emerged through participants’ discussion of their C&D experience.

Development of confidence, skills and opportunities:

The programme had a tangible impact on confidence levels for both participants. Participant 1 said: ‘it has inspired me to look to try to push it further… it’s been inspirational.. it’s made me think, perhaps I can do this.’ Participant 2 expressed similar feelings: ‘it’s definitely given me more confidence. I’ve been interested in sound design for a while, but I’ve never really tried it… So with this, I’ve realised I could – I could do it.’ Participant 2 went on to explain that the programme developed their confidence in their own ability to be spontaneous, to solve problems. For participant 2, the increased confidence stemmed also from developing transferable skills. They were able to apply previous knowledge about lighting in photography and film to theatre, and felt pleased that they could now add new skills to their CV: ‘it definitely gives me more confidence to put myself out there.’

Participant 1 felt they had come away with a clearer understanding of sound design and which parts of it they could tackle solo, and which parts they may need to develop collaborations (bearing in mind lack of accessibility of programming software). They also had plans to develop their professional profile by joining the relevant professional organisation, a recommendation made to them during the course of the programme. This participant had also made new contacts with drama schools which had resulted in an invitation to speak to students.

The programme had led participant 1 to the conclusion that there was a clear need to raise awareness of accessibility requirements of blind or VI Crew & Design professionals with software companies. Both participants mentioned the need for more accessible sound design software. Participant 1 also mentioned the opportunity to develop tactile aids to help with lighting design. They felt motivated to approach companies to discuss accessibility, and to consult on future improvements.

Suggestions for the development of Pathways C&D:

Discussion of future improvements highlighted one aspect of the course which had an impact on participants, namely the late availability of the script for the Showcase. This was a source of frustration, as last minute changes to the script affected the C&D work. It was also felt that the mentoring and masterclasses would have been more productive had the script been in place. Starting the course with a finalised script was the key recommendation for future developments of Pathways C&D.

Other points included having more practical hands-on work – perhaps a day spent in a theatre or a studio for participants to play and experiment with sound. It was suggested that visual awareness training for people involved with Pathways should be mandatory. IT systems used by Pathways need to be able to support access to and editing of large sound files. Finally, one participant suggested that the Pathways Showcases in general could be shorter, to encourage attendance from industry professionals. They suggested that this could be achieved by keeping course numbers smaller, perhaps by a more rigorous application process.

### Pathways Crew & Design: Reflections

Extant ran a reflections session with C&D participants, on Zoom. The conversation covered highlights and points for future development. The Showcase was the highlight for the participants, as this was when they saw all their hard work come together. One person mentioned that it helped develop their understanding of processes that take place within a theatre production, and the need for good organisation. The mentoring also came up as a programme highlight, as did the opportunity to work with each other as a group.

Participants seemed to be in agreement that the deadlines in the run up to the Showcase were challenging, and that although this increased their confidence in their own abilities to deliver under pressure, there are measures that could be taken next time to reduce stress.

The key suggested change was to have the script available from the start. This would reduce the need for last minute changes, which had a knock-on impact for C&D activities such as sound and lighting cues. Having the finalised script earlier could also provide material for the Masterclasses, rather than working on skills in the abstract. Access to the Director from the beginning would also be beneficial.

The accessibility of the communication needed between Extant and participants during the course also came up. It was agreed that on-going efforts to understand potential clashes of accessibility needs will be needed and that communication may need to take place in multiple ways.

Some C&D participants took part in the programme as they wished to develop themselves as a theatre professional with a diverse skill set. As such, they saw an opportunity for Extant to offer a new course to address writing, directing and theatre making on a small scale.

## Visual Impairment Awareness Training

Over the duration of Pathways, Extant ran visual awareness training courses, with participation from 6 organisations, encompassing theatres, companies and drama schools. Additionally, mentors and masterclass leads for Pathways Directors and Writers also took the training.

