

FUTURES

on the needs of emerging theatre-makers in the Highlands

a report by Vivid Roots Collective

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COLLECTIVE



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CONTACT

If you would like to know more, have questions, or would like to engage in the future of this research, you can reach us at contact.vividroots@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

This report covers the participants' demographics and responses in detail. If you are looking for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the research, I would recommend that you read the report in full. If you are looking for a less comprehensive reading that still offers an overview of the key points, we recommend that you read the 'Background' and 'Conclusion' sections, or skip straight to the 'Conclusion' if you are just looking for a snapshot of the research.

About the Report

Since the pandemic and the introduction of lockdown in 2020, there has been rising interest in supporting emerging and early career theatre-makers. For two years, learners have experienced unprecedented disruption to their education at all levels, including the absence of graduation showcases and ceremonies, which are often a launchpad for Higher Education or Further Education (FE/HE) students to access opportunities.

Vivid Roots Collective has a focus on Highland theatre due to the lack of opportunities for professional theatre-making in the region (learn more about Vivid Roots under 'Background'). A lack of opportunities comes with a lack of understanding about the specific needs of emerging theatre-makers in the area. For our company to ensure that our work is relevant and responds directly to the needs of the Highland theatre industry, we embarked upon this project to fill that gap in

research and understanding.

This report is based on focus groups and interviews with 37 participants. I will explain more about the recruitment and delivery of these focus groups in 'Results'. All of these participants had some connection to Highland theatre, whether through growing up or living in the area, studying or training in the area, or through connections with Highland theatre companies and venues.

On Friday the 28th of April 2023, Vivid Roots Collective hosted a launch event for a draft version of this report. This event invited industry stakeholders to gather, share their reflections, and begin to think towards a collective vision for the future. This event included attendees from Developing the Young Workforce (Inverness and Central Highland), University of the Highlands and Islands, Eden Court Theatre, Inverness Creative Academy, Skye Bridge Studios, Aberdeen Arts Centre, Framework Theatre, Highland Council, local government, and several emerging theatre-makers and local freelancers. The discussions from the event are referenced in the Conclusion and offer an important context for the research, demonstrating how the central concerns of this report are industry-wide and not just felt by emerging theatre-makers.

Observations

It is important to acknowledge the **biases** in the responses. The demographic of respondents is primarily young (under the age of 30), cisgender, white and British (Scottish and English); we received

a significant number of responses from people who identify as LGBTQIA+ and/or disabled. While there is suitable representation from the latter groups, global majority and older people are not represented in this report. The reader should understand that our various intersectionalities greatly impact our experience of barriers and opportunities. I would like to impress upon the reader that while this research offers an indication of the needs of many emerging Highland-based theatre-makers, it is by no means an exhaustive account of the needs and experiences of the industry as a whole. The demographic of respondents is described in more detail under 'Equalities Monitoring'.

This report is also influenced by my own bias as a young, white, cisgendered woman. I have a high level of education (MRes Creative Practice from the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Inverness), and a background in Feminist performance, directing, and producing. Not all people will have the luxury or the desire to pursue education beyond secondary school, so my perspective (and this research) will not necessarily be inclusive of these groups. In fact, all participants have engaged with FE/HE. My analysis of responses has been shaped by other research in the sector (outlined in 'Background') and majorly by my own experiences.

Nonetheless, I have done my utmost to deliver the focus groups, and to analyse these responses objectively. I also believe that a strength of this research is that it has been carried out by a new company, a young person, and emerging theatre-maker; this means that emerging voices are being heard and represented at all levels of this research. I

have included the transcripts as part of this report so that readers may draw their own conclusions from the responses which will be unbiased by my background, and subject to different experiences.

I will also offer that this research is a **snapshot in time**. Through the conversations with the participants during the focus groups, and those with organisations and stakeholders during the launch event, this research will already be changing the landscape from which it was necessitated. I have heard from several attendees that they have started to action some of the recommendations from the report and the discussions from the event. This report is designed to capture the learning that we (researcher, organisation, and individuals) have derived from this research in the hopes that it can continue to effect change across the industry both regionally and nationally.

With this in mind, I will offer a summary of the **key points** in this research.

Firstly, and unsurprisingly, **education** is a primary concern for most participants as this is the most common way for theatre-makers to access training. With the emphasis at secondary school for learners to progress into FE/HE, and the expectation for learners to progress into careers immediately after graduating, participants are asking for more support at all levels to help prepare them for success. This support may materialise in a number of forms, and I offer my recommendations at the end of this report, which covers the higher level issues which aren't necessarily outlined by respondents, but which have emerged by grouping the responses together and reading them more holistically.

Secondly, **networks** are identified by almost all groups as being crucial to their development. Understanding how to find, engage, and collaborate with other theatre-makers, companies, and venues, is recognised as a significant step for theatre-makers in establishing themselves professionally. This research, being initiated on behalf of Vivid Roots, focused on how companies (or the sector) could help to facilitate these networks, but responses for support in networking, connecting, and collaborating, indicated that this could be achieved across the sector, including education and other organisations.

Thirdly, and finally, **industry knowledge** is an important theme which captures the needs of emerging theatre-makers in the Highlands. Many of the respondents' anxieties about their emergence was connected to a feeling that they were underprepared to navigate crucial aspects of the industry, such as: freelancing (including tax returns and resilience), funding applications, agents, pay, and networking.

Someone speak to us about tax! [...] in this industry, so many people are self-employed in some capacity [...] It's insane to do a course basically doing that, and no one explains [it].

BACKGROUND

About Vivid Roots

Vivid Roots Collective Ltd is a new company which creates opportunities for local emerging theatre-makers. Our vision is for the Highlands to be recognised nationally and internationally as having an exceptional and growing culture of professional performing arts. We believe that by supporting emerging talent, we can help to encourage theatre-makers to remain in the Highlands while they work, which will contribute to the cultural offering of the region and provide an economic benefit to the area with better retention. You can read more about the relationship between rural arts and local economy in **Forgotten Regions** (see 'Other Research').

In 2021, Emma Roddick MSP made a motion in parliament on our behalf, which recognises the economic impact of our work, and which is now part of our social impact statement. Our work is also influenced by the Scottish Government's Culture Strategy, which advocates for place-based approaches to making and delivering arts; stating that:

a collaborative place-based approach can help create the right conditions for culture to thrive¹

We believe in the importance of championing local voices and talent in an effort to uplift the status of Highland theatre.



You can learn more about Vivid Roots Collective here.

Other Research

This report specifically addresses the needs of emerging theatre-makers in the Highlands. Here, I will cover some of the other research that has both shaped and complements this report.

