Capstone assessment in professional education: Integrating learning, practice and reflection

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This paper examines the role of capstone assessment in professional and work-based higher education and develops a conceptual account of capstone assessment as a form of work-integrated learning (WIL). Drawing on constructivist, experiential, and authentic learning theory, the paper synthesizes assessment and WIL literature alongside UK higher education and professional standards frameworks to distinguish between capstone experiences, capstone projects, and capstone assessment, positioning capstone assessment as a program-level mechanism for integrating learning, evidencing professional capability, and supporting institutional quality assurance. Using policing education as an applied case, the paper demonstrates how capstone assessment enables learners to integrate academic and work-based knowledge, engage in ethical and operational decision-making, and produce outputs of value to external stakeholders. It proposes design principles and evaluative dimensions to support authentic, externally relevant assessment and argues that capstone assessment consolidates professional capability and makes it visible.

Keywords**:** Capstone assessment, work-based learning, authentic assessment, reflective practice, curriculum design, police education

Professional degree programs exist to prepare people for practice, not just for theory. Graduates are expected to interpret evidence, use ethical judgement, and act responsibly in uncertain, real-world environments. Assessment in these programs must, therefore, show more than knowledge recall; it must demonstrate that learners can think and act as reflective, accountable practitioners (Eraut, 1994; Schön, 1983). This expectation is significant in applied and work-based routes such as policing, nursing, teaching, and social work, where graduates move directly into public- and service-facing roles.

Traditional modular assessment struggles to capture this integration. Individual assignments often test knowledge in isolation, typically within a single topic or unit. Students can achieve good marks across modules without ever being required to combine knowledge or apply it to realistic practice problems (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Knight, 2002). This fragmentation also weakens the formation of professional identity, as learners experience the curriculum as a series of separate tasks rather than as a connected journey toward professional competence (Jessop & Tomas, 2017; Trede et al., 2012).

Many professional programs have responded by introducing capstone experiences, typically positioned at the culmination of a degree program and designed to integrate prior learning through an applied or professionally relevant task (Hauhart & Grahe, 2015). These may include work-based projects, portfolios, case analyses, or applied research studies. However, literature often uses the terms capstone, capstone project, capstone experience, and capstone assessment interchangeably, creating conceptual ambiguity, particularly within international and interdisciplinary contexts.

This distinction is important because the learning benefits associated with capstones arise primarily from the experiences or tasks undertaken by students, whereas capstone assessment refers specifically to the structured process by which integrative learning, professional capability, and achievement are evaluated against program-level outcomes and standards. The focus of this paper is the capstone

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assessment as a distinct program-level assessment mechanism within professional and work-based higher education.

Capstone assessments align with the principles of authentic assessment, which require students to perform tasks that resemble real professional activity (Gulikers et al., 2004; Wiggins, 1990). They also align with UK policy frameworks. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2019, 2022) highlights the need for assessment that demonstrates ethical reasoning, application of knowledge, and professional judgement in realistic contexts. The Office for Students (OfS, 2023) links academic quality to demonstrable graduate outcomes and employability. Professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) such as the College of Policing, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), and Social Work England require evidence of holistic professional competence at the point of qualification (College of Policing, 2023; NMC, 2018; Social Work England, 2023).

Capstone assessments have also been increasingly recognized within the international literature on non-placement work-integrated learning (WIL). This literature emphasizes that WIL is defined not by physical placement but by the integration of authentic professional tasks, structured engagement with external stakeholders, and demonstrable value for both learners and partner organizations (Campbell & Eady, 2014; Ferns et al., 2014; Rook & Dean, 2023; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). This distinction is important because some capstone assessments meet these criteria while others do not. Only when external stakeholders, such as employers, professional bodies, or community partners, are informed, supervised, or directly benefit from the work can capstone assessments be legitimately regarded as WIL rather than as purely academic integrative tasks.

Within policing education, these characteristics are particularly salient. The purpose of policing is inherently practice-oriented, requiring assessment that is authentic, operationally relevant, and ethically grounded. Capstone assessments help reduce abstraction, a widely identified challenge in police education, by integrating academic reasoning with real organizational priorities and external stakeholder expectations (Blockley et al., 2025; HMICFRS, 2024). This strengthens the alignment between curriculum intent, workplace demands, and public-service outcomes. Policing education is therefore used within this paper as an applied example through which broader questions of capstone assessment, professional capability, and non-placement WIL can be explored.

This paper presents a conceptual and practice-focused account of capstone assessment in professional education. It argues that the capstone assessment is not simply another final assignment. Rather, it is a program-level curriculum mechanism through which academic and work-based learning are integrated, professional identity is consolidated, and evidence of professional capability is made visible to students, employers, regulators, and universities. In particular, the paper makes three contributions to existing literature. First, it conceptualizes capstone assessment as distinct from capstone experiences or projects, defining it as a program-level assessment mechanism through which integrative learning, professional capability, and employability are evidenced. Second, it positions capstone assessment within non-placement work-integrated learning (WIL), emphasizing the role of authentic tasks, external stakeholder relevance, and organizational engagement in legitimizing assessment as WIL. Third, it proposes a set of design principles and evaluative dimensions that translate theoretical and policy expectations into practical criteria for implementation and quality assurance.

