A Case Study of University–Enterprise Collaboration at A Private Institution in China: The Perspectives of Students

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ABSTRACT	Published Online: July 16, 2025

University–Enterprise Collaboration (UEC) has become a strategic priority in China's higher education system, particularly within creative and practice-oriented disciplines such as Stage and Film Design. While policy initiatives emphasize employment outcomes and institutional integration, less attention has been paid to how students experience and interpret these collaborations. This study investigates the learning experiences of undergraduate students participating in a UEC programme at a private university in northern China. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom and field observations, and student reflective documents. Thematic analysis revealed three core dimensions of student experience: perceptions of learning gains and integration of theory and practice; challenges related to communication, workload, and adaptation; suggested improvements for instructional design and programme coordination. Students reported increased confidence, industry awareness, and professional readiness, but also expressed concerns about misaligned expectations, insufficient preliminary training, and inconsistent communication between institutional and enterprise mentors. To address this, they suggested implementing joint planning sessions or assigning liaison roles to enhance coordination and clarity." The findings are interpreted through Constructivist and Experiential Learning Theories, emphasizing the importance of situated, and scaffolded learning environments. This paper offers practical implications for improving UEC programme delivery, especially in creative fields where the alignment of academic instruction with professional practice is essential. By foregrounding the student perspective, this study contributes new insights into the pedagogical design and emotional dynamics of collaborative education models in the Chinese higher education context.

KEYWORDS: University–Enterprise Collaboration; Student Learning Experience; Experiential Learning; Constructivist Theory; Creative Education; Case Study; Private Higher Education

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 University–Enterprise Collaboration (UEC) in China

Over the past two decades, the government of the People's Republic of China emphasized the need to foster close relationships between universities and mostly, state-owned enterprises. These early relationships had a special focus on technology transfer, technical research, and development projects. As China's economy gradually evolved to become more market-oriented, the scope and nature of UEC have changed significantly. University–Enterprise Collaboration (UEC) has evolved into a pivotal educational and economic strategy within China's higher education landscape. Initially conceptualized as a means to promote technology transfer and industrial innovation, UEC is now increasingly aligned with broader educational reforms and policy directives. These include the 14th Five-Year Plan, and the promotion of Modern Industrial Colleges, all of which advocate for integrative cooperation between academic institutions and industry stakeholders to enhance talent cultivation and regional development (Yang et al., 2025).

In the context of creative and applied disciplines such as Stage and Film Design, the rationale for UEC extends beyond employment outcomes. It also encompasses pedagogical enrichment, skill transformation, and the alignment of learning with professional standards. As China pushes for a more practice-oriented and innovation-driven talent pipeline,

UEC initiatives offer students access to authentic working environments and mentorship from industry professionals (Q. Li, 2024). These experiences serve not only to bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world practice but also to foster soft skills, industry awareness, and a stronger sense of professional identity.

Yet, despite the proliferation of UEC programs in China, scholarly evaluations often focus on institutional output metrics, such as job placement rates or patent outputs (Zhang, 2017). There remains a dearth of empirical, student-centered research that explores how learners actually experience these collaborative environments — cognitively, emotionally, and developmentally. Understanding these dimensions is essential for informing more responsive UEC programme designs that account for learner diversity, engagement levels, and learning trajectories.

1.2 Focus on Student Learning Experiences

This study addresses that critical gap by exploring the learning experiences of students participating in a University–Enterprise Collaborative programme in a private Chinese higher education institution. Specifically, the study focuses on students enrolled in a Stage and Film Design program, a discipline that uniquely combines theoretical instruction with hands-on creative production. Within this domain, the success of UEC does not depend solely on task completion or product delivery, but on the extent to which students are able to internalize skills, apply theory meaningfully, adapt to professional expectations, and navigate interpersonal and emotional challenges in authentic work settings.

To analyze these dimensions, this research adopts a qualitative case study design, drawing on interviews, observational data, and reflective student documents. The goal is to capture students' nuanced perceptions and narratives, highlighting both positive learning outcomes and the tensions or obstacles encountered throughout the UEC process. The study also examines the pedagogical implications of these findings through the lens of Constructivist Learning Theory and Experiential Learning Theory, two frameworks that prioritize active, situated, and reflective forms of knowledge construction.

More specifically, the study investigates the following overarching questions:

•   How do students perceive and respond to the integration of academic and enterprise-based learning?

