Bridging Academia and Industry through Curriculum Partnerships

Abstract:

This article critically examines how curriculum partnerships can bridge the gap between academia and industry. Focusing on the collaboration between the University of Sunderland and Northumbria Police, where students address crime-prevention issues through film production, it explores how partnership-based learning fosters authentic assessment, professional readiness, and civic engagement.

The partnership, grounded in theories of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and authentic assessment (Herrington & Oliver, 2000), informs pedagogical design providing students with professional experiences that extend beyond traditional academic assessments. The research framework informing the partnership is that of reflective pedagogies and communities of practice. They enable students to gain real-world insights and engage with professionals in advance of graduation.

A mixed-methods, practice-led approach combines quantitative module and survey data with qualitative reflections from students and graduates, demonstrating that embedded industry partnerships can strengthen employability readiness. Findings show that co-designed, client-led assessments enhance module engagement, employability awareness, and civic responsibility.

Keywords: Curriculum partnerships; Industry collaboration; Authentic assessment; Employability; Professional skills development; Experiential learning; Pedagogical design.

Introduction:

As the landscape of higher education evolves, increasing emphasis is placed on aligning academic programmes with workplace demands. Institutions are recognising the importance of equipping students with not only theoretical knowledge, but the practical skills sought in employment markets (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Universities have therefore foregrounded career-focused degrees, reflecting sector-

wide strategic and policy shifts (Tomlinson, 2017). This shift is driven by rising student expectations and the need for graduates to demonstrate work readiness (Sin et al., 2022). Employers now prioritise transferable skills and work-integrated learning experiences (Tran, 2022). According to the Institute of Student Employers (2024), only 49% of employers considered graduates 'career-ready' at the point of hire, a decline from 54% in 2023, citing deficits particularly in 'self-awareness' (43%) and 'resilience' (37%). These findings highlight a persistent gap between academic training and workplace expectations.

In response to aligning academic programmes with workplace demands, higher education providers are adopting strategies such as experiential learning, industry partnerships, and curriculum redesign to strengthen graduate readiness. The University of Sunderland (UoS) has responded through a curriculum partnership with Northumbria Police (NP), from now on, referred to as 'the partnership'. Established in 2013, this collaboration embeds real-world engagement into performance and film-production programmes, enabling students to create films addressing serious crime. By working on live briefs, students engage in authentic professional practice that fosters collaboration among learners, educators, and employers. The partnership therefore aims to provide students with learning opportunities which culminate in client-led, employability-focused assessments that enhance their understanding of the workplace in advance of graduation.

The research asks:

RQ1. How can embedding an industry partnership shape authentic learning and assessment design?

RQ2. How can engagement with client-led briefs influence students' understanding of professional development and employability?

This study recognises that employability differs from employment: it concerns the development of transferable skills rather than immediate job acquisition. The partnership responds to Harvey's (2005) observation that limited workplace familiarity hinders graduate adjustment. By embedding professional practice within assessment, the model develops students' workplace competence before graduation.

Accordingly, this article evaluates the partnership's pedagogical and professional impact, focusing on student development, reflective practice, and employability. The study adopts a mixed-methods, practice-led approach. Data was collected from module evaluations, graduate surveys, focus groups and interviews across a twelve-year period, enabling a longitudinal examination of student engagement and professional identity development. It argues that sustained collaboration between academia and industry can produce authentic assessments that prepare students for work and promote understanding of employability.

Context: The University of Sunderland's Police Film Project

Since 2013, UoS students from *BA (Hons) Screen Performance, Performing Arts, and Film Production* programmes have collaborated with NP to produce films addressing crime-prevention issues such as domestic abuse, modern slavery, and male sexual violence. These projects align with the Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner's Crime Plan (Police Crime Report Plan, 2024), prioritising victim support and public engagement.

Informed by anonymised case scenarios and supported by partner organisations, students assume defined professional roles (actors, directors, editors, producers) within evidence-informed productions. The module, delivered over a fifteen-week period from September to January, replaces traditional academic assessments with client-led briefs. The collaboration includes weekly tutorials, iterative client feedback, and culminates in a public screening of the films. By producing films for NP and its partners, students develop industry-standard portfolios. They also gain experience in professional constraints including deadlines, budgets, and stakeholder expectations. This experiential framework aims to support students' transition into creative employment. Importantly, it also situates learning within a civic context, reinforcing students' understanding of the social relevance of their discipline.

Each year, NP and its partners determine the crime-related themes for film projects, underscoring the collaborative and community-based ethos of the initiative (Wenger, 1999). Engaging with such sensitive subjects encourages students to explore ethical responsibility while tackling real-world problems (Boyer, 1996). In addition to creative production, students conduct research that informs the film content, integrating

academic inquiry with professional practice. Students are required to submit formative reflective logs and summative personal evaluations. These instruments guide them in articulating their developing professional identity, ethical awareness, and personal growth. Weekly tutorials and interim screenings provide feedback loops between students, academics, and professional partners, an approach reflecting Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle of concrete experience, reflection, and active experimentation.

In 2015, following student feedback, the module was relocated from level 4 to level 6, reflecting responsiveness to pedagogical evaluation and student readiness. This redesign aligns with principles of scaffolded curriculum design (Biggs & Tang, 2011) and acknowledges the need for emotional maturity, technical proficiency, and cognitive depth when addressing complex subject matter. Students engage with these sensitive topics under structured supervision from police professionals (who are also experts in the field and have experience in training and counselling) and university wellbeing specialists, ensuring both pedagogical and ethical rigour. The completed films are subsequently utilised by NP as training resources across a wide partner network that includes law enforcement, healthcare, legal, and educational sectors. Collaborating organisations include Changing Lives, Sunderland Counsellors, Edge Northeast, South Tyneside Council, and healthcare professionals in services such as A&E departments and university wellbeing units.