The article proceeds in six sections. Section 2 outlines the theoretical and policy foundations for integrative assessment; Section 3 defines the core functions and design principles of capstone

assessments and introduces evaluative dimensions of quality; Section 4 examines educational impact; Section 5 considers operational and ethical challenges; and Section 6 presents applied evidence from policing education before drawing conclusions and recommendations. Although examples are drawn from policing, this paper applies across professional and work-based fields, including nursing, health and social care, education, and criminal justice.

THEORETICAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

Professional learning is not only about acquiring knowledge but also about using that knowledge in context and under constraint. Constructivist theory holds that learners actively build understanding by linking new ideas to prior experience rather than passively receiving information (Biggs, 2003; Piaget, 1972). In higher education, learning is incomplete until students can apply and adapt knowledge in practice. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, describes learning as an iterative process. Assessments that capture only conceptual understanding miss this professional loop. Capstone assessments are well placed to evidence the full cycle because they require students to frame problems, act on evidence and theory, and evaluate the outcomes of their own decisions.

Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasize that professional competence develops through participation in "communities of practice". New entrants learn not only procedures but also the norms, language, and values of their field. Capstone assessments often operate within this space. A work-based improvement project or professional portfolio engages learners with employer priorities, organizational constraints, and stakeholder expectations. This engagement supports identity formation (Trede et al., 2012) and helps students move from knowing about practice, to thinking and acting as practitioners. These features align strongly with emerging work on non-placement WIL, which argues that professionally oriented tasks can foster legitimate peripheral participation even when learners are not physically located in workplaces (Dean et al., 2020; Rook & Dean, 2023).

Authentic assessment asks learners to perform tasks that reflect the complexity of real professional work (Gulikers et al., 2004; Villarroel et al., 2018; Wiggins, 1990). Gulikers et al. (2004) identify several dimensions of authenticity, task, context, criteria, and learner agency that appear in well-designed capstone assessments. Such assessments integrate knowledge, technical skill, ethical judgement, communication, and reflection (Eraut, 1994; Knight, 2002; Lester, 2020). While modular tasks may test fragments of competence, capstone assessments allow examiners to evaluate integration itself. This reflects the shift from content-based curricula to capability-oriented, outcomes-based education (Adam, 2004; Schuwirth & van der Vleuten, 2011; van der Vleuten et al., 2020), in which success is measured by what graduates can do with knowledge in complex, uncertain conditions.

UK policy reinforces these graduate expectations. Current frameworks position higher education as responsible for producing work-ready, ethically aware professionals able to demonstrate impact in practice (Advance HE, 2021; OfS, 2023). The QAA Benchmark Statements for policing, nursing, and social work identify judgment, ethical reasoning, critical reflection, and decision-making under uncertainty as threshold outcomes (NMC, 2018; QAA, 2019, 2022; Social Work England, 2023). The College of Policing (2023) similarly requires evidence-based decision-making, accountability, and reflective practice. In policing specifically, authentic assessment has been framed as essential to ensuring that curriculum tasks reflect the operational and ethical realities of frontline work; recent research demonstrates that high-fidelity, practice-centered assessment reduces abstraction and strengthens students' ability to justify decisions under uncertainty (Blockley et al., 2025).

Alongside these regulatory expectations, providers must ensure the assessment's validity, reliability, inclusivity, and alignment with program outcomes. The Office for Students (2023) links educational quality to graduate outcomes and employer collaboration, while Research England (2021) recognizes applied enquiry and knowledge exchange as evidence of civic contribution. Capstone assessments sit at this intersection. They produce artefacts that can be shared with employers and PSRBs and generate insight into whether curricula genuinely prepare students for the ethical and operational realities of practice (Lester & Costley, 2010). Their alignment with external stakeholders also places them squarely within contemporary definitions of WIL, which identify collaboration with, or meaningful relevance to, an external professional community as a core requirement (Rook & Dean, 2023).

However, variably scoped projects and portfolios can challenge the comparability of standards (Knight, 2002; Sadler, 2009). In fields where assessment outcomes directly contribute to licensing, registration, or deployability, institutions must be able to defend their decisions. Two established strategies are the use of common program-level marking criteria and structured calibration exercises prior to marking (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Both remain central to delivering a credible capstone. They are also consistent with quality requirements in WIL programs, where academic-professional alignment and defensible standards are critical for stakeholder confidence (Dean et al., 2020).