•   What are the key cognitive and practical dimensions of their UEC experience?

•   How can the design and delivery of UEC programs be improved to better support student learning and development?

Through these questions, the study aims to generate insights not only into the educational value of UEC from the learner's perspective, but also into the structural and emotional factors that shape the efficacy of such collaborative initiatives. In so doing, this paper contributes to a more grounded and learner-informed understanding of UEC. It also provides empirical data that may inform policy development, curriculum design, and pedagogical practice in creative disciplines. Importantly, the study is situated within a private institution context — a sector of Chinese higher education that is often underrepresented in UEC literature — thereby offering a fresh perspective on how non-public institutions navigate the opportunities and challenges of university–enterprise integration.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

University–Enterprise Collaboration (UEC) has emerged as a vital mechanism for aligning higher education with the demands of an evolving economy, particularly in countries like China where vocational and practice-based education is undergoing rapid reform. Programs such as 'Made in China 2025' and 'Double First-Class' highlight the importance of bridging higher education outputs towards industry demands. These policies strongly urge institutions and enterprises to establish stronger and more pertinent relationships to ensure that the research being conducted does not only meet academic standards but can also contribute to the industry in terms of commercialization and applicability (Y. Li, 2024).Within this context, increasing attention has been directed toward the structural and policy dimensions of UEC, such as talent pipelines, institutional innovation, and university-industry integration. However, much less emphasis has been placed on the lived experiences of students who participate in these programmes. As the ultimate beneficiaries of UEC, students' perspectives offer critical insights into how collaborative educational models are internalized, negotiated, and experienced in real-world learning environments.

Recent studies suggest that UEC has produced noteworthy outcomes in terms of academic quality improvement, industrial innovation, and regional economic development. One of the most significant outcomes is enhanced graduate employability. With in-depth practical experience, students who participate in UEC are deemed more attractive in the employment market. The practical experience helps them apply theoretical knowledge to real-world scenarios. This experience significantly shortens their learning curve upon entry into the workforce. When UEC effectively implemented, can significantly enhance students' technical abilities, professional confidence, and employability. Students frequently report acquiring domain-specific competencies, improved communication and teamwork skills, and more refined understandings of workplace expectations through enterprise-based projects and internships (Yang et al., 2025). In creative disciplines such as design, media, or film, these experiences often support the development of both aesthetic judgment and practical

execution, allowing students to transform theoretical ideas into tangible products and services. Moreover, exposure to industry mentors and real production environments is frequently linked to increased motivation and career clarity (Y. Li, 2024).

However, the implementation of UEC is not without issues. These include resource constraints, differences in expectations, and communication breakdowns—all of which commonly hinder the success of UEC projects (Lis, 2023). The student experience is not uniformly positive. Multiple qualitative studies, most of which are situated in public universities, have revealed that students often face significant adaptation challenges when navigating between academic expectations and industry requirements. For example, Hu (2023) and Jiang et al. (2021) identified gaps in coordination and mentorship quality in public university settings, where students struggled to reconcile theoretical content with workplace demands. In a study by Shao (2025), also conducted at a public institution, students reported feeling overwhelmed or underprepared, particularly when enterprise training commenced without sufficient technical orientation or structured onboarding processes. These findings highlight recurring tensions within UEC—but they also reflect conditions specific to public institutions, where administrative structures and resource access differ markedly from those of private universities. There is thus a need not only to understand but also to broaden the scope of inquiry, including how such challenges manifest in private-sector UEC contexts (Zhao & Ahmad, 2024).

To understand the dynamics of student learning in UEC, the experiential learning theory developed by Kolb (2014) can be used as a conceptual lens. This theory posits that effective learning involves a cyclical process comprising concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Within UEC, students engage in concrete experience through hands-on tasks and production activities, followed by reflective learning through feedback sessions and personal reflection. When supported by appropriate scaffolding, this cycle facilitates the internalization of abstract concepts and encourages the application of knowledge in new and complex scenarios (Alabi, 2024). In particular, experiential learning is well suited to practice-based disciplines, as it aligns with the iterative, project-driven nature of professional creative work. In addition to experiential learning, constructivist learning theory provides further explanatory power in interpreting student experiences in UEC programmes. According to constructivist principles, learners construct knowledge most effectively when engaged in authentic, meaningful activities that are embedded within real-world contexts. Constructivist scholars emphasize that students benefit most when they are not merely passive recipients of information but active participants in collaborative inquiry, guided by mentors who can contextualize content within professional realities

(Braitiu, 2024). Within UEC, this means integrating theoretical content with enterprise tasks, ensuring that students are not only performing duties but also understanding the rationale and frameworks underpinning their decisions.

