

Research article

The Sound/Image Cinema Lab, *Long Way Back* (dir. Brett Harvey): developing working principles for crewing feature film production with higher education students

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Abstract

Since 2009, students, graduates and staff from the School of Film and Television at Falmouth University in the UK have collaborated with professional partners in the development and production of over 20 short and feature-length narrative and documentary films, within the Sound/Image Cinema Lab research centre. This article makes use of a Sound/Image Cinema Lab co-production with Cornwall-based production company o-region – *Long Way Back*, directed by Brett Harvey, released in 2022 – as a case study to demonstrate both the successes of, and the challenges faced by, the Lab within a higher education environment. Interviews with staff, students and professional crew participants are used to contextualise the principles of work-integrated learning, and the processes that have sustained institutional support for professionally led film production framed by pedagogic practice.

Keywords film education; work-integrated learning; student placement; talent development; mentoring; Sound/Image Cinema Lab; o-region; *Long Way Back*; independent; film production

Introduction

As Bill Wade et al. (2012: 2) have argued, industrial engagement through professional practice in higher education environments can provide both a 'deep real life learning experience', and encourage students to see the wider impact and possibilities of their creative practice. The benefits of integrating professional engagement opportunities within film education are to connect and engage students and staff with industry, reduce the gap that can separate student and professional film-making practices, and allow students to build confidence, both in their creative voices while at university, and in their careers beyond it. As Duncan Petrie and Rod Stoneman (2014: 241) identify, 'creative work within signification can and does generate new and explicit forms of knowledge, moving viewers and makers from distracted reception to conscious interpretation'. The implications of this lived practice of generating knowledge across students and staff allows for some insight into how such collaborative productions between educators and external partners can be facilitated and sustained within the challenging managerial and financial environment of UK higher education.

Collaborations with film production partners were initially undertaken informally at Falmouth University, before a decade of film production practice was consolidated in 2019 into the Sound/Image Cinema Lab. The establishment of the Lab at Falmouth was documented in a series of journal articles and other forms of dissemination (Fox, 2018, 2022; Marshall and Harvey, 2023). The educational principles and values that have emerged through the work of the Lab have since been formally articulated into undergraduate and postgraduate course delivery in the form of live briefs, learning materials and placement opportunities. Further benefits have been actualised through changes to working practices and risk management within the department, in addition to the integration of the Lab into a departmental research environment plan, and through presenting personal development opportunities for staff.

The Lab presents itself as a partner, funder, resource and research centre dedicated to the production of, and education about, independent cinema (Falmouth University, 2018). Increasingly, projects in the lab have focused upon stories that challenge conventional thinking, and which have explored the representation of young people, community and place, mental health, and the environment, and are often playful or experimental in their use of the film form. Since 2015, the Lab has also supported a Graduate Shorts Commission with the regional screen agency, Screen Cornwall.

The first film-making collaboration between Falmouth University's School of Film and Television staff and students and the Cornwall-based production company o-region took place in 2010 with the British independent feature film *Weekend Retreat* (dir. Brett Harvey), which was released in 2011. In the decade since the film's release, students, graduates and staff from the School of Film and Television have collaborated in making over 20 short and feature films. These opportunities have arisen primarily through staff connections with screen industry partners, and they have been enacted through an array of British production companies, including Film4, Early Day Films, Quiddity Films, Grasp the Nettle Films and Unstoppable Entertainment. Projects with these national partners have been further supplemented by productions closer to home, through staff-owned companies based in Cornwall, including Denzil Monk's Bosenia, Independent Film Unit and Awen Productions, Neil Fox's Baracoa Pictures, and Kingsley Marshall's Myskatonic, and those of associate lecturers, including Simon Harvey's o-region and Laura Giles's Storm Force Films.

In all of the projects to date, trainee positions have been distinct from each student's assessment with regard to the course curriculum. This principle of professional placements running parallel to, rather than in place of, traditional assessment has formed an important and consistent part of the Lab's approach to film production. Placements are an enhancement opportunity available to all learners outside of their work as 'student' film-makers. While the experience is explicitly structured to be safe and supportive, as are other external work placements within Falmouth University, it sits outside of formal university assessment. A measure of success is how the experience informs students' own practice through formative processes of learning, rather than being documented with a grade and summative feedback, as would now seem

normative for the consideration of film practice within higher education. We have found that the ability to provide professionally recognised credits while at university has repeatedly corresponded with an impact upon in-sector employment of participants following graduation, and an acceleration from entry-level roles once employed (as evidenced through longitudinal graduate employment returns made to ScreenSkills, an industry-led skills body that accredits selected UK film and television courses best suited to prepare new entrants for a career in the screen industries).