Framework Theatre published a report in 2021, **Building a Framework**, which '[emphasises] the voices of emerging artists within Scottish theatre, and allow others to learn about the challenges they face'². This report is based on Scotland-wide survey results from emerging theatre-makers, and is an excellent complement to this research if you or your organisation is looking for a broader understanding of the needs of emerging theatre-makers across the country. Framework Theatre is producing amazing work that is setting the benchmark for celebrating and supporting emerging artists in Scotland.

Forgotten Regions is a paper by Lindsay Dunbar³, a Highland-based 'cultural crofter', which advocates for rural arts hubs, and the benefits that come with investing in arts and culture regionally. The report uses case studies of Dumfries and Galloway and Holstebro to build an argument towards the economic transformation in rural areas which has been possible through arts investment. This report hasn't directly shaped this project but offers a powerful argument for the wider benefits of this research and has inevitably impacted my own belief in these values.

You can also learn more about the application process for emerging theatre-makers in our report,

Deep Roots & Open Doors⁴, which discusses the importance of accessibility and transparency in these engagements. We also released a report in 2021⁵, which analysed a small number of survey results about Highland arts and emerging artists. These responses shaped our approach to delivering these focus groups, and helped us to define the questions that we asked participants.



1. Scottish Government (2020) p.46

2. Framework Theatre (2021) p.3

3. Dunbar, L. (2019)

4. Walker, L. (2023)

5. Vivid Roots Collective (2021) **VRC Survey One**

RESULTS

Methodology

This research was undertaken using focus groups, ranging in size from one-to-one interviews to a full youth theatre group. The sessions lasted one hour. We felt that focus groups were the best way in which to gather responses from participants in a way that would be comfortable, and would allow us to capture the nuance of their experiences. The conversational element of the focus groups helps us to understand the context of participant responses better than through surveys as it allows for follow-up questions and the space for anecdotal references. Furthermore, the Vivid Roots team, as emerging theatre-makers in the Highlands ourselves, have a lived experience of these issues and know that one of the key concerns regarding emerging in the Highlands is connection and networking. In this way, it was also important that our research felt more personable and that Vivid Roots was visible in this.

There are limitations to working with focus groups. As they require a more sustained level of engagement due to the conversational nature and the need for consent forms, this will raise accessibility barriers to those who are not comfortable or able to engage in these conversations. Acquiring consent also proved to be extremely difficult through one of the youth groups which required a gatekeeper for safeguarding. A significant impact of this challenge is that one of the

focus group transcripts is not available for public reading due to unreturned consent forms. Nonetheless, the conversations sustained with this group has still shaped this report and my recommendations.

To recruit participants for the focus groups, we engaged with gatekeeper organisations, such as: Eden Court (EC) and other arts venues in the Highlands, UHI and schools, and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW). We also recruited through our own network of artists who have engaged with us through various creative projects. We decided to reach participants through gatekeeper organisations in an effort to engage these stakeholders at the outset. Further, this enhanced our safeguarding, ensuring that younger people were supported in their participation via an organisation or group. As with our decision to host focus groups to honour the importance of connection and networking in the Highlands, we also felt that this approach to research which involved organisations early on would support the sector's needs to be connected across all levels; we talk about this in depth in the conclusion.

Focus groups were delivered both online and in-person at the request of the particular group; each format had a specific consent form which detailed the different ways in which we would be recording and processing their responses. If you are interested in our ethical framework, or would like to learn more about how we approach data protection, please get in touch using the email address provided at the start of the report.

Equalities Monitoring

Alongside the focus groups, participants were offered an equalities monitoring form (EMF) so that we could identify the biases in this research. The EMF was an anonymous form, and was hosted online so that participants could disclose their identity separate from their responses.

Of the 37 participants, only 18 participants opted to complete the EMF. The form was made optional to respect the sensitivity of the information that participants were sharing with us. Although it was clear that the EMF was anonymous, less than half of the participants felt confident in sharing that information. This may be for a number of reasons, such as not understanding the importance or relevance of equalities monitoring, not feeling comfortable with disclosing aspects of their identity, not feeling confident in the privacy of the form and their anonymity, or not feeling confident in the GoogleForms privacy statement. With future research, this is something we will work to address.

Of the 18 EMF respondents, a slight majority identified as male (38.9%), followed by female (33.3%); these respondents all indicated that they were cisgender in the following question. A slight minority of respondents (27.8%) identified diversely as LGBTQIA+, including: gender queer, non-binary, demiboy, demigirl, and trans man. This question, alongside race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation offered open text responses so that participants could use their own language to express their identities.

Aside from the 16.7% of respondents who selected 'prefer not to say', all participants were under the age of 30. One of the participants does identify themselves as older in their interview transcript.

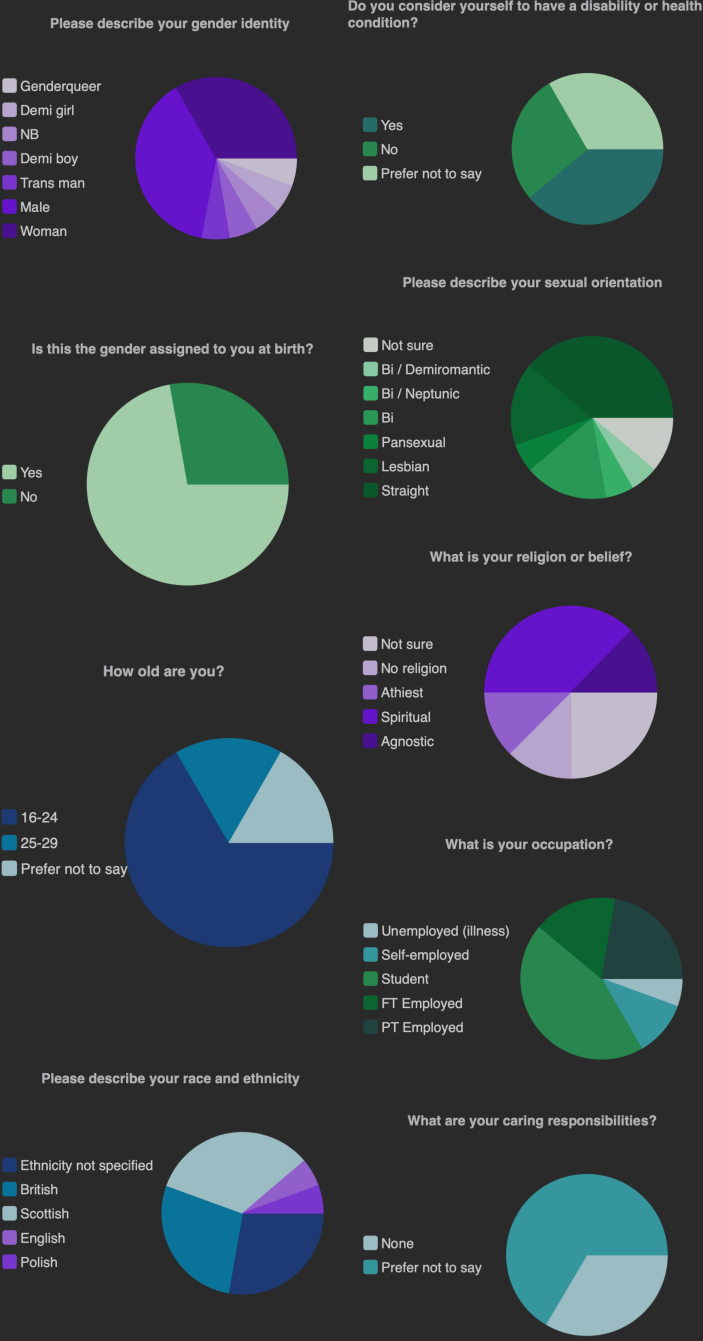
100% of respondents identified as being white, with either no ethnicity specified (27.8%), British ethnicity (27.8%), Scottish ethnicity (33.3%), English ethnicity (5.6%) or Polish ethnicity (5.6%).