Despite these insights, two significant gaps remain in the current literature. First, there is a notable lack of qualitative, student-centered research that foregrounds learners' voices in evaluating UEC outcomes. Much of the available work focuses on institutional outputs, industry perspectives, or macro-level policy analyses, leaving the micro-level experiences of students underrepresented. Second, the majority of existing empirical studies have been conducted within public universities or elite state-funded institutions, where policy frameworks, administrative structures, and resource allocations differ significantly from those in private institutions. As a result, there remains relatively little exploration of how UEC unfolds in private university settings, where resource constraints, staffing limitations, and greater administrative flexibility may shape the collaboration process differently. Given the expanding role of private institutions in China's higher education ecosystem, more research is needed to understand how students in these contexts experience and interpret enterprise collaboration.

In light of these gaps, this study contributes to the literature by offering an in-depth case study of student experiences within a UEC programme situated in a private Chinese university. By drawing on interviews, observation, and student reflections, it offers a grounded account of how learners engage with enterprise-based education—emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally. The findings presented here are intended not only to inform future research but also to support educators, programme designers, and policymakers in developing more responsive and emotionally intelligent models of UEC that account for the complex realities of student learning in collaborative environments.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology to explore students' learning experiences within a University–Enterprise Collaboration (UEC) programme at a private higher education institution in China. The case study approach is particularly suited for in-depth exploration of complex, context-dependent phenomena, allowing researchers to investigate the meanings, interactions, and perceptions of participants as they unfold in natural settings. In this research, the case is bounded by a specific academic programme—Stage and Film Design—delivered in partnership between a private university and selected enterprise collaborators in the cultural and creative industries. Three main instruments were employed to collect data: semi-structured interviews, classroom and enterprise observations, and student reflective documents. Semi-structured interviews formed the core of the data collection strategy. A total of

fifteen students were purposefully selected from among final-year participants in the UEC programme. They were chosen based on their active involvement in at least one complete industry project and their willingness to share in-depth reflections on their learning journey. Interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, were conducted individually, and were audio-recorded with participant consent. The interview guide covered themes such as theory-practice integration, responses to enterprise-based learning, challenges encountered, perceptions of mentorship, and suggestions for improvement.

To complement the interview data and capture students' real-time engagement in enterprise tasks, non-participant observation was conducted during key project milestones, including orientation, production rehearsals, and project reviews. The researcher observed students interacting with mentors, using equipment, and participating in collaborative tasks. Detailed field notes were taken, focusing on students' behavioural engagement, communication patterns, expressions of confidence or confusion, and their interaction with mentors and peers.

A third data source consisted of students' reflective documents, which were collected as part of their academic assessment within the UEC programme. These documents, ranging from 800 to 1,500 words in length, provided a first-person account of students' thoughts and emotions regarding their enterprise projects. The reflections were analyzed to identify recurring themes, metaphors, and evaluative statements related to learning gains, emotional experiences, teamwork, and self-evaluation. Since these reflections were written independently of the research process, they offered a valuable, unfiltered perspective that enriched the study's empirical foundation.

All collected data were transcribed, anonymized, and subjected to thematic analysis, following the six-phase process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). This process included familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme defining and naming, and final report writing. Codes were both inductive (emerging directly from the data) and deductive (informed by theoretical constructs such as experiential and constructivist learning). ATLAS.ti software was used to facilitate coding and data organization.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the university where the study was conducted. Participants were provided with detailed information sheets outlining the purpose of the study, data usage, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Pseudonyms are used in all quotations to protect participant identity.

By employing a case study design supported by interviews, observations, and document analysis, this research offers a holistic and nuanced understanding of student learning within a real-life UEC context. The triangulated approach allows for the exploration of not only what students say they experience but also how they behave in situated learning environments and how they reflect on their journeys over time. This methodology provides a strong empirical basis for examining the interplay between institutional structures, enterprise demands, and individual learning pathways, and for drawing conclusions that are context-sensitive and pedagogically meaningful.

