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**Research article**

# Impact production in higher education: shaping future change makers through film education

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## Abstract

This article considers impact production (using film and other forms of storytelling as the core of a social change strategy) as an important component of well-rounded film education programmes that seek to shape a new generation of socially and environmentally conscious film-makers. Through desk research, interviews and a survey, we found that opportunities to learn about impact production at higher education institutions are limited and expensive, while open-access resources are numerous, but can be overwhelming for those new to the field. We interview practitioners who specialise in: (1) raising awareness about what impact production entails; (2) practically implementing impact production strategies; and (3) educating film-makers in how to design impact campaigns. We analyse two case studies from Majority World countries to demonstrate strengths and weaknesses of existing impact teaching and training. The data gathered inform a theorisation of how impact production can be incorporated into formal educational practices worldwide. The article conceptualises what 'impact production film education' entails in a higher education context. This includes unpacking the interdisciplinary and practice-based nature of impact production. The intention is to shine light on the pedagogical value of impact production for shaping a new generation of film-makers who are

technically equipped to tell compelling stories, and intellectually committed to using film as a tool for change.

**Keywords** impact production; film education; social change strategy; Majority World; decoloniality

## Introduction

The social impact of the independent documentary film sector has grown tremendously over the last decade, with more film-makers opting to include social change strategies as a core component of the development, implementation, marketing and distribution of their films. 'Impact producing' entails devising and implementing strategies that make use of storytelling to support interventions towards positive change in areas including, but not limited to, human rights, social justice and the climate crisis. Using film for social change is gaining support and attention internationally. According to Sahar [Driver and Sonya Childress \(2022: n.p.\)](#), 'today it is almost expected that a social issue documentary film will be accompanied by an impact campaign'. Consequently, job opportunities are increasing for skilled impact producers and facilitators, and other impact team members.

In 2019, the Documentary Producers Alliance ([DPA, 2019: 10](#)) incorporated an official listing for impact producers in its crediting guidelines, noting that impact producers are:

... responsible for maximizing a film's potential for social change. Responsibilities may ... include strategy development, issue mapping, brain trust facilitation, organizational partnership development and management, digital content production and engagement, and evaluation and impact measurement. An Impact Producer may also coordinate and/or oversee a film's semi-theatrical screening campaign and release ... [and] play a role in story development and fundraising, beginning as early as pre-production.

Impact producers are increasingly credited at the ends of films and on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), highlighting the growth in both standing and demand for people skilled in the responsibilities of the role. There are now numerous festivals, societies and film funds that recognise the value of incorporating impact objectives as part of a production process by championing the need to change traditional approaches to making, distributing (and teaching) film. In 2023, the Venice Film Festival became the first major festival to offer an impact award, the Venice Collateral Impact Award. ThinkFilm's founder and CEO Danielle Turkov Wolson remarked that:

... this new award is a true marker of how far the film industry has come in recognising impact as an integral part of the industry. I hope that it leads to many more awards that integrate impact and many more festivals showing their commitment to be part of an industry that truly gives back to society. ([Ravindran, 2023: n.p.](#))

Doc Society, a global non-profit organisation supporting independent documentary film-makers, developed one of the most widely used resources for impact-driven film-makers and researchers, the *Impact Field Guide & Toolkit* ([Doc Society, 2019](#)). They have also set up several funds, thinktanks and labs to support independent documentary film-makers with their impact objectives as they navigate the complexities of producing and sharing films. For instance, through the Good Pitch programme, Doc Society supports several partners around the world to provide opportunities for film-makers interested in designing, making and distributing their films as impact productions (<https://goodpitch.org/>). Additionally, along with several partner organisations, they facilitate the impact-focused Climate Story Labs, which have taken place in several locations since being launched in 2019, including Brazil, Germany, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, the UK and the US (<https://climatestorylabs.org/>). It is significant that to date only one of these Climate Story Labs was hosted by a higher education institution, the University of Cape Town (UCT) ([Film Education Journal  
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[climatestorylabza.org/](https://climatestorylabza.org/)), with all the others being associated with independent foundations, festivals or impact-focused companies.

In one of their recent reports, [The Climate Story Lab UK \(2020: 5\)](#) highlighted the need for standard production models to change:

Now is the time to challenge current models of production. Extractive filmmaking has long been the norm in the creative industries, but now is the time to look to the traditions of co-creation that encourage meaningful collaboration with the subjects and communities represented in our work.

However, through the research conducted for this article, we found that there is a significant gap in the existing provision of impact training and university teaching. Industry training is mostly generated in the West and aimed at professionals already working in the industry – including film-makers and other creatives, impact producers and distribution strategists. Some are free, but superficial and/or generic; others are free, but only open to film-makers or teams with films in production; and others sit behind high pay walls. The options available to film students, emerging film-makers, and aspiring impact producers – especially those in Majority World countries – are limited.

While increasing numbers of film-makers and organisations are calling for radical change in production processes, university film-making courses appear to keep teaching the same methods without foregrounding practical impact production strategies and sustainable approaches for creative work. This is remarkable, given a university's core function to grow the thought-leaders of the future by encouraging innovation and critical engagement with mainstream norms. Regardless of their activist leanings, students interviewed in the research for this article strongly suggest that learning impact-producing strategies earlier in their education would provide them with a wider range of transferable skills that would expand their options upon entering the job market. We argue that, for current models to change, we need to change what we emphasise in practical degrees designed for preparing students to engage with and enter the creative marketplace.

Our aim in this article is thus to argue for the inclusion of impact production teaching into film school and university film production curricula. We do so by describing how teaching, practising and researching film impact distribution can be decolonial, thereby also demonstrating the limitations of existing impact-learning opportunities. Through our analyses of two case studies, we further exemplify the value of impact-production education – especially within Majority World countries. We conclude by conceptualising an open access impact education platform.

