



ACADEMY/ Story Futures

ANNUAL REPORT 2019

NFTS

NATIONAL
FILM AND
TELEVISION
SCHOOL

UK Research
and Innovation



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StoryFutures /ACADEMY/

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LOOKING FORWARD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first year of StoryFutures Academy has seen the establishment of core team infrastructure, key relationships and processes, and a range of highly successful pilot activities which have established the National Centre for Immersive Storytelling as a key partner for skills and innovation in the screen industries and beyond.

This report summarises key highlights including reaching 274 beneficiaries through our range of Experimental Labs, Writers Rooms, Bootcamps and Co-production activities, as well as our achievements with respect to diversity within the programme, including exceeding our 15% BAME target by 10%. The programme has stimulated and supported 74 jobs and leveraged over £0.5million new investment by industry in immersive production.

We also report on key challenges in setting up a programme of this scale, including the need to develop completely new processes, as well as industry-wide challenges in engaging co-production partners.

Finally, we look ahead to the exciting activity lined up for year two, including an increased number of open calls for participation in our programmes, a renewed push for collaboration with regional partners, and an acceleration of our co-production activity - including a specific focus on the games industry.

Year one of StoryFutures Academy has laid important groundwork for this ambitious and unique programme of work, and we look forward to a busy and dynamic next chapter as we move into year two.

STORYFUTURES ACADEMY

Year 1: In Numbers

BENEFICIARIES

274

99%

**SATISFACTION
RATING**

**LEVERAGE
ACHIEVED**

607k

23

**COURSES
ENGAGED**

**BAME
PARTICIPANTS**

25%



DIRECTORS STATEMENT

Our mission is to provide core screen sector talent with the tools, space, creative freedom and cross-sector work structures to unlock the creative and commercial potential of immersive production. Ensuring that diversity is embedded into the development of immersive storytelling across disciplines, StoryFutures Academy will upskill over 180 core screen talent and generate nearly 1,000 beneficiaries.

We are exceptionally proud of the whole StoryFutures Academy team and all the work that has been achieved towards our core mission in just twelve months.

Since 1st September 2018 over 270 creative professionals and students have benefited from the diverse range of programmes StoryFutures Academy has established. These include 129 direct beneficiaries from the core screen industries, including Oscar and BAFTA winners and senior staff from major film and television organisations. This number is particularly significant, as it indicates that not only have we already reached over half of our 3-year goal to develop core screen industries talent, but also that there is significant appetite in the sector for tackling the challenges and opportunities of immersive storytelling.

We have started and supported the journey of hundreds of professionals into the exciting new world of immersive storytelling. In the process we've remained true to our ambitions of reflecting the diversity of the UK's talent pool to ensure that over 25% of participants have been from BAME background, whilst 46% have been female. The team we have assembled across the National Film and Television School and Royal Holloway, University of London is also reflective of this – nearly 50% female and over 15% BAME. The team have worked incredibly hard to make the National Centre function effectively across two sites and institutions, as well as integrating with StoryFutures Creative Industries Cluster Programme.

There have also been significant challenges in setting up StoryFutures Academy. Uncertainty over Brexit has impacted investment in new areas of business across the economy: for StoryFutures Academy, this has a direct impact on our ability to encourage core screen industries to invest in the new area of immersive production. This particularly slowed down our co-production workstream. The BFI, who during the bidding process pledged to support whomever won the National Centre, have been encouraging and engaged but we haven't yet formulated a concrete plan for their partnership support, although positive discussion is ongoing. Equally internal processes at both host institutions, but especially RHUL, have had to make significant adaptations to deliver against the programme goals that have slowed down work. However, in acknowledging these challenges, it is worth bearing in mind the speed of the bidding process, which allowed just over 6 months from announcement of the competition to the start of the award. That we have achieved so much in the first 12 months is all the more encouraging given the need to work in parallel to establish the StoryFutures Creative Cluster.

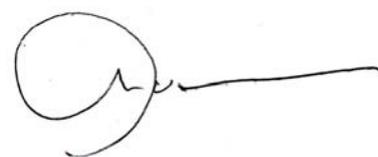
With those set up processes now behind us we can look forward with confidence to the opportunities of year 2, these include:

- Creating BBC3's first audience-facing immersive experience that translates format-telling expertise from television to immersive.
- Development Funding launch Autumn 2019: Kickstart and Booster Funding.
- A series of 'level two' specialist skills workshops.
- A creative review scheme led in collaboration with ILMxLabs open to all CICP award-holders.
- Developing a potential partnership with London Film Festival to commission the first immersive piece from BAFTA winning director Asif Kapadia.
- Increased Regional Activity with TRCMedia in Scotland, Creative England in Manchester and programmes in development with CICP clusters InGAME based at Abertay and Bristol + Bath.

We are very pleased to present our first annual report here and tackling the exciting new opportunities ahead. Our work has only just begun!



Professor James Bennett
Co-Director, StoryFutures Academy



Dr Jon Wardle
Co-Director, StoryFutures Academy

ACHIEVEMENTS

FEATURES
Tribeca 2019's Festival Hub: An Experiential Storytelling Showcase

Video
This year's festival was kicked off by **Common Ground**, a new VR documentary about the Aylesbury Estate in South East London, the largest public housing complex in Europe with over 2,700 dwellings for 2,500 residents. Held up as a British Pruitt-Igoe, the St. Louis poster child for urban decay that was dynamited in the 1970s, it is being "regenerated" in a plan that will destroy the original buildings and replace them with combined luxury and subsidized housing, a plan that is already compromised.