This article makes use of the third Sound/Image Cinema Lab co-production with Simon Harvey's Cornwall-based production company o-region – *Long Way Back* (Dir: Brett Harvey, 2022) – as a case study, drawing from a series of interviews with both staff and student participants. Following [Banks et al. \(2016\)](#), we apply a production studies approach that values the manner in which communities of makers interpret their experience. In the following discussion, we consider how the Lab's structured extracurricular projects catalyse learning gain for our students, alumni, staff and professional participants. We make use of interviews with both staff and student participants in the film-making case study to contextualise principles of practice and institutional support for production through research that 'take[s] the lived realities of people involved in media production as the subjects for theorizing production culture' ([Mayer et al., 2009](#): 4). Through this methodology, we provide students, graduates, staff and professional participants the space to reflect upon and articulate in their own words the impact of their engagement in Lab projects on their confidence in their film-making practice, and the impact on their personal and professional development. In many of these interviews, the deployment of the students' existing skills learned within the university into professional environments is acknowledged by the students as a key learning gain.

Through detailing these practices, together with discussion with the professional participants, we outline four working principles that have emerged over the decade of collaborative film-making that has taken place in the Lab. In summarising these working principles, emerging from 10 years of creative partnerships, we outline how approaches to film production undertaken by the Sound/Image Cinema Lab have developed. These principles detail how we select and manage projects for the Lab's production slate, the selection and management of crew during production, maintaining a slate of projects from development to distribution, and documenting the impact of this activity through traditional research, knowledge exchange and the outputs themselves. Here, we consider the impact on those involved in these productions, and how universities and production companies can better manage such opportunities. We articulate how clarity in terms of engagement between the educational and industrial partners can simultaneously service both the needs of the film and television industries and those of current students, recent graduates, staff and early career film-makers. Finally, our conclusions detail some of the challenges that have informed and improved the Lab's processes in an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement, and how this activity has proven challenging to sustain within a higher education environment.

We add a final note on language: in what follows, we distinguish student trainees from 'professional' heads of department for brevity within the text. Within the Lab, we subscribe to [Petrie and Stoneman's \(2014: 222\)](#) rethinking of the word 'professional' to 'denote the seriousness of sustained and imaginative curiosity, rather than a term of exclusion from employment in an industrial cartel'. As our contributors made clear in their interviews, it is important not to underestimate or devalue the professional contribution of a trainee within a film's production. Rather, we highlight the importance of acknowledging how each head of department serves as a mentor, responsible for the support and development of emerging talent, who are proven to be equally valued and 'professional' to a production.

Principle 1: take care in selecting project partners

The first feature film co-production between Falmouth University's School of Film and Television and o-region occurred in 2010 with the microbudget comedy thriller *Weekend Retreat* (which was released in 2011). The film involved several university staff who worked on set in professional filmmaker roles

including writer/director Brett Harvey, producers Denzil Monk and Simon Harvey, editor Mark Jenkin, re-recording mixer David Smithers, and senior technicians John O'Regan and Dave Clark working within the camera and lighting department. Collectively, these staff possessed significant production experience outside of the university environment, alongside substantial teaching experience with higher education students. Helpfully, Brett and Simon's production company, o-region, had previous success in the production of microbudget features with film-makers in Cornwall, including *The Midnight Drives* (dir. Mark Jenkin), released in 2007, alongside significant experience working with young people in both short film and theatre production contexts. A further benefit of drawing these head of department roles from within the School of Film and Television came through their pre-existing relationships with the student trainees, many of whom had either been taught by the same academic staff or supervised by them on their final major projects. Similarly, the technical staff had experience of working with the student participants throughout their studies through project support and taught inductions and workshops. In our experience, student participation in production is most successful where staff have been directly present through filming, ideally in crew positions, providing a 'safe' crew member to raise issues with or ask questions, and able to monitor the production environment from a university perspective. In the few situations (apart from the named case studies in this article), when a member of staff has not been on set, students have found themselves asked to deviate from risk assessments, work longer than agreed hours or outside their agreed role. In each of these instances, the students have contacted the production liaison, who has been able to make an intervention. Staff have been present on all Lab productions since 2018.