THE ROLE AND DESIGN OF CAPSTONE ASSESSMENT

Capstone assessments are distinctive because they are explicitly synoptic. Rather than testing isolated areas of content, they require students to integrate the knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors developed across an entire program (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). This integration is essential in practice-facing disciplines, where effective performance depends on the combination of conceptual understanding, interpersonal skills, procedural competence, and ethical reasoning (Eraut, 2004; Knight, 2002). Capstone assessments, therefore, act as a bridge between academic study and professional work. They prompt learners to revisit prior learning, apply it to a real-world problem, and explain its relevance to professional outcomes. In doing so, they make the "program narrative" that connects modules, workplace experience, and professional standards visible as a coherent developmental pathway (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Jessop & Tomas, 2017; Trede et al., 2012). This logic aligns closely with contemporary models of non-placement WIL, in which learning is demonstrated through authentic, externally oriented tasks rather than through physical placement alone (Dean et al., 2020; Rook & Dean, 2023).

Capstone assessments can take many forms, including work-based improvement projects, reflective practice portfolios, applied research studies, and structured case analyses (Boud & Soler, 2016; Eynon & Gambino, 2017; Healey et al., 2014; Lester & Costley, 2010). The form matters less than the function. In every case, students are required to draw on relevant theory and evidence, make situated professional decisions, justify those decisions, and evaluate outcomes in a realistic context. Crucially, WIL literature highlights that capstone assessments constitute WIL only when they involve external stakeholders or real organizational priorities; this outward-facing relevance differentiates WIL from purely academic integration (Rook & Dean, 2023). Capstone assessments, therefore, gain their legitimacy not only from academic synthesis but from their alignment with the expectations, constraints, and values of the professional community.

Across disciplines, effective capstone assessments are underpinned by a consistent set of design principles.

- Authenticity ensures that assessment tasks reflect genuine professional activity and realistic constraints (Gulikers et al., 2004; Wiggins, 1990). In policing, authenticity includes engagement with risk, evidence-based decision-making, statutory powers, and partnership responsibilities (Blockley et al., 2025).
- Constructive alignment connects learning outcomes, teaching activities, supervision, and assessment criteria across the whole program, not just within individual modules (Biggs & Tang, 2011).
- Scaffolding and supervision provide structured preparation and ongoing support through clear milestones, formative feedback, and regular contact with supervisors (Boud & Molloy, 2013).
- Transparency makes expectations and criteria clear from the outset, supporting both fairness and student confidence (Sadler, 2009; Price et al., 2012).
- Ethical and legal compliance ensures that learners consider issues such as consent, safeguarding, and data protection at the earliest stage rather than as a final check (ICO, 2023; UKRIO, 2023).
- Stakeholder relevance ensures that project outputs are meaningful to employers, professional bodies, or local communities (Lester & Costley, 2010; Talbot, 2019). This principle reflects the defining feature of WIL, that learning must take place through interaction with, or in relation to, an external professional environment.

In practice, capstone assessments are commonly structured around an initial proposal stage, in which students define a problem, consider ethical implications, and outline a data management approach (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Healey et al., 2014). This is typically followed by a series of agreed milestones, supported by structured supervision meetings or workshops. Final assessment is often underpinned by a shared rubric addressing inquiry design, theoretical application, analysis and judgement, ethics and governance, and communication and impact (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Sadler, 2009). The use of common assessment criteria supports comparability across projects with differing focuses and formats (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007).

Table 1 below operationalizes the core dimensions of capstone assessment design, translating the theoretical and policy expectations outlined in the preceding discussion into assessable criteria. The table identifies key dimensions of effective capstone assessment, including inquiry design, application of theory, analysis and judgement, ethics and governance, and communication and impact, alongside their associated theoretical foundations and indicators of achievement. These dimensions translate abstract pedagogical and professional principles into practical, measurable criteria that can support consistency across diverse capstone formats and disciplinary contexts. When embedded consistently within supervision, feedback, and moderation processes, they can strengthen fairness, clarity, transparency, and auditability within program-level assessment design (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; QAA, 2022).

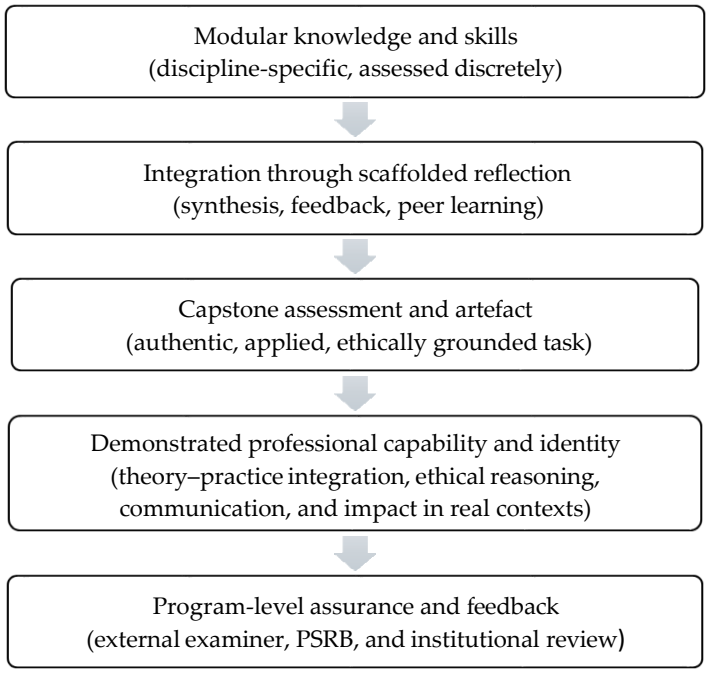
TABLE 1: Core dimensions of capstone assessment and associated indicators of achievement.

