**A Transformative Learning Experience: An Undergraduate Research Conference as Authentic Assessment**

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**Abstract**

This article explores an example of authentic assessment practised on the English and History undergraduate programmes at the University of Derby, involving modules which lead to a public conference. Drawing on notions of authenticity in assessment both as connected to professional scenarios and as potentially transformative for the student in a wider sense, we outline the nature of the modules and their place within broader programme-level assessment strategy. We then detail their impact in terms of public engagement and raising the profile of the disciplines as well as, crucially, student feedback. Overall, we offer this practice as an example of successful authentic assessment in the Humanities which can lead students to engage more critically with their discipline and to discover new and highly transferable skills.

**Keywords**

Authentic; assessment; curriculum co-creation; public engagement; History; English Literature; Higher Education.

**Introduction**

Traditionally, speaking at academic conferences has been the preserve of postgraduate students, academics, and independent researchers. However, there is increased emphasis on the importance of celebrating undergraduate student research, leading to greater opportunities for students to present their work at undergraduate research conferences (Little, 2020). These have included national conferences with delegates from a range of different disciplines, such as the British Conference of Undergraduate Research (Walkington et al., 2017); multidisciplinary institutional conferences, such as the Undergraduate Research Conference at the University of New Hampshire (Potter et al., 2010), and discipline-specific conferences, unattached to a specific module, such as the Economic Scholars programme at Austin College, Texas (Clayton and Nuckols, 2020). While there are some examples of the presentations being assessed (e.g. McGuinness and Simm, 2003; 2005), most undergraduate conferences are extracurricular. The conference discussed in this paper is distinctive in that it is both subject-specific and formally assessed as part of two compulsory undergraduate modules.

This paper highlights the different roles an undergraduate conference can play in shaping authentic assessment strategies within humanities degree programmes. It considers the wider context of this particular undergraduate research conference in relation to the two programmes concerned. It then sets out what takes place on the modules considering both the learning, teaching and assessment strategies employed. The paper demonstrates the impact that these modules have on the academic and personal development of students, highlighting the value of an assessment strategy that combines assessing for learning with authentic assessment. The assessment strategy develops students' academic and professional ambitions, showing how engagement with challenging subject content can be the vehicle for developing a range of transferable skills that equip students for their future graduate careers.

**Citation**

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**Authentic Assessment**

It is important to establish what we mean by authentic assessment. Pedagogic scholars argue that different forms of assessment can be situated on an 'authenticity spectrum', with assessments which are wholly decontextualised at one end, and those mirroring 'real' or 'working life' situations at the other (Segers et al., 2003; Forsyth and Evans, 2019). However, there is some considerable debate about what makes an assessment 'authentic', and pedagogic scholars, subject tutors and students do not always agree (Gulikers et al., 2004). For their research Gulikers et al. (2004) define authentic assessment as 'requiring students to use the same competencies, or combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, that they need to apply in the criterion situation in professional life', highlighting the importance of resemblance between the assessment and the corresponding situation in 'real life' – significantly, working life' (p.69). However, this definition is not without its problems. Within humanities disciplines, 'real' or 'working life' situations are extremely varied; English and History graduates enter a wide range of different professions including education at all levels, publishing, management consultancy, computer programming and related roles, and advertising, to name just a few (British Academy 2020; Hopkins et al., 2023). Therefore, it is important to consider subject-specific authenticity, enabling students to not only engage with disciplinary knowledge, but also to engage with discipline norms and conventions regarding the communication of that knowledge (Kreber, 2013). A crucial additional benefit of this is the development of 'evaluative judgement' whereby students learn to assess the standard of their own work, gaining 'the lifelong capability to assess and regulate their learning and performance' (Villarroel et al., 2018, pp.845-846).

