

Development of a University Feature Film Production Model



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Abstract

This paper presents one possible model for constructing a university feature film production course. This approach was developed through my Screen Production PhD (Young 2013), where I researched my role as a feature producer on *Double Happiness Uranium* (2013).

Drawing from my exegesis research and existing university feature film productions, I identify several issues that were managed on the prototype feature film. These issues were financing, project scheduling, minimum student numbers, and student collaboration issues. This paper addresses ways these issues could be better managed through a two-year Masters degree by coursework program, and explains how this Masters could comply within the AQF (Australia Qualifications Framework) system.

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Introduction

Producing feature films at universities clearly addresses a growing student demand. With two fellow research students, I undertook the production of our PhD film in 2008. We each held a key creative role, based on our past extensive industry practice (www.doublehappinessuranium.com/cast-crew). Cole Larson was director, Matt Hawkins was writer and I took on the role of feature film producer. This production was taken on by Flinders University as a prototype feature film research project to enable three Creative Practice PhDs to be delivered from the production of one feature film. The opportunity to make *Double Happiness Uranium* (2013) inside a tertiary institution was unique and directly connected to our desire to research the production processes of feature filmmaking.

Recognising that this opportunity was unique and innovative, and realising that it may be more difficult for other students to replicate our approach, I decided to focus my own research on potential feature film production models which could provide a similar opportunity to tertiary students who did not have our substantial industry experience nor access to like-minded research collaborators.

The feature film production model presented here was developed as a response to growing student demand to be educated in feature film production methods. Five years ago, this was a new research frontier, and Flinders University was not alone in this endeavour. Other Australian universities were also testing the waters with the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) and Bond University both making feature films, which could be seen partially as a response to the educational sector gradually moving to provide training in industry practice of feature film production. One of the difficulties facing institutions is providing quality educational outcomes that are sustainable on long-term based feature

film production projects. It is this problem that I am seeking to address by presenting this abridged version of my exegesis research. Exploration of this topic begins by looking at how some universities have approached short film and feature film production.

Rationale for University Feature Film Production

Feature film production is generally an industry and commercial practice, and historically university film production courses have predominantly taught short filmmaking. For the graduating student trained to make short films, there is a gap in the knowledge required for feature film production. The feature filmmaking skillset may appear similar, but in reality is somewhat different. Producing a feature film requires the ability to maintain narrative, creative and technical consistency over a much longer film textual length and production duration. In addition, the short filmmaker is unlikely to be familiar with industry practices such as appropriate budget administration, extended production periods, legal issues, and commercial exploitation.

It is likely that feature film production has rarely been undertaken in universities because of the difficulties involving cost, technology, availability of teaching resources and the longer timeframe to complete a project. Short filmmaking continues to dominate through coursework because it is a well-established achievable format that is relatively low cost and easily manageable due to its temporal duration. Essentially short filmmaking provides a convenient, flexible and compatible outcome, fitting neatly within current university filmmaking course structures. Until quite recently Australian Universities, with the exception of a small number of institutions, have not ventured into feature filmmaking through coursework programs.

Another deficiency of only offering short film practice is that outside of educational and training experience, short filmmaking tends to be an artistic niche activity with limited outcomes. An article on the AFTRS, Australia's national film school, discusses the issue:

[T]here is a realisation that –Academy Award nominations and film festival screenings notwithstanding –short films are essentially useless commodities that are, generally, created by individual visions. They have no value beyond teaching technical skills and those skills are no longer a unique commodity globally: short filmmaking courses are available everywhere. (Bodey 2008)

Thus, limiting training to short films restricts the industry background of students, many of whom may have ambitions to work in the commercial feature production industry. For the graduating student trained to make short films, there is a gap in the knowledge required for feature film production. As a response some Australian institutions have offered feature film production as part of postgraduate coursework programs.

In 2009 AFTRS began a collaboration with the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) to produce a feature film, *Before the Rain* (2009), which premiered at the *Dungog Film Festival* in 2010. The AFTRS chief executive, Sandra Levy, described the production as 'a brand new educational and creative experience for everyone involved' (Bodey 2008). The production was jointly funded by the two institutions at the cost of \$600,000. The script was developed by professional writers and the film produced by AFTRS staff (AFTRS 2009). The project involved over 100 students from AFTRS and NIDA (AFTRS 2010).