Dimension	Core question	Theoretical basis	Evidence of achievement
Inquiry design	Is the problem scoped and investigated using appropriate professional and research methods?	Constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011); Inquiry-based learning (Healey et al., 2014)	Clearly articulated question, justified design, feasible plan
Application of theory	Does the student integrate theoretical and empirical knowledge to inform action?	Experiential learning (Kolb, 1984); Situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991)	Demonstrated link between theory and practice decisions
Analysis and judgement	Are conclusions evidence-based and ethically reasoned?	Reflective practice (Schön, 1983); Critical-thinking frameworks	Transparent reasoning, warranted conclusions
Ethics and governance	Is the work compliant and reflexive about ethical implications?	Professional standards (ICO, 2023; NMC, 2018)	Documented ethical approval, reflection on dilemmas
Communication and impact	Are findings communicated effectively to professional audiences?	Authentic assessment (Gulikers et al., 2004; Wiggins, 1990)	Outputs accessible to stakeholders, actionable recommendations

Capstone assessments should also be viewed as part of a developmental pathway rather than as a single high-stakes event. They represent the culmination of learning that begins early in a program and gradually increases student independence, ethical responsibility, and analytical depth. Figure 1 below presents a conceptual model of capstone assessment as a developmental progression from modular learning to demonstrated professional capability. It illustrates how scaffolded learning, reflective practice, authentic assessment, and professional engagement progressively contribute to the consolidation and demonstration of professional capability across a program lifecycle.

When positioned as a developmental pathway, as illustrated in Figure 1, capstone assessment functions not only as a summative mechanism for evidencing integrative learning and professional capability but also as a diagnostic tool for curriculum improvement. Patterns identified through capstone projects, portfolios, and related assessment outputs can reveal gaps in earlier stages of the curriculum, such as limited ethical reasoning or weak evaluation design, allowing program teams to make targeted enhancements (Jessop & Tomas, 2017). This diagnostic value is increasingly recognized within WIL scholarship, where capstone assessment outputs provide insight into the extent to which programs successfully integrate academic learning, professional expectations, and external stakeholder engagement (Kay et al., 2019; Rook & Dean, 2023).

FIGURE 1: Developmental progression of capstone assessment from modular learning to professional capability.



Credibility also depends on robust assessment and calibration processes. Effective practice includes co-assessment by academic staff and professional practitioners, short calibration sessions using anonymized exemplars to benchmark expectations, and detailed assessment handbooks that bring together rubrics, timelines, and ethical guidance (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Hauhart & Grahe, 2015; Lester & Costley, 2010). These measures improve reliability, clarify standards, and provide the transparency required by PSRBs and external examiners. Calibration with practitioners also strengthens the WIL dimension by ensuring that academic judgement aligns with professional expectations.

EDUCATIONAL IMPACT OF CAPSTONE ASSESSMENT

Capstone assessments give students a structured opportunity to integrate knowledge accumulated over several years of study. In many professional degrees, this is the first time learners are required to integrate different areas of learning and to justify how academic theory informs professional decisions (Jessop & Tomas, 2017). This synthesis supports deep learning, long-term retention, and professional confidence (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Entwistle & Ramsden, 2015) and provides a more accurate indicator of professional capability than aggregating isolated module grades (Knight, 2002). For program teams, capstone assessments act as a mirror, revealing areas where understanding remains weak, such as ethics, evaluation design, or decision-making rationale, so that earlier modules can be strengthened through scaffolded enquiry and structured reflection (Healey et al., 2014). This creates an internal enhancement loop in which assessment outcomes directly inform curriculum review and improvement. This reflective loop is widely recognized in the non-placement WIL literature as a core mechanism for program renewal and capability development (Dean et al., 2020; Rook & Dean, 2023).

Reflection is central to professional competence. Schön (1983) described the reflective practitioner as someone who examines their own actions during and after practice. Capstone assessments formalize this process through reflective accounts and critical incident analyses that ask students to consider why they acted as they did and what this reveals about their judgement and professional values (Boud et al., 2013). This kind of reflection fosters ethical awareness and identity formation. Learners begin to view themselves as practitioners with responsibilities rather than as students completing tasks (Trede et al., 2012). Work-based projects and portfolios often require engagement with ethically complex situations, such as the use of authority, safeguarding, and data handling, and explicitly link responses to policy and professional standards (Eraut, 2004; NMC, 2018). This is particularly evident in policing, where reflective accounts serve as a statutory mechanism for evidencing safe, ethical, and legally compliant practice (Blockley et al., 2025; College of Policing, 2023).