For both English and History, conferences are an important part of how professionals share their research findings, and so engaging students with this process helps them to participate in these 'ways of thinking and practicing' (Kreber 2013, p.41). Much research on the impact of undergraduate conferences highlights how they help students to develop a variety of discipline-specific skills (see Little, 2020). In our subjects the focus is on the development of critical thinking, underpinned by independent research, aligning with the more expansive definition of authenticity in assessment provided by Vu and Dall'Alba (2014). They draw on the existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger to propose that the term is best conceptualised in relation to the transformative power of education: '[a]uthentic assessment can be employed in encouraging students to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, while promoting reflexivity about their own ways of knowing, acting and being' (pp.787). Understood in this wider sense, authentic assessment can – in addition to developing capabilities vital for professional life – help students to engage critically with existing knowledge and with the world (Sotiriadou et al., 2020). This connects to the idea of 'self-authorship', where students develop their own understandings of a subject, and can assess how this can be applied in different contexts. Working with others means that there must be an exchange of perspective, leading them to engage with alternative viewpoints and shaping their collective ideas accordingly (Walkington et al., 2017). Self-authorship is often seen by students as being 'authentic', as it reflects the practices of the profession of historians and literary scholars. Forsyth and Evans (2019) have further argued that authentic assessment can lead to a more 'inclusive or participatory history' (p.751), while McArthur (2023), who considers the existentialist paradigm too individualistic, similarly argues that it presents opportunities for students of English Literature to address issues of 'social well-being' (p.94).

**Programme Assessment Strategy**

These different elements of authentic assessment feature on the History and English programmes at the University of Derby. Reflecting the ideals of constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011) they have been designed to integrate transferable and academic skills, and to enable students to become both subject specialists and have wider knowledge that will help them after graduation. There is an emphasis on active learning, with students leading discussions, engaging in debates, and completing guided research projects. There is particular focus on 'integrated' assessments, where the levels of comprehension must be high, and the responsibility for learning is focused on the students (see Segers

et al., 2003). The outputs of these assessments take various forms, and throughout the programmes there is a focus on co-creation, particularly developing strategies to make learning truly interactive and debate driven. For example, a genuine culture of co-delivery has been forged through the assessment of participation in seminars, combining assessment of a class presentation with the grading of students' weekly contributions to seminar debates. To be successful, students cannot give lecture-style presentations, nor can the rest of the class be a passive audience. Those leading the class must engage with their fellow students, demonstrating that they have thought carefully about how to stimulate well-informed discussion. Meanwhile, students must be prepared to participate in the weekly debates, demonstrating their knowledge, their capacity to critically engage with the views of others and an ability to think on their feet.

It is an approach which combines the rigorous demands of an examination with the avoidance of the pitfalls associated with strategic learning. Students cannot just focus on an essay and a single presentation, as can happen on some coursework-only models. They must be reading every week, as they know that they will be expected to demonstrate this knowledge in the class, as well as reflecting on their developing ideas through a reflective component of the assessment. It requires student attendance in class and encourages a culture of active engagement. As students learn to recognise the inter-relationship between different seminar topics, and to read more widely, the approach also helps to raise student attainment. The lively debates that are stimulated help to make learning enjoyable and unique to the learning of each cohort, with the students and tutors as increasingly equal participants. The assessment of seminar participation develops transferable skills, enabling students to emerge as self-confident and articulate graduates. This approach to co-creation on both programmes reflects a shared strategy to embed assessment for learning aligned to authentic assessment. As Villarroel et al observe (2018, p.850), 'a programme approach to assessment design' can 'improve the student learning experience'; our programme learning outcomes reflect the emphasis we place on critical self-reflection, engagement in debate and public speaking, and those of the conference and assessed seminar participation modules are aligned to them.

**The Conference Modules**

The assessment strategy outlined above provides the context for the undergraduate conference that is the focus of this paper. On the English and History programmes there are two level 5 modules, which are prescribed for all single honours students, leading to the presentation of a conference paper. These modules commenced in 2008 for History and in 2016 for English. Initially, there were two separate conferences, but since 2020 there has been a joint event, usually involving between 40-60 students. The students on the two modules are taught together by subject specialists from both disciplines, enabling a team-teaching approach. The modules build upon the foundation of active learning, established earlier in the programmes, and further develop students' confidence in written and oral communication. Students are also prepared for the intellectual demands of the conference through a range of modules at level 4 and level 5, introducing them to key historiographical and critical-theoretical approaches, which they are encouraged to apply in their research for the conference paper.

