



Making professional reliability visible in higher music education: Assessment signals in preparatory simulation

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ABSTRACT

Professional reliability, including planning, communication, logistical judgement, and accountability, remains important yet often weakly specified in higher music education. This topical discussion offers a design-analytic account of a production-based music module in which work-like conditions are structured through assessment rather than through formally embedded external stakeholders. Rather than reporting empirical outcomes, the paper examines how proposals, checkpoints, documentation, execution under real-time production constraints, and reflective accountability function as assessment signals. It argues that the educational value of preparatory simulation lies less in surface realism than in how curriculum and assessment make professional reliability visible and consequential beyond technical performance alone. The discussion outlines implications for academic practice, curriculum design, and employability development in contexts where externally embedded opportunities are limited or uneven.

Keywords: preparatory simulation, professional reliability, assessment signals, employability, higher music education

Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is widely associated with graduate employability in higher education, but its forms and conditions vary across disciplinary contexts (Ferns et al., 2024; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). In creative disciplines, professional preparation may include placements and industry partnerships, but also project-based, production-based, and public-facing forms of experiential learning in which students coordinate artistic, technical, and organisational demands under constraint (Fleischmann, 2015; Kaider et al., 2017; Menger, 1999). These conditions are especially relevant in music, where professional careers are frequently portfolio-based and organised across multiple roles, projects, and forms of participation rather than a single linear pathway (Bartleet et al., 2019; Bennett, 2016). Within this context, an important dimension of work-readiness can remain underspecified: professional reliability. While students may demonstrate developing artistic or technical competence, attributes such as preparedness, follow-through, communication, logistical judgement, and accountability for shared outcomes are not always clearly foregrounded or assessed beyond the final creative product (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). This paper offers a topical discussion and design-analytic account of a production-based music module to argue that the educational value of preparatory simulation lies not simply in work-like activity, but in how assessment makes professional reliability visible and consequential.

Employability is understood here not simply as the possession of transferable skills, but as the developing capacity to enter, navigate, sustain, and adapt professional participation under changing conditions (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). Within that broader frame, professional reliability refers to the capacity

to assume responsibility for shared outcomes through preparedness, follow-through, communication, logistical judgement, and accountable decision-making under constraint. In creative higher education, these dimensions are especially significant because project-based work distributes responsibility across teams and requires students to coordinate artistic, technical, and organisational demands simultaneously (McNamara, 2013; Menger, 1999). Yet such practices are often inferred from participation rather than made explicit as objects of curricular attention and assessment.

The structure of professional preparation in creative disciplines sharpens this issue. Access to placements is often uneven, shaped by institutional resourcing, cost, geography, and other structural barriers, while creative work itself is frequently organised around short-term, project-based, and informally negotiated forms of participation (Godden & Hoessler, 2024; Hora et al., 2020; Mackaway et al., 2024; Menger, 1999). In response, higher-education curricula often use project- and simulation-based designs to replicate selected conditions of professional practice when formal placement opportunities are limited, uneven, or not yet appropriate (Kaider et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2020). The curricular question, therefore, is not only whether students participate in work-like activity, but how programme and assessment design make professionally relevant forms of conduct, judgement, and accountability visible within those conditions.

This paper addresses the curricular problem through the concept of assessment signals. Assessment signals are understood here as the cues communicated through assessment architecture, including task design and sequence, weighting, documentation requirements, checkpoints, criteria, and consequences, about which forms of professional conduct matter, must be made visible, and will count in judgement (Carless & Boud, 2018; Sadler, 1989; Seow, 2026a, 2026e; Tai et al., 2018). The concept complements rather than replaces authentic assessment. Whereas authentic assessment foregrounds the relationship between assessment activity and meaningful professional or real-world practice, assessment signals draw attention to what the architecture of that assessment makes salient, visible, and consequential within the activity (Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Mirzaei et al., 2024; O'Neill, 2024). An assessment may therefore resemble professional practice while leaving expectations of professional reliability largely tacit; conversely, a preparatory simulation can deliberately signal those expectations even where full workplace authenticity is neither available nor intended. The central claim is that in creative higher education, the value of preparatory simulation lies less in surface realism than in the ways assessment structures signal and prioritise professional reliability beyond technical performance alone. The aim, accordingly, is to show how assessment design within a production-based music module can make professional reliability visible, discussable, and assessable in a preparatory simulation context.