4.FINDINGS

This chapter presents the key findings derived from the thematic analysis of interview transcripts, observational data, and students' reflective writings. A total of 27 distinct codes were identified and categorized into three main themes that reflect the core aspects of students' experiences within the University–Enterprise Collaboration (UEC) programme (See Table 1). These themes include: Sentiments on learning experience; Perceived strengths and weaknesses of the programme; Areas for improvement. Each theme is further organized into sub-themes based on recurrent patterns in the data. The findings highlight a range of learning gains, emotional responses, adaptive strategies, and suggestions for enhancing the programme. The analysis not only sheds light on the benefits and challenges encountered by students, but also offers insight into how collaborative, practice-based education can shape learning outcomes in creative disciplines.

Table 1: Themes Generated Based on Codes

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	No. of Codes
Main Theme 1: Sentiments on Learning Experience	Sub-Theme A: Learning Satisfaction and Gains	4
	Sub-Theme B: Integration of Theory and Practice	3
	Sub-Theme C: Expansion of Design Thinking	3
	Sub-Theme D: Learning Challenges and Coping Strategies	2
Sub-Total for Main Theme 1		**12**

Main Theme 2: Strengths and Weaknesses of the Programme	Sub-Theme A: Strengths	4
	Sub-Theme B: Weaknesses	4
Sub-Total for Main Theme 2		**8**
Main Theme 3: Areas for Improvement	Sub-Theme A: Practical Training	3
	Sub-Theme B: Theoretical Instruction	2
	Sub-Theme C: Project Coordination	2
Sub-Total for Main Theme 3		**7**
TOTAL FOR BROAD THEME 1: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE		**27**

4.1 Main Theme 1: Sentiments on Learning Experience

A total of 12 codes were categorized under this theme, reflecting students' emotional responses, cognitive engagement, and practical learning outcomes as they participated in the UEC programme. These sentiments were organized into four sub-themes: learning satisfaction and perceived gains, theory-practice integration, development in design thinking, and emotional adjustment strategies in response to challenges.

Sub-Theme A: Learning Satisfaction and Gains (4 codes)

Many students expressed a deep sense of fulfillment as they witnessed measurable progress in their technical and creative abilities. Unlike in traditional classroom settings, they felt that hands-on experience in enterprise projects brought about real improvements that could be applied beyond the academic environment. For example, Student 3 noted, "Before entering the company, I struggled with operating the engraving machine. But now, I can manage the whole process without supervision—it feels like a huge step forward." Similarly, Student 7 recalled, "At first, the control panel was intimidating. But after working with actual machines, I felt everything gradually became second nature."

This progress was not limited to technical mastery. Students also reported that engaging in enterprise tasks enhanced their confidence and clarified their career aspirations. As Student 5 shared, "Working in the post-production team made me realize how much I enjoy editing. I'm now thinking of pursuing this direction professionally." Reflective entries echoed these points, with several students noting increased confidence and enthusiasm after receiving validation from enterprise mentors. One student wrote, "Getting my work approved by the team leader felt like a breakthrough. It made me believe I can really thrive in this industry" (Student 6). These statements indicate that the UEC programme significantly contributed to students' sense of achievement and self-efficacy.

Sub-Theme B: Integration of Theory and Practice (3 codes)

A recurring pattern across interviews was students' recognition that the practical component of the UEC programme helped make academic theories more understandable and relevant. Concepts that once felt abstract began to resonate when applied in real scenarios. For instance, Student 8 reflected, "I never fully grasped composition rules until we had to apply them while filming on-site. Suddenly, everything made sense." Likewise, Student 6 observed, "I used to just memorize lighting terms for the exam. But after setting up actual lighting during a shoot, the theory clicked."

In several cases, the shift in understanding also enhanced motivation. As Student 10 remarked, "When I saw how theoretical principles guided our production choices, I started to take the lessons more seriously." This alignment between academic content and workplace demands was also visible during observation sessions, where students referred back to classroom knowledge while debating shot composition or discussing design justifications with mentors. Reflective documents revealed similar sentiments, such as one student noting: "Theory was no longer something I had to remember—it became a tool I wanted to use creatively" (Student 14).

Sub-Theme C: Expansion of Design Thinking (3 codes)

The UEC setting provided students with a broader perspective on what it means to design effectively. Several students admitted that prior to the programme, their design approach was driven primarily by personal preference or visual appeal. However, working on real client briefs pushed them to consider user needs, practical constraints, and systemic functionality. Student 6 described this shift: "In the past, I cared only about how things looked. Now, I also think about how they function, who will use them, and whether they make sense within a larger workflow."