On the conference modules, students work in small teams to collaboratively research and write an academic paper of around 3,000 words (to be delivered in twenty minutes). The teams are single discipline so that the students remain 'authentic' to the subject; the teams are quite small, usually with four members per team, and each group member delivers a section of the co-written paper at the conference. There is a different conference theme every year. Recent themes have included 'Old and New', 'National Identities', and 'Rivers, Lakes, and Seas'. Near the beginning of the modules every student team orally pitches several different conference proposals, which must contain a clear question, identify a possible case study, and engage with scholarly research. The proposals are supported by brief written summaries, which include extended bibliographies. Feedback on the

pitches is formative in nature, and the process helps students develop the skills required for the summative assessment. The module tutors use the pitches to select one proposal from each group; the topics selected must reflect the theme of the conference, but also need to produce a diverse and coherent conference programme. The students therefore have a significant input into shaping the content of the modules; this means there is the opportunity to explore subjects in-depth that are not covered elsewhere on the programmes, thus supporting Forsyth and Evans' argument that authentic assessment can help to encourage a more inclusive curriculum (2019). This also means that the students can shape their learning; as Lubicz-Nawrocka (2019) observes, the 'powerful benefits of curriculum co-creation' include '[s]tudents' development as reflective and active learners who can articulate their leadership skills and other transferrable [*sic*] skills', and that the process 'can be transformative for students' (p.40). This is aided by the reflective component of the assessment, detailed below. Certainly, a distinctive feature of the conferences from the outset has been their international scope and the opportunity taken by students to re-examine familiar subjects and challenge accepted narratives.

Once students have their research topic confirmed, they proceed to research and author their paper, supported by weekly group tutorials. These tutorials provide academic supervision of the research, helping the students to shape their paper and building their collective confidence to construct complex arguments and to cope with the particular challenges of the module**.** This means that the tutors can scaffold the support needed to provide the psychological safety required by students undertaking more challenging assessments in the manner discussed by Wake et al. (2023). These sessions also help the tutors to support the team ethos within each group, and students acknowledge this; one noted in post-module feedback that 'the weekly tutorials were really useful to keep on track with the project and to easily discuss any issues alongside the group.' (Anonymous student feedback, 2023). There are also whole group sessions each week, focusing on research skills, advice on collaborative working and coaching for presenting the paper. This includes offering guidance on how to draft the paper as a group rather than attempting to stitch together separately authored sections. Students are encouraged to pool their research and to write the paper as a collective piece, with a single voice and argument. This is facilitated using Microsoft Teams; each group has their own Teams channel on which they can exchange messages, hold meetings outside the curriculum slot, and collaborate on the documents. The approach was praised by one student as follows: '[l]ecturers have allotted equal time to each group and made sure that we all have a say. The small group dynamic has worked well online as we can communicate easily through Teams' (Anonymous student feedback, 2021). Another student commented more recently that they especially liked 'that we were explicitly encouraged to write the overall paper as a collective instead of writing parts of the paper separately and trying to bring it all together'. (Anonymous student feedback, 2023). This creates a really strong sense of shared responsibility, and in the sixteen years that the conference has run, every one of the over seven hundred students due to present has attended the conference in person.

**Summative Assessment**
The conference is a public event, regularly attracting an audience of over 200 people. Part of the assessment involves the students working on a package of marketing materials, to help publicise the event. All groups produce a poster, but they are also encouraged to consider how they can employ a variety of creative mediums to build their public profile. The marketing assignment helps to cement effective team-working and allows students to develop and showcase their creative skills. A recent student commented on the opportunities to innovate and valued 'having the creative freedom to design our own marketing and presentation' (Anonymous student feedback, 2022). Students have devised inventive and creative ways of engaging with a public audience, including the writing of songs, making short films, producing physical artefacts, such as bookmarks and leaflets, as well as running promotional stalls. In recent years, the marketing strategies produced by students have become increasingly digital in nature, with different groups designing websites and social media marketing

campaigns. We encourage students to think about how the marketing strategy fits the content of the paper. For example, a group working on the history of brewing in Burton on Trent produced a range of promotional beer mats and made a video in a pub that introduced the themes of the talk, which was subsequently circulated through social media.