Literature Review:

Recent shifts in higher education policy and practice reflect growing pressure to embed employability more meaningfully within curricula (Tomlinson, 2017; Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2021)). Traditional learning and end-point assessments have been critiqued for foregrounding academic knowledge often disconnected from real-world contexts (Knight, 2001; Bartlett, 2020). Consequently, graduates may lack adaptability, collaboration, and communication skills critical for the contemporary workplace (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). To address these gaps, industry partnerships, client-led briefs, and work-integrated learning have emerged as strategies to bridge academia and employability (Rae et al., 2022).

Recent scholarship on enterprise and entrepreneurship education has increasingly emphasised the value of educational partnerships who bring with them client-led briefs, reflecting a wider pedagogical shift towards authentic, practice-based learning and assessment. Such approaches position students as emerging professionals who must navigate real-world expectations, communicate with external partners, and manage iterative project development to bridge academic learning and employability skills (QAA, 2021; Rae et al, 2022). By working to briefs set by industry partners or third-sector clients, this 'learning by doing' approach enables students to engage in experiential learning that promotes autonomy, employability, and the development of transferable skills including problem-solving, collaboration, and project management (Healey et al., 2016). This model situates learning and assessment not as abstract theory but as socially embedded aligning curricular with employment contexts and the labour market. This further encourages learners to take initiative, negotiate uncertainty, problem solve, and respond creatively to stakeholder needs (Gibb, 2002). Given the increasingly complex and dynamic nature of the modern labour market, embedding client-led briefs within curricula supports the development of employability outcomes, validating the shift from traditional curriculums toward experiential learning and authentic assessment. The partnership exemplifies this trend as industry partnerships and client-led briefs position students as co-creators, integrating theoretical knowledge with real-world relevance.

Embedding experiential learning and authentic assessment is central to the pedagogical shift to embed employability within curriculums, offering students industry-focused experiences that mirror professional complexity and value beyond the university (Gulikers et al., 2004; Ashwin et al., 2015). Research suggests that such experiential learning and authentic assessments foster stronger professional identity formation and enhance students' readiness for complex workplace environments (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Therefore, engaging with professionals positions students as co-contributors to knowledge-making, enhancing learner identity and belonging (Smith, Ferns & Russell, 2016). Authentic learning and assessment, defined by Wiggins (1998) as the evaluation through tasks replicating professional practice, has been shown to improve engagement, motivation, and transferable skills (Villarroel et al., 2018). Ashwin et al. (2015) further link authentic learning and assessment to employability and reflective practice, demonstrating actionable frameworks for higher

education. Alongside considerations around the benefits of this educational model, scholarship also reiterates the need to ensure that during educational planning careful scaffolding and ethical oversight is in place to ensure that client expectations, student wellbeing, and pedagogic aims remain aligned (Pittaway & Edwards, 2012).

Collectively, the literature underscores a shift from abstract, decontextualised education towards practice-integrated curricula that develops professional competence and employment readiness. Embedding authentic learning and assessment opportunities within modules ensures employability development is integral, not peripheral, to academic experience. Producing films for crime-prevention awareness exemplifies integrated learning, developing communication, project management, and ethical reasoning while contributing to civic engagement (Thompson, 2009; Tran, 2022). Within this context, client-led briefs function not only as learning and assessment tools but as structured opportunities for students to experience the social, ethical, and professional dimensions of working with real clients.

Several employability frameworks support the pedagogical design of embedded employability-focused curriculums. The CareerEDGE model (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) highlights the interplay of career development learning, work experience, degree knowledge, and emotional intelligence, emphasising self-efficacy, self-esteem, and confidence as drivers of employability. The USEM model (Yorke & Knight, 2002) complements this, framing employability as understanding, skills, efficacy beliefs, and metacognition. Both frameworks reject simplistic job-oriented definitions of employability, focusing instead on adaptive, context-sensitive graduate capabilities (Harvey, 2005). Work-based learning and communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) provide mechanisms to integrate these frameworks, and empirical studies indicate strong links between work-based learning and positive graduate outcomes (Lowden et al., 2011; Sin, Tavares & Amaral, 2022).

Partnerships such as UoS–NP illustrate how authentic, applied tasks can foster subject expertise, ethical awareness, and professional readiness simultaneously. The partnership situates students within this pedagogical paradigm, illustrating how creative, client-led tasks can operationalise theoretical models in practice. While existing literature affirms the value of authentic learning and assessment and industry engagement, few studies examine longitudinal, co-designed partnerships addressing

sensitive societal issues within creative arts curricula. Building on this literature this study contributes empirical insights into how sustained curriculum partnerships can shape student's interactions with the principles of professional identity, reflective practice, and understanding of employability over time.

Methodology:

The practice-led, mixed-methods approach, informed by the principles of authentic assessment and experiential learning, captures both the qualitative richness of student experiences and quantitative indicators of curriculum impact on employability. Data were gathered through four primary sources:

1. Quantitative student module selection data pre and post partnership (2012 vs 2015).
2. Qualitative and quantitative student evaluation (2024).
3. Qualitative graduate feedback (2019).
4. Qualitative and quantitative graduate feedback (2013-2023).

