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Making Feature Films As Part Of Higher Education Curricula: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

In recent years, a few film programmes at UK and Irish higher education institutions have attempted to produce feature length films (70+ minutes) as part of their curricula. This differs from the dominant approach of producing short student films, which usually require smaller crews. This paper compares five different models that have been used within the UK and Ireland that have successfully produced feature films as part of curricula, yet some of the courses no longer operate and it remains an uncommon method of film education. The aim is to address two questions: What are the different ways in which feature films have been made as part of higher education curricula in the UK and Ireland and what challenges may there be in the future when making feature films using this approach?

Keywords: Motion Pictures, British; Motion Pictures, Irish; Motion Picture Authorship; Motion Pictures in Education—Ireland; Motion Pictures in Education—United Kingdom

Introduction

This paper focuses on recent examples of where feature films (70+ minutes) have been produced as part of curricula within UK and Irish higher education (HE)

institutions. There are historical examples of feature films being made using this approach in the US. Nicholas Ray made *We Can't Go Home Again* (1971) with his students while teaching at Binghamton University. Brian De Palma directed *Home Movies* (1979) as part of a course at Sarah Lawrence College. Robert Altman made *Secret Honor* (1984) with students at the University of Michigan. In recent years, there have been various attempts in the UK and Ireland to produce feature films as part of HE curricula. But despite these attempts, it still remains an uncommon approach and has not transformed into a more mainstream practice. The dominant method of teaching and learning filmmaking in universities is still short films, usually with smaller crews.

There are various motivations for making a feature length film within educational curricula but all broadly attempt to bridge a gap between education and industry. It can be a way of addressing the 'missing middle' (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2011) which emerged in the film and television industries where the freelance labour market led to a collapse of new-industry entrants learning from experienced crew members (Bechky, 2006). Another motivation is the lack of transparency and visible progression routes within the industry for micro-budget feature filmmaking (Fair, 2018). For example, now defunct developmental schemes like iFeatures, Catalyst Project, and Microwave – supported by Creative UK, the Irish Film Board, and Film London respectively – were extremely competitive to access and produced comparatively few films. Producing feature projects in an educational setting can create collaborative experiences that closer emulate the old studio model, closer to traditional craft apprenticeship. The projects can familiarise the students to the logistics of larger crews and higher specialisation of skills, which traditionally differ between academia and industry. Elsewhere, some HE institutions have welcomed a move towards student/staff co-creation of knowledge over traditional teaching; making feature projects can provide a platform for this.

This paper examines five HE institutions in the UK and Ireland where students have recently produced feature length films as part of their educational courses. Using comparative analysis, it is possible to examine a series of factors including curriculum size and structure, crew size and organisation, production budgets, staffing implications, ownership, and repeatability. The intention is not to evaluate the approaches to determine which are better or worse but to evaluate where there are similarities and differences, and establish what the challenges may be when trying to develop curricula around feature film production.

Existing literature in this field looks at the industry/education partnership models (Knowles, 2024; Mateer, 2018), work-integrated learning, and working practice principles of industry collaborations (Marshall, 2024). There are some examples that offer singular case studies of the feature film as a pedagogic practice (Bali & Pinto, 2018; Fox, 2018) but none have offered a comparative analysis of the ways in which different UK and Irish institutions have embedded feature film production into their curricula. This paper attempts to address this existing knowledge gap by addressing two research questions:

1. In recent years, what are the different ways in which feature films have been made as part of HE curricula in the UK and Ireland?
2. What challenges may there be in future when making feature films as part of HE curricula?

Methodology

Comparative analysis is a method of examining the different approaches alongside each other using a single set of identical criteria. Each approach will be presented and responses to the following questions will be established for each:

- At what level in the HE curriculum is the feature film produced? (using the UK scale of Levels 4–6 for undergraduate and Levels 7–8 for postgraduate)
- How, if at all, is the work assessed?
- How many students are on the production?
- What roles do the students take on in the production?
- Where does the script/budget come from?
- What, if any, is the industry involvement?
- How are academic staff involved?

This knowledge was built from first-hand experience, primary unstructured interviews, and secondary research. This is not an ideal methodological approach for collecting data for comparative analysis as it is unstructured and not collected in an identical fashion from each institution. However, the models did not all run simultaneously (they were in various states of operation between 2010-2025) and it is only in hindsight that it became apparent that these models shared the similarity of producing feature films as part of an academic course. Therefore, the methodology is flawed but has still retains some validity. The differing models will be presented anonymously and not associated with particular HE institutions. This decision is based on several factors. First and most importantly, it is not crucial to the research question. Second, it is to not judge one model over another. Third, as some of the courses are no longer running (sometimes for extrinsic reasons), it could be considered commercially sensitive.