The marketing element is also tied into the academic research that underpins each paper, since the students need to think about how they can communicate the nature of their topic visually and in an eye-catching way. This bringing-together of scholarly work with skills specifically connected with broader employability has been noted by the external examiner for English:

> I was impressed particularly by the way the module copes with the difficult balance between the intellectual skills of English Literary analysis and the more 'public-facing' or 'employability' skills fostered. Comparable modules I've seen elsewhere tend to neglect the former when focusing on the latter. [In one example] the marketing material […] itself employed surrealist techniques […]: this is not bland salesmanship, but the creation of intellectually engaged citizens.

> (English moderation report, 2023).

In the final few weeks of the modules the students can present draft papers to the module leaders for preliminary feedback. These rehearsals work as an opportunity for staff to provide guidance on the content of the paper but also to advise students on their delivery style. While students have had some experience in leading seminars in previous modules, this is often the first occasion that students have presented their work in a large lecture theatre. Students are therefore supported to develop professional speaking skills and to ensure that their paper works as a script for oral delivery.

The conference itself is a significant event in the academic year for the History and English programmes. It is a formal event, and we encourage the students to dress professionally. The conference follows a standard academic format (see Appendix for an example). The event is usually opened by the University's Vice Chancellor and is often attended by senior members of the institution. The concluding address is provided by an invited guest, such as senior representatives from local employers, visiting professors and members of the University's Governing Council.

After students have delivered their papers, they take questions from the floor. This means that they get to enjoy the full academic conference experience. The students' ability to answer a range of unexpected questions from a public audience is a truly examining experience, enabling them to demonstrate the breadth and depth of their knowledge. This replicates some of the experience students will have had in the context of the assessed seminars, as mentioned above. However, the conference takes students out of the 'safe' environment of the classroom and tests them in front of an unfamiliar audience in a large lecture auditorium. It is an atmosphere of professional responsibility and expectation that reflects the importance of the physical and social context of authentic assessment, as highlighted by Gulikers et al. (2004). The social element is embodied by the teamwork, whilst the emphasis on collaborative responsibility introduces students to ways of working that are essential features of many professional settings.

The students' delivery of the paper, including their ability to field questions, is a central part of the first summative assessment. The rest of the first summative assessment is a portfolio of collaborative work, which includes the students' material publicising the conference paper, a fully referenced version of the co-written paper and a set of minutes recording how the students managed their collaboration. The multiple components of this assessment are given a single grade (60% of the overall module mark), with all students in the group receiving the same grade. There are some risks with this approach, given that all members of the group may not have made an equal contribution. However, a

key element of the teaching throughout is to emphasise collective responsibility and to link this to authentic examples of teamwork in graduate employment. The second summative assessment is an individually graded portfolio of evidence of individual participation (40% of the overall mark). This includes a reflection on their role in the research, marketing, and delivery of the conference paper, which should highlight how this work has developed their academic and transferable skills. The individual grade for this assignment also allows the teaching team to recognise differential contributions to the group assessment. The students' work is moderated both internally and externally; internal moderators are present at the conference itself.