Others highlighted how challenges in the field sparked creativity within constraints. Student 1 explained, "We had to adjust our designs based on equipment availability and client feedback. It forced us to think on our feet, and I came up with solutions I wouldn't have considered before." This theme was reinforced by observation data, where students were seen revising their layouts after usability discussions or collaborating to resolve real-time technical issues. As Student 13 summarized in his reflection, "The experience helped me think like a designer who solves problems—not just one who decorates."

Sub-Theme D: Learning Challenges and Coping Strategies (2 codes)

Despite many positive experiences, students also encountered substantial difficulties, particularly in the early stages of the

UEC project. Several participants described feeling overwhelmed by unfamiliar tasks, unclear expectations, or high performance pressure. Student 8 shared candidly, "I was scared at first. I didn't want to mess up, especially in front of the mentors. But I kept asking questions, practicing, and watching how others worked." Student 5 expressed a similar struggle: "I didn't know how to start. But I studied others' workflows and slowly adapted."

What emerged strongly was a pattern of resilience and self-directed coping. Students learned to collaborate more effectively, divide responsibilities, and manage time under pressure. Student 14 noted, "Deadlines were tight, and we were also doing other courses. I had to learn how to prioritize fast." Observation records documented students actively seeking guidance, sharing workload with peers, and using whiteboards and checklists to organize project tasks. Reflective narratives confirmed that many students came to view these challenges as important learning moments. One student concluded, "Looking back, those hard times taught me more than any lecture ever did" (Student 12).

4.2 Main Theme 2: Strengths and Weaknesses of the Programme

Students' reflections on the UEC programme highlighted both the strengths they appreciated and the difficulties they encountered throughout the collaborative learning process. This theme is composed of two sub-themes: perceived strengths that facilitated personal and professional growth, and structural weaknesses that limited the effectiveness of the experience. A total of eight codes were generated—four for each sub-theme—revealing a balanced and critical view of the programme's implementation.

Sub-Theme A: Strengths (4 codes)

A prominent strength reported by students was the development of practical, job-relevant competencies. Engaging directly with real tasks in professional contexts allowed them to practice the kind of technical and organizational skills that employers typically expect. Student 2 commented, "I used to feel unsure in lab settings, but now I've completed full-scale tasks that actually resemble professional assignments. It gave me confidence that I can survive in real work environments." Students frequently described this transition from simulated learning to authentic task performance as a turning point in their readiness for employment.

Exposure to industry professionals was also seen as a major advantage of the programme. Students valued the opportunity to interact with mentors who provided practical advice, shared personal experiences, and modeled workplace behaviors. Student 5 remarked, "The way our mentor explained things—using actual production examples—was completely different from how we usually learn. It made things much clearer." These experiences often demystified the creative industries and offered students a clearer picture

of career expectations. Observational notes recorded students actively engaging with enterprise staff, initiating discussions, and requesting feedback on technical or aesthetic decisions, indicating a strong motivation to absorb knowledge from real practitioners.

Another recurring strength was the experiential structure of the learning process. Students appreciated that they were not simply completing assignments but were involved in dynamic, ongoing projects that required continuous decision-making, revisions, and evaluation. Student 8 shared, "Every step we took had consequences. If we messed up one thing, we had to fix it ourselves. That's when you really learn—not from slides, but from the process." These iterative learning cycles were evident in observations where students were seen reworking drafts, testing equipment multiple times, and adjusting lighting or design based on peer and mentor input.

Finally, students reported that their professional self-confidence grew considerably through successful project completion. Many felt more prepared to engage with the demands of the creative industry and more certain about their individual strengths and interests. As Student 10 stated, "I've never felt so capable before. Completing a full project and getting positive feedback gave me the push I needed to believe in myself." Reflections commonly included phrases such as "more confident," "less afraid of feedback," or "ready for the next step," underscoring the emotional as well as cognitive dimensions of learning gains.

Sub-Theme B: Weaknesses (4 codes)

Despite these positive outcomes, students also voiced critical concerns about the programme's structure and execution. One of the most commonly cited issues was the lack of sufficient technical preparation before engaging in enterprise work. Several students felt that they were thrown into unfamiliar tasks without adequate training on equipment or software. Student 3 explained, "We started the project without really knowing how to operate the main tools. I had to figure it out along the way, which wasted a lot of time and caused stress." Similar frustrations appeared in reflective texts, where students recalled feeling unprepared in the first few sessions.

