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# Journal of Media Practice

## A Fistful of Dollars or The Sting? Considering Academic-Industry Collaborations in the Production of Feature Films --Manuscript Draft--

<b>Full Title:</b>	A Fistful of Dollars or The Sting? Considering Academic-Industry Collaborations in the Production of Feature Films
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<b>Keywords:</b>	academic-industry collaboration; public-private partnerships; feature film production; film business models
<b>Abstract:</b>	<p>Increasingly universities and film schools are looking for ways to provide richer experiences for students to enhance their employability as well as find ways to make their programmes stand out in a competitive marketplace. Likewise, economic pressure on commercial feature film production companies, particularly independents, is forcing them to consider alternative means of production and new sources of cost-effective project support. This paper looks at the emergence of formal academic-industry collaboration in the creation, production and support of commercial feature films. Looking at a wide range of examples from collaborations worldwide, it considers three basic models: University as film production company with 'soft' investment; University as film production company with 'hard' investment; and University as film production service provider. It is argued that all three models can be viable but that alignment with corporate and institutional objectives, as well as realistic expectations, are essential to success.</p>

## **A Fistful of Dollars or The Sting? Considering Academic-Industry Collaborations in the Production of Feature Films**

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*Author Biography:*

John Mateer has been working in film and TV for over 30 years and as an academic for over 15. He recently worked on feature films *The Knife That Killed Me* (Universal Pictures UK) as Executive Producer and *Macbeth* (GSP Studios) as Visual Effects Producer. He was a founding member of the department of Theatre, Film and Television and helped to establish its industry engagement strategy.

## Introduction

Feature film production is big business. In 2016 global box office revenue reached a record high of \$38.6 billion (MPAA, 2017) with the number of films being commercially released approaching nearly 3,000 in 2016 alone (The Numbers, 2017). The sector accounts for millions of jobs worldwide and its importance to national economies is regularly acknowledged at government level — cf., Sweney (2017) concerning films positive impact on the UK economy.

Over the past fifty years, there have been an increasing number of university programmes that have aimed to prepare students for working in the film industry<sup>1</sup>. A prime objective of these production-focused courses is to give students a realistic understanding of current professional practice as well as provide them with experience to enhance their ability to break into what is a highly competitive business sector. Work placements and internships have been demonstrated to be effective in meeting these goals (Murakami et al, 2009). Indeed, the offering of these is seen to be a key requirement for obtaining formal course accreditation from bodies such as Creative Skillset (in the UK). However, growing demand for work experience as well as economic pressures on production companies has made it increasingly difficult for universities to ensure these opportunities are available to all students. Likewise, a proliferation in the number of film and television production courses worldwide has meant that institutions have increasingly needed to add perceived value and industry relevance to their offerings. In response to both of these pressures, many academic institutions have begun to explore different means of engaging with industry to give

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<sup>1</sup> Petrie and Stoneman (2014) provide a comprehensive overview of the development of film schools worldwide.

students direct experience working on commercial projects. Starting around the turn of the millennium, a number of academic-industry collaborations in support of the production of commercial feature films began to emerge.

This paper explores the evolution of these collaborations in detail. First, the nature of engagement with industry by the academy on a more generic level is considered to provide a context the emerging partnerships involving the film industry. Then, three common models of collaboration are defined, looking to go beyond the simple idea of a ‘production partnership’:

- 1) University as film production company with ‘soft’ investment
- 2) University as film production company with ‘hard’ investment
- 3) University as film production service provider

A wide range of collaborative projects that culminated in the creation and release of commercial feature films through these different models is discussed. The objective is to show a representative range of the different types of academic-industry collaborations that have taken place with a view to assessing their effectiveness in meeting stakeholder expectations. Analysis of the observations and insights detailed is then undertaken to draw conclusions as to the efficacy, costs and benefits of the different models of academic-industry collaboration for commercial feature film production.

## **Methodology**

In the discussion of models of collaboration, a range of sources of information, compiled from 2008 onward, has been used. Primary sources include on-site visits to specific institutions as well as in-person and email-based interviews with academic and

industry personnel involved in relevant collaborations. In some cases contacts were known to the author, in others they were obtained through contact lists from film-focused university organisations including CILECT and NAHEMI; referrals were considered as well. The author was formally involved in the development of the University of York's 'service provider' model and participated in several of projects discussed on a credited-basis thus has direct first-hand knowledge; information based on this is clearly stated. Secondary sources include information obtained through institutional web sites as well as news and trade press. Only projects released on a formal commercial basis – theatrically, direct to DVD, via a commercial online service such as iTunes or Amazon, etc. – as verified by Internet Movie Database Professional (n.d.) or The Numbers (n.d. a) have been included. Financial figures cited are based either on primary source information, data published on institutional sources or from IMDB Pro<sup>2</sup>. A filmography is included that also lists the academic institution involved and main IMDB link.