## Methodology

We followed a mixed methods approach to examine the problem and generate adequate data to support our recommendations. The approach included an internet search of impact-learning opportunities, interviews with key stakeholders and a survey of professional impact producers. We focused on learning opportunities that incorporate impact as a key component of their teaching objectives. Our desk research was expanded by asking interviewees and survey respondents to share learning opportunities. We were particularly interested in degree programmes; credit-bearing courses that can be taken as part of undergraduate or postgraduate degree programmes; in-person and virtual short courses hosted by or linked to higher education institutions; and structured learning opportunities not linked to higher education institutions, although aimed at professionalising the field and/or leading to qualifications/certifications.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of individuals, selected because they could provide different perspectives on offering and receiving impact education. We conducted interviews in July and August 2023 via Zoom with Venessa Cuervo Forero (Colombia), Farah Fayed (Lebanon), Joan Njeri (Kenya), Thihangwi Ramutsindela (South Africa), Miki Redelinghuys (South Africa), Nontokozi Sibanyoni (South Africa), Emily Wanja (Kenya) and Sydelle Willow Smith (South Africa). Each person was

interviewed separately. The interviews followed a conversational structure, with the authors responding to statements via follow-up questions. The interview process was also subjected to two ethical reviews – one at Bournemouth University, UK, and one at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

We identified two learning opportunities that we expand upon as case studies to provide examples of impact education practices that provide good practice models, and that could usefully inform the development of a relevant model for higher education. Each represents a different type of learning opportunity, and they are from different regions. First, we refer to the Impact Facilitator course developed and delivered by the University of Cape Town in collaboration with the alternative distribution non-governmental organisation (NGO) Sunshine Cinema. This course presents a model that teaches impact distribution, while incorporating impact strategies into the teaching approach. The second case study, the Aflamuna Fellowship Programme, is based in the Arab context, and teaches impact theory and strategy design while providing industry experience. It should be noted that the authors are involved in the Impact Facilitator short course in different capacities: Maasdoorp co-developed it, while Loader is an alumna of the 2023 course. Additionally, as we are both university senior lecturers teaching film-making in various forms, as well as practitioners, we were able to draw on our experiences to guide the data collection and analysis, and to conceptualise an open-access impact-education platform.

We hope to contribute to decolonising film education through our scholarship, and, for this reason, we deliberately foreground case studies and best practice models from Africa, and from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. We believe that this contributes to filling a gap in existing research and practical frameworks, while celebrating valuable innovations that come from the Majority World.

Our choice of terminology reflects our engagement with decoloniality, in that it finds inspiration from Shahidul Alam's (2008) use of the term 'Majority World'. He conceives of it as a term that draws attention to the fact that the majority of the world's population live in the so-called 'developing world' or 'Global South', and offers an alternative to these problematic terms. According to Alam (2008: 89), Majority World 'brings to sharp attention the anomaly that the Group of 8 countries – whose decisions affect [the] majority of the world's peoples – represent a tiny fraction of humankind'. It also 'challenges the West's rhetoric of democracy' (Alam, 2008: 89), since a system in which the minority exploits and makes decisions that adversely affect the majority clearly cannot be democratic. In this article, we therefore use the terms 'Majority World' and 'the West'.

## Impact, decoloniality and education

David Whiteman (2004) stresses the necessity to study the social impact of films from an interdisciplinary perspective that is founded on building strong relationships across disciplines and professional functions. In his conceptualisation of the 'coalition model' to assess the political impact of documentary film, Whiteman (2004: 51) argues against assessing impact merely by analysing a *completed* film's influence 'on individual citizens and within the *dominant* public discourse'. Instead, he proposes a more holistic approach based on a consideration of the entire film-making process vis-à-vis the diverse relationships created between film-makers, participants, activists, decision makers, audiences and entire social movements. These 'coalitions' are then considered in relation to the political context and a project's ability to generate 'alternative spheres of discourse' and 'public opportunities to engage in discussion' (Whiteman, 2004: 51, 55). Kate Nash and John Corner (2016: 228) build on this by discussing the 'coalition model' as a driving force behind the professionalisation of 'strategic impact documentary' – also known as 'social issue documentary' or 'campaign documentary'. This form of film-making exists alongside the mainstream as a 'parallel "industry"' that intersects with established structures but which has its own sources of funding, its own methods of production and distribution and its own organisational ecology' (Nash and Corner, 2016: 228). With such growth, however, comes a need to build interdisciplinary skills required by impact producers, distribution experts, campaign strategists and media makers (Nash and Corner, 2016; Salehi and Schneider, 2015). Our article contends that impact-production education (with its focus on strategising, relationship building

and production innovation) provides a unique pedagogical opportunity to educate independent film-makers not only to think strategically, but also with a collaborative mindset that is geared towards industry innovation, social justice and the representation of marginalised communities.

Additionally, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 16) lists 'decolonization, healing, transformation and mobilization' as 'processes which can be incorporated into practices and methodologies'. Our view on impact-production education is informed by these four 'directions', as they relate to: (1) film content; (2) impact distribution; and (3) academic research. First, in terms of *content*, these processes are especially relevant to issues often addressed in impact films (for example, social and restorative justice, human rights and the climate crisis). Second, during *distribution*, these processes clearly also guide approaches used in strategic impact campaigns. In this regard, community screenings are a primary method used to instigate conversations with audiences directly. Quoting from a report by Emily Verellen (2010: 7) on audience engagement, Nash and Corner (2016: 236) also highlight the unique opportunity that impact screenings offer film-makers:

When a film ends and audience emotions are tangible, the filmmaking team with the support of its partners has a real opportunity to move the audience from passive to active. That small but critical window of opportunity – high emotions, a captive audience, a pressing social issue and collaborative partners – are the right ingredients for inspiring audiences to begin or strengthen their engagement with the social issue.

Significantly, these conversations are ideally facilitated by community members who can inspire conversation around the film's topics precisely because they are also from that community. An impact production's objective to instigate meaningful and healing discussions within the community/audience has the potential to inspire action. Third, Smith's (1999) processes are crucial for any academic inquiry interested in the transformative potential of film. As such, they are of particular relevance for this article's perspective on impact-production education, since they enable the setting of 'strategic research agenda[s]' from and to the benefit of the Majority World (Smith, 1999: 116). We argue, therefore, that teaching and researching impact at a higher education level can contribute meaningfully to the decolonial project, while inspiring a new generation of independent film-makers.