This is a non-empirical, design-analytic paper and does not report learner outcomes or claim efficacy. Instead, it offers a design-analytic discussion of an illustrative module to examine how assessment architecture, structured consultation checkpoints, documentation practices, and reflective accountability can be used to foreground professional reliability in simulation-based pre-WIL. The discussion first situates the argument within creative higher education, employability, and preparatory simulation; then outlines the module's context and design logic; then analyses four dimensions of assessment signalling; and finally considers the implications, transferability, limitations, and future research directions arising from this approach.

Creative WIL, employability, and preparatory simulation

Preparatory simulation in creative disciplines cannot be understood solely through the logic of conventional placement models. For higher education practice, this raises a curricular design question: which aspects of professional practice are made visible, prioritised, and assessable before students encounter more formally embedded workplace or stakeholder contexts?

Within this context, employability is not well captured by generic inventories of transferable or soft skills alone. In creative higher education, employability must also be understood as the developing capacity to participate adaptively and responsibly under changing conditions, including uncertainty, time pressure, interdependence, and uneven resource availability (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). This also suggests that employability is shaped not only by external labour conditions but by how curricula structure what forms of practice, judgement, and evidence are treated as legitimate within a programme of study (Seow, 2026b).

Professional reliability is one important dimension of this broader employability frame. In higher music education, this is especially relevant because employability has been described as poorly defined and difficult to measure, even though graduates must develop not only functional know-how but also the cognitive dispositions and professional capacities needed to engage sustainably as musicians (Bennett, 2016). Recent music education research likewise emphasises that musicians' careers are increasingly portfolio-based, requiring graduates to combine multiple roles, projects, and income streams across unstable, shifting professional contexts rather than progressing along a single, linear pathway (Bartleet et al., 2019). Within this broader employability frame, professional reliability concerns whether students can prepare adequately, communicate clearly, coordinate action, anticipate constraints, and remain accountable for shared outcomes in ways that resemble professional practice (McNamara, 2013; Menger, 1999).

The uneven structure of WIL access intensifies these issues. In creative disciplines, such constraints intersect with labour conditions in which opportunities are often informal, networked, project-based, and unevenly distributed. As a result, participation in work-related activities does not, by itself, guarantee that employability-relevant forms of judgement or reliability will become visible, equitable, or assessable within the curriculum. This concern also resonates with research on digital media professionals, which suggests that contemporary creative careers depend heavily on ongoing, networked, and self-directed learning strategies that higher education cannot assume students will acquire automatically through participation alone (Bridgstock, 2016). If such expectations remain tacit, they risk being distributed unevenly across students rather than deliberately scaffolded and assessed.

For this reason, preparatory simulation warrants attention as more than a second-best substitute for placement. Earlier creative-arts WIL research has already shown that conventional off-campus placements are not always readily available, especially where enrolment growth and local industry capacity are mismatched, and that on-campus or integrated alternatives can provide viable work-ready learning opportunities when deliberately designed (Fleischmann, 2015). Seen in this light, the question is not whether preparatory simulation is identical to placement, but whether it is intentionally structured to surface the kinds of professional judgement and conduct that placements are often assumed to develop. Simulation-based pre-WIL can reproduce selected conditions of professional practice within educational settings by requiring students to work under constraint, coordinate with others, make decisions with consequences, and document how creative intentions are translated into workable action (Kaider et al.,

2017; Wood et al., 2020). Its educational value lies not in replicating industry environments in full, but in designing tasks and responsibilities that require professional modes of thinking and acting.

This positioning also clarifies the paper's gap in the literature. Existing WIL and creative-practice scholarship has extensively discussed placements, authentic activity, projects, and simulation. Yet there has been less attention to how assessment architecture signals what counts as professional conduct in preparatory simulation contexts. The issue is not only whether students participate in work-like tasks, but how curriculum and assessment communicate which forms of reliability, judgement, and accountability matter within those tasks. The following section turns to the music module as an illustrative curricular context through which this design problem becomes concrete.