Across the twelve academic years included in the study (2013–2025), approximately 400 students participated. Cohorts ranged from twenty-five to thirty-five students annually. Recruitment was embedded within the curriculum: students were informed of the research aims during module induction and consented to the use of anonymised reflections and outputs. Participation in the module was independent of research consent. Students who withdrew from the module early or did not complete the required assessment tasks were excluded from the data set. Students were also asked to leave a forwarding contact so that a Qualtrics graduate survey could be sent to them two years post-graduation to map the impact of the module to their current employment situation. The teaching team led data collection, ensuring alignment with pedagogical objectives and maintaining assessment integrity. Given the dual role of the researcher as educator and investigator, researcher positionality and interpretive reflexivity was critical to the process. This was maintained throughout the capturing of data via data analysis and triangulation across data sources.

Ethical approval for the project was sought, reviewed, and granted by the University's Research Committee (REC), conducted in accordance with the University's Research

Ethics Principles, Professional Codes of Practice and the law and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2024). The project is reviewed annually and continues to adhere strictly to guidelines on informed consent, data protection, and the responsible representation of sensitive topics. To ensure ethical rigour, all films are based on anonymised case studies and fictionalised scenarios, with an 'all persona fictitious' disclaimer, in line with BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2024) when advising 'fictionalising' approaches […] are appropriate when confidentiality is required'. No vulnerable or real-life individuals are portrayed in the films but are informed by student-led research, secondary sources, expert consultations, and anonymised data. This is the most appropriate format when capturing the experiences of vulnerable people with whom the students have no direct or consistent interaction.

By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the study evaluates the impact of a curriculum integrating education, employability, client-led practice, and industry partnership. All qualitative data cited throughout this article reflect anonymised, consented feedback collected for the purpose of evaluating student learning and employability, rather than employment outcomes or partner benefits, which would be better placed and realised as a separate study. Quantitative data included module uptake trends. Quantitative graduate survey metrics focused on perceived student confidence, employment readiness, educational satisfaction and preparation for work, the most relevant areas for evaluating authentic assessment and employability impact. Module evaluations capturing qualitative and quantitative feedback functioned as both learning instruments and data sources, supporting iterative reflection and professional identity development. Structured focus groups with twelve alumni in 2019 and Qualtrics graduate survey feedback from twenty-two alumni, captured in 2025 and covering the alumni graduating between 2015-2023, provided longitudinal insights into professional trajectories and employability perceptions. This combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis ensured that the methods directly addressed the research objectives by connecting participants' lived experiences to the overarching aim of enhancing employability development within authentic assessment opportunities.

Data analysis included thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2006) from qualitative data, mapped to theoretical frameworks such as Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1999),

Experiential Learning Cycles (Kolb, 1984), Epistemic Cognition (Muis, 2007), and integrative assessment (Boud et al., 2014). Descriptive statistics from quantitative survey responses were further aligned with CareerEDGE and USEM models to evaluate employability development. This exploratory, longitudinal research design enabled assessment of both immediate learning gains and the evolution of student professional identity and understanding of employability. The exploratory approach is justified by the innovative nature of client-led briefs and co-designed learning within a niche creative-criminal justice context.

As with all mixed-methods research, this study presents some inherent limitations. A key limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, such as qualitative summative evaluations. While these offer valuable insights into student perspectives and identity development, they are subjective in nature and may be influenced by individual bias, memory, or group dynamic (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Additionally, because the reflective tools were integrated into module delivery, some students may have tailored their reflections to meet perceived academic expectations rather than provide candid commentary. While the findings provide strong quantitative insights into the module's influence on employability and professional identity, the sample size for both the alumni steering group (2019) (n=12) and the graduate survey (2025) (n=22) restricts the generalisability of conclusions, particularly as respondents self-selected to participate and may represent those with more positive perceptions of the module. However, the approach to research overall sought qualitative richness to compensate for limited quantitative generalisability. Additionally, the analysis focused on student experience and areas of learning and development, rather than including formal data from graduate destinations surveys, which is perhaps representational of another research area.

Dependability was reinforced by the structured, repeatable nature of the research. The study is appropriately confined to a single UK university and a specific final-year module. Module design is also set (e.g. the module runs for the same duration every year: September-January, across the same student level, and with the same overseeing client). Despite evolving briefs, changing themes, and additional supporting partners, the pedagogical framework remained consistent, allowing a dependable structure for data generation and comparison across cohorts.

Confirmability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of anonymised data, module artefacts, and evaluation feedback, allowing others to trace the analytic process.

The use of multiple data sources (e.g., module evaluations, module selection data, graduate feedback) also mitigated researcher bias. The use of student-led artefacts (rather than interpretations alone) helped manage the influence of the researcher's positionality. The insider perspective provided depth and contextual sensitivity but was balanced through triangulated data and anonymised analysis. This practice-led approach aligns with Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner model, engaging both students and researchers in iterative cycles of action, learning and reflection. Although no formal pilot study preceded the module, the curriculum has been designed iteratively over twelve years, with each cohort serving as a reflexive point of curriculum evaluation and refinement. Feedback and analysis from the early years of delivery informed design improvements, creating a living curriculum responsive to student needs.

The methodological approach chosen is rigorous, examining a partnership-focused, practice-led curriculum through both qualitative and quantitative lenses. By applying reflexive and iterative processes, and employing triangulation across diverse data sources, the study ensures the credibility and robustness of its findings. The alignment of data collection and analysis with established theoretical frameworks further reinforces the validity of the insights generated.