The majority of respondents do identify as having a disability or health condition (38.9%), followed by 33.3% who selected 'prefer not to say', and the remaining 27.8% who do not consider themselves to have a disability or medical condition.

The sexual orientation of respondents is reasonably diverse, with a minority identifying as straight or heterosexual (38.9%), and the majority identifying diversely as LGBTQIA+, including: bisexual (16.7%), lesbian (16.7%), pansexual (5.6%), bisexual/neptunic⁶(5.6%), and bisexual/demiromantic (5.6%).

Respondents mostly identified as not having any religion (33.3%), closely followed by agnostic (27.8%), and atheist (22.2%). 5.6% of respondents identify as spiritual, and 11.1% are unsure. As with gender identity and sexual orientation, participants had a text response to this question.

The majority of responses were from students (44.4%), followed by part-time employed (22.2%), full-time employed (16.7%), and self-employed (11.1%). One respondent shared that they are out of work due to illness.



Finally, of the EMF respondents, almost all indicated they had no caring responsibilities with one participant selecting 'prefer not to say'.

In summary, assuming that the EMF is broadly representative of the majority of the respondents, it can be derived that this research is predominantly of young, white, cisgendered people; a significant proportion have experience of disability or health conditions, and identify as LGBTQIA+. This research is not representative of people of colour; however, according to Scotland's 2011 census, only 1.4% of the Highland population were people of colour (of over 200,000 surveyed)⁷, meaning that there is statistically a small likelihood that we do engage people of colour. I can confirm that a small number of participants did represent global majority, but as these were not identified in the EMF and were very few, I remain that the research has an overwhelmingly white bias. It is also not representative of people over 30, those who follow a religion, or people with caring responsibilities.



Responses

The focus group and interview responses to this research are described in detail below. The questions varied slightly with each group, depending on their age or stage, and the way in which they responded to the initial questions. For this section, I have grouped the responses generally into the following headings:

➔ **Gaps** covers responses that indicate areas that participants felt weren't covered by their training. In this report, training may mean SQA qualifications, youth or community theatre (including am-dram), and further or higher education.

➔ **Opportunities** covers responses that are directly relevant to organisations and groups. Opportunities address ways in which theatre companies, venues, groups, and educational institutions can fill the training gaps.

➔ **Connection** covers responses that are specifically about networking with other theatre-makers, and organisations in the Highlands. This has been identified as a key concern in the research.

➔ **Collaboration** covers responses that talk to the ways in which participants would like to work with other emerging theatre-makers

➔ **Events** includes things like workshops and talks. In most focus groups, and in previous research, participants have asked that the gaps in their training and understanding be met through engaging directly with an organisation via workshops and events.

In this section, I will be recounting the responses to these themes as they were identified by participants during the workshop. In the conclusion, I will be offering a more holistic analysis of the responses; including my observations and links across themes.

Gaps

The key theme, which unites many of the participants' experiences of gaps in their training, is **navigating the industry**. This theme covers the practical aspects of the industry that appeared to cause the most anxiety for participants. Under this theme are perceived gaps that relate in particular to freelancing and performing.

Most obvious here was the feeling of 'not knowing where to start' – that participants felt underprepared in accessing work and opportunities. One participant indicated that they didn't know where to find opportunities; furthermore, they and others indicated that they felt their training hadn't supported them in writing applications, both for opportunities and funding. Part of this lack of confidence was tied up with concerns about not knowing industry language or terminology.

Funding was addressed broadly in almost all focus groups and interviews. One participant in particular praised their university course for providing a module on funding, but they also indicated that they hadn't received guidance on budgets and spreadsheets, which are crucial skills for accessing arts funding.

Participants also identified some elements of freelancing as gaps in their training. Tax returns, knowing how to charge for their work, and coping

with unemployment, were all identified aspects of the industry that their training hadn't covered.

Similarly, participants also identified elements of the performance industry as gaps in their learning, specifically: finding and working with agents, understanding or building creative and online CVs (including Spotlight and similar platforms), the process of auditioning, and curating showreels.

There are other gaps that were identified, which I am grouping very broadly under the theme of **pathways**. These generally relate to education and university, and are about understanding the direction of their learning or careers.

Firstly, and most importantly, a number of participants talked about the general lack of opportunities to study drama at a secondary school level across the Highlands. Two participants who identified this as a problem specifically relate this to their challenges in accessing HE courses. Where participants have engaged in drama through youth theatre, or through EC's SQA courses, their inability to access support from teachers for UCAS applications to conservatoires and drama courses mean that they do not feel equipped to craft successful applications.

I can't even go to a specific teacher and be like: "you know what to do, you've done this", so that was kind of scary and is probably the reason I didn't get in last year.

One applicant pursued a degree in another area of the creative industries, another took a gap year and is trying again. I will talk more in the conclusion about the issues with drama access and knowledge at a secondary school level.