## **Models of Academic-Industry Collaboration**

### ***Background***

Over the past twenty years, universities have been increasingly looked to by government as a means to enhance economic development on a regional and national level through 'technology transfer' – cf. Florida and Cohen (1999). Traditionally this has involved industry working with science and engineering departments where research is often relevant to the development of new technology-driven systems or

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<sup>2</sup> Financial information should be seen as indicative unless otherwise stated. In most instances, it has not been possible to verify whether budgets listed are 'cost' (i.e., actual expenditure only) or 'cash-equivalent' (i.e., actual expenditure plus the value of all in-kind services)

methods. Rosenberg and Nelson (1994) explore this type of collaboration in detail and note a tension between traditional academic research, which tends to be longer-term, and the more immediate needs of industry. The 'spin-out' model, where a company is formed by a university based on a particular area of research that is relevant to industry, has emerged as a means to address this by facilitating faster and more efficient transfer of knowledge to industry through a bespoke entity. Spin-out companies also represent a vehicle through which universities can monetise intellectual property obtained through research and generate additional revenue.

The notion of 'commercialising' research has been somewhat controversial in the academy. Lee's (1996) extensive survey of US academics showed that while most were in favour of their universities engaging with industry and supporting technology transfer, most were against financial partnerships between the two as this could curtail academic freedom. In considering the notion of the 'entrepreneurial university' and how academics engage with industry, D'Este and Perkmann conclude that:

“...the benefits of university-industry collaboration are best attained by cross-fertilization rather than encouraging academics to become economic entrepreneurs. Collaboration is fruitful when it facilitates or contributes to both industry applications and academic research.” (D'Este and Perkmann, 2010, p 332)

However, D'Este (in his work with Bruneel and Salter, 2010) also notes that there can be barriers to such collaborations due to cultural differences between universities and industry in terms of institutional expectations, sharing of intellectual property and operational methods (these findings are relevant to film production-related collaborations as well, which will be explored later). Despite these challenges, there is increasing awareness of the benefits of academic-industry collaboration as noted by PwC (2016) in their report considering public-private partnerships in the United States.

In terms of academic-industry collaboration in the media industries, Holt (2013) considers industry engagement in support of ‘screen studies’ in a variety of contexts although actual production itself is not considered. The benefits of students experiencing production work in a realistic group setting has been explored in range of contexts such as core curriculum design, e.g., Pfaff and Wilks (1977) and Sabal (2009), media-specific work placements, e.g., Allen et al. (2012) and Berger et al. (2013), and integration of the two, cf., Collis (2010). Ashton details other related studies in his consideration of the relationship between higher education and the creative industries labour market (Ashton, 2016, p 269). However, there is currently no literature that considers collaboration between academia and industry specifically for feature film production either with or without student involvement. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

### ***Benefits of Collaboration for Media Production***

The case for collaboration between universities and industry for media production is different to that for the sciences. While there may be some research-derived technologies or methods that could be beneficial to commercial media producers, the majority of benefits are arguably more pragmatic.

Universities can offer industry access to:

- (1) Cost-effective facilities and equipment. With the demand for media production-related courses increasing and the cost of equipment falling, many universities

now have professional-level facilities rivalling those commonly found in industry.<sup>3</sup>

- (2) New funding sources not normally available to industry. For example, in the UK, these include Knowledge Transfer Partnerships supported by Innovate UK and research funding councils as well as production support through grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.
- (3) Motivated, competent and inexpensive labour through students and recent graduates.
- (4) Specialist expertise in the form of academic staff that might otherwise be difficult to source or expensive to secure.

Industry can offer universities:

- (1) Additional income including a means to generate revenue from facilities and equipment during ‘down time’.
- (2) Enhanced student experiences by providing unique access to professionals and ‘real world’ production opportunities
- (3) Enhanced publicity, given the often high-profile nature of film production marketing, benefitting recruitment, demonstrating impact and furthering other university objectives.

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<sup>3</sup> The University of Salford (n.d.) and Birmingham City University (n.d.) in the UK, and Chapman University (n.d.) and Florida State University (n.d.) in the US, are but four recent examples of academic institutions committing significant investment in facilities to support their media production-related programmes.

### ***University as Film Production Company with 'Soft' Investment***

This model represents the most common form of academic-industry collaboration for the creation of feature films. Here, the academic institution provides 'soft' support (i.e., no direct financial commitment) through mechanisms such as: allowing staff with relevant expertise to participate in projects, providing use of production equipment or access to specialist facilities, and/or enabling the involvement of current students or recent graduates in production on a formalised basis. The use of 'production company' here is to suggest that the projects could not have been undertaken (at least in the form that they were) without the support of the academic institution even though there was no explicit financial investment. Essentially this is akin to a film industry co-production model with investment 'in-kind'. On the most basic level, this involves institutional support of a member of staff who is central to the creation of a feature film project.

One of the simplest examples is *Denial* (2016), a \$10M US-UK coproduction starring Rachel Weisz, which was lightly supported by Emory University in the US. Here, Deborah Lipstadt, the author of the book on which the film is based, one of the screenwriters and a Professor at Emory, was given time off to participate in the project. The university served as a location for part of the film, students were given basic work experience (primarily as extras) and Russ Krasnoff, the film's producer, held a Masterclass for Emory's film and media students (Williams, 2016). In this instance, assistance provided by the university was comparatively minimal yet the project could not have proceeded in the manner it did without its consent given the nature of Lipstadt's involvement. The collaboration was mutually beneficial as the university gained appreciable publicity and the commercial production company gained access to an essential production person as well as a cost-effective location.