Teaching impact production from a Majority World perspective also has the potential to constructively address several problematic issues prevalent in the industry today. A 2014 Sundance Institute study found that less than a quarter (24.4 per cent) of *fiction* films in competition at the festival over the preceding 12 years had been directed by women. However, they found that 41.7 per cent of *documentary* films had been helmed by women (Smith et al., 2014). The results of a South African study found a similar discrepancy at the Durban International Film Festival between 2006 and 2016 (Engel, 2018). The latter study shows a racial bias that compounds the issue, with only 8 per cent of fiction films having been directed by Black women over this period, while 12 per cent were directed by their White counterparts (Engel, 2018). Although these were small, localised studies, the findings point to an interesting dynamic that is borne out anecdotally: more women hold key positions in documentary than in fiction film. Documentary production – and we propose that this extends to the impact space – is clearly more welcoming to diverse storytellers. This would suggest that teaching it could drive much-needed transformation in the industry.

Transformation is, of course, also required with audiences, and for that, audiences need to identify with the stories they see on screen. Angela Jean Aguayo (2005: 6) discusses contemporary activist documentary as having the ability to provide 'a sense of shared identification around which a particular audience can orient itself and potentially create a collective audience identity'. This process of identity construction not only generates consumers of media; it also has the potential to construct a 'viewer-citizen identity' that is crucial for initiating social change (Aguayo, 2005: 6). The effect that the media has on generating citizen-viewers is also suggested by Whiteman (2004: 52), when he notes that a 'common focus of the work within political science has been on the impact of the media on the electoral process'. In recent years, this can especially be observed in Majority World countries where alternative distribution

companies are now pushing election awareness film screenings in the hopes of impacting agenda setting, voting behaviour and election turnouts. Generating engaged, politically aware, and critical citizens is, of course, also a function of universities, which is a reason why we argue here for a more deliberate incorporation of impact production in film and television curricula. We believe that this will not only prepare students to enter the challenging industry as equipped professional film-makers; it will also send them into a turbulent world as engaged citizens (and audience members) eager to contribute to 'the project of social change' (Aguayo, 2005: 6).

Given the above theoretical foundation, this article proposes that teaching impact production and distribution alongside commercial production and distribution can contribute to a crucial transformation behind the camera, in addition to creating content that encourages democratic values and human rights. It also points out that finding relevant resources and frameworks for teaching impact is challenging. Many of the most accessible existing resources for learning impact, including open-access guides such as the *Impact Field Guide* (Doc Society, 2019), were created in the West. We in no way want to diminish their contribution, which is substantial. The popularity and value of this resource was evident from the data gathered for this article. Most of our interviewees referred to the guide and/or Doc Society, while 60 per cent of survey respondents either referred to the guide explicitly, or to Doc Society's website more generally, as a source they use extensively. However, we do want to emphasise that projects from other parts of the world offer valuable insights, as they respond to their geographical and sociopolitical contexts in unique ways that add depth to discussions of impact education. To contextualise the above statement with concrete examples, the following section will offer a brief overview of existing learning opportunities.

## A brief overview of the impact-production education landscape

Even though impact production is an expanding career path, we found through our desk research, interviews and survey that the intricacies of this function are hardly taught as part of film degree courses. While some lecturers interested in the field do integrate elements of impact production into teaching, they remain in the minority. For the most part, impact-production teaching appears to be dependent on the individual interests of teaching staff, and their ability to integrate it into existing programmes. It does not appear to be a core element of preparing future independent film-makers for entering the industry with a non-extractive and inclusive storytelling mindset. If incorporated into programmes, this is rarely foregrounded on university websites, pushed by university marketing strategies, or integrated into departmental/institutional policy.

This makes it difficult for potential students interested in becoming impact producers or film-makers for change to identify suitable university programmes that satisfy their impact-driven career ambitions. This is illustrated by the experience of Thihangwi Ramutsindela (a teaching assistant on the Impact Facilitator short course), whose discovery of impact production came late in her educational journey:

I had just completed my honours and I was still feeling a little bit like I don't know what I'm going to do with my life. ... I don't have any production experience. I don't actually know what I'm going to do. And then an email popped up [saying that] there's this opportunity to teach something on impact. And I was like, what is this word 'impact'? ... So, I started researching a bit about it, and I was like, wow! I can actually use what I've developed so far to make a difference in the world or to contribute something beyond myself. (Interview with Thihangwi Ramutsindela, 25 July 2023)

During four years in a film and media department, Ramutsindela had never once heard about impact producing. Joan Njeri (Kenya) also experienced this as a working film-maker. She relates how she stumbled on the Impact Facilitator short course by accident via a Sunshine Cinema Instagram post:

I didn't really know what impact producing was ... I remember when I came into the course ... I had no idea what we were going to learn. I just knew that we are using film as a tool for change. (Interview with Joan Njeri, 28 July 2023)

Njeri first became aware of the developing importance of impact production when she researched funding opportunities for a documentary she was producing in Kenya:

There is always that section in a documentary application when you are looking for funding: 'What are the impact goals of this particular film? Does your film have any impact campaigns attached to it?' And that is why I got interested in trying to figure out what [impact production] is. (Interview with Joan Njeri)

A lack of impact-production knowledge can thus negatively affect one's ability to generate funds as an independent film-maker. This intimates that, if we are to educate successful independent film-makers (whose livelihoods depend on securing funding), we need to educate them about impact strategies precisely because it is now a required element of many funding opportunities. The creation of the Non-Fiction Core Application bears this out. The project is led by the Sundance Institute and the International Documentary Association (IDA) as 'a collaborative field-wide effort ... to standardize a set of questions that are used in non-fiction funding, fiscal sponsor or artist support opportunities' (IDA, 2022b: n.p.). Among the key headings of this application is 'Intended Impact'. Applicants are prompted to articulate:

... your vision for the influence or impact you hope the film will have on the participants, community, and/or broader society – be these social, cultural, political or otherwise. What is your impact strategy and goals, if you have determined them? If not, what steps are you taking to develop an impact campaign (i.e., how are you building partnerships with organizations or others leading or influencing change around the issues in the film)? Whose interests will your film serve and who will benefit and how – in both its production and distribution phases? (IDA, 2022a: n.p.)

Without at least some prior knowledge of impact strategy principles and methods, applicants may be excluded from significant funding opportunities, as the Core Application format is now accepted by a growing number of significant funders, including the Sundance Institute, iTVS, Catapult Film Fund, Pare Lorentz Documentary Fund, IDA Enterprise Documentary Fund, Film Independent and Chicken & Egg Pictures.