In the crew formation of *Weekend Retreat*, second- and third-year undergraduate film students were invited to apply for eight positions on the crew of the production in spring 2010. Principal photography was scheduled to follow the submission of work for assessment in summer the same year. Working with a professional cast, crew positions included roles within the art, sound, camera and editing departments, each led by a professional head of department. The application process required the submission of a cover letter and CV indicating the student's department of interest. Shortlisting was followed by an in-person interview with Simon Harvey (one of the film's producers), alongside the relevant head of department. Participants reported that these initial formal processes felt fair, mirrored industrial practices and encouraged professional engagement in the application process. The process also gave the professional role-holders agency in the selection of crew when forming their teams. While the process has undergone some refinement, it is largely similar to the recruitment experience for the Lab's most recent feature co-production, *The Severed Sun* (dir. Dean Puckett), which concluded principal photography in 2023. On completion, *Weekend Retreat* won awards at the London Independent Film Festival, the Global Independent Film Awards and the Cornwall Film Festival, before its commercial release. Regarding the student participants, at the time of writing, six of the eight original trainees have been in continued employment in the film and television sector in the decade since their experience, working in location management, and across senior roles in the camera department and post-production.

An observation arising from this initial project was that the third-year trainees were occasionally distracted by other concerns, principally the delivery of their projects, which ran in parallel to the lead-up to the production, and finding paid work after graduation. In contrast, the second-year trainees, recruited at the point at which they had completed their specialist skills pathways within their degree (but before embarking on their final-year major projects), benefited from being able to implement the learning from the Lab environment in their studies immediately, without the additional pressures either of an imminent search for employment or of final-year work. In addition, as each of these second-year participants progressed into the third year of their degree studies at Falmouth, following their engagement in *Weekend Retreat*, we noticed the influence of their experience in the scope and ambition of their work. As such, we adjusted the timing of shoots where possible in subsequent projects, to allow for several months of preproduction, where students could engage in preparation for Lab shoots without interfering with their assessed work, and with shoot windows typically occurring after coursework submission. Depending on

the timing of shoots, we have experimented in subsequent Lab projects with working with a range of first-, second- and final-year undergraduates, postgraduate students and alumni. The only formal requirement for application is that students must be in good academic standing to engage in Lab projects.

Long Way Back, commercially released in 2022, is the third microbudget film to have been made in collaboration with the Lab and o-region, following *Weekend Retreat* and Brett Harvey's second feature film, *Brown Willy* (2016). *Long Way Back* is a drama that charts a father's relationship with his daughter during a road trip from her university accommodation in Manchester back to her mother's home in Cornwall. The production was shot in 20 days across 23 locations in summer 2019, with a principal cast of 2 professional actors, along with a supporting cast of 16 and a crew of 27. The crew included 20 student trainees working with 7 professional heads across the camera, sound, assistant director, art, producing, editing and visual effects departments. A further 7 student trainees worked as a behind-the-scenes crew. Several set visits were also arranged for students who had not attained crew roles – principally around a night shoot that took place on the Falmouth University campus. In the electronic press kit for *Long Way Back*, producer Simon Harvey explains that the project was very different in scope to the previous films that the production company had made with the university:

In the past, we had developed projects which had deliberately leaned into our budget constraints, focusing on small casts and few locations. With its road movie premise, *Long Way Back* was a different proposition, with multiple locations, the logistical and technical challenges inherent in filming in and around a moving vehicle, and a larger cast of supporting characters.

Writer/director Brett Harvey explains that despite this change in the ambition, and the logistical challenges presented by the film's narrative, his approach to working with students as a film-maker had not changed substantially in the 10 years since *Weekend Retreat*:

I think *Long Way Back* has been a natural evolution of the process. This was a much more ambitious project, and we had a lot more students on the crew, but our ethos of how we work with people has remained the same. I find that if you treat a student crew professionally and with respect, then they respond professionally, and it wasn't a different experience than working with a wholly professional crew on a production. The students and professionals worked together so well that I quickly didn't need to worry about who was a student and who wasn't. It was the right team, at the right time, on the right project. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 29 August 2023)

In interviews with eight of the students who had undertaken crew roles in the film, the benefits of on-set experience are expressed as having a significant impact on their confidence as film-makers in their subsequent practice. SS, who worked as an art department assistant on *Long Way Back*, explains:

The opportunity to work on *Long Way Back* gave me a foundational understanding of how an industry set is run, and set etiquette and terminology. Being on set can feel intimidating, so being familiar with how to behave and set lingo gave me a confidence boost going forward. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 3 April 2023)

Echoing the experience of the *Weekend Retreat* trainees, SS used this confidence to secure work in the film industry immediately after graduation, initially employed as a location marshal, before working as an art department trainee and then assistant, and they have since worked as a graphics assistant in high-end television productions, including *Bad Sisters* (2022).