Secondly, one participant describes their perceived mistake in not taking a directing module at university. They explain that, as directing wasn't their interest, they prioritised other modules. However, since emerging into the industry, they have realised how much their creative learning practice relies on directing skills. As creative learning is an aspect of the industry that is generally good at offering emerging theatre-makers a 'way in' to working professionally in theatre, this participant could have benefitted from some instruction on the transferrable skills that are offered by their available modules.

Finally, one group in particular described their challenges with learning during Covid-19. For many of the participants across the research, Covid-19 is identified as having a significant impact on their learning and confidence, the most remarkable being that many theatre-makers who started their university education in 2020 have still not had the experience of performing live to a public audience through their degrees.

the pandemic hit a week before my HNC [...] then the next year I was in Glasgow [...] and because Glasgow couldn't behave itself, we had to do an online performance.

In this case, participants talk about feeling inexperienced in performance and are concerned that this will hold them back as they move towards professional practice.

Opportunities

Here, I have collated the responses that participants offered regarding how they would like companies and organisations to respond to these gaps in their learning. The first theme that I have grouped responses under is **professional development** because it directly relates to some of the concerns around navigating the industry under 'Gaps'. As **workshops** and **events** were identified as being important ways for companies to support the emergence of theatre-makers in this and previous research, they have their own section below (page 11).

Opportunities for training were highly regarded as ways for companies to support emerging theatre-makers. While workshops will be discussed more below, participants also asked for opportunities to shadow professionals, and to engage with productions through work experience and volunteering. It was felt that this would allow participants to make networks, and to learn more about industry roles and processes.

A number of participants also indicated that mentorship would be beneficial to their professional development, and that receiving one-to-one support would be an ideal environment to learn. Participants felt that mentors could allow them to understand

more about their pathways into their chosen career and would help them to understand more about the practicalities of working in theatre.

One focus group in particular would like companies to offer support specifically for UCAS applicants; helping secondary-school leavers and those returning to education to workshop their auditions, develop their personal statements, and find the right referees.

having the careers advisor bring the big book out [...] and RCS⁸ wasn't even in it.

One participant also felt that companies in the Highlands could help to showcase talented performers, inviting along agents to facilitate the performers' emergence into the industry. It was expressed that this would also help to subvert their perception that Highland performers and students are underrepresented and ignored by the industry at large. This participant also suggested that they would like a platform where they could connect with UHI graduates as they are an obvious source of emerging talent, so I suggest that a showcase would help to establish these networks locally amongst emerging theatre-makers.

Finally, another participant suggested that they would benefit from a way to engage with companies for support in submitting their tax returns and understanding or navigating the challenges with self-employment – this might be as a workshop or event. Simply having the opportunity or encouragement to connect with a company

informally via email or social media may also help the artist to feel more supported in these challenges.

Another theme adjacent to professional development is creative development. Where the former is more concerned with the development of industry skills and knowledge, creative development is about nurturing creative practice.

A number of participants suggested that a physical space where theatre-makers could 'try stuff out' would be ideal. As this theme was shared across this and previous research, we have allocated a separate section, titled 'Collaboration'. In general, responses that asked for support in creative development were mostly around working with others, and being able to benefit from peer support.

Participants also asked for funding or bursaries that would allow them to create their own work, and collaborate with others. Participants suggested that they would like support working on their own production (individually or as a collective). This would allow them to do what they love and to connect with others through the process.

It was also indicated that if companies and organisations had the capacity to showcase the talent of emerging theatre-makers, this experience and the networks they could make would help them to continue developing their practice.

One participant in particular suggested that an agency model where artists could share their skills or their needs and be matched with others who could help them develop their own work or practice

would be ideal.

Many of the other responses can be broadly grouped under **accessibility**. This covers a wealth of responses centred both around EDI, geographical barriers to access, and approachability. Ways that organisations and companies should be accessible are as follows:

→ Making opportunities for emerging theatre-makers available to people of all ages

→ Be open and approachable so that emerging theatre-makers can feel confident in asking for your help or expertise

→ Be open with your networks, promote other companies, groups, and venues, particularly in different parts of the region

→ Be willing to engage, listen, and encourage

→ Approach emerging theatre-makers with a strong offering of care

→ Make use of online platforms for people who can't travel and who have trouble with social aspects of events and workshops

In particular, some participants asked that we share workshop and event content online. It was also suggested that we establish a board of emerging theatre-makers to listen, understand, and advocate for their needs.

Transport infrastructure is something that underpins much of the conversation around accessibility in a rural context. This was highlighted at the launch

event where several of the participants' depictions of their vision for the future included cars and trains. In another activity (groups were asked to create a profile for an imaginary person who would fill the gaps in their experiences, knowledge, and skills, helping them overcome the barriers to their imagined futures), one group created the profile of a philanthropic power couple, both CEOs of major transport organisations.

Connecting

Finding community is hard, and I'm struggling with it.

In our work and in previous research, we hear often from emerging theatre-makers that one of the biggest challenges in creating work is connecting with other emerging artists. From these focus groups, it is apparent that the reason that emerging artists seek each other out is because they have a mutual understanding about the scope of work (where an experienced artist would expect and require pay, other emerging artists might be more willing to collaborate with others at the same level for the experience and connections). It appears there is comfort in working with peers, and it has been established in this research that emerging theatre-makers feel safer when they are collaborating with others at the same stage.

When asked, almost all participants felt that they wouldn't know where to go to connect with other theatre-makers in the Highlands beyond the groups

they currently engaged with (e.g. EC Youth Theatre, UHI, and Vivid Roots).

I don't think I've met a single emerging artist in my area.

Several participants felt that the Highlands wasn't represented nationally in groups and opportunities for connection and collaboration; one participant going as far to say that:

If you're not Dogstar, you don't get representation of Highland art.

This section is fundamentally about **platforms**. When participants were talking about connecting with other emerging theatre-makers, it was clear that participants across the board would like a blended approach to connecting with others. For most participants, there was a preference for working or 'doing something' in-person, but almost all participants who asked for ways to engage with others asked for online spaces to do this. This was often specifically requested due to the geographic spread of the Highlands and the lack of transport infrastructure; being able to connect with people online was seen as crucial. Participants asked for platforms like message boards, webpage rosters or directories, agency-like platforms, and Facebook or Discord groups where they could meet others, share their own projects for collaborators, and see opportunities by artists, groups, and organisations across the region.

Participants acknowledged that there are already

platforms that offer this kind of facilitation, but that they come with problems for emerging theatre-makers. One participant explained that Discord groups designed for emerging artists ended up being comprised of people looking for work without those to offer or support it. Another participant shared their experience with Facebook groups that make it difficult for emerging artists to engage due to gatekeeping, . One participant explained that groups designed to connect artists often require shared opportunities to be paid, which is not always possible for emerging artists who are wanting to 'try things out'. It was also addressed that groups often only share opportunities for Edinburgh and Glasgow, which isn't accessible for Highland-based artists who struggle with long distance travel, or who can't afford to pay their own travel and accommodation for these opportunities.