Bond University premiered its first feature film *10 Days to Die* (2010) at the 2010 *Gold Coast Film Festival*. The university funded the project for a reported \$1million and it was made as part of the Masters by coursework program (Stojceska 2009). Similar to the AFTRS model, the film was made with industry professionals and university staff in key roles, with students working under their supervision. This film only screened once. Neither Bond nor AFTRS have announced further plans to make feature films as part of their postgraduate coursework programs.

International tertiary institutions have also made feature films. In 2010 the University of Texas Film Institute produced its first feature film, *Dance with the One* (2010). The film premiered at the *South by South West Film Festival* and the institution has not undertaken any more feature film productions.

In Korea in 2007, Park Kiyong established a feature film production program at the Korean Academy of Fine Arts (KAFA) (Talent Campus Tokyo 2011). To date the most successful films out of KAFA include *Bleak Night* (2010) and *Choked* (2011), with both screening at the *Busan International Film Festival* and receiving theatrical release. In March 2012 Park launched a two-year feature film production program at the Dankook University in South Korea (Korean Film Council 2011). To date the program has produced five feature films: *10 Minutes* (2013), *A Fresh Start* (2014), *Miss the Train* (2014), *Wake Up Chun-*

Ja (2014) and *End of Winter* (2014). Each film was produced for KRW50million (approx. US\$49,000) (Cheah 2014). With its slate of productions and low budgets the Dankook University program shows promise.

With the recent possible exception of Dankook University, it appears that many projects cannot be repeated due to the unsustainable effort and costs involved in tertiary feature film production. These examples and the absence of some of these institutions replicating these models raises questions about the sustainability of feature films within the tertiary sector.

This is an unsettling notion when, given the ongoing advancements in digital technology, the industry is now able to produce low budget feature films in short timeframes. Low budget feature films are becoming commonplace. Australian microbudget examples include *Blacktown* (2005) \$50,000, *All My Friends Are Leaving Brisbane* (2007) \$42,000 and *The Tunnel* (2011) \$36,000.

The use of digital technology on feature film productions has been widely adopted: from image acquisition, data storage and post-production pathways to digital release formats and platforms. Technology is no longer a barrier for the industry to produce micro-budget features, and certainly universities have access to similar digital technologies.

Using my own experience as Producer on the making of a tertiary institution feature film, this paper presents an alternative approach to tertiary feature film production that may serve as a foundation for the development of a university feature film production model.

Producing *Double Happiness Uranium* (2013)

In the absence of ongoing university feature film courses, Flinders University approved the production of *Double Happiness Uranium* (2013) as a collaboration by three PhD candidates. The writer, Matt Hawkins, investigated the creative practice of scriptwriting in his PhD *Writing is Rewriting* (2012). Director Cole Larson's PhD is currently a work in progress. My own PhD was the third one attached to the production and my exegesis was titled *Producing the University Feature Film: Double Happiness Uranium* (2013). I reflectively examined the role of producer, and my exegesis included a supporting Portfolio of Documentation.

My reflective research investigated the feature film funding and production processes and from these experiences sought to develop and document an affordable and sustainable university feature filmmaking course. As the film's producer and a researcher I employed a reflective practitioner methodology (Cowan 1998), which consists of three phases: planning for outcomes, practice, and then reflection and evaluation. *Double Happiness Uranium* (2013) was developed as a tertiary prototype to explore how and if it would be possible to replicate this production process more efficiently. My research was focused on the financial and logistical impact of the production, with the aim of documenting the experience.

The feature film project took four and half years to complete with a cash budget of \$92,011 and significant in-kind support from Flinders University and a volunteer crew. The film development took roughly two years, pre-production four months, the shoot five weeks, and post-production another two years. The production involved 15 actors, 50 extras and 80 crew members. Each of the actors and several key crew members received a nominal one-off payment. The large majority of the crew were current students and recent graduates, with friends and family assisting in support roles, such as catering and set building.