THE ARCHITECTS NEWSPAPER
TFF
New York's Tribeca Film Festival offers building-related entertainment
By SUSAN MORRIS • April 29, 2019

Art East On View

(Common Ground VR)

This year's **Tribeca Film Festival's** Virtual Arcade exhibits provocative VR and AR projects for architects. **Common Ground** is the ironic title of an interactive VR documentary about the Aylesbury Estate in South East London, the largest public housing complex in Europe with over 2,700 dwellings for 2,500 residents. Held up as a British Pruitt-Igoe, the St. Louis poster child for urban decay that was dynamited in the 1970s, it is being "regenerated" in a plan that will destroy the original buildings and replace them with combined luxury and subsidized housing, a plan that is already compromised.

Where **There's Smoke**, written and directed by Lance Weiler, mixes live documentary, immersive theater, and an escape room to create an experience that explores memory and loss with the burning of a home. Participants determine the cause of the fire by sitting through the charred remains in a series of rooms.

Tribeca Film Festival's Virtual Arcade is highlighting social causes

Since 2013, the Tribeca Film Festival has been showcasing virtual reality. As this year's Virtual Arcade, the festival has a lineup of 22 AR and augmented exhibits.

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The Aylesbury Estate is the largest social housing project in Britain. Since the 1960s, it has been home to thousands of working-class South Londoners.

Common Ground

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Tribeca Immersive 2019 Awesome List

1. **Common Ground**, presented by The Tribeca Film Festival, is a VR documentary about the Aylesbury Estate in South East London, the largest public housing complex in Europe with over 2,700 dwellings for 2,500 residents. Held up as a British Pruitt-Igoe, the St. Louis poster child for urban decay that was dynamited in the 1970s, it is being "regenerated" in a plan that will destroy the original buildings and replace them with combined luxury and subsidized housing, a plan that is already compromised.

2. **There's Smoke**, written and directed by Lance Weiler, mixes live documentary, immersive theater, and an escape room to create an experience that explores memory and loss with the burning of a home. Participants determine the cause of the fire by sitting through the charred remains in a series of rooms.

STRATEGIC DISCUSSION

The first year of StoryFutures Academy has involved two main activities;

- Establishing vital underlying operations and processes of the Academy;
- Piloting a range of activities in accordance with our delivery plan - focussing on upskilling the core screen industries of Film, TV and Games.

1 ESTABLISHING CORE OPERATIONS

- Setting up Immersive Labs at both NFTS and Royal Holloway with a unique and unparalleled library of over 75 titles
- Establishing key legal templates and processes for workstreams, including training and R&D contracts
- Hiring 10 staff, including our Head of Immersive (Becky Gregory-Clarke), our Executive Producer (Amanda Murphy) and Programme Manager (Sarah Smyth).

2 PILOT WORKSTREAM ACTIVITY

Our work has seen 219 direct beneficiaries take part in at least one of our workstreams, with many taking part in the onward journeys offered from our introductory labs. Through the ripple effect of our placements and co-production workstreams, nearly 300 professionals and students have benefited from StoryFutures Academy in the first year.

Introductory Labs: We ran six introductory labs, training 56 people attracting senior staff from major film and television companies and Oscar and BAFTA winning film and television practitioners. Our pilot work, including work on the skills report, established that a level 1 training course was required for most screen industry professionals, leading our programme away from more 'experimental labs' as first envisaged. Our Introductory Labs therefore act as an entry point for talent in the core screen industries to get started with immersive, including organisations wishing to co-fund productions such as the BBC and Channel 4, for whom we ran bespoke introductory workshops.

Bootcamps: Creating and running two Bootcamps focussed around key skills identified as being in demand by industry: Producing and Games Engines. These workshops were attended by a total of 26 people, over 96% of whom were interested in taking up placements.



ACHIEVEMENTS

Placements: 4 established screen industry professionals have moved on from bootcamps into our on-set placements training scheme. Most positively our placements programme has seen knowledge exchange between established TV/Film professionals and immersive specialists at Rewind Productions, Nexus Studios, Passion Pictures and Maze Theory, benefitting crews of over 50 professionals (see Case Study);

Co-Productions: our co-production funding of £25k unlocked £100,000 of further funding from the CreativeXR programme for VR City's Common Ground. VR City were able to pull together a crew of over 16 professionals to undertake a production that was genuinely innovative in its use of archive, leading to critical and international success at festivals including Tribeca (USA), Sheffield DocFest (UK) and Sandbox (China).

Writers Rooms: Working with Punchdrunk to create and deliver three Writers Rooms for a total of 40 people, including one which was attended by 7 Creative Clusters. One of the great successes of year 1 has been combining the Writers Room with our placement scheme, which built a successful collaboration with Maze Theory to create a Writers Room for their VR Peaky Blinders experience (see Case Study). This model has been developed to work on a new opportunity with To Play For and writing for AI at the start of year 2.