The industry is moving to incorporate impact strategically, which the film-education sector is not yet embracing. This is not to suggest that there are no courses or training programmes available. Through our overview of global learning opportunities, we found that most are webinars, masterclasses and one-off training opportunities of less than a week (also known as 'impact labs'). Recorded webinars and masterclasses especially contribute to the field, because they are often freely accessible. Many are not recorded, however, instead catering for location-specific in-person engagements. They often form part of film festival and film market programmes, for which there are registration fees and limited spaces. While impact labs are offered regularly, they remain highly competitive, and they are aimed predominantly at established film-makers with social impact films already in the making. Although they are almost without exception free of charge, the barrier to entry is high.

We found some higher education institutions that offer impact-related programmes. The University College of Santa Cruz's Master's in Social Documentation (SocDoc), for example, is 'designed for future documentarians committed to social change and to documenting communities, cultures, issues, and individuals who are marginalized in our current landscape of representation' (University College of Santa Cruz, n.d.: n.p.). However, based on the online prospectus, the focus seems to be only on production. There is no overt mention of impact producing, alternative distribution or film-centred social change strategy design. The University of Southern California offered a short online course in Documentary

Filmmaking for Social Change between 2021 and 2022. This was limited to 11 monthly online sessions that lasted for four hours each as part of their continuing education initiative – not as part of the core curriculum for undergraduate and postgraduate students ([University of Southern California, n.d.](#)). It is not entirely clear whether impact strategies were taught as part of the course itself.

There are modules and projects located at universities that offer impact training outside of credit-bearing courses. The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) is based in the School of Communication at the American University (Washington DC). This research centre ‘creates, studies, and showcases media for equity, social change, and social justice’ ([CMSI, n.d.-a](#): n.p.). Between September and November 2020, they offered a series of eight 90-minute virtual masterclasses entitled Digital Power, hosted by CMSI and Together Films, to share ‘best practices for strengthening strategic communications for social justice documentary engagement’ ([CMSI, n.d.-b](#): n.p.). The course was free to participants, and they have since published an open access report on their website, which documents key findings from the series ([CMSI, 2020](#)). Along with CMSI director Caty [Borum Chattoo’s \(2020\)](#) book, *Social Movements: How documentaries empower people and inspire social change*, their open access reports make a meaningful contribution to documentary production and impact strategy design. Noteworthy non-university impact programmes include Documentary Australia’s Impact Producer Program, and Story Money Impact’s SMI Pod programme (Canada).

Of the options at formal higher education institutions, those offered by the Transformative Social Change Department in the College of Social Sciences at Saybrook University in Pasadena in the US, stand out. They offer online and hybrid MA and PhD programmes in ‘transformative social change’. Impact strategist Toni Bell teaches two courses that overtly deal with media for social change: Social Impact Media Stories for Change, and Creating Media Outreach Campaigns for Social Impact. The latter, for example, aims to:

deepen understanding and engagement around the role[s that] film and narrative can play in advancing social change. Students will explore the differences between film distribution and impact, what it means to design and manage outreach campaigns, the role of an ‘impact producer’ in this, and the various forms of social change that are possible with film. ([Saybrook University, n.d.](#): n.p.)

The existence of the Saybrook programmes demonstrates that impact courses and qualifications at higher education institutions are feasible. The limitations are that applicants must have a degree to be eligible, each degree entails a minimum of two years of study, and fees range between £41,333 (MA) and £78,910 (PhD). As postgraduate degrees, they also assume prior knowledge of the field, affirming the need to introduce impact teaching at an undergraduate level.

Doc Society is arguably the most influential organisation in the field of impact producing, contributing tremendously to creating awareness through introductory talks at film festivals and film markets, webinars and panel discussions. Founded in 2005, they aim at ‘enabling great documentary films and connecting them to audiences globally’ ([Doc Society, 2019](#): n.p.). Their impact labs are based on their own *Impact Field Guide & Toolkit* ([Doc Society, 2019](#)), an open-access impact handbook that includes case studies, impact-strategy design tools and other resources. Although their labs are free, they are closed to the public, and the selection of participants is extremely competitive, primarily because they are generally offered to film teams with existing projects. The projects are selected based on their potential to influence meaningful change around pressing issues and artistic excellence.

Most open-access opportunities we found are limited in their usefulness to an aspiring impact producer or film student, as they are numerous and wide-ranging in level and topic. To a large extent, they lack curation, and interaction with teachers or mentors. Film-makers new to the field of impact find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information provided. Emily Wanja (Director of Africa Programmes at Doc Society and the Climate Story Unit) points out that to those new to the concept of impact, the ‘things the *Impact Field Guide* talks about ... can be a lot’, and the danger of this is that readers may feel ‘I don’t know if I can do this’ (interview, 7 August 2023). That is why she believes that the



field guide and impact workshops – even short, introductory ones – work best in tandem, since they have different benefits. An introductory workshop or talk is a good starting point, while the *Impact Field Guide* provides practical information, additional reading resources, case studies, and enough in-depth content to study and find inspiration for impact workers at any level.

Sydelle Willow Smith (co-founder of Sunshine Cinema) points out that the *Impact Field Guide* is a useful resource allowing film-makers and students to understand the impact space, but it is still a resource focused predominantly on well-resourced, Western examples that are not always applicable to countries such as South Africa (interview, 1 August 2023).

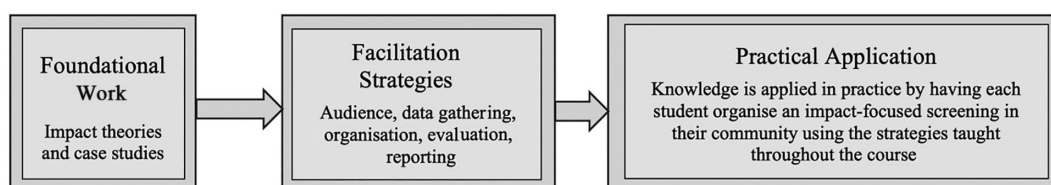
It is against this background that we selected two learning opportunities from the Majority World as concrete case studies that demonstrate good practice. They were selected because they not only provide in-depth training on impact, but also include practical components, while demonstrating the power of collaboration between different partners (including film-makers, educators and civil society). In the following section, we set out some of the major conceptual components of each case study, while also underpinning their approaches with examples of positive student and community experiences.