With the benefit of hindsight, the university model proposed below differs at times from the approach taken for *Double Happiness Uranium*. Our creative practice research was an opportunity engineered by us to explore the approaches to feature film production in the university environment, and we acknowledge that at times we received unique funding and support that would not be available to all students. In particular, firmer financial, budgeting and scheduling parameters are proposed to enhance the successful completion of future projects. For example the model presented below suggests a budget specified at \$20,000 cash, a shoot no longer than four weeks and the entire project should be completed within two years.

This paper proposes one approach to producing micro-budget feature film in the educational environment.

A proposed university model

Consideration of both my research experiences producing *Double Happiness Uranium* and existing university feature film production examples, has led me to identify several key issues in developing a curriculum approach. These issues are

unique to the university environment and have not previously been documented and discussed. This is in contrast to the plethora of texts on producing low- to no-budget feature films. The most useful existing literature is written by successful filmmakers and includes sample documentation and detailed examples that are regionally relevant. *The Satchel: Production budgeting and film management* provides a hands-on reference guide for the feature filmmaker in Australia (Screen Australia 2007). It combines sample documentation, industry information and a special methodology section on low-budget filmmaking. However, while many texts provide information on film production, specific material on producing a university feature film is non-existent.

My research has centred on feature film production within a tertiary institution and suggests a syllabus as a solution to specific issues which were identified through my reflective research practice. These issues include financing, project scheduling, minimum student numbers, collaboration issues, staff requirements, and qualification framework.

Financing

Even for established filmmakers feature film finance is competitive and hard to obtain. In Australia traditional sources of financing include government funding bodies, private investment and presales agreements. The university feature film may not be eligible or viable for some of these more traditional funding sources, meaning investment avenues may not offer practical funding opportunities for university feature films productions. Hence a university needs to provide resources to meet minimum budget requirements. With university-guaranteed finance and in-kind support, some of the barriers faced by tertiary feature filmmakers can be removed. The student cohort should not be relied upon to raise finance and gather resources as their inexperience means there would be no guarantee of success. Additionally, students already pay fees for undergraduate programs and some Masters by coursework. Should a university offer a course in film production it would have to underwrite expenses to ensure the course can run. However, if the educational model is to be viable the level of funding required from the university has to be limited to a feasible and sustainable amount. My argument is that the micro-budget university feature film can be made for \$20,000 cash, when supported with in-kind resources. Half the cash is needed for essential consumables and the other half would be made available to students for optional on-screen production value.

Qualification Framework

The aim of the proposed model is to build upon existing university teaching pedagogies and to provide industry training. Undergraduate courses currently focus on short film production to teach general filmmaking techniques and skill acquisition. The proposed course must assist in bridging the gap between being a maker of short films and offering the beginning of a career in feature film production. The proposed university feature film production model is therefore not aimed at those with little filmmaking experience, but rather the more experienced emerging filmmakers working towards industry practice.

Two possibilities for the university feature film qualification framework are an Honours or Masters by coursework. A PhD framework could be considered, but as it requires the creation of new knowledge it may not be desirable to those students who solely want to make a feature film.

A single Honours year may deliver a worthwhile project but the short duration may not be able to consistently provide a satisfactory educational experience for a feature film production. Research by Screen Australia (2008) puts principal photography on average at eight weeks and post-production at 28 weeks. Because of the stop-and-start nature of low-budget filmmaking, for productions made for less than \$1million, both periods increase by 20 per cent. Thus, if a tertiary institution were to undertake a feature film project to be completed in a year it would leave less than 10 weeks for development and pre-production. It may be possible to undertake a feature in one year if the final script was already prepared prior to the Honours year commencing, but this may still severely limit educational outcomes.

Drawing on Screen Australia's production research the most practicable option for a university feature film program would be a two-year course run as a Masters by coursework. The AQF characterises a significant learning outcome of this level as the mastery of a professional practice. As stated in the AQF Handbook, 'most Masters Degrees require the equivalent of two years of study post the three-year Bachelor Degree or one year of study post the Bachelor Honours Degree or four-year (or longer) Bachelor Degree.' (AQF 2011)

The guidelines go on to detail that candidates with equivalent experience may undertake a Masters by coursework. A Masters is an advanced educational endeavour, and potential applicants are required to demonstrate a high level of

academic and production achievement.