This notion of increased confidence forms a common thread between the interviewees. Much of this confidence seems born from the distinction between the students' perception of their practice as 'student' film-makers within their work for assessment within the university, contrasted with director Brett Harvey's consideration of the student trainees as sharing the same status as the non-student 'professional' crew.

BC progressed from Sound/Image Cinema Lab short films to features during their time at university, and they served as the B Camera digital imaging technician on *Long Way Back*. Following graduation, they have worked as a freelance video editor, and they articulated in their interview the value of the selection process and the notion of the Lab project as a safe environment. They also distinguished their university work from the deployment of their same skills outside of assessment:

I think my experiences on the sets of *Backwoods* [dir. Ryan Mackfall, 2019] and *Long Way Back* were some of the best from my time on the course. In some ways, it took me out of the academic structure of things and put me right into the pipeline you'd find is commonplace in the industry. In this respect, it felt more like a job I applied for and was hired to do, rather than an assignment. I felt like I was under more pressure, but I still had the safety net of it being a learning experience. Something I continue to find now, and in the projects I've worked on since, is that I learn more from putting my skills into practice, and these films provided ample opportunity to do this. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 30 March 2023)

As a head of department on *Long Way Back*, cinematographer Adam Laity also emphasised the value of students making use of skills learned within university environments within Lab projects outside of assessment. He described his relationship with the student members of the camera team and, while distinguishing his work from teaching, he considered the pedagogic value of the experience from both sides of the relationship:

I think the most valuable thing that is happening is an exchange of creative ideas and energy on set. I feel like my job is to try to encourage them to think outside the box, and beyond what they've been taught in the classroom or on their own film projects, so there's a lot of problem solving and conversation about what might work for a shot and how to approach a scene. The School of Film and Television students are so well drilled in the technical and practical aspects of film-making that, by the time I get to work with them, there's not really any specific teaching involved. It's more about dealing with the time and financial restraints of low-budget film-making, how to stay playful and engaged, and how to keep the 'big picture' of the story constantly in mind. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 4 May 2023)

Adam articulates an approach to collaboration between trainees and professional heads of department that – in our experience – has provided great results in shorts and features, and that is key to working with professional partners:

I think what students end up developing when working with me is a sense of the tacit or personal knowledge that one only gets by doing, and I think, in particular, by doing with someone very open and inclusive about sharing their film-making practice. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 4 May 2023)

In terms of collaborators, the Lab's team has been mindful to use each new project to broaden the slate in its equality, diversity and inclusion, in terms of both storytelling and participants, in front of, and behind, the camera. As such, the team encourages all students to engage in opportunities through a schedule of activities throughout the year that speak to past and upcoming projects. Contributors are drawn from students, graduates and professionals with experience in Lab projects, who speak with students through masterclasses and in-course delivery. In addition, each new project marks an incremental change in the development of the Lab itself through the broadening of production partners engaged in projects, including hire houses, equipment manufacturers, screen agencies and distributors. Beginning with *Long Way Back*, and continuing with *Enys Men* (Mark Jenkin, 2023) and forthcoming releases in the slate, the Lab has also grown beyond being a funder of trainee placements to contributing to development finance. This shift brings the Lab in much earlier in the film-development process, serves to acknowledge the value of the Lab as a production partner, and has established earlier connectivity between students, staff and

the partners. Although challenging to set up in a university environment, this shift of engagement earlier in the development cycle has resulted in the greater intellectual investment of students and staff in the entire life of a project, from inception to exhibition. In addition, the potential of a return on investment since 2022 has been set aside within the university to finance further projects, which has allowed for a less reactive and more proactive, longer-term development of the Lab's project slate.