Context and design logic of the creative project module

The illustrative context for this discussion is an undergraduate production-based creative project module in music higher education. The module functions as a capstone-style group project in which students plan, rehearse, coordinate, and deliver a public-facing showcase within a fixed semester structure. Rather than operating solely as a performance assessment, the module foregrounds production logistics, collective responsibility, and professional decision-making alongside artistic outcomes.

Formally, the module is a Level 5 (second-year undergraduate), 20-credit module delivered over one semester. It includes 24 contact hours of teaching, 12 hours of rehearsals with the module leader, and 164 hours of independent study. Its assessment structure comprises a 200-word project proposal due in Week 4 (10%), a 15–25 minute showcase in Week 12 (25%), a 1500-word documentary evidence and reflection paper due in Week 13 (50%), and three 100-word formative reflective log posts due in Weeks 3, 6, and 9 (15%). In the iteration discussed here, students worked in small collaborative project groups.

The module does not include a formally embedded industry placement or an external stakeholder involved in defining the brief, receiving deliverables, or contributing to evaluation. Instead, it operates as a simulation-based pre-WIL design in which students engage with selected work-like conditions inside the curriculum. These include time pressure, role differentiation, coordination across multiple responsibilities, documentation demands, and accountability for shared outcomes. The educator does not function as a genuine external client but as an internal curricular proxy who sets expectations, provides structured feedback, and evaluates whether projects meet the required standards of readiness and execution. In this sense, the public-facing showcase may be authentic in output, but the surrounding structure remains a preparatory simulation rather than a stakeholder-embedded simulated WIL.

The module is organised around a staged assessment sequence that moves students from initial concept formation to final delivery and retrospective accounting. The module guide explicitly frames this as a collaborative journey from inception to showcase and emphasises reflection as a central component of learning rather than a supplementary retrospective task. Early in the process, students submit a concise group proposal that requires them to articulate a central concept, assign responsibilities, and consider feasibility within the available time and resources. This proposal stage establishes that creative ambition alone is insufficient; projects must also demonstrate preparedness, coordination, and operational viability.

Structured consultations then serve as checkpoints for progress rather than informal advisory conversations. During these tutor-mediated checkpoints, students are required to account for planning decisions, anticipated risks, and role clarity before proceeding with the project. These consultation

checkpoints signal that readiness is judged not only by artistic intent but also by the group's ability to demonstrate workable plans, shared responsibility, and awareness of logistical constraints. The result is that planning and coordination are not treated as invisible background labour, but as part of the assessable work of the module. The guide also states that students receive provisional grades, along with written and verbal feedback, after each assessment, clarifying that these signals are reinforced not only through task design and weighting but also through tutor-mediated feedback throughout the project lifecycle.

As projects advance, students are required to produce documentation commonly associated with professional creative practice, including run sheets, technical riders, transition scripts, and programme notes. These artefacts are not appended as administrative extras; they are built into the assessment architecture as evidence of planning, communication, and operational judgement. By requiring students to submit, revise, and enact such documents, the module makes visible how creative ideas are translated into executable plans.

The public-facing showcase serves as an additional assessment point within this structure. Although performance quality remains relevant, the showcase is not treated simply as a recital-style endpoint. Assessment attention also falls on stagecraft, transitions, coordination, flow, responsiveness under real-time conditions, and the group's capacity to sustain professionalism when plans encounter real-time constraints. In this way, the showcase functions less as an isolated performance event than as a simulated production environment in which professional reliability becomes visible through execution under real-time constraints. This emphasis is consistent with the module's showcase rubric, which evaluates not only creativity and quality, but also planning, management, cohesion, and confidence in presentation as dimensions of work suitable for public performance.

The final and most heavily weighted component is an individual reflective submission grounded in documentation and project evidence. Students curate selected artefacts and produce a critical account of their roles, decisions, responsibilities, and contributions across the project lifecycle. Reflection is therefore positioned not as a diary-style narrative, but as an evidence-based form of professional accounting in which claims must be linked to documented actions, decisions, and outcomes. That emphasis is also legible in the module learning outcomes, which explicitly include resourcefulness, professionalism, organisation, critical reflection, and effective contribution to the broader creative process beyond one's area of specialism. This weighting is significant because it signals that professional judgement includes the ability to justify one's actions, acknowledge limitations, and evaluate one's contribution in relation to shared goals (Carless & Boud, 2018; Harvey et al., 2016; Sadler, 1989; Seow, in press-b; Tai et al., 2018).