More often this model is realised as a type of ‘research by practice’. In some instances, particularly in the United Kingdom, these projects can help to fulfil requirements for research outputs although institutional acceptance of this varies (Mateer, 2015). Given the goal of commercial release in some form, publicity and student involvement are sometimes seen as higher priorities. In any case, an academic is the principal project driver. While the degree of institutional involvement can vary markedly, it is always seen as essential to the project’s creation. Below are various examples based on this approach. All had in-kind support from the academic institution, were funded externally and involved students in production roles:

- *High Tide* (2015) was directed by Jimmy Hay, a Lecturer at Swansea University in the UK and crowdsource funded. Students reported that their involvement in the project subsequently led to industry work (Swansea University, 2015).
- *Laurence* (2016) was produced by Sharon Teo-Gooding and co-written and co-directed by Richard Endacott, both Associate Professors at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln in the US. A significant number of students were involved in secondary support roles, e.g., key grip, best boy electrician, assistant editor, etc. (University of Nebraska, 2017)
- *Brown Willy* (2016), directed by Associate Lecturer Brett Harvey (Falmouth, 2016a), and *Wilderness* (2017), written by Senior Lecturer Neil Fox (Falmouth, 2016b), were both supported by Falmouth University in the UK and had a specific goal of introducing students to professional film production through a ‘real world’ setting.

There are other instances of ‘research by practice’ in filmmaking that involve different

approaches to production outside of collaborative models.<sup>4</sup>

The model of ‘University as Film Production Company with ‘Soft’ Investment can also take the shape of a formal course offering in feature film production where the films produced have some form of commercial release. For example, Bath Spa University in the UK and Filmbase in Ireland offer dedicated Masters programmes. These courses typically involve tutors who have industry experience and thus essentially serve as liaisons to facilitate industry access. The academic institution provides infrastructural support in terms of basic equipment, facilities and supervision, with additional production funding coming from external sources often via ‘crowdsource’ funding. These courses are marketed as a more direct means for graduates to enter the industry. Filmbase’s programme, which was originally validated by Staffordshire University and is presently by the University of Western Scotland, is one of the longest running using this model and has supported several films with commercial release including: *Keys to the City* (2012), *Light of Day* (2014), *Fading Away* (2015), *Monged* (2015), *The Randomer* (2016) and *Writing Home* (2017). Their films *How to be Happy* (2013) and *Poison Pen* (2014) are particularly notable as they also enjoyed festival success. It is interesting to note that various new programmes focusing on the development of feature film projects, such as those offered by Bournemouth University and Birmingham City University in the UK, are beginning to emerge. It is not yet clear whether projects developed as part of these courses will ultimately be produced in a related manner.

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<sup>4</sup> The Filmmaking Research Network, led by Joanna Callaghan and Susan Kerrigan, was designed in part to document the range of filmmaking projects involved in ‘research by practice’ through a register of films (FRN, n.d.).

Rather than offering full degree programmes, a number of academic institutions, such as the London Film Academy in the UK and Fairleigh Dickenson University in the US, are offering shorter courses specifically geared toward feature film production. Fairleigh Dickenson's Summer Feature Film programme is particularly notable as it has generated several projects including *Favorite Son* (2008), *Dark Tarot* (2014) and *Stray* (2015) that have had commercial release. Whereas development of the projects at Fairleigh Dickenson and the London Film Academy were driven by academic staff, *Hell at Heathridge* (2013) was developed specifically as part of a course in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Kent State University. More than 50 students were involved in developing and producing the project, which was written by a former student and funded via Kickstarter. The goal of the initiative was to "give students a taste of the real-world film industry" (Kent State University, n.d.) Interestingly, despite the project not achieving its crowd-funding objectives, it was still completed although it is unclear whether funding was obtained through other means or whether the scope of the project was reduced.

Some academic programmes that are not specifically dedicated to feature films still facilitate their production on a 'soft' basis. For example, INCINE in Ecuador has supported the transition of students in the final year of their studies to industry through supporting feature film development through their OUTCINE initiative. Camilo Luzuriaga explains:

"Graduates start developing their feature projects during their fourth and last year of studies. Once they are graduates, a commission of three teachers [...] keep track on the developing of the projects, through monthly meetings with the writers and producers of the projects, who have to be necessarily INCINE graduates. We help and support them to send the projects for funding. The project that gets the cash funding receives the OUTCINE support with equipment, transportation, wardrobe, props and other production and post production facilities." (Luzuriaga, 2012)

*Distante cercanía, la ley del más vivo* (2013) is one example of an INCINE-supported project with international release. In Italy, the Milano Scuola di Cinema e Televisione has also been involved in a similar approach to the development of projects for theatrically released feature films. This involved professional production companies working with recent graduates and current students although specific details were not made available (Bianco, 2012).

The most complex implementations of the ‘University as Film Production Company’ involve an intermediary entity that serves as a bridge between the academic and industry partners. The majority of these involve institutional investment (discussed in detail below) but there is one collaboration of note involving ‘soft’ cost. In the US, the University of Pittsburgh is involved with the commercial production company Two Kids and a Camera through a joint venture known as the Steeltown Film Lab (2017), part of the non-profit Steeltown Entertainment Project. This collaboration was driven by industry veteran Carl Kurlander, who is now a Senior Lecturer at the university, and Demetrius Wren a visiting Assistant Professor and up-and-coming filmmaker. Steeltown Film Lab’s first project, *The Rehabilitation of the Hill* (2018), completed principal photography in 2017 and is due for release the following year. As Fike and Dyer (2017) report, the primary goal of the project is to facilitate “a collaboration that merges film studies with film production” by putting “students alongside film professionals and talent from the community both in front of and behind the camera. Students assume junior roles in which they learn about costumes, directing, lighting, sound and other aspects of filmmaking.” Wren notes (quoted in Fike and Dyer, 2017), “These kinds of experiences are meant to teach and prepare [...] and give people professional credit to open the door to opportunity.” As will be shown in the following section, the collaboration is effectively a fully commercial partnership although it

differs from the 'hard investment' model in that it is solely dependent on funding from sources outside of both organisations (primarily public donations).