Principle 2: manage the partnership closely

By its nature, every film production is unique in its needs, and each project proposed to the Lab is considered on its own merits. Following an approach from a potential partner, a staff lead is assigned to serve as a single point of contact between a member of the production – typically the producer – and the university. This member of staff liaises with the wider university team in terms of stores equipment and facility requirements (drawn from an external hire rate sheet), public liability and equipment insurance considerations, and risk assessment. All projects are subject to full economic costing, and a short business case is used internally to review and agree on the levels of in-kind and financial support on both sides. Any further student set visits or crew masterclasses are agreed upon at this stage, and the staff liaison will note the details of crew requirements, including detail of working days and whether roles are paid or unpaid, alongside information on catering, accommodation, travel and expenses. In some instances, the staff liaison will have flagged other staff or alumni contributions to production. Equipment and facility requirements are reviewed in terms of availability and student use, and the staff liaison may direct partners to existing relationships outside of the university, such as external equipment or facility hire that cannot be procured from the Lab (for example, university camera lenses are not approved for external hire). Shoot and post-production dates are agreed, with the staff liaison making clear to the partner that production is in service of the wider context of existing student and university needs. This typically limits shooting to times outside assessment windows, and equipment hire to times outside high-use periods by students. Once dates are agreed upon, the liaison works with Falmouth University's Head of Film and Television, and the department's Technical and Facilities Manager, in agreeing on the levels of in-kind or paid-for equipment, spaces and post-production support. These details are noted in a memorandum of understanding between the Lab and the production partner.

The notion of collaboration, and the additional effort required from professional partners, is explained to the heads of department in detail, with the understanding that the crew will be working with individuals with less experience, who may thus require a little more mentoring. Jez Marshall describes this process from his perspective as First Assistant Director of *Long Way Back*:

In a very short time, you have to get the machine of the film set running smoothly and efficiently. Luckily, when you have such keen students, the process can be quite quick. We had a good production meeting prior to starting, and talks with our individual teams to put a lot of theory into place first, which helped. You also must be very patient and not expect too much in the beginning, lead by example and take a bit more time to explain what's happening, what you're doing and what you expect them to do. I was very surprised ultimately about how competent the students were in the early days, and how quickly they became a well-oiled crew. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 3 April 2023)

The same staff liaison typically works with the production from that first approach and business case approval, through the production and post-production period itself, all the way through to exhibition. Following the internal approval, they manage the application process for the trainees with the employability team at the university, launch the project with the students, and coordinate the pre-selection and interview processes with the production partner. The liaison is also responsible for connecting with alumni and external agencies, such as Screen Cornwall, where appropriate. During the production itself, the staff liaison is likely to be present or a regular visitor to set, and they will coordinate any supplementary

non-crew student visits during the production. Following principal photography, the staff liaison may assist in the post-production of the film itself – coordinating editing, grading and dubbing theatre visits for students – and they will typically coordinate the delivery of any behind-the-scenes filming undertaken by Lab trainees. They also collate materials suitable for teaching from the production (this has included everything from scripts, line budgets, lighting plans, pitch and sales decks, and rushes), and arrange follow-on masterclasses with the partner. In several instances, staff have accompanied students to festival screenings of the film. Support often also extends to hosting preview screenings and Q&A sessions, both within the university and through public forums.

The limits of the Lab articulated by both students and production partners will be familiar to anyone working in low-budget independent film-making, principally with regard to time and money. Cinematographer Adam Laity, who has worked on three Lab productions to date, notes that despite the introduction of pre-shoot briefings and kit prep days with crew, allowing a longer period for preparation of the production would further accelerate the relationships. He states:

As ever, more lead-in time would be invaluable. Getting to know the crew better, and particularly recce'ing locations and prepping kit, plus talking through the story and letting them into more of the conversations and creative processes between the DP [Director of Photography] and director would be great. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 4 May 2023)

Ideally, partners provide a long lead time, and the staff liaison will have discussed the need to engage with the Lab as early as possible. Of course, this is not always the case in independent film-making, and the Lab's ability to respond to opportunities has become increasingly agile. Trainees have been placed on shoots with less than a month's notice, across all three taught study blocks in the academic year, including periods in the run-up to student assessment, and during university holidays.

An additional benefit for the university has been how production can expose gaps in teaching, equipment and facilities. Graduate BC, B Camera Digital Imaging Technician on *Long Way Back*, notes that the Lab puts a lot of pressure on university technical resources, and can indicate areas where the university is lacking:

One thing I think that could be improved for DITs [digital imaging technicians] and editors going through the same experience would be additional tech support for the sort of kit you would be using in the industry. I think it was due to the nature of low budget film-making that we pushed our own personal laptops to the absolute limit, but I think kit like an eGPU, or possibly laptops on loan, would have let us bite our nails less. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 30 March 2023)

This 'nail-biting' has extended to post-production support, an example being out-of-date software licences for grading software, which did not correspond with the latest versions used by industry partners. Although these instances can be painful, the exposure of weaknesses in teaching delivery has subsequently highlighted the need for expenditure within the university to be more informed by industrial modes of film-making, to better support student and Lab production.