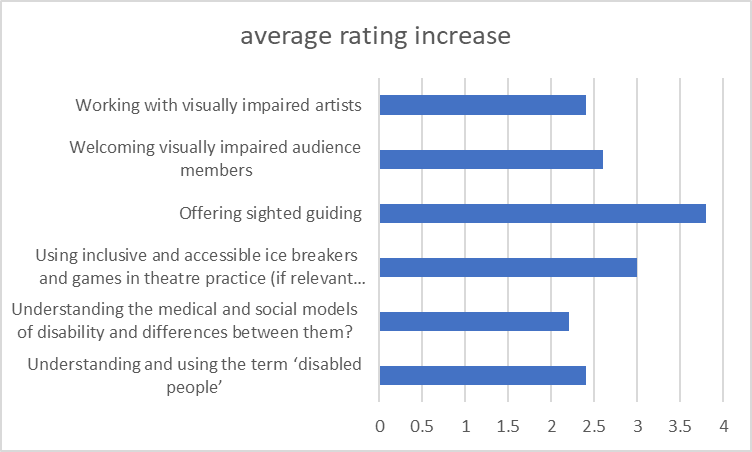
Pre/post questionnaires were issued to assess any gains in confidence across key aspects of the training:

* Understanding and using the term ‘disabled people’
* Understanding the medical and social models of disability and the differences between them
* Using inclusive and accessible ice breakers and games in theatre practice (if relevant to job role)
* Offering sighted guiding
* Welcoming visually impaired audience members
* Working with visually impaired artists

Participants were asked to rate their levels of confidence, out of 10, where 1 equals ‘I do not feel at all confident about it’, and 10 equals ‘I feel extremely confident about it’.

Pre and post data were collected from 5 contributors to Pathways (mentors and masterclass leads). Four participants gained in confidence across all aspects of the training. The fifth participant’s levels of confidence remained the same across some aspects and increased in others. Figure 1 below plots the average gains in confidence for the five mentors and masterclass leads. This shows that participants gained most confidence in ‘offering sighted guiding’ (3.8), followed by ‘using inclusive and accessible ice breakers and games in theatre practice’ (3), ‘welcoming visually impaired audience members’ (2.6), ‘understanding and using the term ‘disabled people’/ Working with visually impaired artists’ (2.4), and ‘understanding the medical and social models of disability and differences between them’ (2.2) (ratings for the latter were already relatively high pre-training).

Figure 1: Gains in confidence through visual awareness training, for five Pathways contributors



Pre/post data were not consistently available for the other organisations that took part, however qualitative comments indicated that participants benefited from the training:

“I can ensure that classes I run or shows I put on have accessibility built in as a starting point in the schedule and/or rehearsals. I also have some good starting points for further research and can engage my networks in further dialogue”

“I definitely think this helped in my professional development. I want to make my work more inclusive and this is a great part of that.”

Participants also made a few suggestions for future development of the training, including providing some written notes, exploring the functionality of screen readers and other technology used to aid reading and writing, and more hands-on practise with guiding.

## The Extant Perspective

A semi-structed in-depth interview was conducted with the Pathways Programme Manager upon completion of Crew & Design. The Programme Manager joined after delivery of Pathways Actors, and so the interview focused on Directors, Writers and Crew & Design. The discussion addressed the following:

* original aims and objectives for running Pathways
* what went well and what were the challenges
* impacts of the programme on the participants, the sector and Extant
* recommendations for future developments of Pathways

The rationale for Pathways was that Extant wished to ‘create a level playing field for VI creatives.’ They were aiming to build skills and confidence so that VI creatives could navigate the industry and pursue opportunities like their non VI counterparts.

Pathways ran at a challenging time. As the Programme Manager launched Pathways Directors, the Covid-19 pandemic hit and immediately limited the possibilities for face-to-face interaction and work in rehearsal rooms. The on-going impacts of the pandemic made some aspects of the Pathways programmes more challenging than they would otherwise have been, such as shadowing. Conversely, it created opportunities to ‘talk across the nation’ using Zoom, opening Pathways up to participants UK wide. The Programme Manager also felt it created a sense of community during the pandemic. Their view was that Zoom delivery of Masterclasses, although not originally planned, worked well for these programmes.

The Programme Manager’s view was that Pathways had resulted in growth of skills and confidence for the participants. The key challenge from their perspective was time: two days a week was not enough for the scope of the role. Additional time was able to be funded towards the latter part of the programme, but even so capacity was a difficulty. They had some specific suggestions for the structure of the role for future development of Pathways.

