

Practice based learning example: Brief Cases at Middlesex

MA Global Governance and Sustainable Development

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Introduction

This non-work based practical learning opportunity is offered through one of the existing 20 credit modules (SSC4031 Work experience – short placement) in the Department of Law and Politics. Tailored for the students on the MA Global Governance and Sustainable Development it has been developed in collaboration with the Barnet based The Heaven Company London Ltd. While The Heaven Company have been running the innovative Brief Cases initiative with a number universities prior to Middlesex, Brief Cases at Middlesex is the first postgraduate level iteration and has been specifically tailored to meet the learning outcomes of the MA Global Governance and Sustainable Development. It was first run for the 2018/2019 cohort of students. The aim of Brief Cases is to help bridge the gap between academic study and commercial reality. Hundreds of undergraduate students undertake a Brief Cases project each year, the learning and interactions are delivered in the classroom at each of the participating universities (The Heaven Company 2018).

Brief Cases at Middlesex provides students the opportunity to work to a brief set by a sustainability consultancy – The Heaven Company – providing a realistic setting for transferring some of the knowledge and skills that students have learned in taught modules to a professional task. The briefs reflect small and medium size businesses' needs in developing environmentally and socially sound business practices and solutions and the link to Programme content is supported by asking students to explicitly relate each outcome and offered solution to the brief to specific UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Working to a Brief Cases brief therefore requires students to think innovatively and to apply the theoretical and policy knowledge that they have gained in their taught modules to a real-life context.

From knowledge acquisition to creative application and evaluation

Brief Cases is delivered by The Heaven Company through three contact sessions that take place on the University's Hendon campus. Beyond the introductory session, sessions are student led and based on students presenting work to receive feedback from The Heaven Company. This brings a strong skills orientation into the module. While the content of what students present is crucial, they are also required to present it in a manner that is accessible, engaging and focussed. The two briefing sessions are aimed at supporting independent work and students are encouraged to identify problems and challenges and share them to seek support and to achieve a focus on problem solving. This means that students also learn from each other. The openness to engage directly with the business seems to encourage confidence and the opportunity to talk about an idea, project or product for which students feel strong ownership, and this has elicited some inspired classroom contributions. The first run of Brief Cases at Middlesex suggests that it is well poised to support and accommodate alternative learning styles, thereby increasing belonging and engagement, uncovering and enabling potential and supporting self-reflection, all central components of embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum (EEDC - Hanesworth, 2015; Fry et al. 2015). Independent work on briefs is intended to provide students with an opportunity to expand their skills and understanding of the sustainability challenges and potential responses in the private sector, to develop the kind of independent initiative required at workplace, and to meet industry requirements and standards in output. Students also get an opportunity to receive realistic feedback from industry representatives and to interact with a potential employer. As a final output, students devise a business report within which they present their response to the brief; a practical project, policy or an innovative product. Brief Cases therefore constitutes an effort to address the identified private sector sustainability skills gap (e.g. Drayson 2016), where lack of appropriate skills and perspective has been deemed to significantly hinder the implementation of important policy instruments such as environmental management systems, environmental impact assessment and environmental, social and governance standards. So far students have relished the opportunity to work outside the academic format, to creatively devise projects, products and policies that could potentially help a business of their choice to become more sustainable.

The non-placement placement

From student feedback I know that the availability of work placement modules on the politics MA programmes constitutes a significant reason for choosing to study with us. But a significant obstacle to students completing these modules is the difficulty of obtaining placements within suitable organisations, especially for our predominantly international student cohorts who cannot depend on contacts or previous employers in the UK. A large proportion of Middlesex students is from outside the UK – according to THE in 2017, Middlesex was the 15th most international university in the world with 46% of the student body consisting of international students (The Times 16.5.2018). All this diversity is both a challenge and a resource in the classroom context, making it all the more important to pay close attention to the central themes of embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum. Brief Cases at Middlesex does not provide an opportunity to be physically placed within a work-place, and some students find this disappointing. It nevertheless establishes a link to industry integrating a contextual understanding into students' learning experience and developing important practical skills. In the words of one of the students in the first cohort:

“Unfortunately, since there was no need to be present at the company there is no real way to evaluate the different organizational structures or professional practices of The Heaven Company. However, through this module I was able to develop my own personal professional practice because this is an area that truly interests me, and I can see myself working in something related to this profession. Throughout my experience in the module, I had to intrinsically approach to understand the interaction of my project and its people; create a clear linkage between my project and where and who to apply it with.”

References:

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Hanesworth, P. (2015) Embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum: A model for learning and teaching practitioners. York: Higher Education Academy.

The Haven Company (2018) Brief Cases linking business and university. Web page available online at: <http://www.brief-cases.com/>