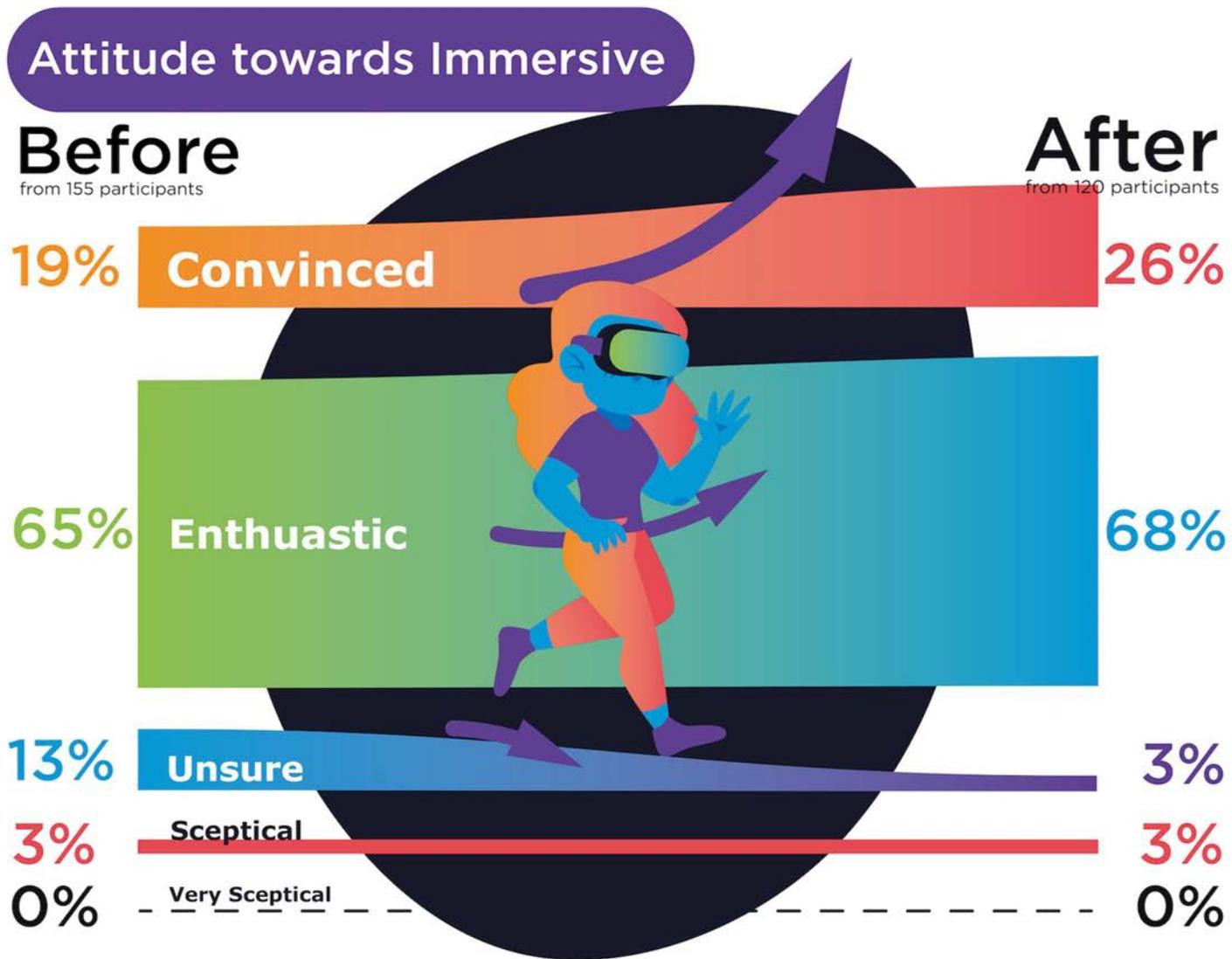
Developmental Stream: Integrating immersive into 14 NFTS MA courses and 9 RHUL undergraduate and MA courses as well as the StoryFutures' PhD programme. Initial workshops have led to wider NFTS and RHUL staff designing immersive workshops and skills into foundation of these courses.





ADDITIONAL HIGHLIGHTS:

- Hosting a Masterclass with VR pioneer **Nonny de la Peña**, attended by 77 people.
- Collaborating on the first cross-sector trade body survey and review of the skills gap in the immersive economy, focusing on audience facing content (see Impact case study).
- Collaborating with BBC3 on our first challenge-led co-production, leading to six television production companies attending a bespoke experimental lab with a view for pitching to build an immersive prototype to take place at the start of year 2.
- Piloting a development funding scheme by agreeing our first project - Violence by director Shola Amoo in collaboration with immersive producer Nell Whitley, from Marshmallow Laser Feast.
- Agreeing a creative review mentoring group with ILMxLabs, which will be open to all CICP award-holders to put forward a production for consideration.



The work achieved over year 1 has refined our work packages significantly, but most importantly helped us understand the significant appetite for immersive storytelling within the screen industries. Our Introductory Lab exit surveys reveal a **10% reduction** in levels of scepticism about the potential of immersive for screen industries.

CASE STUDY

Bootcamp & Placement with REWIND

Steve Shannon, an established senior level Creative Director with over 20 years of television, advertising and marketing experience, was selected to go on the first SFA funded placement with REWIND for 6 weeks.

Steve took on the role of 'Producer' and was paired with REWIND in-house Producer, Aimee Melmoth-Bennett: 'It felt like such a valuable pairing. I think Steve learnt a lot about our AR processes, lots of little milestones daily to deliver iterating as we go. And I learnt so much from Steve having never run a shoot on the scale of the one he produced for us, such as how invaluable the prep and pre-production meetings were and how to manage the stresses of such a big live shoot. It was amazing'.

Stephen Brown, REWIND says, "The main project we took Steve on for was a good bridge of traditional and more interactive content so there was a real need for his skillset."

Project one: Top Gear Immersive stunt.