## Case studies

### The Impact Facilitator short course (online)

The UCT/Sunshine Cinema Film Screening Impact Facilitator short course was co-developed by the University of Cape Town Centre for Film and Media Studies and the NGO Sunshine Cinema (Sunshine Cinema 2023). Two of the independent film-makers interviewed for this article are alumni of this six-month part-time online course. Their contributions offer an insight into the value of impact-production education and the perception of it by students who were previously unfamiliar with the concept. Launched in 2021, the course approaches the topic of impact from a Majority World vantage point. Participants are invited to engage with topics via learning videos, prescribed films, readings and case studies. Self-directed learning is followed by discussions with peers in small groups, and it culminates in consolidation through discussions in live online classes. The learning is internalised and integrated through practice-based assignments that rely on participants applying course content to their own fieldwork. The course focuses on alternative distribution, first providing students with a foundation in the impact environment. This process is supported by giving them access to case studies from the Majority World and in-depth discussions with film-makers, impact producers and movement leaders. Students are then taught how to understand the needs of audiences, what it entails to organise a local screening event, how to collect data, and how to evaluate the conversations at the event and report on a screening in a way that provides insights that help to direct future actions as part of the impact goals of the film. Over the years, guest speakers have included Zackie Achmat and Connie Mogale (social movement leaders, South Africa), Arthur Pratt (director of *Survivors* [2018] and founder of WeOwnTV, Sierra Leone), Emily Wanja (impact producer of *Thank You for the Rain* [2017] and director of Africa Programmes at Doc Society and the Climate Story Unit, Kenya) and Khushboo Ranka (director of *An Insignificant Man* [2016] and impact consultant, India). The course culminates in students having to organise a screening in their community by applying the methods and theories discussed in class (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Course breakdown – the Impact Facilitator short course



This course has a particular teaching style that resembles the character of impact screenings, namely, not to impose knowledge from above, but to facilitate learning through self-expression and community conversation. Described as 'horizontal learning' (interview with Thihangwi Ramutsindela; interview with Miki Redelinghuys, 3 August 2023), the course's pedagogical approach seeks to empower students regardless of their level. Some students enrolled in the course come straight from school, and have never experienced a higher education setting, but there are also students with degrees and professional films under their belts. They are taught together, thus giving younger students a sense that their perspectives are valid, and that their lack of a degree does not undermine the legitimacy of their life experiences so far (interviews with Thihangwi Ramutsindela; Joan Njeri).

Njeri, a Kenyan film-maker and 2022 participant, stresses the transnational dimension of this form of learning, which nurtures cross-cultural synergies between students on the course: the realisation that someone in South Africa has similar experiences to someone in Kenya, Mozambique, Brazil or the UK is empowering, and gives the course 'global appeal'. Programme director Miki Redelinghuys marvels at how rewarding it is to witness students coming together in their views, despite being geographically distant and culturally diverse. Seeing a student from Brazil connect with the themes of a South African film such as *Afrikaaps* (2010) demonstrates that impact education resonates, and that students see their experiences reflected in the topics and case studies analysed. In some cases, students even open up in class to reveal their own experiences of injustice. To Redelinghuys, impact education is therefore also about making a difference in the lives of the students, empowering them by listening to the diversity and relevance of their experiences:

[I]t just made me realise how important it is to create a course where people can talk about social change ... Sometimes we think that social change has to be the 'big thing' – like we have to stop the fossil fuel companies. Yes, of course we do. We have to stop the platinum mines polluting our waters. But sometimes it is about stopping the drug dealer at the bottom of your road. Sometimes it is about having a better understanding of a mental health issue so that you can support your loved one. That was for me, very powerful ... knowing that no issue is too small to be spoken about. (Interview with Miki Redelinghuys)

As such, impact education in this course already facilitates impact – in the lives of the students, and in the communities that they connect with during their practical work – before any lofty impact goals are reached. This provides an example in practice of the 'sense of shared identification' that [Aguayo \(2005: 6\)](#) describes, which contributes to the formation of a 'viewer-citizen identity' that can initiate social change.

The capstone assignment for this course requires each student to apply the learning they gained from completing the six modules by facilitating an impact screening in their own community. One past student, for instance, chose to screen a film about gender-based violence, which was well attended by men from the community. Upon seeing the film, the men founded a group initiative to accompany vulnerable women and children who need to walk alone to and from their homes. They would, for example, walk with them to taxi ranks and bus stations – even as early as four o'clock in the morning. According to Nontokozi Sibanyoni, an alumna of the course, and currently a media coordinator at Sunshine Cinema, the 'group started because of the screening ... that is the impact we want with these films, to start those conversations and actually find solutions' (interview, 1 August 2023). Another student with previous film-making experience noted that the course gave her the tools to navigate power dynamics which previously terrified her as a film-maker interested in addressing challenging social issues (interview with Sydelle Willow Smith). A further young facilitator 'rebranded' his existing YouTube channel from entertainment to impact. His focus has shifted to conducting conversations with community leaders about social issues. He has developed into 'a true activist going out into his community', putting on screenings with partners who are 'actually bringing change within the community' (interview with Nontokozi Sibanyoni).

During its pilot year (2021), the course was offered for free to 20 Sunshine Cinema 'sunbox ambassadors' as part of the course's impact-value system. It has been open to applicants from anywhere

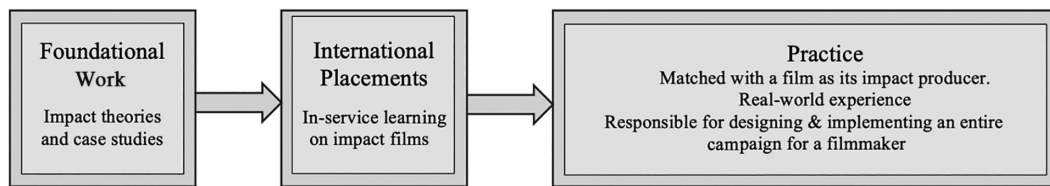
in the world since 2022, and it attracts pan-African and international applications. The course is highly subsidised, thanks to in-kind contributions from UCT, Sunshine Cinema and their partners. Course fees from paying students are used to cross-subsidise bursaries for deserving candidates from poorer communities in the Majority World. The ambition is to keep costs low for paying students (around £800). The needs of running a course of this nature are making this increasingly difficult. This could perhaps also explain why the fees of several other courses we identified are high, and potentially exclude Majority World participants.