Taken together, the module's design makes professional reliability visible not by assuming it will emerge automatically through participation, but by structuring it through proposals, consultation checkpoints, documentation, execution under real-time constraints, and reflective accountability. Assessment is therefore used not only to judge final outputs, but to organise participation in professional-like processes and to clarify what counts as credible professional practice within a simulation-based pre-WIL environment. The following section builds on this design logic by examining how these structures function as assessment signals.

Assessment architecture and professional reliability

Within simulation-based pre-WIL, assessment does more than evaluate whether students complete tasks successfully. It also communicates what counts as credible professional practice within the module and, in

doing so, shapes what students must notice, prioritise, document, and justify. In this paper, these dimensions are not presented as themes derived from student data, but as analytic categories developed from analysis of the module's documented design. More specifically, the analysis traces recurring emphases across the module guide, assessment sequence, rubric criteria, consultation checkpoints, documentation requirements, and showcase expectations, and interprets those emphases in relation to existing scholarship on assessment, employability, WIL, and professional judgement. The section analytically examines how the module's assessment architecture renders selected dimensions of professional reliability visible and consequential. Four dimensions are especially salient: responsibility and accountability; logistical and production judgement; professional communication and stagecraft; and reflective professional judgement.

Signalling responsibility and accountability

Professional reliability begins with responsibility for shared outcomes. In WIL and assessment terms, responsibility and accountability do not become visible simply through participation in collaborative activity, but through assessment designs that make expectations, roles, and justified judgement more explicit (McNamara, 2013; Tai et al., 2018). In the module, responsibility is not left implicit within collaborative group work, nor is it assumed to arise automatically from participation in a creative project. Instead, it is signalled through assessment requirements that require students to articulate project concepts, assign responsibilities, justify feasibility, and demonstrate preparedness before proceeding. The early proposal stage is important in this regard because it establishes that artistic ambition alone is insufficient; students must also show that the project is organised, distributed, and workable within the available conditions.

This signalling is reinforced through consultation checkpoints. These consultations function not merely as supportive conversations but as moments of progression at which groups must demonstrate readiness, role clarity, and awareness of risk. The use of consultation checkpoints, planning prompts, and assessment expectations communicates that poorly coordinated or underprepared work carries consequences. In this way, responsibility becomes observable through the assessment process itself. Students are not simply told to "be accountable"; they are required to enact accountability through role allocation, planning decisions, and evidence of coordination before the project moves forward.

This matters because responsibility in creative education is often diffuse. Students may work together intensively while remaining uncertain about who is answerable for planning, communication, or follow-through. Where assessment attends primarily to final artistic output, shared processes can remain opaque and unrecoverable, allowing professional unreliability to be absorbed into the messiness of collaboration. By contrast, an assessment that asks students to specify roles, justify decisions, and demonstrate readiness makes responsibility visible as part of the work rather than as an assumed background virtue.

The signal here is therefore not simple compliance. Responsibility is framed as a form of judgement regarding collective goals, constraints, and consequences. Assessment indicates that professional participation entails ownership of both the process and the output, and that failure to prepare, coordinate, or anticipate affects not only individual performance but also shared outcomes. In this sense, the module uses assessment to position accountability as a practical, evaluable element of professional reliability rather than as an abstract attribute students are presumed to possess.

Signalling logistical and production judgement

A second dimension of assessment signalling concerns logistical and production judgement. This aligns with WIL scholarship arguing that authentic assessment is not only about real-world resemblance but also about strategically linking WIL experiences to assessment tasks and authentic student evidence, including project-based formats that prepare students for later placement or internship demands (Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Mirzaei et al., 2024). In professional creative work, ideas do not become viable simply because they are artistically interesting; they must also be translated into executable plans. In practice, the module makes this visible through production documentation such as run sheets, technical riders, transition scripts, and programme notes. These artefacts are treated as core assessment materials rather than supplementary administrative extras, signalling that professional practice includes the capacity to operationalise creative intentions under constraint.

This matters because logistics are often under-recognised in creative work in higher education. Students may be praised for the quality of their performance or conceptual originality. At the same time, difficulties with timing, sequencing, transitions, task dependencies, and contingency planning are treated as secondary or informal concerns. Yet these are precisely the kinds of issues that often determine whether a creative project can actually function in professional settings. By requiring students to submit, revise, and enact documentation that anticipates these issues, the module makes logistical judgement visible as an assessable form of professional competence.