**Public Engagement**
The conference promotes a community of learning. Not only do all the students who are taking part in the event benefit from the shared experience, but it is also attended by all current English and History students at the University of Derby. This means that students are supporting one another, and that those students who will be taking part the following year have a chance to see the event and how it works. The strong sense of cross-cohort community is reflected by the fact that many of our alumni attend to re-live their own experiences and re-engage with the University. The conference also provides a rare opportunity for students' friends and family to come into the University and see the work that they are undertaking, as well as giving the wider public the opportunity to engage with an event on campus. This reflects the argument of Lubicz-Nawrocka (2019) that student co-creation can have 'an impact […] on the wider community', producing 'civic impact' (p. 45). Here, this has included taking part in extracurricular opportunities, a phenomenon also noted by other academics who have run undergraduate research conferences (e.g. Little, 2020). Many students who have completed the modules have also been active participants in the University of Derby's Undergraduate Research Scholarship Scheme, which gives students the chance to take part in a funded and supported research project in the summer between their level 5 and level 6 studies (University of Derby, 2023a). Several of the research projects that students have undertaken as part of this scheme have involved working with external partners, including the Derby Museums and Derby Cathedral. This reflects the wider commitment within the University to be a 'Civic University' and its commitment to work with partners to support the city and county in securing a prosperous and sustainable future (University of Derby, 2023c).

Students have also been inspired to take part in other (non-assessed) research conferences. In 2011 they set up their own conference, the 'Dissertation Showcase', where they presented papers based on their final year individual research projects. This has continued to be an annual event, which now involves students from across the discipline of Humanities, and there is also a regional event for final year history students that runs as part of the East Midlands Centre for History Learning and Teaching. It is interesting to note that students directly make the connection between the second-year conference and these other opportunities, with one student noting in 2023 that the 'public conference has definitely helped with future work and perspectives [as in] the third year, we would maybe do the dissertation showcase, […] it's having confidence in your own work' (University of Derby, 2023b).

**Impact on the Students**
This confidence can be seen in the students' academic work as they move into Level 6. The quality of the papers presented at the conference is often very high; the benefit of students working together to research means that they can engage in significant amounts of research within a relatively short amount of time (January – May). The English conference papers frequently build upon ideas encountered on the programme's core critical theory modules, such as deconstruction and postmodernism, to produce sophisticated, conceptually-framed arguments based upon close textual analysis, while the History papers often challenge existing historiography (on at least one occasion, with newly identified primary evidence). In 2014, the conference theme marked the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, and the papers were collectively so coherent and focused that they

were published in an edited volume (Larsen and Whitehead, 2017). Students have expressed great satisfaction at the ways in which the modules have enabled their intellectual development, often related particularly to the 'freedom' that 'has made us produce good work' (Anonymous student feedback, 2019) and the way in which the process 'allows you to become more independent in researching' (Anonymous student feedback, 2020). This experience aligns with the arguments of Vu and Dall-alba (2014), Walkington et al (2017), Lubicz-Nawrocka (2019) and Sotiriadou et al. (2020) cited above. One student noted that '[b]eing able to study a subject of our choice was good and made for enjoyable research' (Anonymous student feedback, 2020). Crucially, students recognise and value the way in which '[w]e are encouraged to challenge the things we think we already know' (2021). This challenge is also frequently passed to the audience; the papers demonstrate the rigour and excitement of the disciplines to those unfamiliar with them.

Many scholars note that one of the key features of authentic assessment is the way it enhances students' employability (Sokhanvar et al., 2021), and in their research on the long-term impact of engaging with a (non-assessed) undergraduate research conference, Little (2020) noted that many of the students felt that the experience of presenting their work had a positive impact on their confidence as well as their ability to structure a formal presentation. The feedback from students on our two modules indicates the ways in which the delivery of the papers at the conference builds key transferable skills and increases confidence in the manner Little describes. One commented that the experience '[i]mproves presentation skills for a career in teaching' (Anonymous student feedback, 2019) while another described it as 'hugely helpful' in the way in which it builds 'confidence both within groups and as an individual' (Anonymous student feedback, 2022). A third student observed that 'the skills gained (confidence, problem solving, team building) alongside the general feeling on the day of the conference with people engaging and understanding clearly [shows that the] process paid off' (Anonymous student feedback, 2022). Among the most recent cohort (2023), one student noted that '[t]his module has provided me with a plethora of transferable skills ranging from marketing to public speaking, including completing research and writing the paper itself', while another offered the following summary: '[t]his module is the closest thing to a real world setting of work and as such […] this module shows how our new skills can be applied in the working world' (Anonymous student feedback, 2023).