Project Scheduling

With marketing and distribution commitments the lifespan of a feature film project can carry on for years. The university course, by contrast, needs a definite end point, where the course concludes and educational outcomes have been met. Delivery of a completed film would be one natural end point, and to extend the educational outcomes of the model, an extensive marketing and distribution plan should be generated as part of the delivery items. A completed project, with potential, is then in good shape to continue on in the hands of the university or graduating student.

The university feature film has to be delivered within the course period. In the case of a Masters, this is two years. Realistically, the maximum project length for a Masters is 22 months. The university project should begin with an original idea and end with the delivery of a feature film, and associated deliverables for marketing.

A summary schedule in Table 1 shows how the proposed university feature film production slate is structured over the 22-month study period.

Table 1. Proposed Summary Schedule

From the outset it should be noted that, without guaranteed institutional finance combined with script development centred on the use of available resources, dictating finite development and postproduction periods would not be possible. While the university film is relatively free of financing concerns, it must also take into consideration the time required to train students. As such, the university film would benefit from the longest possible development period. From a project development perspective, an extended period also allows the script to go through multiple drafts.

There is no absolute distinction between development and pre-production phases. In general terms, development is focused on scriptwriting and financing, and pre-production is the hands-on preparation before shooting. Casting and location scouting are often examples of overlapping tasks. During pre-production the script moves from the final draft to the shooting script, in preparation for the commencement of principal photography. A dedicated pre-production period is required to ensure all elements of the shooting script are in place. A two to three month period is typical.

To limit costs the length of the university film shoot needs to be capped. The proposed model suggests a maximum of four weeks. To ensure safety and maintain the morale of the unpaid crew, a week should consist of five days, and each day should be no longer than ten hours.

A full-time shoot block is generally preferable to after-hours, or weekend, shooting. Out of business hours scheduling is useful for emerging filmmakers who must work around full-time jobs. However, students are in the opposite position, often working part-time on weekends and nights outside of the university weekday timetable. Consequently, scheduling a film shoot on weekdays during non-semester time will maximise student availability. This does not exclude shooting at night or weekends, but it highlights the most likely student schedule, and therefore the difficulties that might be encountered.

These potential difficulties should be discussed with the crew during development, when the script and production approach can be more easily modified. The Screen Australia (2011) study *Production Duration* specifies that Australia feature films spend 31 weeks on average in postproduction. Low-budget films made for under \$1million average an additional four weeks in post-production on average. The university feature film has the potential advantage of sharing the workload between multiple editors, assistants and a post-sound team. The proposed approach allows for up to nine months or 39 weeks as a post-production period.

Taking into consideration the post-production period and working back from delivery, principal photography should occur in February of the second year of the course. A February shoot is advantageous in that it is outside the academic year for undergraduate students. In the absence of university classes these students are more likely to be available and can be called on to assist during the shoot. University equipment and locations are also under-utilised outside of semester time. Likewise, these shoots could be delayed until April in order to take advantage of the mid-semester university break but this leaves a significantly reduced post-production period.

The proposed summary schedule (Table 1) is constructed to make the best use of available time. While each film may result in a different breakdown, each arrangement must consider the university calendar and time required to train students. Ultimately, adherence to a tight schedule with finite milestones requires close supervision.

Minimum student numbers

Running a feature film program will require a minimum number of students to justify teaching resources and university financing. On the other hand, if the cohort is too large, the educational outcomes for individuals may suffer as a large component of the proposed course would be production participation, where students take on a skill speciality and are expected to contribute to general filmmaking activities to aid the production.

The teaching of more skill specialties may increase student numbers. There are seven major roles involved: writing, producing, directing, production design, editing, cinematography and sound design.