Another significant challenge involved the alignment—or lack thereof—between academic content and enterprise expectations. Students noted that what they learned in class was not always directly applicable to the tasks they faced in the workplace. Student 6 remarked, "Sometimes I wondered why we studied certain theories when none of that showed up in the company project. It felt disconnected." These mismatches contributed to confusion and undermined students' confidence in the value of classroom instruction. Observational data also confirmed moments when students hesitated or expressed uncertainty when translating theoretical concepts into action.

Communication breakdowns between institutional stakeholders also negatively affected students' experiences.

Participants described receiving conflicting messages from academic staff and enterprise mentors, or facing abrupt changes in schedule without sufficient notice. As Student 10 reported, "We would be told one thing by the lecturer, and then the company person would give different instructions. It made planning almost impossible." These coordination issues led to feelings of frustration, inefficiency, and, in some cases, project delays. Student 4 added in their reflection, "I often felt like I was stuck in the middle, relaying messages between two sides who weren't talking directly to each other."

A final area of concern was the intensity of the workload and scheduling pressure. Students found it challenging to balance UEC responsibilities with their other academic obligations. Deadlines from enterprise mentors often conflicted with assignment submissions from unrelated courses. Student 9 expressed, "There were weeks when I barely slept. We had to complete client work and also prepare for exams. It was too much." Reflective entries and field notes showed similar patterns, with students rushing to meet overlapping deadlines or struggling to stay focused due to fatigue. While many students appreciated the realism of a fast-paced environment, they also felt that better time management and clearer scheduling could have improved their ability to perform well in both academic and enterprise settings.

4.3   Main Theme 3: Areas for Improvement

While students acknowledged many valuable aspects of the UEC programme, they also offered constructive feedback regarding how it could be better structured and supported in the future. Their suggestions coalesced around three interrelated areas: the need for more structured and accessible practical training, stronger alignment between theory and industry expectations, and improved coordination between academic and enterprise partners. These insights, grounded in participants' lived experiences, highlight the importance of refining both instructional design and institutional cooperation to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of such collaborative initiatives.

Sub-Theme A: Practical Training (3 codes)

A major concern raised by students was the lack of systematic technical training prior to beginning enterprise-based tasks. Many participants felt that the initial stages of the project were hindered by their unfamiliarity with equipment or industry-standard software. Student 4 reflected, "We should have had more hands-on sessions before starting. In the first week, I was mostly guessing how to set things up." Without sufficient pre-training, students reported feeling hesitant and anxious, which delayed their engagement and limited their creative output. Observational records from early sessions confirmed instances where students appeared unsure of basic operations and repeatedly sought clarification from peers or mentors.

Another recurring suggestion involved increasing the frequency and depth of enterprise-led workshops. Students

appreciated the opportunity to learn from professionals but felt these interactions were too limited. Student 2 explained, "The mentor sessions were helpful, but they were too short. If we had more time with them, we could really learn the workflow instead of just finishing tasks." Others proposed that longer or more regular mentoring blocks would allow for deeper skill acquisition and more meaningful interaction with industry expectations. Student 7 remarked, "Watching professionals solve real problems taught me more than any textbook. We just didn't have enough exposure."

Additionally, students called for the provision of clear instructional guides or technical references. Several participants expressed a desire for workflow charts, visual manuals, or digital resources to support self-directed learning during the enterprise phase. Student 5 suggested, "It would help a lot to have a checklist or a setup guide. Sometimes we didn't even know what to ask because we didn't know where to start." These practical tools were seen as essential for reducing early confusion and ensuring students could make the most of limited mentor contact time.

Sub-Theme B: Theoretical Instruction (2 codes)

Beyond technical preparation, students also pointed to the need for better integration between classroom theory and enterprise project demands. A common frustration was that some theoretical content seemed disconnected from the practical tasks they encountered. Student 12 noted, "Some of what we learned in class didn't really match the company's workflow. It felt like we were running two different systems." This perceived disconnect undermined the relevance of academic instruction and made it harder for students to transfer knowledge effectively.