REWIND put Top Gear viewers in the drivers' seat of their stunt car via 360 filming. This drew on Steve's extensive knowledge of live filming; 'I've never been on a shoot that mixes 1st person and 3rd person perspectives and in 360, so pulling these different elements together was really interesting and I feel I have gained so much more knowledge about 360 filming on a much bigger scale'.

[Watch it here on YouTube](#)



Project Two: Samsung AR secret menu

Steve then shadowed and assisted REWIND Producer Aimee Melmoth-Bennett on Samsung's AR project to create a AR virtual menu for various food chains. This project exposed Steve to a whole new area of digital production, based wholly around mobile phones, QR codes and data – away from cameras and production shoots, enabling him to develop a whole new skill set.

Feedback from Sol Rogers, Founder/CEO REWIND: "The talent supply chain will not change and the industry will not progress unless initiatives like StoryFutures Academy are adopted. Enabling skilled people from the traditional TV, film, and theatre industries to have access to immersive companies and vice versa leads to accelerated learning and development on both sides, plus helps to further cement the UK's position as a leader in immersive content creation. This cross-sector approach is not only innovative but highly valuable.

The 'Value' of the Placement: StoryFutures Academy's initial bootcamp training upskilled Steve to enable his production skills to form a vital cog in the creation of a REWIND project that might not have otherwise happened. Our financial support de-risked the on-set training for Steve and enabled in-house REWIND staff to benefit from cross-sector knowledge exchange, supporting over 50 jobs on set. Without the combination of skills, the project could not have been delivered. In the process of creating the placement, StoryFutures Academy has developed a valuable alumni network which includes an obligation on Steve Shannon to provide 'pass it on' training to future cohorts at the Academy. In so doing, a virtuous learning cycle has been established that is already feeding into our future placements with Passion Pictures, Maze Theory, Nexus Studios and To Play For.

Most importantly, StoryFutures Academy helped REWIND and the BBC blaze new ground in immersive production. **Duncan Gray, Commercial Director , Top Gear:** 'We wanted to create entertaining content for our YouTube channel that took fans behind the scenes of a Top Gear stunt. And by producing this content in 360 we were able to 'virtually' put viewers right there in the driving seat ... something we've never done before. The results are smashing!'

[Link to the BBC top gear stunt](#)

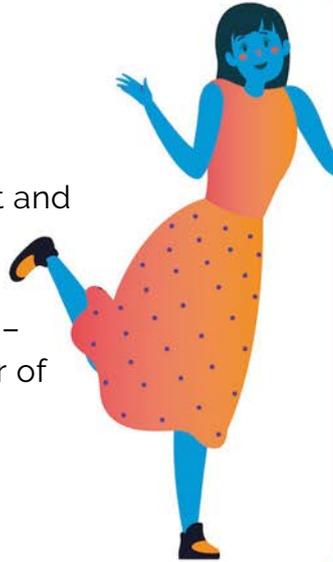
IMPACT & ENGAGEMENT

Gender

StoryFutures Academy's predominant focus on impact and engagement has been on the core screen industries of film, television and games – as represented in the number of professionals and companies engaged in our workstreams.

One of the most significant impacts in this regard has been our success in engaging BAME and female professionals and beneficiaries.

Against ambitious targets laid out by Sir Lenny Henry, we've managed to make significant progress. 25% of all beneficiaries have been BAME and just under 50% female.



Ethnicity

25%
BAME out of 154 participants



Asian or Asian British
Black or Black British
White
Mixed/Other

We have also worked to engage beneficiaries across the UK, running a writers' room for the CICIP award holders and their creative partners that included participants from 7 clusters. We have developed partnerships in Scotland with TRC media to reach Scottish companies looking to transition into immersive production and in Manchester with Creative England to reach the burgeoning creative cluster in the North West.

We have also impacted policy-makers, contributing to the DCMS review of Immersive and Addictive Technologies who cited the work of Dr Andy Woods and Professor James Bennett approvingly in making the recommendation for greater attention to the ethical review of how this sector develops:

Virtual Reality

168. Virtual reality is also an area of rapid growth and innovation that offers opportunities for the UK to lead the way on setting best practice in design standards. **StoryFutures**, which researches immersive storytelling as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Creative Industries Clusters Programme, told us in written evidence that

By investing at the outset in VR/AR, the government can help ensure its development follows an informed, ethical path, helping to pre-empt and quickly respond to future issues.³¹⁶

169. We have heard that there is currently a serious lack of understanding and guidance on best practice in the creation of immersive experiences using VR. Sarah Jones told us that in her experience there are "no guidelines" for "what you can do or should not do" with VR technology, and not enough data to "understand how it can impact people and what kind of length of experience there should be."³¹⁷ Although such judgments are likely to depend on the nature of the experience, and there is no desire to stifle creativity, she said that those who "are looking for different ways to trick the mind into feeling a different way" need to understand the ethical and wider implications of the immersive technologies they use.³¹⁸

DCMS Recommendation: To provide clarity for policy-makers and the public, the Government should outline in its response to this report how it intends to support independent research into the application, extent and effect of design mechanics used in digital technologies to extend user engagement. Such research should then inform the development of a behavioural design code of practice for online services. This should be developed within an adequate timeframe to inform the future online harms regulator's work around "designed addiction" and "excessive screen time".



CASE STUDY

Sector and Policy Engagement – Immersive Skills Report

In partnership with Immerse UK, Pact, Ukie, UK Screen Alliance and BIMA StoryFutures Academy launched the first ever national immersive content production skills research. Responding to the key finding in Innovate UK's 2018 Immersive Economy Report, which found that skills were a major concern for the emerging industry,

StoryFutures Academy surveyed over 100 companies and interviewed 20 leading creative practitioners on the skills challenges facing the immersive production sector. Our report, which will be published in late 2019 and is featured in the 2019 Immersive Economy Report, found that the concern with skills had only grown: 97% of the sector thought that they were lacking key skills that caused a barrier to growth.

