**Working beyond end-point assessments to deliver employability experiences: The University of Sunderland’s Crime Awareness student film projects in collaboration with Northumbria Police and its Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC)**

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**Background:**

The University of Sunderland has a sustained (6 year) relationship with Northumbria Police’s Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC). The collaboration affords undergraduates from BA (Hons) Drama and Film Production programmes the opportunity to work on live client briefs and produce films about complex category serious crime.

Northumbria Police have commissioned twenty-three films, which have been produced by approximately 500 students who contribute as actor or filmmaker. All films address key issues of crime including: capacity to consent; sexual exploitation; domestic violence; cyber-safety; modern-day slavery and male rape. These films provide dynamic, reciprocal drivers of crime planning, education and training to the police and invested partners from counselling services, law, healthcare, secondary, tertiary and Higher Education.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Synergistically, the project affords students the opportunity to engage with employability-focussed assessments that have the opportunity to impact society. Students have gained specific awareness of the needs of the policing community, which has reciprocally provided an understanding of their signature pedagogies, showing how film can tackle important civic issues.

**Methodology:**

Methodologically, the work is informed by career EDGE and USEM models of employability. It acknowledges that employability is not the same as employment; offering learners an experience of a professional working environment in advance of graduation. The project reacts to Harvey’s (2005) recommendations that little knowledge of the workplace makes it difficult for learner’s to adjust upon graduation. By working beyond end-point assessments and engaging students in employment-level professionalism as part of the curricular process the project focusses on developing the skills of students into graduates.

Via the career EDGE model of employability the project attempts to capture opportunities to develop transferrable skills that go beyond the student’s subject-specialism and offers opportunities to develop levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence. Procedurally this links student learning with external ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1999) building the confidence of students as active participants working with professionals beyond the university.

Recognising the recommendations of the USEM model of employability (Yorke & Knight, 2002), the project acknowledges the needs of students, employers, and other stakeholders. The decision to embed interactions with live clients reacts to the overwhelming evidence for the value of work-based learning experiences (Lowden, Hall, Elliot & Lewin, 2011). Through networking with agencies on a client brief, experiential learning is embedded into the curriculum enabling ‘authentic learning; where the outcomes of student learning have transferability into real world settings’ (Ashwin, et.al, 2015, p.16).

**Approach:**

The project is embedded into the TV Drama and Digital Fictional Film modules, which are taught annually from September to January. The SARC team lead each year on setting the brief and its specific crime(s).

An initial meeting between academics and the SARC outline the boundaries and future intentions for the use of the films, alongside specific support students may need (technically and in relation to the identified issue). Integrating wider partners into the team to act as advisors and to provide specific details on the issues has been vital. Key to this is providing expert advice for students in order to help create believability within the films. A typical example was, when addressing the issue of male rape, *Sunderland Counselling Service* provided anonymous scenarios of real crimes, so that these could be used authentically in the films.

As an ethical disclosure the films are fictional and we operate an ‘all persona fictitious’ disclaimer. The persons portrayed are not based on real-life people, but are informed by anonymised case studies and student-led research. The result is a non-intrusive research method, which is the most appropriate format when capturing vulnerable people that the students have no consistent interaction with. We ensure that we work alongside our health and wellbeing department to offer students support from a team of professionals, should it be required. Our partners are also experts in the field and have experience in training and counselling.

Up to four visits from partners are scheduled throughout the fifteen-week module. These visits allow for discussions about the issue, iterative feedback on drafts of work, and exploration of client expectations. It is the synergy between all collaborators, which ensures that students are introduced and exposed to complex and challenging affective learning, which is beyond the immediate parameters of their academic disciplines.

After filming, an interim viewing is held for the students to receive formative feedback. The students then work on points for development before a summative assessment of their work takes places. The films are finally screened before an audience of invited guests. There have been speeches from key industry figures including ITV’s News Correspondent Alastair Stewart OBE, Director of Policy Performance and Scrutiny at the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Northumbria Police- Ruth Durham, and Assistant Chief Constable Rachel Bacon; who praised the students’ creative efforts and promoted the importance of the films.