Importantly, the signal is not simply that documents must exist. The presence of a run sheet or rider alone is not the point; what matters is whether such documentation demonstrates coherence, usability, and foresight. Assessment, therefore, turns documentation into a site where planning assumptions can be externalised and judged. Timing, resource allocation, transitions, sequencing, and contingency thinking become available for scrutiny because students must articulate them in concrete terms rather than carry them tacitly or improvise them.

This use of documentation also shifts the status of logistical work within the curriculum. Instead of appearing as backstage support for the “real” artistic task, logistics become part of the professional task itself. Assessment communicates that creative reliability requires more than technical ability or expressive intention; it requires the capacity to translate intention into coordinated, workable action. In this way, logistical judgement is foregrounded not as a managerial add-on, but as a constitutive dimension of professional practice in creative production contexts (Kaider et al., 2017; McNamara, 2013; Menger, 1999).

Signalling professional communication and stagecraft

A third dimension of assessment signalling concerns professional communication and stagecraft. Recent WIL assessment scholarship suggests that workplace-relevant judgement is often communicated not only through final outputs, but through process realism, coordination demands, and the management of live or public-facing activity under authentic constraints (Mirzaei et al., 2024; O'Neill, 2024). In the public-facing showcase, students are judged not only on artistic or technical performance but also on how effectively they manage transitions, sustain flow, cue one another, coordinate actions, respond to real-time constraints, and communicate purpose through execution. Assessment, therefore, extends into dimensions of practice that are often taken for granted in professional environments but underspecified in educational assessment.

This matters because communication in creative work is rarely reducible to verbal explanation alone. It includes cueing, timing, responsiveness, spatial awareness, transition management, audience orientation, and the capacity to sustain collective focus under real-time conditions. These practices are often tacit, learned through doing, and difficult to isolate once a performance has succeeded or failed. When assessment privileges only the final artistic product, these forms of communication may remain invisible even though they are central to a production's professional success.

By embedding stagecraft and coordination within the assessment criteria, the module communicates that professional communication is a matter of reliable execution rather than decorative polish. Students are required to demonstrate that they can maintain coherence throughout the live event, support collective timing and flow, and respond to unfolding conditions without the project collapsing into disorganisation. The signal here is that communication is not peripheral to employability in creative fields; it is one way reliability is enacted and judged. In ensemble-based music contexts, this includes role clarity, groove cohesion, and coordinated responsiveness, which can be deliberately cultivated rather than left as tacit by-products of performance experience (Seow, 2026c, 2026d, in press-a).

Stagecraft is similarly repositioned. Rather than being treated as an aesthetic supplement to musical performance, it becomes a visible form of situational judgement. How groups manage entrances, exits, transitions, attention, pacing, and audience-facing execution reflects whether they have coordinated their work in ways that resemble professional production practices. Assessment thus communicates that stagecraft concerns not only presentation quality but also the broader question of whether a group can collectively assume responsibility under real-time conditions.

Signalling reflective professional judgement

The fourth and most explicit dimension of assessment signalling concerns reflective professional judgement. This emphasis is consistent with assessment scholarship that treats evaluative judgement and evidence-based reflection as central to students' capacity to interpret quality, justify decisions, and account for practice in credible ways (Carless & Boud, 2018; Sadler, 1989; Tai et al., 2018). The final, heavily weighted reflective submission requires students to curate documentation and project artefacts and to critically account for their responsibilities, decisions, contributions, and limitations across the project lifecycle. This weighting is important because it signals that professional practice includes the ability to justify one's actions, evaluate one's judgement, and account for one's role in relation to shared outcomes.

Reflection in this module is not framed as a personal diary or a retrospective narrative of experience. Students are not simply asked how they felt about the project or whether they believed it went well. Instead, they are required to link their claims to documentary and practical evidence. Reflection is therefore treated as an evidence-based mode of professional accounting. Students must show how decisions were made, what constraints they encountered, what responsibilities they assumed, where coordination succeeded or broke down, and how their actions related to the group's collective work.