StoryFutures Academy's research helps identify where these concerns lie, the barriers they present to growth as well as the developing mix of how companies respond to these pressures in their own teams, recruitment and training programmes.



Barriers to growth in the UK's immersive economy

Mind the Skills Gap

Mind the Skills Gap: Barriers to Growth in the UK's Immersive Economy

Amanda Murphy and James Bennett, StoryFutures Academy, National Centre for Immersive Storytelling

As part of StoryFutures Academy's ambition to ensure the UK creative workforce is the most skilled in the world in immersive storytelling, a comprehensive skills report will reveal the major skills challenges facing this nascent industry.

Working with partners across the screen industries, including Immerse UK, Pact, Ukie, the UK Screen Alliance and BIMA, this research includes a survey of over 100 companies creating audience-facing immersive experiences, interviews with 15 experienced content makers, and a focus group of leading industry figures.

Here we highlight key findings ahead of the full report's publication in Autumn 2019.

97% The immersive economy is appropriate

The skills gap is a significant barrier
"The medium is so young that there aren't any experts yet" – Mohen Leo, Director of Immersive Content at i.MxLab

- 97% of our survey respondents thought that the immersive economy was an appropriate skills
- 77% of companies identified lack of skills within their own company talent pool as a barrier to growth
- Creative roles were highlighted by respondents, with a lack of experience in creative writers, directors, and animators being cited
- 23% focused on the need for more leaders, particularly those who can manage both technical and creative elements
- Over 68% of survey respondents sourcing the right skills to build a team as 'difficult' or 'mostly difficult', many citing the pace of change as a challenge in predicting and skills required to build successful

"The medium is so young that there aren't any experts yet"

Mohen Leo – Director of Immersive Content, i.MxLab

KPI DISCUSSION

Overall, KPI achievement is healthy within the StoryFutures Academy programme, and we delighted to have surpassed our targets in key areas including core screen talent development, new and saved jobs, leverage and BAME representation within the programme. A detailed exploration of the KPIs is contained within the tables below.

Title	Year 1 Target	Actual Year 1 Total	Variance	Challenges	Mitigation
Core screen talent development	50	129	+79	Having a varied cohort for our labs/workshops.	More 'open' labs to be offered. Also engaging with various trade associations e.g. Screen Alliance, Women in Film & TV and Independent Film Trust to broaden the demographic reach.
Jobs - New & Saved jobs	18	Total 74 <i>Rewind Placement: 40, excluding placement</i> <i>Common Ground: 16, excluding placement</i> <i>Maze Theory Placement: 8, excluding placement.</i> <i>Nexus Studios: TBC, in process.</i> <i>Passion Pictures: TBC, in process.</i> SF Academy: 10 – incl. Head of Immersive, Programme Manager, Partnership Manager, 2 x Senior Technicians, Comms & Events Co-ordinator, COO, Exec producer, Finance Officer, Administrator,	+56	Our initial methodology based jobs created targets on ONS economic modelling data against R&D spend worked out as a multiplier effect. In practice SFA's spend focuses predominantly on training. Our Delivery plan also included 2 separate KPIs for jobs – those created directly on placements/co-pros and those from this wider-spill over.	We are able to produce much richer and clearer data from closer reporting to companies engaged in our workstreams. Our placements and co-production reporting requires detailing of jobs created/saved through the production. We have thus combined our overall target figures here (80 overall across 3 years) and focus on richer narrative reporting. We welcome feedback.

KPI DISCUSSION

Co-productions	2	<p>Completed: '<i>Common Ground</i>' with VR City</p> <p>In Progress: '<i>Violence</i>' with A Method Ltd (Shola Amoo)</p> <p>Committed: commission with BBC3</p>	Achieved	Establishing protocols and processes for Co-production and Development Funding.	SFA have piloted new processes and protocols which are ready to be implemented, including an open call for Development Funding to be launched in October 2019.
Leverage from industry	£200K target in first year	<p>£607,593.00 to end of June. Including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £100,000 match-funding from Creative XR investors for <i>Common Ground</i> • £25,940 from <i>Rewind</i> in staff time on placement for Steve Shannon. • £288,073 - Buckinghamshire Thames Valley Growth Deal - investment in equipment (<i>Atmos</i>) • £29,140 - <i>Maze Theory</i> in staff time for Writers Room & Kerry Kolbe placement • £62,400 - NFTS -staff time and facilities • £73,640 - RHUL staff time and facilities 	+ £407,593 achieved		

Gender Diversity	50%	46%	-4%	Reaching a wide audience for our events.	Promoting open calls via our website and social media. Working with various associations to increase this percentage, like Women in Film & TV.
BAME pledge	15-20 %	25%	+10%	Reaching a wide audience for our events.	Continue to engage with various organisations to help grow this percentage.
Industry Placements	5	4: <i>Rewind</i> , <i>Maze Theory</i> , <i>Nexus Studios</i> , <i>Passion Pictures</i>	-1	The pilot model for Placements with a Bootcamp designed around a specific company was resource heavy and yielded low results.	Created new model of Bootcamp designed around a job role, inviting many interested companies to participate, interview and offer placements to the cohort. This yields many more placements.
Delivery of workstreams outside of London.	1	0	-1	First year has been focussed on pilot activity and consolidating, although we hosted all Clusters for a Punchdrunk writers room.	<p>Agreement with TRC to deliver a Bootcamp and placement (possibly 2) in Scotland in February 2020.</p> <p>In discussion with Bristol & Bath cluster to co-deliver a workshop.</p> <p>In discussion with InGame in Dundee to deliver a Games Jam.</p>

WORKSTREAM

ACTIVITY



WORKSTREAM 1 - BOOTCAMPS AND ON-SET TRAINING

Our Placement stream was one of the higher risk work packages of StoryFutures Academy bid, requiring us to align companies working in immersive with a specific skills need, a willingness to risk working with new entrants to the immersive industry with established screen industries talent with appetite for immersive and availability to work on new productions.