Students also expressed interest in a more applied, case-based approach to theory instruction. They wanted theory classes to use real-world examples, possibly drawn from their ongoing enterprise projects. Student 1 shared, "If we could analyze our actual tasks in class—like lighting setups or editing choices—it would make the lessons stick more." Others suggested using past student projects or industry case studies as teaching material, which would provide a bridge between conceptual understanding and applied decision-making. Student 8 reflected, "I remember the one time our lecturer used an actual client video as an example. That class made the most sense to me."

Sub-Theme C: Project Coordination (2 codes)

Students frequently described issues related to poor coordination between the university and enterprise, which often resulted in confusion, inefficiency, and emotional stress. One major problem was inconsistent or overlapping scheduling between institutional responsibilities and enterprise deadlines. Student 3 recalled, "We would get project updates from the company right before we had a big assignment due in another course. There was no way to plan ahead." This lack of a unified calendar left students struggling

to prioritize and often led to last-minute compromises in work quality.

Another area of concern was unclear communication between the different stakeholders involved in the programme. Students felt that lecturers and enterprise mentors were not always aligned in terms of expectations, task assignments, or evaluation criteria. Student 13 explained, "Sometimes the school told us one thing, and the mentor said something else. We were caught in between." Others described situations where tasks had to be redone or timelines were shifted without clear explanation. Reflective documents echoed this sentiment, with one student writing, "I felt like I spent more time figuring out who to ask than doing the actual work" (Student 14).

To address these issues, students recommended the introduction of a dedicated coordinator role or liaison officer responsible for maintaining communication across parties. Student 1 proposed, "If there was someone whose job was to make sure everyone's on the same page, things would run much smoother." Students believed that clearer institutional frameworks and regular cross-party meetings could help eliminate misunderstandings and ensure a more supportive learning environment.

5. DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore how students participating in a University–Enterprise Collaboration (UEC) programme within a private creative arts institution in China experienced the process of collaborative, practice-based learning. The findings indicate that while students generally viewed the programme as beneficial and transformative, their experiences were shaped by a complex interplay of practical skill acquisition, emotional adjustment, and structural challenges. This complexity underscores the importance of considering UEC not merely as a policy mechanism for industry-academic cooperation, but as a multidimensional educational environment that demands careful pedagogical and emotional design.

One of the most salient outcomes observed was the substantial satisfaction students derived from hands-on participation in enterprise projects. Rather than remaining passive recipients of knowledge, they were placed in environments that required decision-making, real-time collaboration, and independent problem-solving. Students frequently noted that their technical capabilities improved significantly, and that they became more confident in their creative and operational skills. This aligns with the foundational principles of experiential learning theory, particularly Kolb's (2014) experiential cycle, which emphasizes the importance of active participation, reflection, and abstraction in deep learning. The enterprise context served as a real-world laboratory where students could engage in concrete experience and immediately witness the outcomes of their actions. This type of applied learning often

resulted in a clearer understanding of theoretical principles and increased self-assurance in tackling professional tasks.

Beyond technical growth, students also described a significant evolution in their ways of thinking about design. Initially focused on aesthetics or classroom-based norms, they gradually adopted more holistic, user-centered approaches. Facing real-world constraints and feedback from mentors prompted them to consider functionality, feasibility, and user experience in their design processes. This transformation illustrates the relevance of constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that learners build meaningful knowledge when they engage in authentic tasks situated in real contexts. Rather than simply memorizing concepts, students in this study constructed new mental frameworks by applying theory to unfamiliar problems, adapting their thinking in response to client expectations and industry standards. This shift in cognition—from individual creativity to socially and functionally responsive design—highlights how UEC can foster deeper cognitive engagement. However, the learning experience was not uniformly smooth or positive. Students encountered considerable stress during the early stages of the project, particularly when they were unfamiliar with professional tools or lacked clear instructions. Many described feelings of anxiety or uncertainty, but instead of disengaging, they demonstrated adaptive behavior—seeking help from peers, experimenting independently, and gradually developing their own strategies to navigate ambiguity.

Another key theme was the integration, or in some cases, misalignment, of theory and practice. Students overwhelmingly valued moments when academic content supported their enterprise work, such as when principles of lighting, editing, or storytelling helped them make production decisions. However, they also pointed to disconnections, noting that not all theoretical instruction translated effectively into the enterprise environment. This inconsistency sometimes reduced their motivation to engage with classroom content and led them to question the practical utility of certain lessons. These observations highlight the urgent need for more deliberate curriculum alignment—where theoretical components are designed to feed directly into the practical demands of industry tasks. Without this coherence, students risk viewing their learning as fragmented, and universities risk diminishing the perceived value of academic content.