Students in the survey undertaken by Little (2020) noted that working collaboratively helped them to provide and accept constructive feedback, as well as to understand how to manage a team-based project. Of course, both History and English are subjects which involve a great deal of individual research and writing; it is therefore vital that opportunities are provided for students to work together, experiencing a team dynamic and managing a group project. Many students find this to be a positive experience, with one reflecting:

> I am also grateful for the opportunity to engage in group work of this kind (producing a paper with peers), as I have not done this before. Whilst I have worked in teams throughout my working life, they have tended to be based around physical tasks, and so the opportunity to write with others has been hugely beneficial. I feel that my writing has improved because of this module.
>
> (Anonymous student feedback, 2023).

Although some students can struggle with group work, the vast majority see its benefits. One student noted, 'I have enjoyed the opportunity to work within a group, focusing on specific topic of our choosing' (Anonymous student feedback, 2022), while another praised 'the challenge of working in a group and extending those skills' (Anonymous student feedback, 2021). Others have found that work for the conference is '[g]reat for teamwork and learning to do better at meeting deadlines' and that '[m]aking us do group presentations helped me focus more because it's not just my grade on the line'

(Anonymous student feedback, 2021). Of course, this can bring an element of risk; a minority of students have reported frustration with fellow team members who were 'not responding to communications' (Anonymous student feedback, 2021) or have found that they 'had to take on more than my fair share of the work' (Anonymous student feedback, 2020). It must be emphasised that such situations have not arisen often; where they do, the module tutors take them seriously and host extra-curricular meetings with the teams involved to resolve the issue. This is also where the benefit of splitting the grade between a group and an individual mark becomes apparent, as noted above.

Whether such challenges occur or not, the modules often result in the development of organisational and leadership capabilities in members who decide to take the lead. One student noted that, in addition to 'boost[ing] my confidence', the module has 'improved my leadership skills' (Anonymous student feedback, 2023). This process is something we find frequently described in the individual reflections, where students often report how they have (unexpectedly) developed their skills of organisation, time management and communication when dealing with the group dynamic. The modules can be particularly helpful to students who have previously struggled with shyness or anxiety about speaking. One noted that the experience 'has helped me come out of my shell' while another praised the way in which 'this module forced me to confront some [...] fears', producing a feeling of being 'less intimidated at the thought of going into work in a field related to my eventual degree' (Anonymous student feedback, 2023). Vu and Dall'alba observe that for Heidegger, 'we are "thrown" into "crisis" situations which present themselves as a turning point for us to become authentic' (Vu and Dall'alba (2014), p. 784). In these multiple instances of students becoming more confident, learning new skills and developing greater resilience, we see the transformative effect of the authentic assessment in full. As one student put it: 'It asks a lot of you, and makes you rise to the challenge' (Anonymous student feedback, 2021).

The marketing component leads to the development of skills not traditionally associated with either History or English. Work on the poster sometimes enables those with existing artistic talents to employ these; students with A-level training in Art and Design have therefore been able to draw on these as part of their English and History degrees in a way which would not always be possible on more conventional courses. The move towards digital marketing, highlighted above, also ensures that the modules build the ability to work with various technologies both in terms of graphic design and the development of web resources. In their reflections and marketing reports, students have evidenced ways in which they have drawn upon scholarship in designing their marketing strategies, and have also learned to work with publishing and design software; one student additionally learned how to code in HTML. This aspect of the modules can lead students to discover a potential career path: one History student noted in their feedback that the marketing work for the conference '[m]ade me realize that marketing is a plausible career to follow after a history degree' (Anonymous student feedback, 2023). Interviewed after the 2023 conference, an English student stated that 'the marketing aspect has made me realise that that might be something I want to go into after University'. Furthermore, indicating the way in which the modules develop academic and wider skills simultaneously, the same student observed that 'it's helped a lot with writing essays as well, and developing structure. Overall it's been really beneficial to my Uni experience as a whole' (University of Derby, 2023b). As Sambell et al note (2013, p.103), '[s]hared experiences strengthen and enhance students' academic experiences as they gain "feedback-like effects" via involvement and interaction'. This also contributes to the development of evaluative judgement in the manner advocated by Villarroel et al. (2018).