Principle 3: attaching the (right) participants

Once a business case has been approved internally, and a memorandum of understanding completed between the Sound/Image Cinema Lab and the production partner, the participant selection process begins. Typically, partners are invited to present a masterclass to students before the launch of the trainee opportunity, accompanied by a screening of their previous work. Past student and alumni participants from earlier Lab projects also contribute to a briefing to those expressing interest in applying for roles. In recent years, the first screening for the School of Film and Television's incoming students has been of a Sound/Image Cinema Lab production, with student and professional cast and crew speaking about their

experience to stage upcoming projects and encourage participation. Adam Laity states that the process of application, shortlisting, interview and pre-briefing before production lends confidence to students, and pays forward their value to a production:

The practical skill level and commitment to the process never fails to surprise me. By the time we've interviewed people and assigned roles, they're all, for the most part, engaged and excited to get stuck in. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 4 May 2023)

Considering the learning gain reported by previous trainees, and how best to leverage that gain to maximise the impact for students in their assessment-driven film-making, placement opportunities have (since *Weekend Retreat*) been brought forward in the degree from the end of the third year to first- and second-year students. Students across all years have contributed to the crews of the feature films *Happy Christmas* (Jenkin, 2011), *Brown Willy* (Harvey, 2016), *Wilderness* (Doherty, 2017), *Bait* (Jenkin, 2019), *The Tape* (Tilston, 2021), *Long Way Back* (2022), *Enys Men* (Jenkin, 2022) and *The Severed Sun* (2023), with a similar mix of years working in behind-the-scenes projects for these productions. Outside feature film production, further opportunities for students have been offered on short film projects, including *Bronco's House* (Jenkin, 2015), *Backwoods* (2019), *Hard, Cracked the Wind* (Jenkin, 2019), *Mr Whippy* (Suri, 2021), *The Birdwatcher* (Mackfall, 2024) and *Bleujyowa* (Canning, 2023). The shorter shooting duration often provides a less intimidating entry point for first-year student trainees on Lab projects, with many of these students moving to feature film projects later in their Falmouth experience.

Bringing this professional exposure forward has resulted in a marked increase in students' ambition in their own summative projects at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Students are engaged in fundraising and pre-production much earlier, cast nationally as opposed to regionally, and are less reluctant to work with higher-end equipment. They have gained confidence in shooting in high-risk environments, and with additional expertise, including stunt and intimacy coordinators, and they are more strategic in their deployment of visual effects. They also allow much more time for post-production, the relative lack of which is, in our experience, a perennial problem in undergraduate teaching. Most indicative of this increased ambition is the expansion of crew sizes, with larger grip, lighting and camera departments, and on set DIT/editing processes.

In addition to participants taking their learning from the Lab projects back to their own sets, Lab participants also seed good practice across the wider department. In this respect, across recent years, we have noticed a marked increase in collaboration with earlier year groups and across different courses, including music, graphic design, costume and specialist cinematographers, such as underwater operators.

Where agreed with partners, staff have also arranged accompanied single-day set visits with students to several productions, including *Bait* (2019), *Hard, Cracked the Wind* (2019), *Make Up* (Oakley, 2019) and *The Severed Sun* (2023). These visits typically incorporate a full day on set, with the students making up the numbers of supporting cast as extras and background talent. These short, immersive experiences suit students as a way of gaining on-set experience without the pressure of undertaking a specific role in the production. In several instances, such set visits have incorporated meeting heads of department in the working environment, outside the formal context of a masterclass or an on-campus lecture.

For many Lab participants, putting classroom experience to the test becomes secondary to a sense of responsibility, and the on-set guidance inherent within each project. Student NB worked as a sound recordist on the behind-the-scenes film for *Long Way Back*, and they have worked as a metadata specialist for Welocalize since graduation. Reflecting on the distinction between their experience on *Long Way Back* and student productions, they state:

I believe that the most significant difference I noticed was the level of responsibility and accountability that was expected from me. Mistakes can be more easily forgiven or corrected on a student production, while on a professional film set, the stakes are higher. This experience helped me develop valuable skills, such as communication, time management, problem

solving and creative thinking. It also helped me after graduation – I had a professional credit to put on my CV, and I was better equipped to navigate the industry and secure employment opportunities. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 31 March 2023)