The emotional dimension of learning was especially prominent in students' reflections. Many articulated strong feelings—pride when their work was validated, frustration when expectations were unclear, and anxiety when faced with unfamiliar tasks. These emotions often intensified their cognitive engagement, serving as both motivators and barriers to learning. This reinforces recent arguments in higher education literature that emotional factors are not peripheral to learning but central to how students process, retain, and apply knowledge. Recognizing emotional

engagement as part of the learning process requires institutions to move beyond purely cognitive or skills-based models of UEC. Support systems, mentoring, and institutional empathy become vital in helping students manage emotional fluctuations that occur during complex, collaborative projects.

Despite the many strengths of the programme, students also pointed out clear areas for improvement. They emphasized the need for more structured technical preparation before the enterprise phase, expressing that early confusion could have been mitigated by pre-training workshops, clearer instructions, or basic workflow guides. The lack of such preparation often led to hesitation and decreased productivity during the initial sessions. Similarly, the limited duration of enterprise mentor engagement was seen as a missed opportunity for deeper learning. Students wanted more frequent and sustained interaction with professionals who could model industry standards and provide detailed feedback. These issues suggest that experiential learning environments require not only authentic tasks but also intentional scaffolding and mentor involvement.

Furthermore, students identified weaknesses in communication and coordination between the university and enterprise partners. Conflicting instructions, inconsistent scheduling, and unclear roles often placed students in the middle of institutional misalignment. These breakdowns not only caused delays but also created emotional stress, as students were unsure whom to consult or how to prioritize competing demands. Their recommendation to establish a dedicated liaison or coordinator role reflects a practical awareness that multi-stakeholder collaborations require active mediation. Without such a structure, the benefits of UEC may be compromised by administrative inefficiency and role ambiguity.

Finally, the challenge of balancing academic coursework with enterprise demands emerged as a significant stressor. Students often felt overwhelmed when deadlines overlapped or when expectations from both sides were not harmonized. While many appreciated the realism of a fast-paced industry environment, they also believed that better synchronization of timelines and clearer communication would enable them to perform more effectively in both spheres. This again highlights the importance of coordination—not only across institutions but also within the academic calendar—to ensure that learning remains challenging but manageable.

In sum, the findings of this study reveal that the student experience of UEC is rich, complex, and highly contingent upon the quality of instructional design, emotional support, and institutional coordination. While students gained valuable skills, professional insights, and confidence, these gains were often achieved through navigating ambiguity, emotional discomfort, and structural inefficiencies. These insights contribute to a growing body of literature that calls for more holistic models of UEC—ones that account not only

for learning outcomes but also for emotional well-being, institutional alignment, and learner agency. Universities and enterprise partners must view collaboration not simply as a placement exercise, but as a co-constructed pedagogical journey—one that requires care, clarity, and continuous reflection to be truly transformative.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined students' learning experiences within a University–Enterprise Collaboration (UEC) programme at a private creative arts institution in China. Using a qualitative case study approach, it explored how students engaged with enterprise-based learning, navigated challenges, and reflected on their professional growth. The findings revealed that UEC, when supported by authentic tasks and guided mentorship, can significantly enhance students' technical skills, confidence, and professional awareness.

Students valued the opportunity to apply theory in real-world settings and reported that practical engagement helped clarify academic concepts and reshape their design thinking. Many developed stronger creative judgment, team collaboration, and workplace adaptability. These results align with experiential and constructivist learning theories, underscoring the importance of hands-on, situated learning in creative disciplines.

At the same time, the study identified areas for improvement. Students noted difficulties in transitioning into enterprise roles due to insufficient technical preparation, inconsistent communication between university and enterprise mentors, and overlapping deadlines. Emotional factors such as stress and uncertainty also played a central role in shaping learning experiences, highlighting the need for better support structures.

This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of UEC by centering the student voice and focusing on a private institutional context, which remains underrepresented in existing literature. While findings are limited to one programme and site, they offer practical insights for improving UEC design and implementation.

Future studies could expand to include multiple institutions or track long-term student outcomes. Ultimately, effective UEC requires more than institutional partnerships—it demands coordinated planning, emotional awareness, and learner-centered pedagogy to create truly transformative educational experiences.

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