This distinction matters because reflective tasks in higher education can easily drift toward description rather than judgement. Students may recount what happened without interrogating why decisions were made, what alternatives were available, or how their conduct affected shared outcomes. By contrast, the assessment design here signals that reflective writing becomes professionally meaningful when it requires justification, evidence, and evaluative reasoning. Reflection is positioned not as a therapeutic add-on, but

as a practice of professional sense-making and accountability (Carless & Boud, 2018; Harvey et al., 2016; Sadler, 1989; Seow, in press-b; Tai et al., 2018).

The prominence of this component is especially significant because it clarifies that professional reliability is not exhausted by execution under real-time constraints. Reliability also includes the capacity to look back on one's actions, recognise limitations, account for decisions, and articulate learning in ways that remain anchored to evidence. Assessment, therefore, signals that professional judgement extends across the whole cycle of preparation, execution, and retrospective evaluation.

Taken together, these four dimensions illustrate how assessment architecture can make professional reliability visible in simulation-based pre-WIL. Read alongside recent WIL assessment scholarship, the module's documented assessment architecture makes them analytically visible as recurring sites where professionally relevant judgement is signalled and assessed (Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Mirzaei et al., 2024; O'Neill, 2024). Responsibility, logistics, communication, and reflection are not presented as isolated skills or generic employability descriptors. Rather, they become consequential because assessment gives them form, weight, sequence, and visibility across the module lifecycle. The significance lies not merely in students' participation in work-like activity, but in how the curriculum communicates which forms of conduct count as credible professional practice within that activity. From this perspective, assessment signals offer one way of understanding how employability is made visible and consequential in preparatory simulation.

Why these signals matter for academic practice

Discussions of employability and professional preparation in higher education frequently emphasise authenticity of experience, industry exposure, and participation in work-related activity. Yet these emphases can obscure a more basic curricular question: how are employability-relevant forms of conduct made visible and assessable within educational designs? The discussion developed here suggests that professional reliability is not an automatic outcome of participation in work-like tasks. Rather, it is shaped by what assessment explicitly signals as valuable, necessary, and consequential within those tasks. This matters not only for simulation-based pre-WIL, but for academic practice more broadly in contexts where professional preparation is shaped through curriculum and assessment.

One practical implication is that WIL designs should move beyond participation-based assumptions. In both placement and non-placement models, students may complete tasks, enter professional environments, or contribute to projects without necessarily making responsibility, logistical judgement, or accountability visible in ways that can be discussed or evaluated. Assessment signals can help address this problem by clarifying what constitutes credible professional conduct and embedding those expectations into task design, criteria, documentation requirements, and progression points. In this sense, assessment does not merely record professional learning after the fact; it helps structure what students must notice, enact, evidence, and justify.

A second practical implication concerns transparency and relative equity in curriculum and assessment design. Placement-based WIL often occurs in contexts that educators cannot fully standardise or control, creating uneven opportunities for students to demonstrate employability-relevant capabilities. Where access to external stakeholders, workplace quality, or project intensity varies, certain forms of professional reliability may be easier to demonstrate for some students than for others. Simulation-based pre-WIL cannot eliminate all inequities, but assessment designs that clearly signal responsibility, coordination,

documentation, and reflection can reduce ambiguity about expectations and provide more consistent opportunities for those expectations to be evidenced across a cohort. In this sense, assessment signalling offers one way to make employability formation more transparent when access to workplace immersion is limited, uneven, or delayed.

A third implication is that such signals must not harden into rigid checklists. Professional reliability is context-sensitive and cannot be reduced fully to exhaustive descriptors or generic employability inventories. If assessment signals are treated too mechanically, students may focus on satisfying visible requirements without engaging meaningfully with the professional judgement those requirements are meant to cultivate. Collaborative projects may also complicate the attribution of individual contribution, while consultation checkpoints and documentation requirements can increase demands on both students and assessors. The value of signalling, therefore, lies not in bureaucratizing professional practice but in making otherwise tacit expectations discussable while still leaving room for contextual judgement, adaptation, and creative decision-making.

This is why reflective accountability remains important. Signals work best when they are paired with opportunities for students to explain how and why decisions were made, what constraints were encountered, and how responsibilities were negotiated in relation to shared goals. Reflection helps prevent assessment signals from becoming mere proxies for compliance by reconnecting visible requirements to underlying professional reasoning (Seow, in press-b). Together, structure and reflection allow assessment to support both guidance and agency.