### ***University as Film Production Company with 'Hard' Investment***

In this model, the academic institution provides a 'hard' investment (i.e., cash) as well as providing other resources 'in-kind'. Because there is a financial commitment, there is an expectation of return in some form, usually through profit but occasionally this is measured in other ways (e.g., increased institutional awareness, increased recruitment, increased donations, etc.) This also means that the risks to the academic institution are significantly higher than those in the other collaboration models. Often the institution establishes some form of formal commercial entity through which film projects are produced, with industry involvement taking more of a supporting role in areas such as casting, marketing or distribution.

Some implementations of this model are comparatively simple, particularly when feature film production aligns with other institutional objectives. For example, Regent University and Liberty University are both faith-based institutions in the United States that consider promotion of their beliefs as an important aspect of their activities. Both have invested significant amounts in the creation of commercial feature films involving name Hollywood talent as well as staff and students from their institutions.

*In-Lawfully Yours* (2016) is a light romantic comedy that stars US television stalwarts Marilu Henner (known for the hit comedy *Taxi*) and Corbin Bernsen (star of *L.A. Law*) and was produced by Regent University reportedly for \$625K. Mitch Land, Dean of the School of Communication & The Arts, served as the Executive Producer with more than 80 students involved in the project (Regent University, 2016). High profile televangelist Pat Robertson is the CEO of Regent University and promoted the film through his show *The 700 Club*, which airs in 138 countries and claims a

viewership of over 300M people (CBN, n.d.). However, despite the high visibility of the project among its target audience and a ‘name’ cast, the film has grossed just under \$70K in one year of release (The Numbers, n.d. b).

Liberty University touts *Extraordinary* (2017) as the first “feature film created by a university film program [released] in movie theaters nationwide.” (Liberty News, 2017). The \$2M film is based on the true story of one of Liberty’s professors and stars Kirk Cameron, a long-established US TV actor. It screened in 400 US cinemas in September of 2017. The President of Liberty University is Jerry Falwell, another high profile televangelist. Again, students were involved significantly in production and the project clearly had a secondary objective to raise the profile of Liberty’s film school. Whereas Regent’s project was intended to serve as more of a crossover project involving religious themes, *Extraordinary* is more specifically evangelically focused. As of this writing no data is available to consider the film’s financial performance but, based on the performance of similar titles, it would seem that the film is unlikely to recoup costs. Considering the faith-based nature of both institutions, it would seem that the return on investment from these projects is not being considered strictly in terms of revenue but rather in other ways.

Academic institutions where faith is not an emphasis have also utilised the ‘hard investment’ production company model for feature film production. The University of Missouri-Columbia in the US (known as MU) has produced a number of projects starting in 2005 through a collaboration between their Computer Science and Film Studies departments that enabled engineering and film students the opportunity to work alongside industry professionals in supporting production roles. The projects utilised postproduction facilities at the university and have been financed in part by MU’s Interdisciplinary Innovation Fund (MERIC, 2008; Wiese-Fales, 2011). Two examples

are *Mil Mascaras vs. the Aztec Mummy* (2007) and *Academy of Doom* (2008), ‘Lucha Libre’ themed films that were produced through MU’s Project IT production company and involved Chip Gubera, an instructor in the Computer Science department, as the films’ director with Jeff Uhlmann, an Associate Professor of Computer Science, as the writer of both. The projects were co-produced with local professional companies including Osmium Entertainment and Boster Castle, and involved students working in various crew roles. *Mil Mascaras vs. the Aztec Mummy* had a budget of \$900K though the majority of funding came from external sources; financial information for *Academy of Doom* is not available. Both were distributed by Monogram Releasing with limited theatrical and DVD release. MU’s most recent project is *Aztec Revenge* (2015) is a lower budget (\$20K) follow-up film produced by Uhlmann working again with Boster Castle.

Point Park University in the US has sought out academic-industry collaborations specifically to “expand its cinema and digital arts offerings to a wider array of students who have the desire to forge a career in the entertainment industry.” (Point Park University, 2014a) In addition to its collaboration with the US cable television network STARZ in producing *The Chair* (Point Park University, 2014b), Point Park has produced three feature films including *The Umbrella Man* (2016), which was directed by veteran director Michael Grasso, produced by experienced television producer Philipp Barnett and supported by Point Park staff, students and alumni. While specific budget information is scarce, the film has been reported as ‘low budget’ and it is possible to speculate that it is roughly consistent with their previous projects *Not Cool* (2014) and *Hollidaysburg* (2014), both of which are reported to have budgets of \$800K (IMDB Pro, n.d.). While there is no financial information available for *The Umbrella Man*, both *Not Cool* and *Hollidaysburg* have not performed particularly well with

revenue reports of \$96K and \$4K respectively (The Numbers, n.d. a). It is unclear how much production funding comes from the collaboration with STARZ but these figures suggest there are questions surrounding financial viability given the returns are so low.