Authentic assessment also enhances employability in ways that go beyond lists of transferable skills. When assessment mirrors real practice, students internalize professional standards and learn to present their contributions in sector-relevant terms (Gulikers et al., 2004; Wiggins, 1990). Research links capstone learning with increased confidence, agency, and perceived employability (Jackson, 2015, 2016; Jackson et al., 2022). Employers value graduates who can define problems, evaluate options using evidence, consider ethical implications, and communicate recommendations clearly (QAA, 2022; Trede et al., 2012). Capstone assessments also generate tangible artefacts such as work-based reports, evidence-based proposals, and competence portfolios that support job applications, appraisals, and professional registration (College of Policing, 2023; NMC, 2018; Social Work England, 2023). Non-placement WIL studies confirm that the artefacts students produce, such as reports, proposals, or portfolios, serve as credible indicators of workplace readiness when they are anchored in real organizational needs and stakeholder expectations (Dean et al., 2020).

Capstone projects and related assessment outputs can also function as mechanisms of knowledge exchange. Organizations may gain access to evidence-informed analysis, recommendations, and practice insights that they may not otherwise have the capacity to produce internally, while students develop contextual understanding, professional networks, and a stronger sense of professional identity and purpose. This reciprocal benefit aligns with national agendas relating to civic contribution, employer engagement, and applied research impact (Lester & Costley, 2010; Research England, 2021; Talbot, 2019). In policing, reducing abstraction and aligning capstone assessment with operational priorities has been shown to generate immediate organizational benefits, reinforcing capstone assessment as a mechanism for force-level improvement and evidence-based practice (Blockley et al., 2025).

Capstone assessment can support the development of assessment literacy through staged supervision and feedback. Through iterative proposal and review cycles, students develop the ability to interpret standards, evaluate their own progress, and apply feedback with increasing independence (Price et al., 2012). This process develops sustainable assessment skills and evaluative judgement that underpin continuing professional development (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Tai et al., 2018). Autonomy in topic selection supports intrinsic motivation and fulfils the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness identified in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As a result, engagement, persistence, and retention improve, enhancing both the student experience and institutional outcomes (OfS, 2023). WIL literature similarly identifies autonomy and stakeholder-engaged problem definition as key drivers of learner agency and professional identity development (Dean et al., 2020).

Capstone assessments also provide credible evidence for external scrutiny. Because they demonstrate achievement of program-level outcomes, they serve as key artefacts for examiners, PSRBs, and employer partners (College of Policing, 2023; QAA, 2022). Internally, thematic analysis of projects and reflective narratives provide valuable insight into trends in learning and professional practice. This positions the capstone assessment as a driver of continuous improvement (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Within WIL scholarship, capstone assessment is increasingly recognized as a strategic institutional asset and a source of evidence for governance, accreditation, and quality assurance, especially when it incorporates external stakeholder validation (Rook & Dean, 2023).

CAPSTONE ASSESSMENT: CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Despite their pedagogical and professional value, capstone assessments present several operational and institutional challenges. Supervisors must guide inquiry design, ensure ethical and legal compliance, monitor progress, and provide formative feedback across large and diverse cohorts (Hauhart & Grahe, 2015). These expectations create workload pressures and risk inconsistent student experiences. Scalable models rely on structured processes rather than informal or ad hoc supervision. Group or cluster supervision enables students working on related themes to share feedback and troubleshoot collectively. Digital milestone tracking allows early intervention when projects drift, and shared resource banks containing ethics forms, consent templates, and data checklists improve consistency. These measures protect staff capacity and enhance student feedback literacy by making supervision more dialogic and collaborative (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless & Boud, 2018; Tai et al., 2018). Within WIL research, structured supervision and milestone-based progression are considered core enabling features, particularly in non-placement WIL, where learning arises from iterative engagement with authentic organizational problems rather than extended immersion in the workplace (Dean et al., 2020; Rook & Dean, 2023).

Ensuring fairness and comparability is another persistent challenge. Because students choose project topics, variation in scope and context can lead to perceptions of inequity if moderation is weak (Knight, 2002; Sadler, 2009). Reliability can be strengthened through shared program-wide rubrics mapped to learning outcomes, pre-marking calibration sessions where assessors review exemplars together, and dual or co-marking arrangements involving both practitioners and academics (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Hauhart & Grahe, 2015). Some programs also use oral presentations or viva voce defenses to verify authenticity and reinforce professional accountability. In WIL contexts, this issue is heightened because authentic assessment depends on an external stakeholder and real organizational constraints; without consistent calibration, assessor expectations can drift between academically focused and workplace-focused interpretations of "quality."