**Outcomes:**

The material collected to document the impact of the project, consists of audience observations, partnership feedback and student evaluations. Currently, we have a lot of qualitative data available to us, but moving forward, we are keen to access quantitative data (e.g. stats, figures, leaver’s destinations), in order to make comparisons to feedback and outcomes across disciplines and in relation to other modules.

Experiential learning has helped develop professional and transferable skills, with demonstrable impact on the employability of graduates. One BA (Hons) Drama graduate, now training with the *Bridge Theatre Training Company*, stated:

‘The film has helped me progress into a professional industry and it is on my showreel for agents and casting directors to view. Without this opportunity my experience as an actor wouldn’t be as broad’ (personal communication, May 3, 2019).

BA (Hons) Film production graduate and producer of *Damaged Goods* (2016), about sexual exploitation (now a videographer and editor in London), explained:

‘Producing a film for Northumbria Police was perhaps the first time I got a taste for what it’s like to work on a client’s brief. It gave us a more ‘real-world’ experience whilst being in the ‘safety-net’ of the university environment. It helped lay the foundation to how I now approach my freelance work, with the added bonus of knowing the work serves a good cause’ (personal communication, May 3, 2019).

The project has had a wider impact on the delivery of modules and programmes locally. Professor Arabella Plouviez, Dean of the Faculty, commended the project as an exemplar of good practice ‘which has led to other subjects developing cross-disciplinary and externally focussed opportunities’ (personal communication, May, 2019).

One example of this was embedding SARC and its partners into Performing Art’s modules that focus on theatre for social change, and devised performance. Modular study of devised performance incorporated interviews with a range of SARC’s partners in order to help students create a theatrical presentation on issues including: domestic violence, suicide, missing people and dementia. The performance on domestic violence was linked to SARC’s partnership with Gentoo and Barnardos.[[2]](#footnote-2) Following this performance, Women’s Aid approached the university with an opportunity for students to become ambassadors for women who experience domestic violence, and one BA (Hons) Drama graduate is now a Women’s Aid ambassador, delivering training on domestic violence.

We were approached by a team of academics from Sociology who were working on a project titled ‘*Be the Difference’*, which aimed to provide 90 minute taster sessions to over 300 students in their first year at the university, relating to safety on campus. We created three distinct films to run alongside the workshops in order to address the issues of discrimination against appearance, religiosity and disability. Academics across the two faculties then identified reciprocal opportunities to share best practice, with academics from sociology undertaking peer observations of a range of drama lectures.

Beyond the context of the university, the films are regarded as ‘excellent for police training purposes’ (Isle of Jersey SARC Manager, Personal Communication, March 2019) and our partners use ‘the footage whilst training, police, probation, social services and many voluntary sectors across all our working areas. Having such footage embedded in our training to raise awareness to frontline staff has been extremely powerful’ (Debra Cowey, Service Manager Changing Lives, Personal Communication, March 2019). The work shines ‘a much-needed spotlight on important issues and is an asset in raising awareness’ (Assistant Chief Constable Rachel Bacon, Personal Communication, March 2019).

At its maximum level of impact and through reflecting on the societal reach of these films, Police Crime Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird said:

‘The University has not shirked away from responding to our briefs by producing fantastic films on difficult issues. The films transmit messages in a way that we cannot and will be used by Northumbria Police to share far and wide’ (‘Winners of powerful short film’, 2019).

Having recently won a CATE (2019) award for the project, we are interested to see what other areas of academic research may arise from the project, internal and external to the immediate parameters of the department. We are in conversations with SARC in order to attend conferences more specific to the sector of policing, whilst exploring opportunities to more widely disseminate the relevance and success of this collaborative work institutionally, initially by undertaking conversations with other departments (including criminology, health and wellbeing and careers) to see where other collaborations may take shape. We hope to develop more research into understanding the full impact of this project for the students, the university and its partners; particularly from a quantitative angle. Ultimately, we hope to improve awareness around the important role projects of this nature can play in the propagation of societal issues, and the teaching of relevant employability activities within Higher Education.

**Word Count: 1631**

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1. Invested partners include: Changing Lives, Sunderland Counsellors, Slater & Gordon, Healthcare Professionals (e.g. GPs, GUM services, University Wellbeing Departments, Accident & Emergency Departments). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Gentoo is a housing association that owns and manages more than 29000 homes in Sunderland working to rehouse survivors of domestic violence). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)