A new platform which was identified by one participant is **FTConnect**, a membership platform hosted by Framework Theatre which is designed to connect emerging theatre-makers across Scotland.

Where participants referenced in-person opportunities to engage with others, this was mostly in the form of groups, workshops, and events, which are covered separately.

Several participants expressed that a venue or physical space where they could rehearse and connect with the company and emerging theatre-makers would be ideal. One participant in particular felt that they would like to attend a venue where they could access a 'yellow-pages' for artists, groups,

and opportunities in the area. Another participant felt that universities should host message boards (both physical and digital) where students could share ideas, request collaborators, and ask questions.

Collaboration

In response to participants in this and other research asking for spaces where they can collaborate with other emerging theatre-makers, I have dedicated this section to their proposals. I have divided their responses into:

→ **benefits** – why they feel this kind of opportunity is important to their experience and development

→ **delivery** – how they would like to engage with this type of opportunity

→ **purpose** – what they feel the space or group should offer and serve.

Most of the benefits were shared across groups, and generally referred to the value of making connections in a 'hands-on' environment. A number of participants felt that working creatively and in-person with other artists was the best way to ignite long-lasting industry connections as it allows participants to showcase their creativity and learn whose praxes best compliment their own. Participants also felt that it would generally be beneficial to see the work of other artists as it would enhance their own creative development through experience. As explained in a previous section,

participants generally felt that this type of environment to learn and work with other emerging theatre-makers was important in creating safe and supportive spaces to work on their creative practice by being able to take risks and try new approaches, styles, and skills without the pressure of performing to a professional standard. One participant added that this group would be valuable because, by connecting with other theatre-makers, participants would experience peer support in working towards their chosen career; they suggested that this would be especially important in a culture where performing arts is still seen as an irrelevant career choice. Particularly in the Highlands where drama is so rarely taught in secondary schools, participants would benefit from experiences that help to relieve the pressure of that adversity.

As in the previous section, 'Collaboration', participants generally asked for a blended **delivery** with online elements to connect with participants across the Highlands, but almost all participants would prefer in-person working due to the depth of connection that is generated in physical spaces. Some participants liked the idea of visiting different areas in the Highlands as part of this group to facilitate stronger networks and creative exchange across the region. Participants felt that online spaces as part of this blended approach would be supported by platforms that allowed the group to communicate organically outwith the timetabled delivery of the project.

The **purpose** of the group was unanimous in the broad sense that the group should be a safe space

for people to connect, create, and learn. None of the participants suggested that the group should be one that strives towards excellence or productions, but rather a platform for participants to test their work with an audience and to be held accountable for their own creative and professional development. Beyond this basic principle, I have listed below the responses which describe a more specific purpose:

Sharing interests and passions – learning what excites other people and having the space to work on the things that excite themselves

Sense-checking, and sharing creative work and ideas, such as sharing scripts for feedback, trying out scenes, themes, and styles

Facilitating space for devising work as a company and/or for individuals to lead on stories, themes, and styles that they are developing individually

Landmarks to enhance creativity and accountability, such as regular creative challenges for participants to respond to; and scratch nights so that work can be tested in front of an audience

Focus group participants also shared concerns about some of the **barriers** that often prevent them from being able to engage with these types of opportunities. These barriers are well documented, and the most prevalent is geographical accessibility. There is a significant cost associated with travelling in the Highlands, and public transport is often inaccessible due to limited timetables and a majorly

rural population. Where travel costs and expectations are not mitigated, these groups become exclusive; only accessible to participants who can afford to travel (both due to time, finances, and physical ability) and/or those who live in urban spaces with better transport access. Time is also a significant barrier, especially when concerning emerging and early-career theatre-makers. As this demographic works towards freelance careers, many potential participants work evenings in creative learning, and other industries, and are not able to sacrifice work for unpaid creative opportunities. This means that companies and groups offering this kind of experience have to think hard about what they are offering to make sure that participants will not be losing out, otherwise these opportunities are again inaccessible to participants with a financial barrier. Finally, one participant particularly referenced age as a barrier for their involvement; opportunities for skills development are regularly targeted towards young people (under 25). Potential participants who have joined the industry later in life due to caring responsibilities, disabilities, and other life circumstances, find it difficult to access these crucial initial experiences to develop their career and their craft.

Events

This section covers participant responses on the delivery of talks, workshops, and large-scale events that would support their emergence. Firstly, I will cover the **workshop** themes that were identified by participants, which were a mixture of industry skills and creative practice. Workshops relating to

industry skills were:

Professional freelance and admin support, such as taxes, invoices, CVs, marketing and more

Performer freelance support, such as audition etiquette, showreels, Spotlight, and working with agents

Coping with the freelance industry, in particular being able to manage rejection and unemployment

Producing; although this could also be covered under 'creative practice', the attitude with which participants requested producing to be taught was as an industry skill, relating to budgets, funding applications, and understanding the purpose of the role more fully. In particular, some participants were interested in the difference between producing work of both large- and small-scale, and the practicalities of producing work from conception to performance

Workshops relating to creative practice were:

Production skills; this came up frequently, with participants either feeling that they are expected to know how to perform all roles, or genuinely curious about design and technical processes (e.g. lighting design, technical theatre, and stage management).

Performance skills, such as acting skills, improvisation, and physical theatre; participants felt that acting skill workshops were beneficial to those who had pursued non-traditional routes into performance (i.e. not attending drama degrees), improvisation was a crucial skill that caused them a lot of anxiety, and that physical theatre was something they generally enjoyed

Directing was identified by a number of participants as being a crucial skill that they felt they hadn't learned enough about and that either: they realised they were missing directing skills in their current work, or felt they would be more employable if they could also direct

Writing was another creative role that many participants indicated they would like to attend workshops for; most participants who wanted to attend writing workshops expressed either a desire to be better at something they were already passionate about, or for fun, meeting others, and learning a new approach

What has been most striking from the responses to questions relating to workshops is the sense that many emerging theatre-makers feel the need to be able to do everything.

my experience with it, and the way I view what I was being taught is: "you need to learn how to do everything on your own", which is fundamentally at odds with the reality of theatre.

I will talk more about this in the conclusion.