Student numbers could be increased through role sharing. It is not uncommon for feature films to have multiple producers, writers or a team for post-sound. Two to three students per role would provide the recommended balance. Collaboration would be a fundamental component of the role sharing; this and other student issues are addressed in the section below. Seven different roles with two to three students per role makes a cohort of 14 to 21 students. This number of students should enable course feasibility while providing a satisfactory educational experience.

The absolute minimum number of students is seven, one person per role, but this makes for a very small crew with no reserves. Often during the making of *Double Happiness Uranium* (2013) the responsibilities of writing, directing and producing were freely shared between the PhD team in order to ease the substantial workload otherwise put on one person.

The proposed model would be student-driven, and requires a large cohort to ensure all production tasks, big and small, can be adequately completed. Key roles and responsibilities could be undertaken by the group of students enrolled in the Masters. Additional voluntary crew roles could be made up of undergraduates, enticed by the offer of work experience and credit on a feature film. Additional volunteers, such as recent graduates, family, and friends, can undertake minor crew roles. These latter groups are generally less experienced and committed to the project, but are necessary on large production days. Students enrolled in the feature film production Masters would need to undertake the bulk of the work to successfully meet their course requirements.

Collaboration Issues

From day one, team building and encouraging collaboration will be important as it has to be anticipated that every project is going to run into trouble with student collaboration issues at some stage. Students have been put together rather than having chosen to work together; they come from different backgrounds and will have different opinions. Collaboration issues have the potential to be amplified with multiple students sharing one role.

Hodge (2009) makes a strong case for training students in how to collaborate and discusses ways to teach the necessary skills. For example engaging an external group work facilitator for a short workshop may be advantageous. With each new cohort, short film exercises can also be used to find out how roles are to be shared. For example, writing students may take turns in writing a script draft, or they could each be responsible for a different act in the same draft. Production is a relatively easy role to share, as the producer's responsibilities are numerous and can be divided. Post-sound is similar, tasks like Foley recording, dialogue editing, track laying and sound mixing can be shared and/or divided. Precedents exist in the industry for multiple producers or writers on the same project; however instances of multiple directors are far less common.

For directing students, a division of the role may be by scene, act or location. Alternatively, responsibilities could be divided, for instance, into technical, performance and design. The project trap to avoid is the making of multiple short films which only equate to a feature film by being added together. While this is not unheard of, it is a far from common format and does not fully test students in maintaining narrative, creative and technical consistency over a continuous and uninterrupted feature length.

Regardless of the production methodology and the sharing of roles, a detailed joint vision statement is required. All collaborating students need to have a common and shared understanding of their role.

During the production the student cohort needs to meet on a weekly basis and communicate more frequently via email and phone.

In the industry, if a project runs into trouble there is always one person (or a small group), commonly the executive producer/s, with the power to make the final decision. In this model university staff are akin to executive producers. The proposed approach is not a democracy, so if issues that have the potential to derail the project arise, staff acting as executive producers make the decisions and students must comply. Of course, staff intervention should be fully explained to all students. This arrangement would be accepted by all students as a condition of enrolment.

Underperforming students and any students withdrawing from the course have the potential to affect other students and the project as a whole. Having multiple students per role helps safeguard the project and ensures production will continue with minimal interruption.

Staffing requirements

A course in feature film production requires staff equipped to teach and supervise the project. Staff will need to have both knowledge and experience of feature film production. As it is unlikely there will be staff to teach all aspects of feature film production, guest lecturers need to be incorporated into the program. Sections of the course with guest lecturers should involve an industry member to teach industry practice. Each industry member can be coupled with a university counterpart to explain how the university model will operate; for instance, an accountant may be matched with a university financial officer or a casting agent with a drama lecturer.

Teaching the course will be costly considering the relatively small student cohort. To reduce some expense, strategies must be employed to reduce teaching contact hours. Students can be given independent research assignments and be required (at times) to use self-taught filmmaking techniques to produce results. This strategy would require staff to guide and supervise students with less preparation and presenting of lectures.

In a similar vein, students in the first part of the course could be exposed to industry practice through work experience, to further reduce university staff commitment. In terms of the project supervision the producer/s can be a conduit to the lecturer.