Arguably the largest and most aggressive approach to the ‘University as Production Company’ model was attempted by the University of Texas at Austin. Through the creation of a new University of Texas Film Institute (known as UTFI) and a for-profit spin-out company, Burnt Orange Productions, the university planned to produce “eight to 10 high-quality, low budget independent feature films during its first three years of operation” (UT News, 2003). Interestingly, as a public university UT is not able legally own a for-profit company but was able to circumvent this by establishing the non-profit Communication Foundation as an external bridging body to support for-profit activity (Daily Texan, 2013) – the relevance of this is discussed shortly. The scale of the ambition was remarkable:

“Burnt Orange Productions will produce two types of films: co-productions involving third-party financing and outside talent in key creative roles, and in-house productions featuring students and faculty in key creative roles. Co-productions—ranging from \$1 to \$3 million—will be shot either on film or in digital format and will be marketed and distributed by third-party financing companies. Co-productions will be green-lit based on distribution prospects. Burnt Orange’s in-house productions—ranging from \$500,000 to \$1 million—will be shot in digital format and will be marketed by Burnt Orange Productions.” (UT News, 2003)

In total, over \$3M of private equity financing was raised to cover production and other related costs (Schatz, 2008). Experienced independent film producer and Alive Films founder Carolyn Pfeiffer was brought in to run Burnt Orange. She quickly established a network of UT alumni working in Hollywood, including agents at CAA, to help package and support productions.

The first film to emerge from the initiative was *The Quiet* (2005), starring Hollywood actors Elisha Cuthbert and Edie Falco, with a production budget of \$900K. It involved over fifty UT students and recent graduates with experienced industry crew (often UT alumni) serving in key roles. It was picked up by Sony Pictures Classics and screened at over 300 theatres but only grossed \$380K across all platforms.

Whereas the first project had significant industry involvement, the second, *The Cassidy Kids* (2006) involved relatively unknown actors (including a young Judah Friedlander, before the hit show *30 Rock*) and had students (over sixty) serving as crew and undertaking the majority of key roles. Although official budget figures are not available, it is speculated that it was at least \$300K. After limited festival success, it struggled to find distribution and, although it aired on the Independent Film Channel, did not generate any significant revenue (Schatz, 2008).

Schatz described the third project, *Homo Erectus* (2007) as “more of a project for hire” (ibid). Budgeted at over \$1.1M and directed by Adam Rifkin, best known for Hollywood projects *Mousehunt*, *Small Soldiers* and *The Chase*, this project was intended to specifically generate revenue for Burnt Orange. The film was picked up by a distributor as a direct-to-DVD project and rebranded as *National Lampoon’s Homo Erectus* (to utilise the name recognition of the high-profile humour magazine), which generated a large pre-release order of 220,000 copies. Yet despite this, the film did not perform particularly well and it was speculated that investors would be lucky to recoup their investment. Schatz expressed disappointment with the project saying that it was not worthwhile pedagogically and poorly placed in terms of budget to be cost-effective; it would be the last of the ‘big budget’ UTFI productions (ibid).

UTFI produced two more projects. *Elvis and Annabelle* (2007) had the lowest budget to date at \$240,000. Although Burnt Orange handled commercial aspects of the

film, it did not provide funding. As with the first two projects, over fifty students were involved and there was some 'name' cast, including Joe Mantegna, Mary Steenburgen, Keith Carradine and a young Blake Lively. *Dance with the One* (2010) was produced in a similar way at a comparable level but the cast was almost completely unknown. Neither film was able to secure significant distribution and thus did not generate sufficient revenue for UTFI to be sustainable. Schatz noted that the economic downturn of the late noughties coupled with cuts at the University of Texas meant that UTFI had to be put on hold indefinitely (Schatz, 2010). He speculated the model could work if viable distribution mechanisms were found stating, "I remain convinced that [academic-industry production collaborations are] something films schools should be pursuing. Although original cable programming may make more sense these days than theatrical features." (ibid)

A 2013 article in UT's newspaper *The Daily Texan* considering the *Homo Erectus* project, reported that a review of the accounts for the Communications Foundation, the non-profit bridging entity that enabled the university to have financial dealings with Burnt Orange Productions, showed that it "registered consistent negative balance of more than \$760,000 on its tax forms since filmmaking ended" (*Daily Texan*, 2013). The article went on to note,

"By writing off its losses, the foundation registered a positive balance on its 2012 tax return of \$22,000, but how those funds will be spent and whether or not the organization has any potential as a vehicle for funding at the University of Texas remains to be seen. Should *Homo Erectus* and a filmmaking company described as a "sinkhole" for private and public money be a part of the mission of higher education? Many students involved directly in the project say "yes," because the foundation provided them with valuable learning experience. One student told the *Texan*, "The main long-term benefit I received was working with high quality material." (ibid)

Interestingly, despite the well-publicised negative experience of the University of Texas, Chapman University a private institution based in Southern California, adopted a similar approach to feature film production through the creation of Chapman Filmed Entertainment (CFE) in 2013. Like *Burnt Orange*, CFE was set up as a “launching pad” for students to enter the industry by working alongside professionals on projects with budgets ranging from \$250K to \$1M<sup>5</sup>. Although they have publicly stated the ambition to produce four to six films per year, only one – *The Barber* (2014) – has been completed and released. The thriller stars Scott Glenn and includes other name cast but, as with UTFI, crew roles were undertaken by students and alumni. Budget figures are not available but it has been classed as ‘low budget’ by the trade press. U.S. distribution rights were purchased by ARC Entertainment for “mid-six figures” (McNary, 2014), and revenue figures show income of just under \$800K, which suggests the film has likely come close to recouping costs. Although another project, *Ride Share* is listed as being in development, there is no information later than 2016 so it is unclear whether CFE is still active in producing films. This is an area for further exploration.