Principle 4: maximise the impact

John T. Caldwell (2009: 214) notes the blurred distinctions between scholarship and production, alongside the importance of scholarship's place in moving beyond the 'tired forms of deference the trade and popular press typically grant industry'. Contrastingly, Caldwell (2009) argues that production within the academy serves as a place of enrichment. In the Sound/Image Cinema Lab, the project team manages project development and delivery, in addition to taking responsibility for the dissemination of this practice through knowledge exchange. This post-project work serves to promote the Lab's activity in the wider academy through the presentation of academic research and practice outputs, while also developing and deploying the emergent pedagogies drawn from the Lab into wider teaching and learning within the department. The Lab requires staff to be inside and outside production, simultaneously sensitive both to the commercial drivers of production partners and to the needs of students, alumni, staff and the wider university community.

Additional opportunities for students have emerged in the capturing of film production, with crews contributing to the electronic press kits for *Brown Willy*, *Make Up*, *Bait* and *Long Way Back* through creating behind-the-scenes films and stills. These are a useful student-led contribution to understanding production management within a larger framework. The incorporation of behind-the-scenes capture has assisted in the further dissemination of projects and the marketing of experiences available within courses. It also extends the scope of projects for students who are interested in corporate film-making, offering the opportunity to deliver a client-originated brief. For example, the behind-the-scenes films for *Make Up* and *Long Way Back* were commissioned outside the main production and deployed as an independent second unit working to a brief from the respective producers. GS worked as the director of the behind-the-scenes film for *Long Way Back*. Since graduating, they have worked as a Crowd PA for productions for Marvel, Netflix and Paramount Pictures, before working as a Set PA for Left Bank Pictures, Amazon Studios and Sony Pictures Entertainment. GS explains their learning gain from a student perspective:

Getting your foot through the door can be a very daunting prospect, so the chance to talk, to and work with, professionals is invaluable. Whilst studying at Falmouth, *Long Way Back* gave me the opportunity to be placed in a department and soak up all the knowledge around. From learning how to read a call sheet, to learning on-set etiquette, the skills I picked up were key. You could see first-hand the craft and troubleshooting delivered by professionals. This production was particularly special as I felt included in the craft, we weren't a small cog in a larger machine. Our ideas were valued and included. It was a fantastic experience, and, in retrospect, an invaluable learning curve. Above anything else, it allowed me to leave university with on-set experience that boosted my CV, and, in turn, landed my first job in the industry. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 25 August 2023)

Since 2022, students have also been invited to book into post-production observation sessions; for example, sitting with an editor, VFX supervisor, colourist or dubbing mixer. The ability to ask questions and see the working relationship between the director, producer and post-production staff in real time is a valuable practice, and also shows the School of Film and Television facility as a working, industrial environment, in addition to a teaching space. HD, who edited the behind-the-scenes film for *Long Way Back* (Smith, 2020), and who has since been employed as a technical operator, and now as a craft assistant in online post-production, describes the value of their experience on the crew:

As a student, I changed my practice to fall more in line with an industry edit practice of having commissioner review sessions, and the commissioner in the cutting room with me. Compared to student productions, this allowed for a much greater understanding of what the goal of the film was, and the narrative that was expected. Adjusting my practice to suit this workflow, I ensured that dedicated sessions were set up ahead of time to allow for everyone to be present, as well as working under an NDA [non-disclosure agreement], which on student films are not usually required. I think at the time, my biggest learning experience was the turnovers for daily review during the initial offline process, and ensuring that I could deliver on time. The experience allowed me to adjust my workflow and demeanour to fit in with what is expected as an industry professional. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 30 March 2023)

Outside feature films, the Lab has continued to provide short film production opportunities for staff within the department through higher education and public finance streams (including the Higher Education Investment Fund, the Cornish-language FylmK scheme, and the BFI Network and Screen Growth funds). The Falmouth University Graduate Shorts Commission has run annually since 2015, in partnership with the regional screen agency Screen Cornwall. The commission is open to applicants from the current cohort of graduates, alongside a larger award open to alumni from the School of Film and Television. Projects are shortlisted by an independent panel, with an executive producer assigned from the Lab's project team to help the successful graduates develop and realise their films, providing further support through equipment, facility hire and festival strategy. Often, these graduates choose to shoot in the region, and draw from the current student cohort for their crew, mirroring the processes of the larger scale Sound/Image Cinema Lab productions, with their executive producer serving as the staff liaison. The strength of these projects as an emergent talent scheme is evidenced not only by festival success, but also by a significant number of graduates having successfully leveraged Graduate Short finance as match funding for further production finance from the BFI Network and other short film funds ([Screen Cornwall, 2022, 2023](#)).