Findings and Discussion:

The data collated and triangulated demonstrated that the curriculum partnership had influenced student engagement, professional identity and employability in several important ways. Quantitative data strategically compared pre-partnership (2012) and post-partnership (2015 onward) module selection for *BA (Hons) Performing Arts* programme cohorts, where the module is optionally offered to students. *BA (Hons) Screen Performance and Film Production* cohorts take the module as part of their programme's core module diet so were not included in this sample. In 2012, prior to the integration of the curriculum partnership, student assessments were based on fictional briefs designed to simulate industry conditions. While useful for introducing technical skills, these simulations lacked the immediacy, complexity, and

accountability of real-world briefs and experiences. 2015 also represents the modules move to level six for all learners. While some fluctuating variables between the 2012 and 2015 quantitative data exist (e.g. group dynamics, programme diet, module credit weighting), the data highlights that despite overall student programme enrolment numbers being lower in 2015 than 2012, 2015 data indicated a notable increase in student module selection (Figure 1).
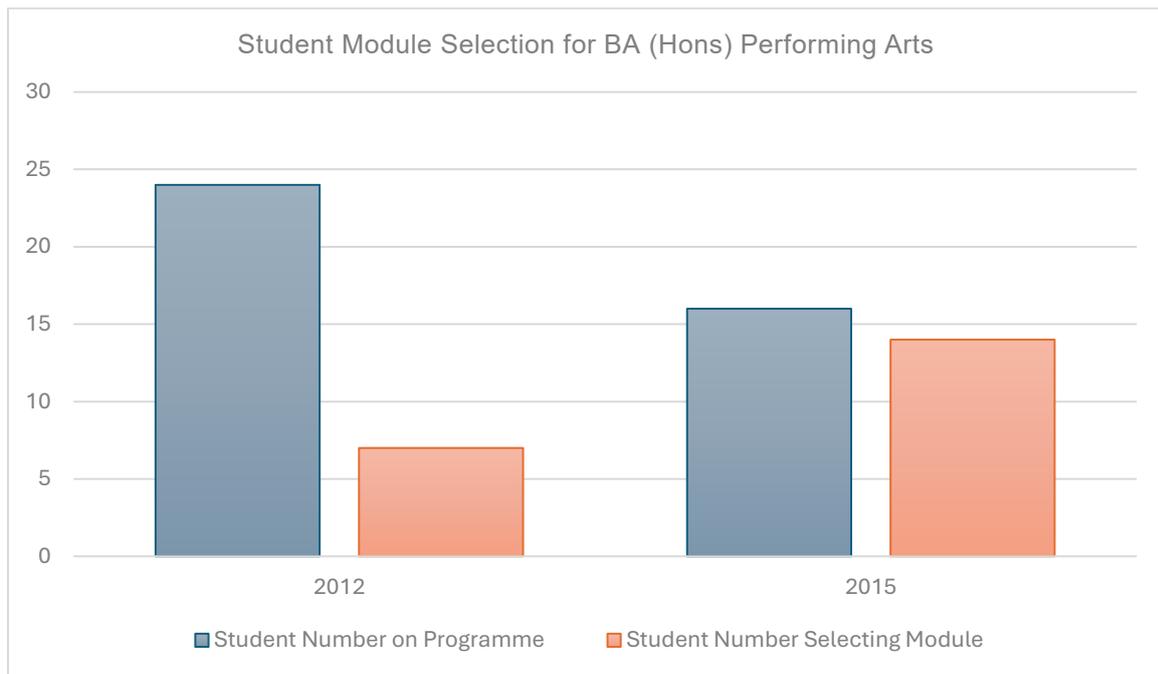

Figure 1: Number of students enrolled on the module pre- and post-partnership, including level four to level six transition.

This increase suggests that embedding authentic industry experiences and client-led briefs heighten the module's appeal, indicating that students value opportunities for real-world engagement and opportunities to consider employability. By 2025, the module enrolment comprises twenty-five students from the *BA (Hons) Performing Arts* programme, matching the overall programme cohort enrolment and indicating full participation across the degree, further evidencing its growing relevance and perceived value among learners.

Quantitative feedback taken from the 2024 Qualtrics student module evaluation helped to analyse and reinforce positive perceptions of employability learning. Among forty-eight student respondents, 92% indicated the module enhanced their understanding of employment, 87% reported increased motivation for employment preparation, and