Participants also responded extremely positively to the suggestion of events, like festivals and networking events, targeted towards emerging theatre-makers. As part of these events, participants were interested in opportunities to learn new skills (both industry, and creative), participating in networking and activities that helped participants learn what was available to them, and to showcase their work and champion the talent of others. Experiences relating to learning and development are:

Workshops (see above)

Talks from professionals on industry skills, such as: producing, funding, and applying for work

Script-swaps to have your work proof-read and to share approaches, themes, and techniques

A sample-like space for trying and learning about different production skills, such as lighting, costume, and sound



Networking elements of these events asked for by participants are:

Workshops (in that they are a valuable way to meet new people through doing, which I have spoken about in previous sections)

Stalls to talk to freelancers and organisations about their work, pathways, and opportunities

Networking activities and workshops that prepare emerging theatre-makers for the networking events – this was identified particularly as being useful for neurodiverse attendees who may struggle with the social elements of networking. Receiving help crafting a statement about their practice and what they might be looking for would be beneficial

A directory for all attendees to support connections and networking beyond the event, including QR code and business cards

I also noted that all participants who talked about events for emerging theatre-makers felt that it was important for both emerging and established artists to be present

Opportunities for showcasing which were identified by participants are:

Graduate performances

Connecting with other groups across the Highlands

Scratch nights

Footage of productions from companies and freelancers

Finally, some participants offered preferences about the delivery of this type of event. One participant asked that the event include local businesses and occurred in multiple spaces across the area/region to create the feel of a festival. They also asked that the event be marketed to all arts groups and industries due to the transferrable skills and knowledge. I also acknowledge that the Highlands has a strong practice of multi-disciplinary arts, and an event targeted towards theatre should recognise this.

Some participants also asked that talks, workshops, and performances be recorded so that attendees and those unable to travel would also have access to the experience and the connections.

In the conclusion, I will expand more on these themes and the other points of interest that emerged from this research.



CONCLUSION

Reflections

In the Introduction, I identified three central observations: **education**, **networks**, and **industry knowledge**. These themes seemed to be the most central to the participants' concerns about their emergence into the industry. Before I dive into the recommendations, I will first offer some of my reflections on these themes more holistically. For a comprehensive look into the responses, I recommend reading the full report.

In the report draft that was shared for the launch event, I featured **education** as the main point of my analysis because it is the dominant pathway for people to access theatre training and to engage with the industry. However, what was clear from the discussions at the event is that **networks** are the primary concern for the industry more broadly. 'Connection' was a key theme of the day, referenced by most as the primary goal, and a crucial barrier for theatre-making in and beyond the Highlands. This is not a new issue but it is clear that it has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, a sentiment which I have seen expressed across many different spaces (anecdotally).

It has also become clear that strong networks across the industry are a vital starting point in filling in these gaps for emerging theatre-makers. In honour of this, I have restructured this report to feature **networks** as the primary focus for the

reflections. Many responses included in this research identified networks as a vital need for participants to excel in the industry. The responses clearly demonstrate the value in connecting with emerging theatre-makers, and how participants would like to access this, so I won't cover those points again. Instead, I will argue that better relationships and partnerships across the whole industry (including education, am-dram, venues, and professionals; locally and nationally) will help emerging theatre-makers to build their own networks. I will talk about this more in 'Recommendations'.

Particularly regarding platforms for industry networks, this research demonstrated that there are already many platforms that exist for industry networking. There are dozens of Facebook groups, Discord groups, and membership platforms, including Framework Theatre's **FTConnect**. It is my opinion that adding to this plethora of networking platforms is unhelpful. Better relationships between sector partners will help signpost emerging theatre-makers to platforms that will best suit their needs. It will also help to facilitate better discourse between education, organisations and individuals, which should make theatre-makers feel more confident about approaching organisations and professionals for support to find work and people.

In addition, stronger intra-sector communication and sharing will be extremely useful in implementing mentorship and shadowing opportunities, which were identified by most groups as being a useful way to learn new skills and engage with the industry.

It was also felt by participants that mentorship and shadowing opportunities, as well as events like workshops and festivals, are great opportunities for emerging theatre-makers to access those wider industry networks and get a foot in the door.

I think it is telling that so many of the participants expressed a desire to connect with other artists, both emerging and established, and identified this as a barrier to their ability to work in the industry. This disconnection is also felt by industry stakeholders in and beyond the Highlands. It is attributed to a lack of exposure to theatre or creative careers in other aspects of our cultural lives and education, and the industry's reliance on a freelance workforce. Because the workforce isn't generally tied to expansive organisations, emerging theatre-makers don't know where to go to access this network or the support attached to it. A number of participants asked for more spaces and venues, which was also apparent in some of the imagined futures at the launch event. I will talk to this more in the recommendations.

Education is also a crucial point of interrogation for this research. Education is where school-age children can be inspired to pursue creative careers, and is the primary pathway for many emerging artists to train. It is therefore important that educators understand the impact that they will have on the creative journeys of their learners. Where educators can effectively demonstrate their place within the theatre industry as a whole, identify the gaps that they are not able to fill in career pathways, and signpost learners to fill those gaps, learners will

be best placed to feel career-ready at graduation.

It was apparent that many learners felt unprepared and unsupported in their progression from secondary school to FE/HE or from FE/HE to professional working. In particular, those who had graduated with HE degrees did not express that they were fully trained practitioners as a result of their training. Most graduates implied that they didn't know what area of the theatre industry they were emerging into, which manifested in their desire to learn a bit of everything on the production side, to learn about being a playwright, a director, a designer, and more. There was largely an emphasis from the majority of groups and participants on learning how to execute new roles rather than specialising in their own areas of interest.

On a more positive note, more than one participant expressed praise for EC's delivery of SQA drama. Participants describe that access to a theatre space, and learning alongside passionate people who were giving up their weekends led to extremely positive and lasting experiences.

if I go down to Edinburgh and Glasgow – most people I know from the [Highland] theatre industry [I know] because we all did Eden Court together

Participants also championed university degrees that were 'hands-on' and that facilitated better connections between lecturers and students.

Industry knowledge was the area that seemed to cause participants the most anxiety regarding the gaps in their training. In the broadest sense, this is about how the industry actually works. I argue that the lack of industry knowledge in participants is largely why many of them felt the need to be able to fulfil all creative roles rather than specialising. If participants (particularly graduates) had a better understanding of the industry, particularly in production, they might feel more confident specialising in the area/s that interest them the most. I am not arguing that theatre-makers can only be one thing – I specialise in directing, producing, and research – but I think it is unreasonable to expect theatre-makers to be *everything*.