Conclusions: the Lab as a place for testing and analysis

The naming of the Sound/Image Cinema Lab was agreed in a van returning to Cornwall from the premiere of Mark Jenkin's *Hard, Cracked the Wind* at the 2019 Encounters Film Festival in Bristol. This short film was a co-production between the Lab and Early Day Films, and it followed the successful collaboration on Jenkin's BAFTA-winning feature film *Bait*, a film that served as a keystone of how production would be consolidated into the Lab as a research grouping at Falmouth University. As befits its title, the Sound/Image Cinema Lab is a safe space to discover and explore the spaces and connections between the theoretical and creative possibilities presented by film education, exploring the place that [Petrie and Stoneman \(2014: 236\)](#) describe as combining 'disparate forms of signifying practice in a reflective context'. To borrow terminology from [Caldwell \(2009: 215\)](#), the Lab allows students and staff alike to access and research production from within, wherein 'scholars now function more as "observational participants" (who fulfil industrial roles) than as "participant-observers" (the traditional academic model)'.

For staff, the Lab serves as a place to reflect on film-making from both scholarly and industrial perspectives, to better understand the value of teaching and learning in different environments, and to apply these aspects of learning to the taught curriculum within the School of Film and Television. [Petrie and Stoneman \(2014: 235\)](#) observe the dangers of connecting 'practice-based research to industrial sponsorship as though the industry that demands those skills is socially benevolent and neutral'. They warn of a 'gospel of employability': a demand from industry that universities prepare students for the real world, rather than developing critical skills and creativity. We argue that the Lab is positioned across both industrial and practice-based learning spaces. Lab projects provide a catalyst for participants to further develop themselves, their voice and their confidence in a space between the classroom and the creative

environment – the academy and industry – and to apply the skills learned in the university seminar room or workshop as a valued member of a ‘professional’ crew, in a safe and supportive environment.

Adam Laity observes that:

Very often, I would say there is little difference between students and professionals, except that students are fresher, less jaded, less know-it-all, and have a real hunger and energy to learn and do a good job. I’ve always found it fun, because they often know a lot about recent tech and remind me of the ‘right way’ of doing things, which it’s then fun to kinda throw away a little. For example, if there’s a reason that something is done a specific way, I would encourage them to ask ‘why?’, and perhaps see how far we can bend the rules. (Interviewed by Kingsley Marshall, 4 May 2023)

In an ethnographic study, Ritesh Mehta (2017: 22) notes how students ‘hustled’ in their taught film programme, ‘working across multiple projects ... and in the process, build their individual and collective reputations’. Although this is as true in the School of Film and Television at Falmouth University as it is in Mehta’s MFA film/television production course in Los Angeles, the Sound/Image Cinema Lab provides a framework for this hustle through structuring placements outside of the curriculum that are informed by, and draw upon, the culture of film-making within the School: a safe space to experiment, observe and practice the field of film-making, and to build confidence, creative voice and ambition.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Falmouth University ethics board.

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: Kingsley Marshall and Simon Harvey served as producers on the case study film, *Long Way Back*. 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

Backwoods (GB 2019, Ryan Mackfall)

Bad Sisters (IE 2022, various)

Bait (GB 2019, Mark Jenkin)

Bait: Behind the scenes (GB 2019, Rachael Jones)

The Birdwatcher (GB 2024, Ryan Mackfall)

Bleujyowa (GB 2023, Laura Canning)

Bronco’s House (GB 2015, Mark Jenkin)

Brown Willy (GB 2016, Brett Harvey)

Brown Willy: Behind the scenes (GB 2016, Brett Harvey)

Enys Men (GB 2023, Mark Jenkin)

Happy Christmas (GB 2011, Mark Jenkin)

Hard, Cracked the Wind (GB 2019, Mark Jenkin)
Long Way Back (GB 2022, Brett Harvey)
Long Way Back: Behind the scenes (GB 2020, Grace Smith)
Make Up (GB 2019, Claire Oakley)
The Midnight Drives (GB 2007, Mark Jenkin)
Mr Whippy (GB 2021, Rachna Suri)
The Severed Sun (GB 2023, Dean Puckett)
The Tape (GB 2021, Martha Tilston)
Weekend Retreat (GB 2011, Brett Harvey)
Wilderness (GB 2017, Justin John Doherty)

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