### **Aflamuna Fellowship Programme (in-person)**

Aflamuna (formerly Beirut DC) is a non-profit cultural organisation that was formed in Beirut in 1990 to create a space for independent documentary film-makers from Arab-speaking countries to share their work (<https://aflamuna.org/who-we-are/>). Over the years, they have run small training and production programmes, established a co-production platform and hosted a film festival. According to Farah Fayed, their Director of Programmes, they had been using film – particularly documentary film – to record social issues and advocate for change long before they were introduced to the term ‘impact producing’ at Good Pitch Europe in 2018 (interview, 1 August 2023). Shortly afterwards, they offered their first local impact lab (2019), supported by Doc Society, and facilitated by its co-founder Beadie Finzi. They realised that to make the impact model work in their region, it cannot simply be a case of translating the *Impact Field Guide* into Arabic. Consequently, as discussed in the interview, Farah and contributors from Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt and Sudan each translated a section of the resource material that Finzi had presented at their impact lab, adding local examples relevant to the Arab context. They initially offered a ‘train the trainer’ lab, after which the newly minted trainers went on to host ‘local editions of the labs with local partners – organisations that do the same as we do, but in their own country’. Fayed believes that training and supporting aspiring impact producers is critical to developing strong impact campaigns, but that learning in practice is equally important. She maintains that to become an impact producer you ‘don’t need a license to do it. Just do it’ (interview with Farah Fayed).

The Aflamuna model is based on individuals who specialise as impact producers. In many other contexts, there is pressure on the director or producer of the film to do everything. They are expected to make the film, take it to festivals and sell it to broadcasters, while simultaneously running an effective impact campaign. However, Fayed emphasises the benefits of handing the film over to a dedicated impact producer who can approach the work not only with skill and undivided attention, but also with fresh eyes that ultimately benefit the realisation of a film’s impact objectives. It is to support this model that they created the Aflamuna Impact Fellowship Programme. Although Fayed regularly guest lectures at universities, and recently offered a 20-hour module as part of a university film course, the fellowship is not linked to a university. Fayed does, however, see the fellowship as a way to formalise impact training. It provides an opportunity for more in-depth engagement with each topic, and to offer more academic inputs than are possible in a one-off lab. The programme thus empowers its fellows to feel qualified to do the work (interview with Farah Fayed). Although applicants are not required to have a film in production – since the fellowship is aimed at developing independent impact producers, not campaigns for particular films (as is the case with most labs) – the fellowship is still highly competitive. The organisers had to go through several rounds of selection in order to narrow the 100-plus applicants down to 10 fellows.

According to Fayed, the first three months of the fellowship were dedicated to inputs that were more academic in nature: sharing theory using the *Impact Field Guide* as a handbook to cover topics such as ‘theory of change, strategy of impact campaigns, fundraising, partnerships, evaluation, alternative distribution’. A core element was also to analyse and discuss case studies relevant to the Arab world, while doing ‘a lot of exercise[s]’. Fellows were then placed internationally as trainees on several existing impact campaigns, where they could observe experienced impact producers at work and assist them at screenings, and even host their own screening of the film with an audience back home. The next phase

**Figure 2. Course breakdown – Aflamuna Fellowship Programme**

of the fellowship entailed matching fellows with four films where they then worked as fully fledged impact producers – designing and running impact campaigns – with continuing mentorship from fellowship trainers (interview with Farah Fayed). This model combines theoretical learning and observation of existing practice with industry application on actual films. It thus exemplifies a powerful good practice model in impact education (see Figure 2).

This approach assisted the fellows in understanding what it means to be an impact producer for a film in the Arab context, where the sociopolitical realities of some countries present significant logistical difficulties, as well as risks to the personal safety and well-being of the film-makers, those being filmed and the impact producer. One Lebanese impact producer, for instance, came to speak to participants about his approach to facilitating impact screenings about a film raising awareness about LGBTQIA+ rights. Given the danger of campaigning around this issue in the region, the approach was to organise small screenings targeted at mothers of LGBTQIA+ children who have been suffering due to restrictive beliefs and laws. The main speaker at each screening was a mother who had already gone through the trauma of having to protect her child from societal prejudices. This mother was the only person other than the audience present at the screening, to create a safe space for the audience to speak freely. Significantly, each screening deliberately had only five or six mothers as audience members, and nothing – neither attendance nor what was discussed – was documented. After each screening, most of the mothers opted to join the partner NGO involved in the campaign, and they later reported that they cultivated ‘a healthier relationship with their children’ as a result (interview with Farah Fayed). The goal, therefore, was not to ‘have massive impact’ by influencing policy, but rather to create a domino effect starting with changing the hearts and minds of the LGBTQIA+ individuals’ immediate family members (interview with Farah Fayed). This contributes to a much-needed recalibration that Driver and Childress (2022: n.p.) call for in the documentary impact terrain, to ensure that ‘a film’s impact is first felt by those closest to the film ... then it slowly expands outward to the communities at the center of the story, ... and then finally to the audience who may be disconnected to the lived realities of those documented on camera’. Providing students with such case studies and direct access to the relevant practitioners is invaluable for any impact-production training, according to Fayed (a statement corroborated by the other interviewees for this research). It is not surprising, therefore, that both courses discussed here provide students with numerous examples of successful campaigns. However, Fayed emphasises that it is important to provide case studies that are localised and relevant to the students’ own environment. This is necessary to manage expectations, but also to provide inspiration. Fayed thus champions a pedagogical approach that allows students to realise that creating impact is not an unachievable ideal. An impact campaign can therefore be small and understated, but no less impactful – which empowers students to realise that they too can do this type of work.