Outside of the United States there have also been various examples of academic institutions creating and investing in feature films with the goal of commercial release. In Israel, the Sam Spiegel Film and Television School collaborated with Channel 2 TV for *Miss Entebbe* (2003), which also had funding from the Jerusalem Fund and the Israeli Lottery Fund. All crew members were graduates or current students and equipment was provided by the school. The film played in more than fifty festivals

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that, as a private university, Chapman is not subject to the same regulatory issues involved in public-private partnerships as the University of Texas, which is a public institution.

worldwide and won a ‘Crystal Bear – Special Mention’ award at the Berlin International Film Festival. Yet, despite the significant recognition, the film only generated limited revenue and the school did not recoup the \$250K investment (Shahar, 2012).

*Sandcastle* (2010) was produced by at the Puttnam School of Film at the Lasalle College of the Arts in Singapore. The film had a budget of \$330K and was directed by Junfeng Boo, a recent graduate of the programme. It secured international distribution after being nominated for both the ‘Critics Week Grand Prize’ and ‘Golden Camera Award’ at the Cannes Film Festival. Total revenues generated are not available but the school indicated that they were satisfied with project and were looking to expand the approach:

“We do have [further] ambitions of indeed collaborating in the creation of a commercial project, where the incubator will coproduce a feature film. [...] The incubator will secure shares in the film by providing equipment for the production” (Snaer, 2012)

In the United Kingdom, the Met Film School has actively engaged with industry through its Met Film Production (MFP) arm since 2007. Jonny Persey, Chief Executive of Met Film notes, “We pride ourselves on blurring the boundaries between education and industry [...] *Town of Runners* is a great example” (Persey, 2012). *Town of Runners* (2012) originated with an idea that Dan Demissie (then a student) brought to Al Morrow, Head of Documentary for the school, who help to turn the idea into a feature film that was produced through MFP with the two acting as producers (Morrow, 2012). Although financial information is not available, the film played in numerous festivals internationally. More recently, MFP projects including the documentaries *How to Change the World* (2015), which grossed just over \$170K and *Sour Grapes* (2016), which grossed \$25K (both of which were produced by Morrow) and the comedy *Swimming with Men* (due for completion in 2018), which features British stars including

Charlotte Riley, Rupert Graves, Jane Horrocks and comedian Rob Brydon, have been showcased by Met Film School as just a few of the collaborative industry projects produced by MFP that have enabled their students to “cut their teeth on real industry projects” (Met Film School, n.d.).

The largest of the international initiatives appears to be the collaboration between Australia’s Griffith Film School and Visionquest for *Bullets for the Dead* (2015). This project was facilitated through Live Lab, the commercial arm of Griffith that was founded in 2010 that also includes industry-standard production facilities (Live Lab, n.d.). The adventure comedy had a budget of \$2M and secured distribution through GSP Studios International, who had previous involvement with academic-industry feature film collaborations (detailed below). There is no revenue data available presently but Griffith has seen the collaboration as a success:

“We are now Australia’s largest film school and [...] we want to give our students the opportunity to work on long-form films and open up opportunities for industry collaboration. [...] Film schools have a vital role to play in preparing students to take on these roles [and collaborations with industry are part of that]” (Herman van Eyken, Head of Griffith Film School, in Crossen, 2016)

It is evident that investment into production companies by academic institutions to facilitate collaborations with the film industry carries an appreciable level of uncertainty and risk. Yet, as some of the examples above show, these relationships can be beneficial if the objectives of those involved are well aligned to the likely outcomes.

### ***University as Film Production Service Provider***

In this model of academic-industry collaboration, the commercial partner initiates, funds and drives the project with the university partner only providing logistical or infrastructural support. Typically this involves the industry production company using

university equipment or facilities in support of production or postproduction. Industry personnel serve in key roles with student involvement generally limited to shorter-term crew positions or work placements. If the resources needed by the commercial partner have already been procured by the academic institution to support other activities (e.g., teaching or research), this model represents the lowest risk as access can be controlled so that commercial activities only take place in quiet periods. From a university perspective, this arrangement can be a means to enhance the student experience through access to ‘real world’ projects, not to mention generating revenue from equipment that might otherwise sit idle. Given the significant investment many institutions have made in their departments (as noted above), this prospect can be highly attractive. However, culture clashes and differing expectations between partners can mean that enabling this type of collaboration is not always straightforward.

Because of the highly variable nature involved with this type of partnership and, in some instances, a need to preserve confidentiality, gaining a true picture of how many institutions are involved in a ‘service provider’ model and obtaining specific project information is challenging. Below are three examples of different type of engagement that are felt to be indicative of workings and challenges associated with this form of collaboration.