Establishing this workstream involved significant partner engagement and organisation. The achievements of this workstream include developing the criteria for inclusion in bootcamps and placements for both companies and creative professionals, the legal contracting templates for placements to take place according to whether the professional was a freelancer, a sole-trader or a fulltime employee at another institution.

WORKSTREAMS

Many hours of legal and relationship management work later, we have emerged with a programme that successfully attracts creative producers, directors and writers to a bootcamp training experience that provides them the skills to be ready for production and immersive production companies the confidence to hire them with the support of StoryFutures Academy's placement funding.

This model splits placement funding 60/40, ensuring the hiring company has a firm commitment to developing the new entrant's talent.

Placements have continued to reach our gender and BAME targets, with 60% of those placed identifying as female and 20% BAME.

CASE STUDY

Career Changing

IT WAS
COMPLETELY NEW
TO ME
BUT FANTASTIC TO BE PART OF

- Grace Baird

Grace Baird, a Digital Producer, and International Digital Manager, at Warner Bros. International TV Production, attended StoryFutures Academy Bootcamp: Toolbox For Creatives in June 2019. Inspired and motivated by the opportunities in immersive, Grace decided to leave her position at Warners and immerse herself in XR production.

Armed with the knowledge from the bootcamp and the value of her screen industries experience, Grace attended interviews with Nexus Studios, an award-winning animation, film and interactive studios, for one of StoryFutures Academy's paid placements. Nexus were so impressed with Grace's passion for immersive, her background and digital skills that they decided she was over-qualified for the placement and hired her instead! Grace took on the role of Production Manager on an interactive web-based, non-linear, story-driven art experience, with Nexus also taking another StoryFuturesAcademy graduate on placement.

Following her successful completion of the production, Grace was offered a step up via our placements programme to take up a 10 week paid placement with the virtual reality production company, Surround Vision.

CASE STUDY

Combining Workstreams: Writers Room & Placement with Maze Theory



Maze Theory are a VR specialist who emerge from a Games and Animation background, focused on 'redrawing the lines of storytelling and creating truly immersive VR entertainment'. They were the perfect partner to explore how cross-sector collaboration could develop new and innovative ways of storytelling in immersive. When they were awarded the commission to realise Peaky Blinders in VR they approached StoryFutures Academy to find TV writers with an interest in immersive to help develop the project.

We sourced 6 writers via the BBC Writers Room and alumni from the National Film and TV School MA Screenwriting course. Consulting with Maze Theory and working with Pete Higgin from SFA partner Punchdrunk we devised a two-day workshop on designing and writing narratives in immersive spaces. One writer went on to be offered a paid placement on the Peaky Blinders project. Several of the Maze Theory team also attended the Writers Room to facilitate the conversation over the development period.

Feedback from Maze Theory who described it as "invaluable" and "brilliant" and from all participants including those who were unsuccessful. The success of this Writers Room model, leading to a placement will be repeated with Charisma Ai on 18th and 19th September.

The 'Value' Of The Placement: At the end of the two days there was a growing understanding of how much writers from film and TV have to offer immersive content-creators, especially when developing pre-existing IP. The writers benefited immensely from Maze Theory's full engagement with the process and their readiness to discuss approaches and share (under NDA) sensitive assets. Both writers and Maze Theory learned from Punchdrunk's immersive experience and well-designed exercises

.As a result of their experience of the workshop Maze Theory entirely re-thought their narrative design process and decided to use a writers room model to create content which could be broken down at a beat level with the developers, employing an experienced TV development executive with an interest in immersive (who had already been through a StoryFutures Academy bootcamp) and two additional writers as well as the successful placement candidate. They are also central to the project which will ultimately employ 8 people.



VR CITY PRESENTS
"COMMON GROUND"
CREATED BY DARREN EMERSON
PRODUCED BY EAST CITY FILMS

COMMON GROUND

A VIRTUAL REALITY DOCUMENTARY

Funded by
CREATIVE
XR

CATAPULT
Digital

ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND



NFTS

NATIONAL
FILM AND
TELEVISION
SCHOOL

StoryFutures



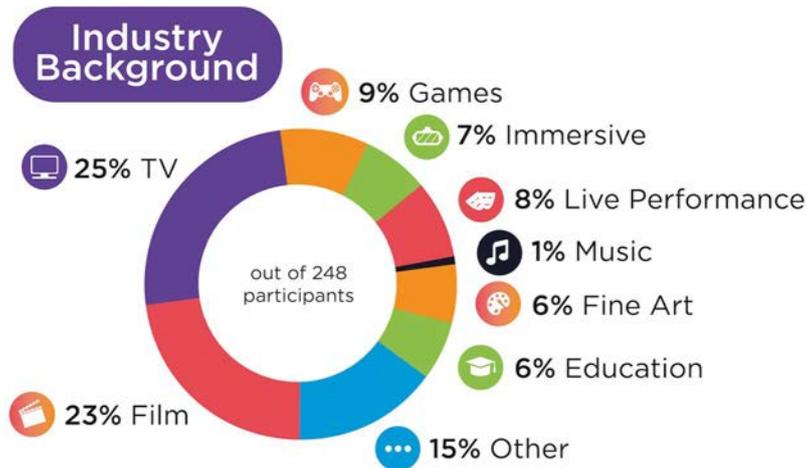
WORKSTREAM 2 - DEVELOPMENT AND CO-PRODUCTION

Our first co-production, Common Ground, was selected for Tribeca Film Festival and was awarded for its innovative new forms of storytelling in VR.