## A proposal for an impact education platform

As the above illustrates, impact production is a vibrant and inspiring direction that empowers students and practitioners to become change agents in their own lives, and in the lives of others. However, it is also evident that the integration of impact production into film-production courses is still underdeveloped. As Fayed observes, the reason for this could be that the interdisciplinary nature of impact production

makes it challenging to incorporate into conventional university frameworks. Depending on the issue being addressed and the nature of the impact strategy, it can encompass aspects of film studies, political science, anthropology, psychology, public health and various other disciplines:

[I]t really has no limits. It does not have one recipe. If you count all the impact campaigns that have been done so far, they each have a very different strategy. (Interview with Farah Fayed)

It is worth considering designing such programmes as interdepartmental collaborations with an interdisciplinary focus. Willow Smith, who completed a BA in film production and an honours in visual anthropology, suggests that social scientists are also required for this kind of work, and can make excellent impact producers:

It's not really about the film-making. It is about community dialogues. It is about audience engagements. It is actually much more anthropological in terms of how you are trying to reach people and create intergenerational dialogues or create dialogues between policymakers and government, and activists and everyday people. It requires a wider variety of skills than just to be a storyteller ... It is more the people management side of things. Who is your audience? How do you mobilise that audience? How do you track that? (Interview with Sydelle Willow Smith)

Moreover, several of our interviewees highlighted that not all films are impact productions, which makes it even more complicated to integrate impact teaching into conventional film programmes. It would be counterproductive, for instance, to give undergraduate students the impression that their films can only be meaningful with an impact objective at their core. Film students should be given the freedom to explore personal interests, and should not be made to feel judged if they choose a more commercially driven or 'art for art's sake' route. Not all films have to be activist in nature (interview with Farah Fayed). That freedom to choose one's own path at university should always be there, but what needs to be emphasised with film students is the power of film to change the mindsets and behaviours of consuming audiences. A glaring omission on film courses, Farah notes, is that students are not exposed to how the 'theory of change' is a fundamental element of film-making – especially when you are dealing with films based on fact (documentary or fictional; independent or mainstream):

But what you can teach is the power that film holds over narrative shift ... It is very important for students to understand the power of documentary, specifically independent documentaries, not those commissioned by [NGOs]. (Interview with Farah Fayed)

From this perspective, integrating impact production teaching into film programmes should be designed to further students' career options in a way that also expands their ability to critically reflect on their work. Impact production is ideally situated at the intersection of interdisciplinarity, practical film-making and critical awareness. It requires a sociopolitical awareness, and an ability to package information in a persuasive manner for audiences to enjoy. It also relies on the ability to apply theory in practice, to analyse and adapt models to specific situations, and to engage directly with audiences. We argue, therefore, that impact training works at its best if it includes opportunities to learn:

- (1) about theories of change
- (2) from case studies and practitioner experiences
- (3) by doing the work in practice
- (4) with relevant mentorship.

Practical work can take many forms, involving one or a combination of the following elements:

- (1) working on an existing campaign as a trainee or intern
- (2) completing strategy design class exercises, such as drafting a strategy for an existing film (preferably as a small group assignment)

- (3) designing and running an original campaign for a completed film, or for one in the final stages of production; this could be a personal project or someone else's film.

The Impact Facilitator short course and the Aflamuna Fellowship Programme include theoretical inputs, opportunities to engage with and learn from practitioners, and to analyse case studies. Both provide opportunities to apply that learning in practice, sequencing participants through several low-stakes assignments before requiring them to run their own high-stakes campaign. They use pedagogical variety, including collaborative, peer-to-peer and in-service learning, as well as mentorship from experienced practitioners.

We acknowledge that both these models require significant time and resources to develop and run, and so propose the creation of an adaptable, user-friendly open-access learning tool that includes resources for students and teachers. We believe that it is important to make it as easy as possible for teachers to incorporate impact into their teaching. We envisage developing a collection of frameworks, resources and content that trainers and students can freely use and adapt to their unique needs. We hope that this will invite co-creation, adaptation and sharing of existing teaching resources. Several lesson-plan templates for different applications, including a single lesson, a module and a full course, should be accompanied by text, video and audio learning materials. These materials should incorporate short interviews with impact producers from various regions. Links to online resources such as the *Impact Field Guide*, and to shorter pieces such as articles and case studies, should be accompanied by discussion points and suggestions for further viewing and reading, thus inviting those who want to learn more to delve deeper on their own. Exercises and assignment prompts that can be adapted to suit different contexts, cultures and regions should enhance practical work. Simple, user-friendly worksheets can be provided for in-class small group exercises or take-home assignments, and editable rubrics would streamline incorporating impact learning into credit-bearing courses.

Based on our survey of impact producers, much of the content that would be needed for such an impact teaching tool already exists, including the *Impact Field Guide* (Doc Society, 2019), the Commons Social Change Library (<https://commonslibrary.org/>), the Creative Distribution 101 podcast (<https://creativedistribution101.libsyn.com/>), and many webinar videos available on YouTube. But working through comprehensive resources such as these on one's own without prior knowledge about the field can be overwhelming. We therefore contend that an adaptable, carefully designed impact teaching tool could make navigating this field less daunting, and may facilitate self-paced independent learning in addition to course teaching. It could bridge the gaps between introductory and hyper-focused content, and between theory and practical models for impact – as developed and expanded on in the *Impact Field Guide* (Doc Society, 2019), *Story Movements: How documentaries empower people and inspire social change* (Borum Chattoo, 2020) and other in-depth impact resources.

It seems that collaborating with universities, lecturers and students would be welcomed by impact practitioners, but this potential remains largely untapped. Vanessa Cuervo Forero (impact strategist from Colombia) stresses that the impact-production ecosystem must include universities and academic research for this form of film-making to find more traction with funders. She finds that financiers value it when new developments in film production practices find their way into higher education settings (interview, 8 August 2023). Navigating the complex funding landscape is a daunting prospect for any impact producer – novice and experienced professional alike – and academic teaching and publication could provide another level of legitimacy that could ultimately lead to more financial support.

Impact theory and practice operate in tandem. Students therefore also need to be provided with access to local and international practitioners and work relevant to their context in order to understand how impact dynamics work in practice. The teaching infrastructure should therefore be able to support this need, which it currently only does to a limited extent. And there is certainly a demand. In the interview, Cuervo Forero pointed out the overwhelming number of applications they receive for the ACCION! Impact Labs, created by DoccoLabs in Colombia: rising from around 400

for the first edition (2021), to almost 700 (2023), while there are only 35 spaces available per year. This development is echoed in Lebanon, where, in the interview, Farah Fayed (programme director of Aflamuna), noted that they received over 100 applications from the Arab world for a fellowship programme that could only accommodate 10 people. This is also a situation that can be observed in Africa, where training spaces providing localised strategies are limited.