It is important to note that the examples used here are not exhaustive. There are other examples of where feature films have been created as part of curricula which have been excluded for different reasons. Some are similar to examples already included, others differ in education level (e.g. secondary-level education) and therefore would complicate the comparison. All five models examined here have taken place from 2010–2025 at UK or Irish HE institutions.

For full disclosure and to acknowledge potential bias, it should be noted that the author has been directly or indirectly involved in three of these examples. This is a further reason to refrain from evaluating whether one model is preferable to another. Further examination of this area by more impartial researchers would be welcome.

The Different Models

This section addresses the first research question – examining the different ways in which feature films have been made as part of HE curricula in the UK and Ireland. It will briefly present the different models in relation to the questions identified in the methodology. Despite being presented alphabetically for the sake of comparison, they are in no particular order. All these models operated as part of degree programmes related to film.

Model A

In this model, students chose to produce feature films at Level 6, negotiated as part of their final project module. There were two features produced within one academic

cohort. In both cases the scripts were written by the students. The crews differed substantially in size. One was very lean, using five final-year undergraduates, the other was larger with more than 20 students from across different year groups, but with final year students in the key roles, with no industry involvement. The films were funded between the students themselves and crowdfunding that they carried out. Staff acted as supervisors to the academic element of the assessment, the same as other final-year projects of an undergraduate degree. The films were assessed in a 40-credit module, with an additional 20 credits for a separate project proposal. Each student was graded depending on their contribution and particular research element (e.g., cinematography or editing etc).

Although the model is open to students developing it into a feature film, very few have done so due to the volume of work involved, which overshoots the intended learning outcomes of the module.

Model B

This model is an outlier to the others; it is more ad-hoc, often extra-curricular, and not formally embedded or assessed within a curriculum. Essentially, feature films are being produced by various faculty members at the university, and students and recent graduates can apply to be trainees upon the projects. The number of students involved depends on the requirements of each project. The scripts came from industry or academic staff as well as from a production's Head of Department (HoD). Roles are filled by experienced staff. The films are funded through a mix of sources including industry funds, university contributions, and external investment. Recently a Level 7 curriculum was constructed to formalise this student/staff collaboration, but as it is in the first year of operation we cannot be certain of its outcomes.

Model C

This model was a Level 7 master's programme, delivered by an industry franchisee and validated by a university. The whole curriculum was structured specifically towards feature film production. Students were assessed across a variety of modules with individual negotiation, based on their specific experiences upon the collaborative feature project.

Industry provided scripts was also involved in the writing and development phase. The films were funded through a mix of crowdfunding and investment from the industry franchisee (effectively, a course materials budget). Academic staff acted as supervisors to the assessment while industry professionals provided training in production skills. The students were in all roles and would compete for the HoD roles through a series of competency exercises and pitches. There were 20–30 students within each cohort. Larger cohorts produced two features to maintain significant opportunities for each student. The programme is no longer in operation but produced nine features over six years.

Model D

This model used the same master's programme as Model C but operated at the validating university rather than at the industry franchisee. However, there were industry partners attached to the project who provided the script and key personnel. The funding varied between industry investment, crowdfunding, and research grants.

Like Model C, students were assessed across a variety of units, but in this case it was academic staff or industry practitioners in HoD roles, and the students would compete for other roles, often assisting the HoDs. There was also the opportunity for some undergraduates to apply to assist on the project, albeit in an extracurricular and unassessed capacity.

The cohorts were small, with 4–10 postgraduate students, with 10–30 undergraduate volunteers (depending on the project). Therefore, these projects drew from all academic levels of HE, from Levels 4–7. The programme made two features but no longer runs today.

Model E

The final model was embedded into a year-long, optional 40-credit module called 'Feature Film' at Level 5 (i.e. second year undergraduate). There were between 20–30 students on the module. Like Model C, students would compete for all roles upon the production through a mixture of competency exercises and pitches. There was no industry involvement – the script would come from academic staff and they would supervise the project through the usual module leadership. There were no budgets attached to the projects. The assessment was mixture of individual reflection and staff observation. The module no longer operates this way due to the parity of students' experiences being too varied, depending on their roles. To address this, attempts were made to produce anthology features – a series of short films stitched together to make a coherent feature narrative – but this has also stopped.

Discussion

In response to the first research question, it is clear from these different models that there are multiple ways to make feature length films as part of a HE curriculum. The commonality of the project size leads to some similar issues on each model, yet the different designs all have different emphases. These shall now be examined while addressing the second research question: What challenges may there be in future when making feature films as part of HE curricula?