Both the English and History programmes have had high levels of overall satisfaction in the National Student Survey since introducing an undergraduate research conference onto their programmes. History has consistently had overall satisfaction levels of over 90%, and both programmes have gained 100% overall satisfaction on numerous occasions; English has achieved this three times since introducing its conference module, most recently in 2022 (Office for Students, 2022). In open

comments students often reference the presentation components, mentioning the conference as a highlight, when completing the NSS. A History graduate observed that the programme:

> involves some monumental challenges such as the [second year] conference. This is fantastic as it allows you to develop confidence you never even know you had. I feel that this is something I can take into future employment as an example of teamwork, public speaking, marketing and research. The entire concept of this module seems to be focused on character building, which I believe to be a crucial part of studying at university.
>
> (Anonymous open comment in NSS, 2016).

Another stated that the conference module 'helps you gain more confidence with public speaking and answering questions. I feel that I have gained the skills that the course originally set out to [develop].' (Anonymous open comment in NSS, 2016). English students have noted that '[p]resentations on both small and large scales have prepared me for public speaking later on life as it doesn't feel as daunting anymore' and that '[p]resentations have […] helped with verbal communication and confidence'; another described the degree as 'a very effective course' that has 'developed my communication skills' (Anonymous open comments in NSS, 2022).

Lastly, the conference modules have been highly praised by successive external examiners in both disciplines. The following, from a recent English report, is both indicative and effectively summarises the benefits of our approach. The report notes that the module 'is an extremely valuable and important part of the English degree' and embodies best practice firstly in terms of its 'copious, careful, meticulously-tailored and helpful' feedback; secondly in the 'collegiate collaboration of the assessors, coming from different disciplines'. Thirdly:

> I must commend the module's design and delivery, offering as it does a powerful opportunity for students to gain essential personal skills of team-working, communication, analysis, synthesis, time management, and the deployment of outward-facing energies embodied in their marketing strategies and performances. These skills are highly valued by employers and are a key – and highly laudable – aspect of this degree programme.
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> (External Examiner's report for English, 2022).

**Conclusion**

As noted by Garde-Hansen and Calvert (2007), 'a student-led research conference is one simple, effective and low-cost way of developing a research culture in the undergraduate curriculum. It can promote peer mentorship, cross-level communication and a joined-up curriculum and place undergraduate research at the forefront of a degree programme' (p.114). The two conference modules discussed in this paper are emblematic of student-focused curricula, where the students are increasingly empowered and inspired as co-producers of their learning. The modules have successfully combined the nurturing of academic excellence with the development and enhancement of employability skills; the mode of assessment enables the simultaneous development of both. The conference provides a public platform for student work, whilst its success has raised the external profile of the degree programmes. Placing the conference modules, and thus authentic assessment, at the heart of the History and English degrees at the University of Derby has enabled students to engage more critically with their disciplines, and in the process to benefit fully from the transformative effects that Higher Education can produce.

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**Appendix 1.**

Outline of an example schedule of the English and History Public Conference, based on the papers delivered in 2022 on the theme 'Old and New'.

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Registration and Welcome

Paper 1: Modernizing Scripture: The New English Bible.
Paper 2: Goya and the Reinvention of Hell.

Break

Paper 3: Merrie Old England: Medievalism in Pre-Raphaelite Art.
Paper 4: "There is no version of the story that is not true": The Changing Influence of Nigerian Folktales.

Break

Paper 5: Back to the Kitchen? The Impact of German Reunification on East German Women.
Paper 6: War Communism: A New Order?

Lunch

Paper 7: The Sonderbund War 1847: Old Antagonists, New Strategy.
Paper 8: Mussolini's Roman Revolution: An Eternal City Reborn?

Break

Paper 9: Langston Hughes Redefines the Blues: The Origins of Jazz Poetry.
Paper 10: The Magical Labyrinth: Jorge Luis Borges and Latin American Proto-Postmodernism.

Concluding Address

Close

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