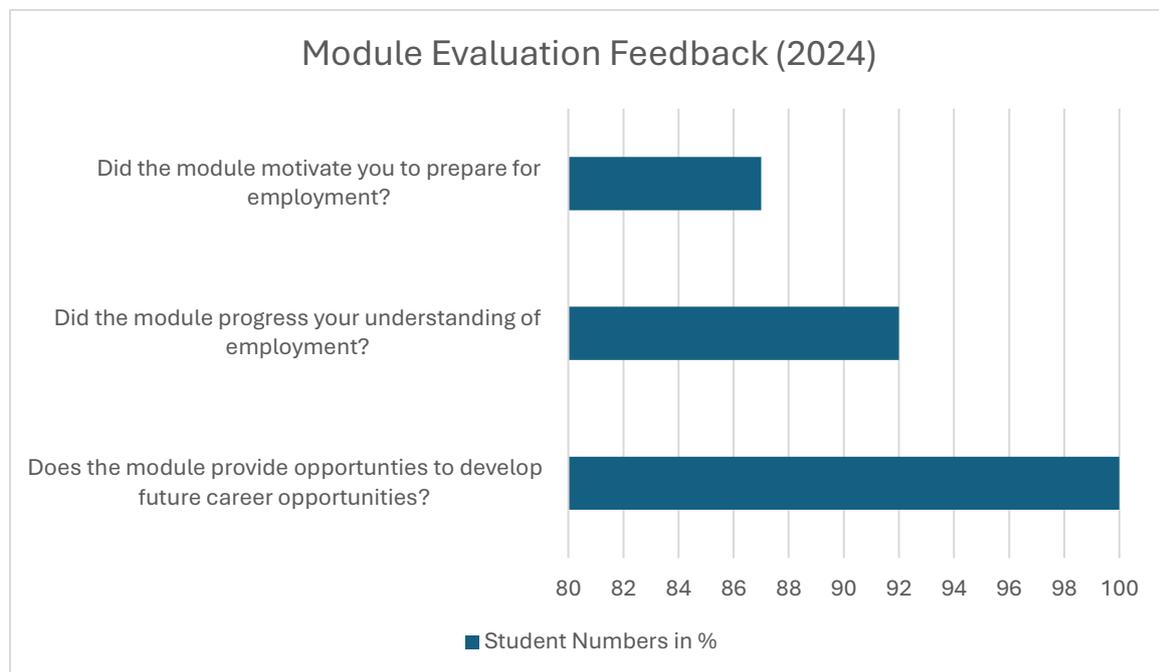100% agreed the module provided opportunities to develop future career prospects Figure 2).

Figure 2: Module evaluation statistics across all programmes, 2024.

Qualitative feedback from module evaluation highlights substantial gains in both disciplinary and metacognitive understanding. Students reported that the module enhanced their appreciation of the educational and social potential of film, with one student noting, 'I understand how films like these can educate people on these topics' (Student Evaluation, 2024). This response illustrates how the module fostered not only technical proficiency but also critical awareness of media as a pedagogical and societal tool. The integration of theory and practice through collaborative work with film students encouraged a deeper engagement with authentic, real-world contexts. Students indicated a greater awareness of the complexities involved in media production, stating they had developed 'a better understanding of what it's like to be on a film set.' Such comments reflect the module's alignment with employability frameworks that emphasise applied knowledge and contextual learning (Knight & Yorke, 2002).

Student reflections strongly suggested that the module supported the development of transferable skills central to employability, including collaboration, communication, adaptability, and reflective practice. Several students commented that the module

'helped better [their] preparation skills and critical analysis skills' (Student Evaluation, 2024). The emphasis on rehearsals, discussions with directors, and character research directly contributed to professional readiness. Reflective activities, including justifying artistic and technical decisions, were seen as particularly developmental. One student commented that they learned 'to justify choices and challenges, strengths and weaknesses during and after production' (Student Evaluation, 2024). This metacognitive process demonstrates how the module successfully embedded reflective practice within assessment, thereby fostering professional identity formation.

A consistent theme throughout the feedback relates to the authenticity of the learning environment. Working alongside and producing materials for an external stakeholder introduced an additional level of professional realism. This authentic partnership not only supported employability skills but also exposed students to ethical and emotional dimensions of working with 'sensitive subject matters.' Such experiences are known to enhance empathy, self-regulation, and resilience, qualities increasingly valued in creative and applied professions (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Overall, the qualitative module evaluation findings suggest that this interdisciplinary, practice-based module effectively cultivates both subject-specific and transferable skills aligned with employability and lifelong learning outcomes. The integration of reflective, authentic, and collaborative practices supports student development across cognitive, affective, and practical domains.

Qualitative evidence from graduate focus groups held in 2019 demonstrate that the module made a significant contribution to graduates' understanding of employability. Alumni working across film, performance, and in some instances civic sectors consistently emphasised that working to client-led briefs fostered 'industry awareness,' 'confidence,' and an 'ability to navigate ethically complex subject matter' (Graduate Feedback, 2019). One alumnus reflected that 'while conventional modules focused on theoretical and technical filmmaking skills, producing a film in response to a live brief was the first time I truly understood the demands of working to a client's objectives. The experience fundamentally shaped how I now approach freelance work and client-led projects' (Graduate Feedback, 2019). These accounts corroborate prior research to the benefits of authentic and work-integrated learning (Herrington & Oliver, 2000) highlighting how structured external collaboration can advance students' transition

from learner to professional. In particular, the integration of real-world stakeholders into assessment appears to have provided students with a framework for understanding the expectations, constraints, and ethical dimensions of professional practice.