Funding is a part of this, and was by far the most widely identified gap in participants' training; the only participant who stated that they did have access to this kind of training indicated that it wasn't comprehensive as they weren't educated on budgets.

funding applications, because why – I don't know about you – but why do all of these creative courses not teach it?

Many participants in this research indicated insecurity due to their inability to access funding, or a feeling of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of writing a funding application; but all participants who identified this as a gap in their training expressed that they felt that they had to be able to successfully apply for funding in order to create their own work. This is not necessarily true; this

sentiment is indicative that graduates are not being taught about the different career paths and creative roles which work in collaboration. It is very common for practitioners to seek out producers to support their funding applications, and navigate the administrative elements of theatre-making. I argue that, for the emerging theatre-makers who find funding applications difficult, they will benefit from support in finding practitioners and producers who do have more confidence and experience in applying for funding. However, for those learners and theatre-makers who might have the intuition for funding applications, it is categorical that this be taught in education. It is one of the most important industry skills – to be able to fundraise, or to find people who can.

Industry knowledge in freelancing and self-employment is also called upon by participants. Some are baffled by the fact that in their four years studying a degree, that would likely require them to be self-employed, they were never taught about tax returns, entrepreneurship, or how to write an application. In their interviews, and from my own anecdotal experience, I can confidently say that this is the experience of almost all emerging theatre-makers. Where these crucial points of understanding are not addressed or supported, significant barriers to accessing arts careers are established. These barriers prevent people – specifically those without entrepreneurial families or backgrounds; who struggle with forms, numbers, and language; or who generally have to manage challenges related to mental health and neurodiversity – from being successful and from

feeling that they have a place within the industry.

I will also add some more context that is specifically in relation to the **Highlands**. All of the above is amplified by the perceived challenges of working in the region. With the lack of drama education, the lack of local professional theatre, and the barriers to travel and access, emerging theatre-makers in the Highlands are pushed to move to Edinburgh and Glasgow in search of other opportunities. Some of the participants expressed a feeling that there just wasn't anything here for them – in terms of opportunities, inspiration, encouragement, and more. While there is a great existing culture of online working in the Highlands, which has been around long before Covid-19, this doesn't translate to the central belt. Opportunities that ask applicants or artists to travel to the central belt are made inaccessible to Highland-based theatre-makers who might not be able to afford to travel, or be able to travel up to eight hours each way for a one-hour audition.

This is not just a request for centrally-based organisations to improve their reach and consider all of Scotland (unless they have a specific reason for only employing from the central belt), but is also a strong advocacy for more locally produced professional theatre. There are significant challenges to this, many of which are not included as part of this report, and include issues like a lack of affordable accommodation, a lack of affordable rehearsal space, a lack of available local artists, and more. The most important barrier to locally produced work is that local talent is not able to

access training that helps them to feel prepared to create their own work, to engage networks, and to navigate the industry at large. If more emerging theatre-makers can access training that helps them to feel prepared and empowered to make work in the Highlands, we will see more of it.

Recommendations

My primary recommendation from this report is that relationships amongst the creative sector need to be strengthened and become more transparent and accessible to individuals. This is particularly important in **education** where industry leaders (both individuals and organisations) should be visible to learners. If young people and emerging theatre-makers have more exposure to industry networks throughout their learner journeys, they will be more confident in accessing this network in the future, which will be of particular benefit when they are seeking support in filling the gaps in their education. Better connections may also lessen the gaps in training because it will better facilitate dialogue between learners, professionals, organisations, venues, and more. For example, if a learner feels that they need support in navigating the legal and financial realm of self-employment but the educational institution is not equipped to facilitate this, the learner could be signposted to professionals within that network for support. This doesn't just apply to schools and universities but to all groups who educate young people and emerging artists in performing arts – including youth arts groups, and venues that host SQA courses.

Below, I have listed some specific steps that may be taken in an educational setting:

➔ Reach out to the professional sector – initiate and be open to new relationships with professionals and organisations this will help you help your learners

➔ Think about how your learners can access this network. We know that time is precious and teachers/lecturers are often already working more than their contracted hours, so think about how you can facilitate this dialogue without making yourself a mediator. Holding space for groups, organisations, and other sector stakeholders to engage directly with learners is a great way of making stakeholders feel more accessible – this will make learners more confident engaging with stakeholders independently. Have you thought about inviting stakeholders in to view performances? (This is for high schools, universities, youth groups, and am-dram) This could be an exceptional way to facilitate networking and could genuinely enhance the quality and depth of the work being produced by the learners

➔ Prioritise cultivating career-ready leavers and graduates; if you're not sure how, ask your learners what they feel they need and signpost them within your network if you don't have the capacity to fill these gaps yourself

➔ Find out if your learners feel career-ready in the lead up to graduation/leaving. Ask, host surveys, push for better alumni communication

(if your organisation offers this)

Guidance teachers and personal academic tutors also need to understand how to support their learners in achieving their aspirations. If you have a learner wanting to apply to universities that require auditions, self-tapes, or showreels, and you don't know how to best support that, connect with an organisation or professional who does. If you work with a student who expresses that they wish to be a performer but your degree is targeted towards production, signpost them to other training or professionals who can support them

Be absolutely clear about what your degree is designed to produce in your learners. If you are an acting- or performance-based degree, prioritise this in how the degree is marketed; if you are aiming to produce an 'all-rounder' experience so that students can learn what aspect they are interested in, be clear that the degree won't necessarily encourage students to specialise. This will help prevent students graduating with anxieties about having to be able to produce, direct, write, design, and perform to a high standard. For students who know what they want to specialise in, this will allow them make an informed decision about their educational pathways

Educators can also try to have practicing artists on their degrees as they will have the most connected and current understanding of the industry, and will be able to pass that on as a teacher, filtering

through other staff. Where this isn't possible or available, educators should ensure that their industry networks are especially strong, diverse, and accessible.

I would also like to acknowledge the term 'cultural confidence' which was offered at the launch event. This term was used by several participants in different ways, but captured feelings that: Highland-based artists and organisations can and should value and advocate for region's cultural output and identity; that we are a part of that identity; and that this is in reference to both historical and contemporary culture and creativity. This term was first spoken in one of the participants' visions for the future, and was featured alongside a brief discussion about the disengagement of learners, which is something I have been aware of and experienced first-hand as a student. I recently had a conversation with a staff member from a local venue who expressed that it is 'impossible' to engage students through invitations to public performances and workshops. When we put this challenge within the context of 'cultural confidence', we see a pattern emerging where the lack of work being produced in the area, the reluctance for organisations to engage with students, and the disengagement of students perpetuates each other.