A further tension for capstone assessments lies in balancing academic rigor with professional authenticity. Students may produce practice innovations valued by employers but underpinned by limited theoretical rationale, while theoretically robust projects can appear less relevant to immediate workplace needs (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Lester & Costley, 2010). Effective supervision and clear constructive alignment help resolve this, ensuring that applied outputs remain conceptually grounded (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Co-assessment with practitioners enhances professional credibility when accompanied by calibration and guidance to maintain academic consistency (Lester, 2020). The aim is not to trade rigor for relevance, but to show how relevance itself can be critically reasoned and evidence-informed. In policing, this tension is well-documented, officers produce analyses with strong operational insight but variable theoretical underpinning, mirroring the broader challenge of integrating evidence-based practice into professional education (Blockley et al., 2025). Capstone

assessments clearly expose this tension because they require students to justify their operational reasoning, considering academic, ethical, and statutory frameworks.

Ethical, legal, and safeguarding considerations are integral to work-based assessment approaches, such as capstone assessments. Projects that involve live organizational data or vulnerable individuals carry reputational and compliance risks (ICO, 2023; UKRIO, 2023). Students must understand confidentiality, consent, and data minimization, and view ethical approval as a professional responsibility rather than a bureaucratic process. Good practice includes requiring concise ethics and data management plans at the proposal stage, establishing clear escalation routes for sensitive cases, and assigning supervisors with relevant ethical or safeguarding expertise (Universities UK, 2019). Embedding these measures strengthens both student competence and institutional assurance. Within non-placement WIL, ethical governance must also account for the triadic relationship among the students, the university, and external stakeholders, a defining feature of WIL practice (Dean et al., 2020; Rook & Dean, 2023).

Capstone assessments must also be inclusive and accessible. Professional and work-based programs attract diverse cohorts, including mature, part-time, and disabled students, as well as those with caring responsibilities. Without flexible design, these learners can be disadvantaged by rigid timelines or inaccessible supervision arrangements (Hockings, 2010; Thomas et al., 2017). Inclusive assessment, aligned with Universal Design for Learning principles (Ajjawi et al., 2022; CAST, 2018), provides alternative but equivalent formats, flexible supervision options, and structured milestones that clarify expectations. Inclusivity is therefore a matter not only of fairness but also of retention, progression, and the diversity of the professional workforce (OfS, 2023). Non-placement WIL scholarship emphasizes inclusivity as a key strength, allowing students who cannot access traditional placements due to disability, geography, finances, or caring responsibilities to engage meaningfully in workplace-relevant learning through authentic tasks and external stakeholder engagement (Dean et al., 2020).

Strong governance is essential to sustain quality. Capstone assessments often carry substantial credit and are scrutinized by PSRBs, external examiners, and employer partners. Institutions must ensure that workload models, progression policies, and marking timelines reflect the distinctive demands of these assessments (College of Policing, 2023; QAA, 2022). Increasingly, capstone assessments serve as primary evidence within accreditation and review processes, positioning them not as peripheral tasks but as central mechanisms of institutional quality assurance and enhancement. This aligns with the wider WIL agenda, in which capstone assessments, particularly non-placement assessments, are recognized as strategic institutional assets because they demonstrate employer engagement, civic contribution, and strong impact without relying on traditional placement availability (Rook & Dean, 2023).

CASE EXAMPLE: POLICING EDUCATION

In England and Wales, initial police officer education is delivered through structured entry routes aligned to national professional standards set by the College of Policing. These include degree-based and work-based pathways, such as the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA), which combines academic study with operational deployment. Officers are required to demonstrate competence against the National Policing Curriculum, including evidence-based decision-making, ethical practice, and operational performance. Within this model, assessment must evidence both academic learning and workplace capability, creating a strong rationale for integrative, work-based assessment approaches such as capstone assessment.

The value of capstone assessment is evident in police education, particularly through the Work-Based Project and Professional Practice Portfolio used within the PCDA and related degree programs at Leeds Trinity University. Program-level evaluation and practitioner feedback indicate that capstone-style assessment, which combines a final-year work-based project with a longitudinal professional portfolio, can yield tangible benefits for students, employers, and the policing profession. Importantly, these capstone assessments align with the broader category of non-placement WIL, in which authentic engagement with an external stakeholder, in this case the police force, is foundational to the learning process (Dean et al., 2020; Rook & Dean, 2023). This case is presented to demonstrate how a capstone assessment can be operationalized within a professional education context.