The 2025 Qualtrics graduate survey was distributed to alumni from 2015–2023, inviting reflections on the module's influence on current employment and skill development. Twenty-two graduates responded, nine of whom currently work in the film and performance industries. While all responses were considered as part of the research feedback, particular attention was spent unpicking the qualitative feedback of the nine students who currently work in the sector to which the module was aimed. Quantitative results (Figure 3, Table 1, Figure 4,) indicated strong agreement that the module enhanced employability and provided insight into professional practice.
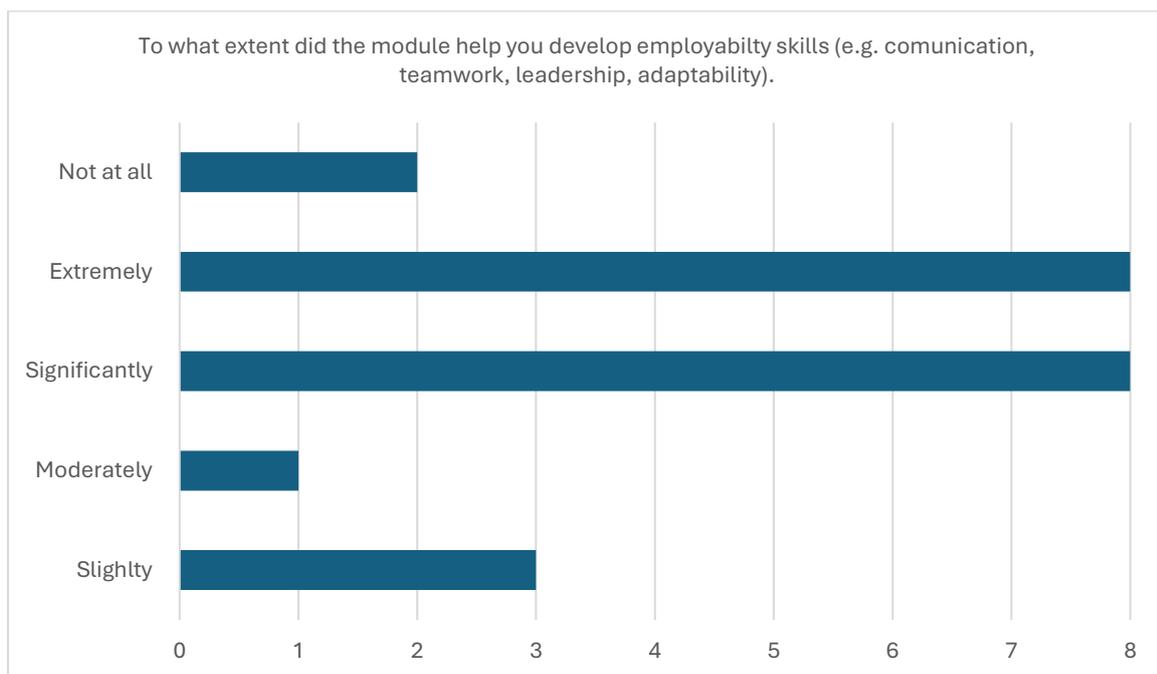

Figure 3: Data to demonstrate to what extent the module helped graduates develop employability skills.

Working on live or real industry briefs gave me insight into the expectations of the professional world.		
	% count	Number count
Strongly Agree	50%	11
Agree	32%	7
Neither agree nor disagree	5%	1
Disagree	5%	1
Strongly disagree	9%	2

Table 1: Data to demonstrate how the live/ real industry briefs gave insight into the professional world.
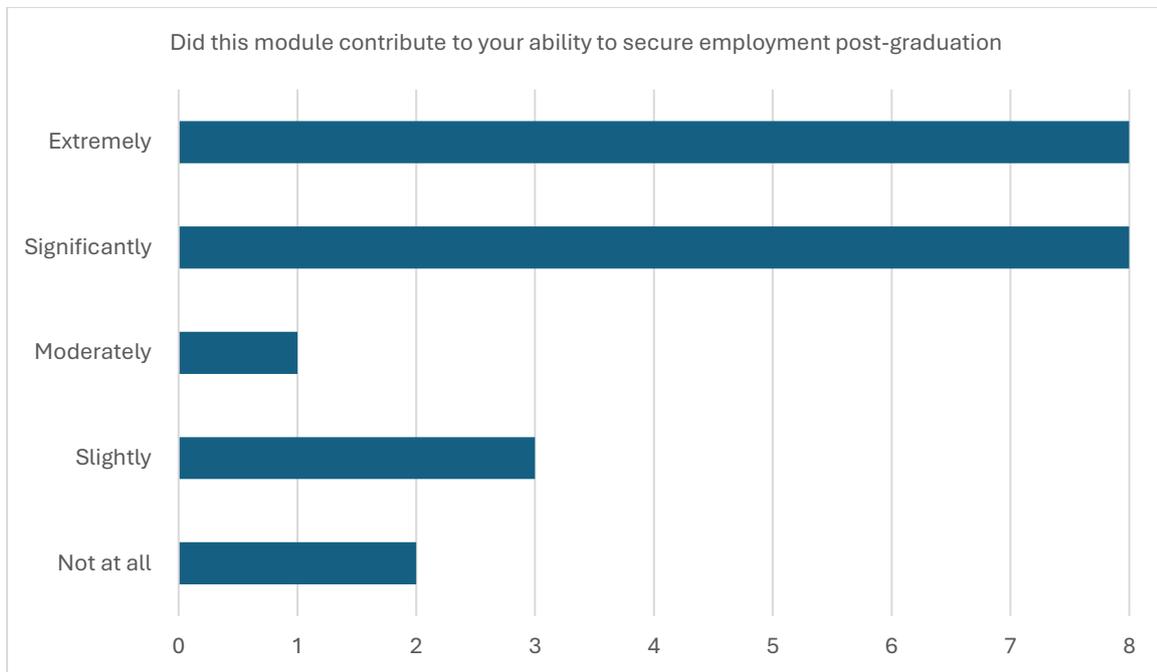

Figure 4: Data to demonstrate whether the module contributed to the graduate's ability to achieve employment.