VR City's work was supported by StoryFutures Academy for its novel approach to the use of archive footage in immersive environments, culminating in nominations for the VR awards, a Tribeca film festival and Sheffield Doc Fest selection. It also won the Sandbox award in China.

VR City piloted our contracting process and our strategy to create a powerful and creatively excellent alumni group with a commitment to training future StoryFutures Academy cohorts. VR City's lead creative, Darren Emerson, taught on Introductory Labs in year 1 and will mentor students on his productions in future years.

Co-production work has been slower than anticipated due to the need to gain leverage from screen industries sceptical about the value immersive will add to their business. However, we end year 1 in a great degree of momentum having contracted to undertake a £100,000 co-production with BBC3 using the StoryLab challenge model for the Channel's first immersive experience and collaborated with Creative XR to support 3 projects into their marketplace for further funding and development at the start of year 2. We have also launched our Production Kickstart fund with Shola Amoo's project Violence, supported with £10,000 StoryFutures Academy budget and a creative review process that will support an exciting young director from a BAME background to tell his first story in VR.

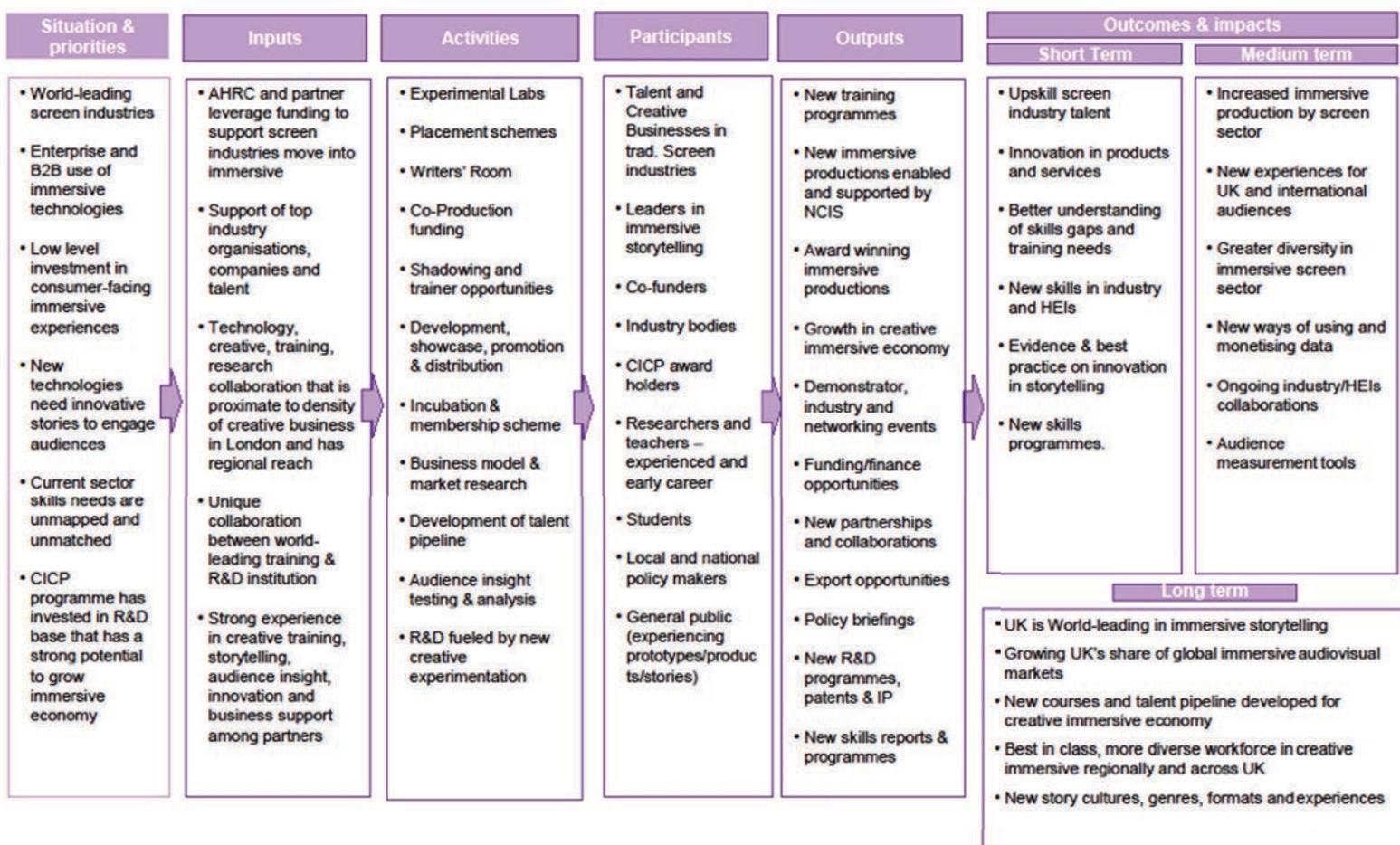


WORKSTREAM 3 - EXPERIMENTAL LABS & WRITERS ROOMS

Experimental Labs were some of the earliest pilot activities run by SFA; aimed at introducing core screen talent to 360/VR/AR projects, technical and business landscapes of the immersive sector. A key component of the two-day Labs was critique and discussion about the value of using immersive technology to tell a story. 99% of participants in labs found it met or exceeded expectations.