The National Film and Television School in the UK has been actively involved in these types of joint ventures (‘JVs’) for a number of years and has seen this as vital to its students. Citing commercial sensitivities, they were unable to share specific project or collaborator information but did note that:

“...some JV's are one offs while others last several years [...] We are running between 5 and 10 JVs each year. In general they are extra-curricular and are aimed at very recent grads as well as final year students. They are not done for profit at all [...] but to give students industry credits and experience they can put on their

CV's. [...] The underlying business model for most of the JVs is we put up the facilities and crew and the commercial partner puts up the cash budget.” (Powell, 2012)

In some instances the ‘service provider’ model can involve investment from the academic partner if the expenditure can be seen to have other benefits. An extreme example of this is the partnership between Carnegie-Mellon University (CMU) and 31<sup>st</sup> Street Studios in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. CMU has had a history of engagement with Hollywood studios dating back to the late 1990s, when Randy Pausch and Don Marinelli established the Entertainment Technology Center (ETC), a new department at the university focused on advanced interactive games (Pausch and Marinelli, 2007); Pausch had been a consultant for Walt Disney Imagineering Research & Development, a Disney studios subsidiary, since 1996 (Pausch, 2011). In 2012, Marinelli brokered a deal with local Pittsburgh film studio 31<sup>st</sup> Street Studios and Paramount On-Location whereby CMU would commit a significant investment (believed to be seven figures) into purchasing a Knight Vision motion capture system (Davidson, 2012). Knight Vision was originally developed to support production of James Cameron’s *Avatar* and this was to be the only such system on the US East Coast. Specifics are scarce, but it is understood that the deal was structured such that CMU was to receive a percentage of all revenue generated from 31<sup>st</sup> Studios renting out the system, with the investment being recouped over several years (ibid). One of the driving factors was an opportunity spotted with the production of *Avatar 2*, which was seen as likely use all Knight Vision capacity thus driving clients to Pittsburgh to do production with the system (Schooley, 2012). CMU’s objective was to have students (all on Masters courses in ETC) trained in the operation of the system then have them work on projects coming into the studio. Initially was to be on an ad-hoc basis although the ultimate objective was to have these placements integrated into the curriculum (Davidson, 2012). The collaboration was

touted as enabling “The best film and video production facility for movies outside of Southern California” (Rodgers, 2012). However, 31st Street Studios encountered financial difficulties and the deal was put on hold in 2013; by 2016, it was facing foreclosure (Van Osdol, 2016). As of this writing, the studio has survived and is continuing business although there is no evidence of the ETC collaboration. It is unclear whether CMU lost any of its investment.

In contrast to Carnegie-Mellon’s highly ambitious, high-profile attempt at a ‘service provider’ model, film industry collaborations at the University of York in the UK have been much more low key yet enabled support of a significant number of commercial film projects<sup>6</sup>. The first project, *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey* (2007), produced by Bauer-Martinez for MGM Studios and starring Joely Richardson and Tom Berenger, came to the university almost by accident. Kit Monkman, Visual Effects Supervisor for the film, approached the author of this article whom he had known as part of a regional creative network. Monkman had been tasked with creating composites for a small number of ‘blue screen’ shots for the film and was looking for students to support creation of the required scenes as well as office space for the team. The author, then a lecturer in the Department of Electronics, identified a team of five students for Monkman and his associate Tom Wexler to train, and also arranged facilities on the university’s Science Park (University of York, 2006). Seeing the quality of work produced by the students, the producers were impressed and the ‘handful’ of shots became 40,000 frames of compositing work. The project was deemed a success: students gained invaluable paid work experience (two went directly

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the author was directly involved in many of the projects at York so much of the information provided in this section is first hand although additional sources have been included wherever possible.

to VFX jobs in London), the University gained good publicity and the production company saved money while not sacrificing quality.

The benefits of that collaboration were noted during the development of York's new Department of Theatre, Film and Television (TFTV). Part of the funding for the department came from the European Regional Development Fund. Conditions of this funding stipulated that the department had to facilitate a number a business 'assists', supporting local companies to add value to the regional economy. Considering the collaboration for *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey* and several other factors, the university took the view that the ERDF requirements could be met by providing production and postproduction support to film and television projects. This required increased investment in high-end equipment and facilities in keeping with industry needs; however, it was also felt that there would be a 'trickle down effect' as students would benefit from access to both industry-standard equipment and professionals through live projects.

TFTV opened its new building in late 2010 and created a 'commercial arm', Heslington Studios (HS), soon after to provide production and postproduction support to commercial clients (University of York, 2012a). It was envisioned that this support would involve student work placements and, in some instances, paid crew positions wherever possible. HS supported a range of broadcast clients, including sound mixing for the BBC series *In the Club* and *The Syndicate* as well as postproduction support for Channel 4's *Location, Location, Location*, but its main client was Green Screen Productions (GSP), a feature film production company established by indie film veterans Alan Latham and Tom Mattinson as well as Monkman, all of whom had been involved in the *Toomey* project. The author brokered an 'umbrella agreement' between the company and HS that enabled priority access to TFTV facilities out-of-hours. It

stipulated that there would be a minimum of five large-scale films per year, primarily produced with HS resources, brought to the department from GSP, for which a minimum fee would be paid to HS for each as well as small profit-share (University of York, 2012b).