This perspective also has implications for scholarship on academic practice, employability, and curriculum design. It aligns with writing-transfer research in WIL, which argues that professional communication cannot be presumed to transfer simply from academic contexts to workplace or practice settings. Transfer needs to be intentionally scaffolded and made visible to students so they can recognise how disciplinary practices are recontextualised in professional environments (Eady et al., 2021). Similarly, rather than treating employability as an outcome inferred solely from exposure to workplaces or work-like environments, researchers can more closely examine how specific assessment structures shape what students attend to, what becomes visible as professional practice, and how reliability is recognised within a given design. Such a shift does not replace outcome-oriented research, but complements it by focusing attention on the curricular mechanisms through which professional judgement and accountability are organised.

The discussion also clarifies one possible direction in which the present design might develop. If an external stakeholder were formally involved in shaping the brief, receiving deliverables, participating in checkpoints, or contributing to evaluation, the module would move toward a more externally embedded form of professional preparation. The present case does not claim that status. Its contribution lies instead in showing how preparatory simulation can be designed to make professional reliability visible before such stakeholder-embedded arrangements are feasible or available. For other creative disciplines, the transferable lesson is not the specific showcase format itself, but the use of assessment sequencing, consultation checkpoints, documentation requirements, execution under real-time constraints, and reflective accountability to make tacit professional expectations visible before or alongside formal WIL. These mechanisms are potentially transferable across creative disciplines even where the specific artefacts, production formats, and professional contexts differ. Future work could examine how such assessment signals change when briefs, checkpoints, or evaluation are co-designed with external partners.

Limitations and future research

This paper is a topical discussion and design-analytic account rather than an empirical evaluation of the module. It does not claim that the assessment design described here has been shown to improve employability outcomes, strengthen professional reliability, or produce generalisable effects across contexts. Nor does it claim that preparatory simulation can replace more externally embedded forms of professional preparation where such opportunities are available and appropriate. Its contribution is narrower: to provide a conceptual vocabulary and an illustrative curricular account for understanding how assessment architecture can make professional reliability visible and consequential within preparatory simulation. The four dimensions should therefore be understood as theoretically informed analytic categories derived from the module's documented assessment design, rather than as validated findings about student outcomes.

That boundary also suggests a clear future research agenda. Empirical work could examine how students interpret and respond to these assessment signals, how tutors or assessors recognise professional reliability in practice, and how artefacts, interviews, or observational data might reveal the relationship between assessment design and professional judgement. Further research could also explore whether modules of this kind shape students' readiness for later workplace, stakeholder, or other professional contexts, how assessment signals operate when briefs, consultation checkpoints, or evaluation are co-designed with external partners, and whether similar signalling strategies travel effectively across other disciplines where placements are limited, short-term, or uneven in quality.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that, in creative higher education, employability cannot be assumed to emerge simply from participation in work-like activity. What matters is not only whether students undertake projects that resemble professional practice, but how curriculum and assessment make professional reliability visible, valued, and assessable within those projects.

Using a production-based music module as an illustrative context, the discussion illustrates how assessment architecture can signal responsibility and accountability, logistical and production judgement, professional communication and stagecraft, and reflective professional judgement. Through proposals, consultation checkpoints, documentation requirements, execution under real-time constraints, and reflective accounting, preparatory simulation can make these dimensions of practice visible without relying on formal placements or embedded external stakeholders.

The contribution of the paper is to propose the concept of assessment signals and to argue that preparatory simulation becomes educationally valuable not simply through surface realism, but through the way assessment architecture makes visible and consequential what counts as credible professional practice. For higher-education practitioners and researchers, this may offer one way of thinking more precisely about how employability is communicated, made visible and evidenced through curriculum and assessment in contexts where externally embedded opportunities are limited, uneven, or still to come.

Biography

Eugene Seow is a Singapore-based lecturer and practice-led researcher in higher music education. His work focuses on aural fluency, musical judgement, ensemble pedagogy, curriculum design, assessment, and practice-led contemporary musicianship. He teaches and supervises across Singapore's higher music education contexts, with interests in employability, reflection, and professional learning.

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