There have been 3 labs aimed at specific screen cohorts: Documentary, Fiction and Animation. Labs have attracted significant interest from high-end talent, attracting the likes of Turner Prize winning artist Gillian Wearing, Channel 4 commissioner Fozia Khan, BFI Deputy Chief Executive, Ben Roberts and Oscar Winning Director, Asif Kapadia (above)

We have now formatted one-day Introductory Labs where content, equipment and business are still covered, but in a more condensed way. Based on the work of our skills report we know that literacy classes available to time-poor industry professionals are widely perceived to be crucial to the development of the sector. These will be appended in year 2 by more experimental, 'level 2', training labs that allow more hands-on work for participants already literate in immersive. We hope that these labs will provide opportunity to put the R&D programme of the CICP clusters into the hands of creative producers.



PATHWAYS TO IMPACT REVIEW

Engaging and developing collaborative work to showcase CICP award holders' R&D has been more difficult than anticipated. StoryFutures Academy held a CICP Writers Room with Punchdrunk in November 2018 to stimulate dialogue and areas for collaboration, launching a series of initiatives that award holders could take part in. A dedicated partnership manager was appointed, as per our bid programme of work, engaging each cluster individually with those opportunities. Unfortunately there has been no uptake on those initiatives and whilst there are very constructive dialogues with InGameand B+B in particular, we understand that it is very hard for CICP award holders to engage with SFA's offering when there is so much set up of their own process and priorities. We have therefore worked towards plans of national engagement that ensure talent across the UK is supported via:

- Partnership with TRC Media to run placements and bootcamps in support of their ImmersiveCross Creative scheme in Scotland, February 2020
- Partnership with Creative England to offer introductory workshops and bootcamps to their Manchester based scheme IDEATE. scheme
- Reaching other HEI and FE providers who wish to upskill their staff but are not part of the CICP programme



MAJOR CHANGES

We have not made significant changes to our delivery or spending plans, but the following evolutions of the programme are worth noting:

Changes to R&D activity: Our major change is to co-production activity (see workstreams). Whilst we have a BBC3 StoryLab with 6 TV Indies established for Sept 2019 we also recognise the need to accelerate and diversify our work in this area. For this reason, we have chosen to diversify the way we approach this work package, building in both a development funding stream to incubate projects, and investigating other co-production opportunities - including an international co-production with Canada (following the recent UKRI led mission). In particular we aim to accelerate the work planned in co-productions to support innovators working in immersive to share their best practice with current and future students of StoryFutures Academy. For the UK to become a world leader in immersive, it is crucial that we are positioned as both a key part of the future of existing screen industries, as well as an invaluable resource to the emerging 'immersive storytelling sector'

We have worked to engage the relevant CICPs, making individual visits to their Universities and hosting workshops. To date none of the follow up activities have been taken up by our partners, owing largely to those clusters focusing on their own deliverables and year 1 set up. We remain committed to working with the CICPs and are developing plans with at least three of them for year 2 collaborations.

Funding: The funding profile is flat, but our activity isn't flat. Once we begin to commit production monies we expect to close the under spend. A number of large projects are committed to at the start of year 2, including BBC3, Magic Leap, a talent-led production and Creative XR projects. We also expect to appoint further staff.

Leadership and Management: After employing a temporary CTO in the first six months of the project, once we recruited a permanent Head of Immersive - who had a technical background - at the NFTS, it was felt to be redundant to appoint a permanent CTO.

LOOKING FORWARD

In 2019/20 we expect to focus on four key priorities for development in year two:

- Increasing our visibility to open our programmes to even more participants, including both targeting BAME and female participants as well as an increased number of open calls.
- Rolling out our regional activity through partnerships with key CICPs as well as other regional partners.
- Accelerating our co-production activity, especially with regards to narrative-led games.
- Extending the opportunities to support the growing UK community of creators already working within immersive, and looking to become world leaders.

Delivering on these four priorities we look ahead to an exciting year of our programme, including the following highlights:

Co-productions: We expect the groundwork laid with key partners to lead to fruitful co-productions in the year ahead with BBC3, the BFI, Magic Leap, international co-funders Canada Media Fund and with individuals such as Asif Kapadia.

ILMxLabs Partnership: We will launch a creative mentoring scheme with ILMxLabs, creators of Star Wars: Secrets of the Empire and Vader Immortal to offer knowledge sharing, masterclasses, mentoring and creative review to projects selected by StoryFutures from the Creative Clusters programme.

CICP Collaborations: We expect to launch a games-focused collaboration with InGAME to develop writing talent for new ways of exploring immersive games.

Level 2 Experimental Labs: Based on our pilot year 1 work and extensive skills audit research, we will be offering workshops to more experienced immersive creatives that explore immersive sound design, photo gammetry, interaction design and motion capture.





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Jude Middleton pp 1,2,7 (top),8 (bottom),
14,27,28

Emilie Dubois pp 7 (bottom), 9,18,25, 29

SFA Launch pp 4

Common Ground pp 8 (top)