The first project was *The Knife That Killed Me* (2014), an experimental feature film backed by Universal Pictures UK that was seen as a ‘flagship’ project for GSP. Monkman and theatre director Marcus Romer co-directed the film with Latham and Mattinson producing (the author was one of the films executive producers and also was the VFX producer). The £3M film was based on the best-selling teen book and featured a highly stylised look, being shot on green screen with all setting created through CGI. What was particularly novel was that, apart from the author, all of the visual effects team were recent TFTV graduates, all of whom were on staff with GSP and paid full industry salaries. The VFX team was housed in the TFTV building itself and made use of all of its facilities. While the film achieved some strong reviews, including being named “10<sup>th</sup> Best Film of 2014” by the Huffington Post (Crow, 2014) and receiving a four-star rating in *The Times* (Ide, 2014), Universal did not see value in marketing it heavily and the film obtained only limited release. As a result, the film generated minimal revenue.

During the production of *The Knife That Killed Me*, senior department staff became worried that GSP was not bringing in the number of large-scale projects promised in the agreement. There were several projects that involved low-level support such as basic sound mixing or picture finishing, including *Entity* (2012) starring Dervla Kerwin and *Sparks and Embers* (2015) with Chris Marshall, but these did not yield the income the department expected. At times payment from GSP was late and there was

tension between the uncertain culture of independent filmmaking and the regularity required by academia.

In 2016, department senior management reconsidered whether Heslington Studios was really cost-effective, given its two dedicated full-time members of staff, particularly since ERDF requirements had been met. It decided to disband the company and conduct industry engagement directly through the department. Somewhat surprisingly, central to this plan was creating an exclusive arrangement with Green Screen Productions, which had now created a new company, GSP Studios, that also included a distribution arm. The 'umbrella agreement' was reworked to both better reflect the actual level of production and enable exclusivity but also tighten payment requirements. A number of other films were supported from that point including *Bliss!* (2016), *Dusty & Me* (2016), *Mad to be Normal* (2017) with David Tenant and Elizabeth Moss, *In Extremis* (2017) and John Hurt's last film, *That Good Night* (2017). During this time GSP developed and produced *Macbeth* (2018), its second 'flagship' film. This project utilised the green screen production model as well as the same key personnel as *The Knife That Killed Me*, including a now-expanded VFX team involving more graduates and the addition of Prof Judith Buchanan as the screenwriter, with Monkman being the sole director. During its completion, Green Screen Productions, the original production company established by Latham, got into tax trouble with the UK government and was forced to cease trading in late 2016. While this did not directly affect *Macbeth* or TFTV's agreement with GSP Studios (which was a separate entity), the formal agreement was ended in mid-2017 although some collaboration continues on an ad-hoc basis. GSP Studios merged with Goldfinch Entertainment in late 2017 but still has offices and a studio complex in Yorkshire.

Despite these ups and downs, the overall collaboration has been viewed as a success as it generated over 20 full time jobs for TFTV graduates (14 of which have continued with Viridian VFX, the new company born out of the merger with Goldfinch), a substantial number of work placement opportunities for TFTV students, and appreciable revenue to the department although not at the levels originally hoped.

## **Conclusions**

The range of experiences detailed in the examples above show the opportunities and challenges involved in academic-industry collaborations for feature film production irrespective of the model used. Each approach can be seen as workable but both partners, particularly those on the academic side, need to consider the nature of engagement in terms of how it directly relates to their overall institutional objectives. If these are closely aligned, the likelihood of success is demonstrably greater. However, if either side has unrealistic expectations, it is clear that few benefits will be realised and, indeed, such partnerships can prove to be expensive. Clearly these types of collaborations are evolving and the ability to conduct them is becoming increasingly fluid, particularly with increased support (and pressure) from government. However, looking at the revenue generated by even the most successful of these projects, it is evident that benefits need to be considered using other measures. While academic-industry collaborations for feature film production usually do not represent 'The Sting', it is clear they also do not yield 'A Fistful of Dollars'.

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<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0814397/>
- Bliss! 2016. Dir. Rita Osei. University of York, United Kingdom.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1316541/>
- Brown Willy. 2016. Dir. Brett Harvey. Falmouth University, United Kingdom.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5106182/>
- Bullets for the Dead. 2015. Dir. Michael Du-Shane. Griffith Film School, Australia.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2932530/>
- Dance with the One. 2010. Dir. Mike Dolan. University of Texas, United States.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1307892/>
- Dark Tarot. 2014. Dirs. David Landau, Jim Cocoliato. Fairleigh Dickinson University, United States. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2726688/>
- Denial. 2016. Dir. Mick Jackson. Emory University, United States.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4645330/>
- Distante cercanía, la ley del más vivo (aka. The Law of the Swindler). 2013. Dir. Alex Schlenker. INCINE, Ecuador. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2413524/>
- Dusty & Me. 2016. Dir. Betsan Morris Evans. University of York, United Kingdom.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4125372/>
- Elvis and Annabelle. 2007. Dir. Will Geiger. University of Texas at Austin, United States. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0787462/>
- Entity. 2012. Dir. Steve Stone. University of York, United Kingdom.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1842356/>
- Extraordinary. 2017. Dir. Scotty Curlee. Liberty University, United States.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5992114/>
- Fading Away. 2015. Dirs. Edwina Casey, David Johnston, Lisa Winstanley. Filmbase, Ireland. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4973196/>
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<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0837794/>
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<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4439872/>

Holidaysburg. 2014. Dir. Anna Martemucci. Point Park University, United States.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3569326/>

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<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0484207/>

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<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4286666/>

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Laurence. 2016. Dir. Steven Kellam. University of Nebraska at Lincoln, United States.  
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