This is not a one-sided issue, and shouldn't be left solely to educational providers. With this in mind, here are some of my recommendations for **creative venues and organisations**.

Engage with educational groups and institutions in your area, they might not always have the capacity to reach out first. Initiate conversations about how the relationship can best be

facilitated with the learners' needs at the centre of this dialogue

Don't give up. While the majority of learners might seem disengaged, some of us are not and have the potential to go on to start companies, lead successful freelance careers, and join arts organisations

When you are seeking to engage with learners, look beyond schools and universities to youth groups, theatre groups, and am-dram, as fewer schools offer drama as a subject; by extension, if you are in the position to advocate for improved access to drama education, do so

Be accessible; you don't have to be offering paid work for emerging theatre-makers at all times, as this won't fit within the remit of many companies' aims – but do make it easy for emerging theatre-makers to be in touch for support and networking

Have stakes in local groups, am-dram, and professional theatre, and make yourself as present within communities that are populated with emerging theatre-makers as you are within established professional communities

Know that many emerging theatre-makers join Facebook, and Discord groups, be aware of new platforms that are emerging and be connected via these spaces where it is appropriate. Engage with companies and organisations who already have a membership platform, like **FTConnect** and a similar initiative

hosted by EC

There are more and more events and projects being targeted towards emerging and early-career theatre-makers (especially since Covid-19); be present at festivals, scratch nights, and performances

If you have a venue, think about how you want people to be in that space; in my conversations with emerging theatre-makers in this research and anecdotally, people often reference the café spaces of the Tron, the Traverse, and the Lyceum as industry beehives. Start working towards being this space for the Highlands. In an industry of freelancers, establishing spaces in which people want to work, meet, and network, is extremely important

What I hoped would emerge from the launch event, and which I will now address, are the things that educational institutions and arts organisations need to facilitate their support of emerging theatre-makers. These forces are often unseen by emerging theatre-makers, but here are some recommendations for **government, council, and funders**.

Participants and stakeholders want to see clearly that, and how, you value the arts. You can do this by working on visible and accessible arts and culture policies that are followed through and followed up

If you don't see the value of the arts, maybe check out some of the other publications that I have referenced under 'Background', which

evidence the economic benefit of engaging in the arts, such as **Forgotten Regions** and the Scottish Government's Culture Strategy

Get young people and emerging artists involved in the conversation. I have participated in spaces where young people have been involved in policy-making and it can have a transformative effect on the young person and the organisation. One example of my experience is the National Youth Arts Advisory Group (NYAAG) which is currently going through an extraordinary process of reform after hearing and acting upon the needs of the young people in the group.

Make it easier for arts organisations and emerging theatre-makers to reach you; council, government, and funding bodies are notorious for being shrouded in bureaucracy – make a deliberate effort to be available

If you see work, research, and opportunities emerging in your area, or emerging in places where this is uncommon – champion this! Emma Roddick made a parliamentary motion on behalf of Vivid Roots Collective in 2021 and this has undoubtedly supported our efforts to access funding and advocate for the benefits of the work we are creating

Arts organisations and emerging artists want to engage with these vital stakeholders so that they can influence policy, find new routes for funding, advocate for their regional and industry-specific needs, and do their part to make a difference. I

would like to ask that you all make yourself available to be a part of these growing networks in the Highlands.

My final point here is in reference of the caveat that I offered for lecturers and venues, acknowledging that these stakeholders are extremely busy. Anecdotally, I have spoken with numerous freelancers and organisation representatives over the past five months who describe a workforce that is busier and more over-capacity than ever before. I wish to urge policymakers, government, council, and funders to consider how reduction in funding and de-prioritising the creative industries impacts the future generation of the workforce. In a sector where artists and organisations are working harder for less, they lose the capacity to invest in emerging theatre-makers. Reducing funding for the arts prohibits the sector from paving the way for the industry's future.

Most of this is likely relevant across the sector, but, I would like to conclude this report with observations that are particular to the **Highlands** (and potentially other rural areas).

Firstly, for national bodies: be national or be specific. If you advertise yourself to be representative of the country's creativity, be visible and reachable outwith the central belt. Practically, this means: making connections with organisations and individuals across the country to forge strong networks in all regions; making events accessible to the whole of Scotland by offering online options, delivering events in different regions, and offering

travel bursaries. You should also be doing this as standard, not as an extra. If this is beyond your capacity, it might be worth reconsidering who you are representing. and being specific about your reach.

Secondly, regardless of where and who you are, if you are wanting to engage with Highland-based theatre-makers, your best chance is to do so through other organisations and groups. Most participants wanted to be reached through spaces in which they are already engaged. Remember that many of the barriers and challenges for emerging theatre-makers are compacted in the Highlands by poor infrastructure, a perceived barren landscape for professional opportunities, and a general lack of practicing professionals in the region. This leads me to my recommendations for a final group.

Thirdly, and finally, due to the absence of professional performance opportunities in the region, **am-dram** dominates some of the main stages in the Highlands. This is an extremely important part of the industry as it promotes the joy of performance for participants and their loved ones, and gets people of all ages and backgrounds into the auditorium. It can be a great experience for people who are new to the industry to see the inside of a performance space and to craft that event. However, it is indicated that this part of the industry feels isolated from the rest. All of the participants who referenced am-dram in their interviews suggested that they would like these groups to be better connected to other organisations, venues, and educational spaces, and open to facilitating better relationships with the industry.

since we're all based in the Highlands, we all know the talent that we have here, and if those groups would be willing to share your information [...] I think it would be helpful. Also, it will be good for, like, the Florian's Juniors who are thinking of leaving [...]

There is much more to be derived from this report, and I encourage you to read it in full (if you haven't already) and to establish your own reflections and recommendations to improve pathways for emerging theatre-makers.

Something that everyone can take away from this report is that emerging theatre-makers, at all ages and stages, are the future of the industry. The creative industries is one of Scotland's growth sectors, and is thought to be one of the key industries that will withstand technological advancements⁹. So, in this way, emerging theatre-makers (and artists) are the future of Scotland. I argue that – even if your company's or organisation's work is not explicitly targeted towards emerging theatre-makers – if you are in the performance industry, and you hope to be sustainable, you should be thinking about our futures.

APPENDICES

References



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Scottish census 2011 [online]

Transcripts & Event Notes

If you would like to read the research transcripts in full, or if you would like to read the notes from the launch event, you can access them using the QR code below. If this doesn't work for you, you can get in touch using the contact information at the beginning of this report, or on our website.