Qualitative responses reinforced this, describing the module as 'creating a sense of discipline,' promoting 'strong people skills,' and developing the ability to 'translate a clear brief into engaging, audience-focused outputs' (Graduate Feedback, 2025). Graduates valued opportunities for 'external engagement,' 'group work skills,' and a 'wider understanding of civic-facing issues' (Graduate Feedback, 2025). Some participants explicitly recognised the module's realism and transferability noting that it 'replicated key aspects of employment such as health and safety briefings and signing

contract-like documents' (Graduate Feedback, 2025). Another reflected that the experience of integrating policy and governance themes into film practice 'opened my eyes to the bigger picture, leading to later collaborations with civic partners including Harrow Council and The Josh Hanson Trust on projects addressing knife crime' (Graduate Feedback, 2025). These examples suggest that the module's design supported both career readiness and civic engagement, aligning with contemporary models of employability that incorporate ethical and societal awareness (Yorke & Knight, 2002; Lowden et al., 2011).

Graduates also reflected on how the module influenced their career choices and sense of professional direction. Several respondents described discovering a passion for 'editing', 'post-production', or 'acting for screen', others highlighted the development of transferable skills such as 'teamwork', 'communication', and 'resilience' (Graduate Feedback, 2025). One graduate commented that the module 'positively affected the way I view myself and what I'm capable of; I learnt more about the ways in which I like to work' (Graduate Feedback, 2025). Explicitly highlighting the acquisition of transferable employability skills. In one case, a graduate's experience led to their current role as a safeguarding lead, shaping educational content around social issues such as county lines.

The teaching and learning approaches were also commended for 'balancing autonomy and collaboration' (Graduate Feedback, 2025). Graduates reported that independent research tasks fostered 'problem-solving and self-management', while group projects and workshops developed 'adaptability and communication' (Graduate Feedback, 2025). Deadlines and presentations were seen as 'realistic exercises that encouraged focus and composure under pressure' (Graduate Feedback, 2025). These reflections echo the value of authentic assessment and experiential pedagogy in supporting employability (Harvey, 2005; Knight & Yorke, 2002).

Finally, the graduate data reveals a recurring theme of civic and ethical awareness. Graduates articulated an enhanced understanding of the societal value of their work, 'connecting creative practice to broader questions of justice and community impact' (Graduate Feedback, 2025). One alumnus concluded, 'this module is an example of how I have worked since leaving Sunderland. I have created, I have helped, I have

told stories, and I have tried to have an impact. Regardless of the field, this module gave me a heart for social justice' (Graduate Feedback, 2025).

Across data sources, a coherent pattern emerges and thematic analysis of the data across student and graduate responses (2015–2025) identified recurrent patterns that align with the theoretical underpinnings of the curriculum. Students consistently highlighted five areas of impact, including professional identity, industry engagement, collaborative practice, longitudinal development, and career readiness (Table 2).

Theme	Repeated feedback outcomes	Links to theoretical frameworks	Insights	Connection to theme
Professional identity formation	'Shaped confidence' 'Understanding of the industry' 'My role is important'	Wenger (1999) Communities of Practice CareerEdge (Dacre, Pool & Sewell, 2007)	Integration of learning identity	Students developing confidence and sense of professional identity reflect the idea of shaped through participation. Confidence and reflection as core elements of identify and employability.
Industry engagement & Authentic learning	'Working with clients' 'real-world value' 'Live-client brief' 'professionalism' 'Industry-aligned working dynamic'	Wenger (1999) Communities of Practice Kolb (1984) Boud et al. (2014) CareerEdge, USEM (Yorke, 2004)	Learning occurs through legitimate peripheral participation Development of epistemic maturity and ethical awareness Situation learning in a social setting	Authentic client-based learning aligns with the emphasis on peripheral participation and learning by-doing in social contexts. Industry engagement promotes employability, work experience, and reflection- key pillars of both models.
Employability skills and career readiness	'Foundational employability experiences' 'Career-readiness' 'Freelance practices' 'Ongoing industry relationship' 'Transferable'	Wenger (1999) Communities of Practice Kolb (1984) Boud et al. (2014) CareerEdge USEM	Reflective Practice and integrative assessment build identity	Through reflective cycles and practical work, students integrate employability skills and build their future professional identities. Emphasis on self-efficacy, experience, and reflection in employability development.
Collaborative Practice	'Collaboration within production teams' 'Support from professionals' 'Engage with challenging and sensitive topics'	Muis (2007) Epistemic cognition CareerEdge	Growth in understanding of complexity	Collaborative challenges promote epistemic growth, helping students engage with complexity and ethical decision-making. Teamwork and emotional intelligence- central to CareerEdge- are developed through collaborative practice.
Longitudinal support and development	'Relationship throughout our third year' 'Supported by professionals into graduation' 'Developed industry understandings'	Wenger (1999) Communities of Practice Kolb (1984) Boud et al (2014)	Cyclical, reflective learning Identity formation through participation over time	Sustained professional engagement across time supports identity development and reflective learning.

Table 2: Data Mapping of Qualitative Feedback to Theoretical Frameworks.

The findings indicate that embedding authentic, client-led curriculums supports the development of both professional and civic competencies. Quantitative data (module uptake and survey results) converge with qualitative insights (reflections and interviews), demonstrating the efficacy of client-led, co-designed curricula in preparing graduates for professional roles. The partnership model not only facilitated technical skill acquisition but also fostered ethical awareness, self-efficacy, and adaptability, key attributes of employable graduates. By situating learning within live, socially engaged contexts, the module bridged gaps between academic study and professional practice,

demonstrating how curriculum design can simultaneously promote employability, social responsibility, and lifelong learning dispositions. Mapping these qualitative outcomes against experiential learning and communities of practice frameworks (Kolb, 1984; Wenger, 1999) and conceptual models of graduate employability (USEM and CareerEDGE, Yorke & Knight, 2002) demonstrates that the partnership effectively supports the development of transferable skills, professional identity, and civic engagement. Triangulating the qualitative findings with the quantitative enrolment data and student module reflections strengthens the validity of these findings and demonstrates that curriculum co-design can achieve intended learning and employability outcomes.