Integrating Academic and Operational Learning

Program-level evaluation data and supervisor feedback from student officers indicate that investigating a live policing issue can deepen their understanding of how theory informs operational decision-making, especially in areas such as ethical use of authority, victim engagement, and partnership working. This reflects Schön's (1983) model of the reflective practitioner and supports Boud and Molloy's (2013) argument that assessment should build learners' capacity for evaluative judgement. Supervisors and force partners observe that defining a problem, analyzing evidence, and proposing improvements enhance officers' analytical, ethical, and problem-solving skills. Many projects have produced practical outcomes, improved deployment models, enhanced victim-support pathways, or stronger inter-agency protocols, demonstrating that the capstone serves not only as a measure of individual learning but also as a mechanism for organizational knowledge exchange (Lester & Costley, 2010; Talbot, 2019). These operational impacts mirror findings from the broader WIL literature, which demonstrate that authentic, externally situated inquiry produces meaningful benefits for host organizations (Lester & Costley, 2010; Talbot, 2019).

For learners, participation in capstone assessment can support the development of professional identity. Completing a substantial work-based enquiry allows officers to see themselves as reflective professionals capable of improving practice rather than simply implementing procedure. This mirrors wider research on identity development and early professional autonomy in regulated occupations (Eraut, 2004; Trede et al., 2012). Feedback from police force representatives and program-level evaluation indicates that graduates who complete capstone assessments demonstrate greater readiness for independent patrol and greater confidence in evidence-based decision-making than those trained primarily through procedural instruction (College of Policing, 2023; HMICFRS, 2024). This aligns with empirical analyses of policing education that emphasize authentic assessment, employer engagement, and reduced abstraction as drivers of professional competence (Blockley et al., 2025).

The Professional Practice Portfolio

The Professional Practice Portfolio provides evidence of operational competence in line with the National Policing Curriculum (College of Policing, 2023). It contains reflective accounts of critical incidents, mapped competencies, supervisor feedback, and examples of ethical reasoning in live contexts. Combined with the work-based project, it forms a synoptic assessment demonstrating that officers can think critically, apply theory, act lawfully and ethically, and evaluate outcomes in real time. In WIL terms, the portfolio represents sustained engagement with workplace expectations, structured reflection, and collaboration with an external stakeholder, core features of non-placement WIL models (Rook & Dean, 2023).

Responding To Policy Reform

Recent policy shifts away from the PCDA as the default entry route and toward modular, non-degree pathways (College of Policing, 2024; Home Office, 2024) create uncertainty but not redundancy. The need to evidence professional capability, ethical judgement, and critical analysis remains. Retaining integrative capstone assessments, such as a professional portfolio and a practice-improvement project aligned with national outcomes, would preserve the reflective, analytical, and professionally integrative dimensions of learning that distinguish professional education from technical training (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Lester, 2020).

Here, the policing case aligns with broader WIL scholarship that positions capstone assessments as scalable, sustainable mechanisms for embedding authentic work engagement, even when traditional placements are constrained (Dean et al., 2020). Such a model could maintain parity of competence across routes while sustaining higher-order analytical reasoning and ethical accountability.

Institutional Learning and Enhancement

At the institutional level, a systematic review of capstone assessment outputs has supported continuous improvement in curriculum design, professional learning, and organizational practice. Recurring weaknesses in evaluation design prompted earlier, more explicit instruction in applied research methods. At the same time, repeated references to inter-agency data-sharing barriers were escalated as organizational rather than individual issues. The review of capstone assessment outputs has therefore been used not only to evaluate student achievement but also to identify systemic challenges and to inform curriculum revision and force-level improvement planning (Research England, 2021; QAA, 2022).

These findings reinforce the argument that capstone assessment functions both as an educational mechanism and as a tool for program evaluation and quality assurance. By demonstrating alignment among academic outcomes, professional standards, and practice impact, the capstone assessment provides universities and employers with a transparent, evidence-informed mechanism for improvement. This institutional function aligns with broader WIL literature, which identifies capstone projects and associated assessment outputs as important contributors to knowledge exchange and organizational learning beyond individual student outcomes (Lester & Costley, 2010; Rook & Dean, 2023; Talbot, 2019).

Integrative Implications for Professional Education

This paper extends existing work on capstone assessment and experiential learning by conceptualizing capstone assessment as a distinct program-level mechanism within non-placement WIL (Rook & Dean, 2023; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). It advances the argument that capstone assessment can be understood as actively structuring the integration of academic knowledge, professional capability, and relevance to external stakeholders, positioning assessment itself as a mechanism of learning within WIL rather than a retrospective measure (Dean et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2022). The paper further proposes a set of design principles and evaluative dimensions that operationalize capstone assessment in practice, providing a framework that is pedagogically robust, aligned with professional and regulatory expectations, and consistent with established principles of authentic and programmatic assessment (Schuwirth & van der Vleuten, 2011; Villarroel et al., 2018). The policing example illustrates a broader principle that the capstone assessment embodies a model of professional education in which knowledge, ethics, and practice are inseparable. It addresses a key

limitation of modular curricula by creating a culminating point in which learners integrate their knowledge and demonstrate how it informs their professional judgement (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Jessop & Tomas, 2017). It also supports the transition from student to autonomous practitioner, someone able to justify decisions, reflect on outcomes, and act responsibly in complex contexts (Eraut, 2004; Trede et al., 2012).