A range of positive impacts came out of the interview discussion. The Programme Manager observed personal gains for many participants, in terms of increased confidence in their professional skills (networking, new collaborations) and also in terms of personal growth (confidence with travel, friendships). Participants who had completed Pathways went on to undertake paid creative work with Extant on other Pathways courses or Extant projects. At an industry level, the Programme Manager considered Pathways to have had a positive influence on awareness of and support for VI creatives. Particularly encouraging was the fact that some collaborators showed on-going commitment to Pathways, hosting Masterclasses, providing mentoring, and attending the Showcase: ‘they stand strong by the ethos of Extant.’ The visual impairment awareness training was a positive impact on the industry (although its reach needs to be expanded, see ‘recommendations’) although it was acknowledged that it was difficult to measure the extent of any resulting direct impacts or behavioural change in the everyday creative practice and running of theatre partners. However, some anecdotal gains were reported with theatre professionals recognising how little they had known about visual impairment and blindness prior to engaging with Extant and the training.

**Recommendations and future developments**

The Programme Manager reflected on a number of recommendations for future development of Pathways, which clustered around three key themes:

*Selection of participants and managing the participant experience*

The Programme Manager’s view was that the recruitment strategy for Pathways should remain broadly the same, namely ‘to keep welcoming participants no matter what their existing skill set or experience- that level playing field.’ However, this strategy necessarily results in a participant group with diverse experience and needs, meaning the courses need to be ‘tailor made’. Mentoring was regarded as a crucial element in order to develop this bespoke element.

Most participants were balancing Pathways alongside paid freelance work. The Programme Manager felt that future funding bids should allow for participant payment, so that they could receive a stipend while taking the course, or have their time financially recognised for specific activities, e.g. being paid to shadow theatre professionals. The aim of this would be to enable participants to commit more fully to Pathways and to have the time and resources to prioritise it.

The Programme Manager recognised that participants would benefit from having clearer information upfront about the structure of the course its content and aims, although there is a need for some flexibility in an industry that works to short-term and sometime unpredictable deadlines.

*More administrative capacity and separation of roles*

The Programme Manager felt that more support with admin was required. Some practical suggestions were to use SharePoint to reduce the amount of communication that needed to be done by email. However, further work should be done to review the use of Sharepoint from an accessibility perspective. Experience so far indicates that helpful measures would include limiting the number of folders and documents, and only uploading files shortly before they are needed.

Separation of roles would benefit the running and development of Pathways. The suggestion was to create a role for an access support worker, who would provide ‘pastoral care and admin support’, for example supporting participants with the organisation of travel arrangements and expenses reimbursement. This would increase time in the Programme Manager role for reflection and strategic planning, thereby creating ‘breathing space’ to 1) develop the recruitment strategy for participants, 2) develop the planned programme of delivery upfront to make it clearer to the participants what they will experience and what the expectations are of them and 3) allow for more time for engagement with the wider industry, with the aim of strategically recruiting industry professionals to attend the Showcases, thereby creating networking opportunities for Pathways participants that are more tailored to their interests.

*Training*

Visual Impairment Awareness training should be in place for new Extant workers ‘from day one’. The Programme Manager agreed that visual impairment awareness training for contributors to Pathways from the wider industry is crucial and could indeed be mandatory.

The roll out of Extant’s visual impairment awareness training programme also fell within the Programme Manager’s role, but more capacity was needed to give this the time and focus it required.

Managing the legacy of Pathways and the future of the programme was also discussed. It was recognised that the Pathways programmes are not designed to be an end in themselves. Rather, the role of Extant is ‘to be a really supportive group but at the same time supporting them to navigate the industry and deal with the ups and downs and knocks that they will inevitably encounter.’ In response, as Pathways draws to a close, Extant now has an Artist Development Manager in place. This role will focus on supporting the Pathways participants in their future endeavours, for example through advice on bids and grants, matching people with paid opportunities for creative work at Extant, supporting networking and networking skills, and developing their skills as artistic directors. It is likely that Pathways, as Extant’s flagship programme, will run again in the future.

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