The main implications for practice, taken from the collective evidence analysed as part of the research, suggests that the curriculum partnership creates a synergistic learning environment where experiential, reflective, and authentic assessment strategies converge. For educators, this highlights the value of co-designing modules in collaboration with industry partners, using real-world briefs to provide students with opportunities to develop transferable skills, ethical awareness, and reflective practice. Practically, it suggests that scaffolding experiential learning through structured feedback loops, industry interaction, and iterative reflection can bridge the gap between academic learning and workplace readiness. Institutions can adopt similar partnership-focused models to cultivate discipline-specific expertise, ensuring that graduates are not only technically competent but also adaptable and prepared to navigate complex professional contexts.

Students are immersed in ethically complex, socially meaningful projects, which cultivate professional identity, transferable skills, and civic consciousness. Simultaneously, the film outputs bridge the gap between higher education and professional practice. The integrated analysis shows that client-led, co-designed curricula enhance students understanding of employability, directly addressing the study's research questions: the partnership influences module engagement, professional identity and employability, while providing a replicable model for embedding industry-integrated experiential learning in higher education.

Conclusion:

The partnership illustrates how higher education can bridge the gap between academic learning and professional practice, producing graduates who are technically competent, career-ready, ethically aware and civically engaged. **In relation to research question 1, this demonstrates how embedding an industry partnership situates teaching practice within real professional contexts directly shaping authentic assessment and learning.** Quantitative and qualitative evidence converge, showing that authentic, co-designed briefs increase module uptake, motivate students, and develop practical skills directly relevant to professional practice and employability.

Graduate and student reflections indicate that engagement with client-led briefs fosters confidence, collaborative competence, and professional development, supporting the formation of professional identities that are both practice-informed and socially responsible. **Addressing research question 2, these findings show that sustained engagement with client-led briefs enhance students' understanding of professional development and employability by exposing them to industry expectations, ethical responsibility, and real-world impact.** Iterative feedback loops with academics and industry partners reinforce situated learning and reflective practice, demonstrating the value of experiential pedagogy in fostering employability. Furthermore, in generating crime-prevention issue-based films as assessment outputs, which are actively used in professional training by police, social services, and voluntary organisations, the curricula can extend learning beyond the institution, providing students with authentic professional experiences in advance of graduation. **This further demonstrates how industry-embedded learning and assessment produces authentic outputs with professional relevance, reinforcing the role of partnership in shaping meaningful assessment practice (RQ1 &2).**

The success of the partnership reflects alignment with established educational theories and pedagogical principles alongside employability frameworks. The partnership therefore contributes to ongoing debates about the role of authentic assessment and client-led pedagogy in higher education (Gulikers, Bastiaens & Kirschner, 2004). **Collectively, these findings offer direct responses to both research questions by evidencing the mechanisms through which industry partnerships shape learning and assessment and how client-led engagement**

enhances employability understanding (RQ 1 & 2). It suggests that carefully scaffolded collaborations can serve as employability focused environments, enabling students to construct professional identities while engaging critically with real-world issues. For educators designing modules with external partners, the findings reinforce the value of aligning academic learning outcomes with professional contexts to enhance graduate readiness. The findings **collectively demonstrate how embedding industry partnerships shapes authentic learning and assessment design (RQ1) and how engagement with client-led briefs strengthens students' professional development and employability understanding (RQ2). Therefore, the curriculum partnership:**

1. Enhances the relevance and attractiveness of modules, increasing student engagement.
2. Supports the development of professional identity, ethical awareness, and reflective practice.
3. Provides authentic assessment and learning experiences that align academic learning with real-world industry expectations.
4. Strengthens graduate employability through exposure to client-led briefs and professionally focused assessment design.

The research highlights the strategic value of embedding authentic partnership opportunities within curricula, demonstrating how higher education can foster graduate readiness and professional employability. By positioning students as co-creators of knowledge with real-world consequences, the curriculum partnership exemplifies a pedagogical model for higher education institutions seeking to integrate experiential, socially engaged, and industry-focused learning that aligns academic rigour with civic engagement.

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Appendix

Glossary of Data-Related Terms:

Module Selection (or Enrolment Data)	Refers to the number of students who opted to take a particular module within a given academic year. In this case, comparisons are made between pre-(2012) and post-partnership (2015) data from the BA (Hons) Performing Arts Programme.
Pre-Partnership / Post-Partnership Data	These terms distinguish between two timeframes: • **Pre-partnership (e.g., 2012):** When assessments were based on simulated industry briefs. • **Post-partnership (e.g., 2015 onward):** When modules included client-led briefs and civic engagement.
Module Evaluation Feedback	Student responses collected via surveys (e.g., Qualtrics) at the end of a module. Used to evaluate teaching quality, relevance, and impact on student learning and employability.
Qualtrics	An online survey platform used by the university to collect, analyse, and report student feedback and other qualitative/quantitative data.
Graduate Outcomes Survey	A UK-wide data collection exercise run by HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) measuring graduate employment, job relevance, skill use, and further study 15 months after graduation.

Employment Readiness	Measured through self-reported confidence, skill acquisition, and graduate outcomes. Data in the case study shows a strong correlation between the curriculum model and perceived employability.