Curricularly, capstone assessment functions as a narrative and integrative mechanism that clarifies the purpose and progression of a program. Constructive alignment ensures that program outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment form a coherent pathway toward professional capability (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Pedagogically, capstone assessment can support transformative learning (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) by prompting students to critically examine their assumptions, professional values, and approaches to practice.

Employability is reframed through this integrative model. Instead of abstract claims of "work readiness," capstone assessments provide authentic evidence of performance. Graduates have already negotiated organizational constraints, ethical tensions, and stakeholder needs (Jackson et al., 2022; Rae, 2007; Yorke, 2006). For employers and regulators, this evidence demonstrates not only competence but also judgement, accountability, and reflective agency (College of Policing, 2023; NMC, 2018; Social Work England, 2023). This aligns with WIL frameworks that define employability not as a set of abstract skills but as demonstrated performance in authentic, externally contextualized tasks (Campbell & Eady, 2014; Dean et al., 2020).

Institutionally, capstone assessments offer triangulated assurance of quality. They demonstrate coherence between program outcomes, PSRB requirements, and graduate performance, while generating data for enhancement and public-value reporting (OfS, 2023; QAA, 2022; Research England, 2021). In outcome-focused regulatory environments, such integrative evidence is increasingly indispensable.

CONCLUSION

Capstone assessment provides a structured, authentic means of evidencing the synthesis of academic learning, work-based practice, ethical reasoning, and reflective capability. In applied fields such as policing, nursing, education, and social work, this integration is vital because graduates enter roles that demand accountability and professional judgement from the outset (College of Policing, 2023; Eraut, 1994; NMC, 2018). Within a WIL framework, capstone assessments can also be understood as a mature form of non-placement WIL, in which authentic inquiry, external stakeholder engagement, and real-world constraints constitute the core conditions for learning (Dean et al., 2020; Rook & Dean, 2023).

Capstone assessment, therefore, serves three interlinked purposes. Educationally, they consolidate learning and develop reflective, ethically aware practitioners (Boud et al., 2013; Schön, 1983; Trede et al., 2012). Professionally, they generate credible, employability-focused evidence valued by employers and regulators (Jackson et al., 2022; OfS, 2023; QAA, 2022). Institutionally, they provide robust evidence of alignment between curriculum intent, professional standards, and graduate achievement (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Research England, 2021). Across the WIL literature, this triad mirrors long-standing arguments that authentic assessment must be grounded in genuine workplace relevance, collaborative problem-solving with external partners, and tasks that meaningfully reflect professional realities (Campbell & Eady, 2014; Lester & Costley, 2010; Rook & Dean, 2023).

As policing reform continues, retaining integrative and reflective assessment is essential. Removing these elements risks reducing education to procedural training and weakening professional culture and public trust (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Eraut, 2004). The policing curriculum itself emphasizes workplace-aligned learning, evidence-based decision-making, and reduced abstraction as foundations of professional competence (Blockley et al., 2025). For universities and professional partners, the implication is clear; the capstone assessment should remain central to program design and quality assurance. Positioning the capstone explicitly as a form of non-placement WIL also clarifies its role in sustaining employer engagement and in ensuring that assessment continues to reflect operational complexity, even as entry routes diversify.

Future research in capstone assessment should focus on empirically testing the conceptual framework presented in this paper across different professional disciplines and institutional contexts. This includes evaluating the extent to which capstone assessment contributes to measurable employability outcomes, professional identity development, and organizational impact. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable for examining how capstone experiences influence early-career performance and professional decision-making. Further work is needed to explore how capstone assessment can be adapted across diverse delivery models, including non-degree and modular professional pathways.

To sustain its value, institutions should embed capstone assessments as program-level requirements; invest in supervision capacity, calibration, and ethical governance; design inclusive, scaffolded pathways for diverse learners; and systematically review assessment outputs to inform curriculum and organizational improvement. These enhancements align with WIL research showing that quality, sustainability, and fairness depend on structured supervision, external stakeholder involvement, and transparent processes for managing risk and variation (Rook & Dean, 2023). In this sense, the capstone assessment is not simply a concluding academic requirement. Rather, it provides a structured mechanism through which students demonstrate integrated professional capability, ethical reasoning, and applied judgement in ways that are visible and meaningful to employers, regulators, and higher education institutions.

DISCLOSURE OF THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

Generative AI tools, (Grammarly) were used in a limited capacity to support language refinement, editorial clarity, proofreading, and formatting during manuscript preparation. All conceptual development, interpretation, analysis, argument construction, and academic content were produced solely by the author. No generative AI tools were used to generate scholarly arguments, literature summaries, research findings, or interpretive conclusions.

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International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning
ISSN: 2538-1032
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