Feature film production is a complex endeavour, and breaking down the components into a number of topics demonstrates how a course syllabus could be formed.

Proposed syllabus

The proposed syllabus is developed in conjunction with the previously discussed two-year project schedule. Each topic is interconnected and progresses towards delivering a completed feature film. Approximately one third of the topics focus on general filmmaking principles, which are applicable to all students. One topic per semester is a self-directed research project to allow skill specialisation. In addition, one topic per semester is dedicated to work on the production itself. In order to accommodate the diverse workloads of the different crew roles, the self-directed research and production topics are interchangeable. The proposed syllabus seeks to provide a balance between general and specialist training. The following sample syllabus outline briefly presents the type of material to be covered in each topic.

Sample syllabus outline

Semester One

1. **Introduction:** Micro-budget films and methodologies, the university production model, digital technology, collaboration, cast and crew. This topic has students working together to produce a short film, promoting teamwork, bonding and collaboration.
2. **Project and Script Development:** Target audience, marketing and distribution. Script Development: Outline, Treatment, Pitch documents and Script draft one. Students work together on a joint vision to guide the development process.
3. **Finance and Budgeting:** Funding, in-kind resources and budgeting. Together students explore how a project can be funded, and the allocation of resources. This topic also allows the student cohort to investigate raising additional funds, beyond the university provision.
4. **Research Project One:** Independent research from the perspective of a skill specialist. Students analyse three successful micro-budget films to determine their strengths and weaknesses, and how this may be applied to their film. This topic also examines creative practice methodologies, making the desired outcomes (both aesthetic and industrial) explicit for students and constructing processes to best achieve those outcomes.

Semester Two

1. **Business:** Production entity, accounting systems, insurance, legal agreements, contracts, intellectual property, copyright, chain of title, scheduling and logistics. This topic covers essential administrative responsibilities necessary for production.
2. **Script Development:** Drafts two, three, four and final. Students continue to collaborate on the script development through frequent and regular meetings. All students are expected to provide detailed feedback on script drafts from their crew role perspective.
3. **Work Experience:** Students are paired with an experienced industry partner in their chosen skill specialty. Students have the opportunity to learn from this mentor, and are encouraged to seek advice on their university crew role.
4. **Research Project Two:** Independent research on Pre-Production, from the perspective of a skill specialist. This research should aim to be of benefit to the feature film production. This topic also reflects on, and evaluates, the previous research project, and the creative practice methodology employed.

Semester Three

1. **Production Management:** Production calendar, locations, production office, running the set, occupational health and safety (OHS). In this topic every student becomes familiar with the day-to-day management and operation of a feature film project during pre-production and principal photography.
2. **Pre-Production:** Work in crew roles ensures the film is ready to shoot.
3. **Research Project Three:** Independent research on Production and/or Post-production, from the perspective of a skill specialist. This research should aim to benefit the production.
4. **Production:** Student work in their crew role.

Semester Four

1. **Post-Production:** Editing, post sound and ongoing reviews. All students are required to view edits, provide feedback and analyse their own crew role contribution.
2. **Research Project Four:** Independent research on Marketing, Distribution and Exhibition, from the perspective of a skill specialist. This research should aim to benefit the production.
3. **Deliverables:** Marketing and distribution preparation. All students contribute to the development and resourcing of the release strategy.
4. **Future Planning:** Self-evaluation, career and future project planning.

Conclusion

This paper presents one possible approach to constructing a university feature film production course. It suggests generic strategies for the management of time, money and student labour, with a view to achieving both the successful completion of a feature film and a satisfying educational outcome for those involved in the production process. It aims to define an industry-relevant educational model that has not previously been described in either educational or industry-based literature. This sustainable micro-budget approach has been designed to have the potential to be integrated into mainstream postgraduate university education.

Without significant institutional and student input, the model outlined here cannot lead to a viable feature film. In addition, students undertaking feature film production using this model would require experienced and knowledgeable mentors throughout the production process. Comprehensive institutional support and commitment is also necessary in terms of in-kind resources and finance. Ultimately the model requires further testing and refinement, and continuing adaptation for specific educational contexts.

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