Student-led or staff/industry-led

There is a continuum along which the projects are entirely student-led (Model A), entirely staff/industry-led (Model B), or a mixture of both. There is a difference in how student motivation may be accommodated between these different designs: they could express themselves with a larger project, or gain knowledge working alongside experienced practitioners. This difference needs to be articulated before the student takes the course, as they result in different learning experiences. There is also a staffing issue within each of these models. All exist because there are staff members who encourage such projects and may be unfazed by the process of making features. If the staff change institution, the course becomes problematic. Continuous feasibility is a challenge when trying to validate such modules or programmes.

Process or product

There is a question upon which these models sit: Is the emphasis on the process or product? Student-led projects tend to emphasise the academic process with the finished film being a by-product. Industry-led projects (especially those with external money) tend to emphasise the product, sticking closely to industry practice. Given that

all these models are supposed to be learning experiences, there is significant difference in how the learning is demonstrated or assessed. There is a question over academic rigour here too. What makes these experiences valid as undergraduate or postgraduate as opposed to an apprenticeship or traineeship?

To design or not to design?

One of the key differences between models is specific, feature film curriculum design versus ad-hoc, local solutions. For example, Model A has sufficient flexibility for a student to shoot a feature within the framework of the final major project, but it overshoots the module learning outcomes in some respects and doesn't meet them in others. In contrast, Model C is designed with only the feature film production in mind. Models A and B can be used on projects with different production demands and crew sizes, whereas others cannot. There are advantages and disadvantages to both, but again, it needs to be articulated to students enrolling on the course as they are very different experiences.

Emphasis on production over distribution or exhibition

Due to time constraints, each of the models focuses primarily on production over development, distribution, or exhibition. This is unfortunate as there are employment opportunities, including less precarious ones, in these roles too. In some ways the scope of the curriculum would become too large, and there are postgraduate degrees that only focus on these other stages. Nevertheless, a discourse between these different elements seems to be missing. Does this limit the ability of the films to go further in the marketplace? To what extent do students and the academic institution need the feature film do to well in the marketplace to bring validation and acclaim to the qualification?

Parity of student experience

A reoccurring problem within these different models is that the parity of student experience differs significantly depending on the role they have within the film. For example, a student that gets to direct is having a different experience from the person holding the boom microphone. The models also operate at different academic levels, sometimes using a combination in collaboration which can exacerbate the parity further. This problem doesn't disappear when experienced practitioners take the key HoD roles, as students will be in closer or further proximity depending on the role they take. Scaffolding this expectation is crucial here. If a student aspires to direct but isn't chosen, their motivation and engagement can drop. It is difficult to combat this within these models and perhaps explains why the short film format remains dominant in HE curricula and may remain so in future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Feature films have been produced in different ways as part of HE curricula in the UK and Ireland. Some of the challenges they face are common, such as parity of student experience, whereas other issues are unique to their different designs. Film production courses face other challenges such as generative artificial intelligence, a volatile and unpredictable employment market, and uncertain sustainability of existing business models.

Optimistically, it could be argued that these models have the potential to offer some solutions and bring some stability to the marketplace. They could offer a much-needed training ground to discover and develop new talent and a visible progression route for new entrants to the industry. Conversely, some of these models can also be viewed as an exploitative inverse-apprenticeship, where students pay for the privilege of gaining experience on an otherwise commercial shoot. Questions also arise over ownership: Who profits if one of these movies does become commercially successful?

There is also the argument that university qualifications are primarily focused on individual endeavour rather than collective achievement. Although it is possible to create curricula that account for individual learner journeys while working as a collective whole, collaborative projects cannot always align. For example, time taken to perfect the cinematography or production design may impact on editing time. This problem arises in short film production but is much more pronounced in feature projects. If individual achievement remains at the centre of a qualification, the parity of student experience issue will always exist. One potential workaround for this would be negotiated curricula, where the students identify their own unique research problem within their role (e.g. Model A) However, this can be unpopular with students who prefer fixed learning outcomes and assessment and could be perceived as academic chicanery rather than developing a skill necessary for their careers.

There is a lot of scope for future research in this area. First, there is a need for more rigorous methodological approach towards documenting this process, but also micro-budget filmmaking more generally. It operates in an ad-hoc manner that does not get recognised or documented in trade papers or traditional industry spaces. Second, there is a narrative fallacy around filmmaking which tends to look at early-stage career success after someone has had industry success and does not account for all the work that does not break through. Looking ahead, in specific regard to the educational models that produce feature films, data could be collected and analysed in lots of different fields, such as student feedback, graduate career destinations and trajectories, and comparison to conventional film programmes with short productions. Ultimately it is not to determine a better or worse approach to filmmaking education but to reflect a diversity of approaches that can coexist and lead to a diverse film culture also.

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