The impact-education platform proposed here should include an active network of practitioners willing to support and engage with students during their impact-learning journey by providing access to case studies and practical learning opportunities. This should be designed as a database that teachers can add to as they find practitioners and case studies in their area. The database should also include a list of courses, labs and other learning resources that users can refer to and contribute to. We hope that the platform will mobilise film-makers, experienced impact producers and impact-focused production companies/consultancies to join and support student education. This could include film-makers who task students to design campaigns for their films – the best of which could be implemented. This would be a win-win situation, where students receive meaningful practical opportunities to apply their knowledge. Film-makers, in turn, benefit from bespoke impact strategies, screenings and reports. This would align with the impact ethos of encouraging mutual benefit that leverages partners' respective strengths to effect positive change for shared social impact.

It would also contribute to decolonising higher education, a project that many scholars and institutions have been grappling with in recent years. Adam Haupt, director of the Centre for Film and Media Studies (UCT), said at the inaugural graduation ceremony of the Impact Facilitator short course:

What Sunshine Cinema and UCT colleagues are proving is that ... a university can live in a community, can serve a community, it can partner with the community to empower that community to tell its own stories on its own terms. ... And this is how we decolonise the continent. We empower fellow Africans to tell stories, to consult, to listen, to observe ... We've been debating what it means to decolonise a university, to decolonise education. [This course is] actually showing people how to do it. You're not just theorising it and pontificating about it, you're doing it. And that's an important message. (Haupt, 2021: n.p.)

This is a worthy function of higher education institutions, which aligns their function directly with impact-production education. Such education, similar to impact production itself, seeks to effect change through the actual process of teaching/film-making, and it has potential for 'decolonization, healing, transformation and mobilization' (Smith, 1999: 16). It functions not as a solution, but as a conversation starter, and as an ongoing process that affirms students' and audiences' agency to take action, find solutions and effect change.

## Conclusion

It is clear from our interviews, desk research and survey that there is a hunger for more structured impact-learning opportunities, especially in the Majority World. Our research respondents' insights highlight the importance of listening to diverse perspectives, and of incorporating them into our learning structures. Local knowledge and experiences that are not only derived from the West should feature in the way we educate film-makers, since a great deal can be gained from capitalising on cross-cultural synergies that are inclusive and sensitive to cultural and political contexts. We argue that the impact production space is ideally situated to create such interdisciplinary coalitions that enhance decolonial learning.

Through our research we found a dearth of free, or at least affordable, high-quality impact courses around the world. However, it is also clear that universal theories and practical models need more local case studies to become applicable to specific contexts. Significantly, teaching this kind of work requires prompting students to learn through practical application. Because each campaign is so different, there

is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to impact production and its teaching. Students thus need to learn to be flexible, to listen, and to collaborate with impact goals in mind.

A structured and sustainable avenue through which lecturers and film practitioners can exchange knowledge about training methodologies in the field of impact production is lacking. Moreover, the work already done by impact producers, impact strategists and educators should be used more widely as a source of inspiration for aspiring independent film-makers – especially because this area grew out of the independent documentary movement. Given that this growth was already observed in 2016 by Nash and Corner, we should encourage our universities to acknowledge the pedagogical opportunities that this area of film-making holds for providing students a rounded education that not only gives them knowledge in the subject, but also practical options for successfully entering the marketplace.

The experts we spoke to repeatedly emphasised the key role that universities and the academic community should play in the future growth of this field. They highlighted the importance of:

- (1) creating more opportunities for film and other students to learn about the potential of their craft to inspire change – if developed, produced and distributed strategically
- (2) offering opportunities for praxis that show students how film and media theories and methodologies can be applied in practice to help design impact strategies and/or measure social change through engagement with civil society about critical social issues
- (3) providing local, in-person learning opportunities as well as global, virtual ones to serve different constituents, while bringing creatives and other stakeholders together across disciplines, institutions and regions.

In speaking in the interview about impact training in Africa, Wanja pointed out that we need to 'make more case studies available, and not just the ones that are well-resourced'. This echoes Fayed's view, coming out of the Arab world, that case studies should demonstrate that impact is achievable by showcasing and discussing examples that students can relate to due to their own lived experiences. While managing expectations is, of course, necessary, it is also important to instil in students an understanding that one can already make a difference as a student with few resources. So perhaps documenting and sharing a wider range of case studies, particularly those from the Majority World, and those that create change with little funding and limited resources, should form an integral part of creating an impact-education tool. This will make the tool more useful to emerging impact producers and the work more accessible to those from poor or under-resourced communities. University and film school students who have to design campaigns that take their budget constraints into consideration will benefit as well. Even those seeking alternative distribution and marketing channels for artistic or commercial films can learn from the innovative approaches used in the impact field.

Based on the perspectives and experiences shared by our interviewees, we further argue that impact teaching should be inspired by the ethos of impact producing itself. It should welcome diversity, create opportunities for co-creation, inspire constructive conversations and provide resources that students can use to advance their own learning and practice. In short, it should decolonise conventional approaches to content and pedagogy. The principles of a facilitated post-screening conversation can, for instance, be used equally well to facilitate learning. The added value is that the learning experience is amplified by a sense from students that the *process* of their *applied* learning can already effect change. This would lead to significant career development, as well as to the acquisition of transferable skills that are not merely tick-box exercises towards obtaining a degree or other qualification. This article shines a light on the pedagogical value of impact production for shaping a new generation of film-makers. Such graduates would not only be technically equipped to tell compelling stories, but also intellectually committed to using film as a tool for change. This is indeed, as Ramuntsindela observes, 'a transformative experience'.



## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Bournemouth University and the University of Cape Town ethics boards.

### Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare the following interests: Maasdorp co-developed the UCT Sunshine Cinema Impact Facilitator short course, and Loader is an alumna of the 2023 course. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

## Filmography

*Afrikaaps* (ZA 2010, Dylan Valley)

*An Insignificant Man* (IN 2016, Khushboo Ranka, Vinay Shukla)

*Survivors* (US/SL 2018, Anna Fitch, Lansana Mansaray, Arthur Pratt, Banker White)

*Thank You for the Rain* (GB/NO 2017, Julia Dahr)

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