

Using Live Briefs in Marketing Education: How to Increase Student Employability by Blending Sustainability and Internationalization



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Learning Objectives:

This chapter presents the pedagogy case study of introducing live briefs in a master marketing course curriculum. The learning objectives are as follows:

1. Recognize the benefits and challenges of introducing live briefs in the marketing curriculum.
2. Identify and enhance the development of student employability skills by using live briefs.
3. Plan more engaging, enriching and elevated learning and teaching experiences with live briefs.
4. Critically reflect on current marketing education practices by considering live brief-based module design.
5. Critically analyse the module delivery surrounding campaign strategy development for international, sustainable brands.

1 Introduction

This chapter critically reflects on a postgraduate module's pedagogy and learning practices in which international sustainable brands provided live briefs for the students to work on integrated marketing communications (IMC) strategy. It draws on the 30-credit module called Developing Advertising and Promotional Strategies that the authors have re-designed and delivered since September 2018. To date, over 200

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students in MA Strategic Marketing and MA in Strategic Advertising and Marketing Communications (University of Greenwich, UK) took this module.

Marketing is defined as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (American Marketing Association, 2017). Therefore, when theoretical approaches to the teaching of marketing are used, they are invariably designed to meet intrinsically practical ends (Bove & Davis, 2009). The University of Greenwich is one of the first universities to offer a specialist degree in marketing communications, of which postgraduate degree courses provide a wide range of modules such as Digital Marketing, Creative Content, and Data Analytics.

However, teaching and learning methods may not have been as diverse as the range of modules. For example, case studies were most frequently used to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the extant curriculum. However, traditional case studies are often seen as one-dimensional, static, and inadequate simulations of real-world problems in the marketing profession (Burns, 1990). On the other hand, the benefits of live case studies and client-sponsored projects in the context of marketing education have been well established from the perspective of a student, educator, and client (i.e., Elam & Spotts, 2004; Gremler et al., 2000; Kennedy et al., 2001; Lopez & Lee, 2005; Razzouk et al., 2003). The authors, therefore, aimed to diversify teaching and learning methods by introducing live briefs set by real-life clients.

When we pursued potential clients to collaborate in this module, we focused on identifying sustainable companies, ideally with a non-UK brand origin. This also aligned with the University of Greenwich’s strategic values on sustainability, inclusivity, and diversity. The University of Greenwich won first place in People and Planet’s University Green League (2012) and the Times Higher Award for Outstanding Contribution to Sustainable Development (2013). The University’s commitment to sustainability was at the core of our module re-design process. In addition, the increasingly diverse and international student body in our MA marketing division is expected to find it easier to identify with international brands.

From the outset of the module development, our aim was threefold: first, to bring sustainable consumption to the core of marketing education; second, to develop graduate employability by facilitating real-life learning experiences involving clients; and third, to diversity and internationalize curriculum by introducing non-domestic, sustainable brands as clients.

In the years 2018 and 2019, we worked with the brand EQUA. Originated from Slovenia, EQUA quickly became a synonym for eco-friendly, reusable products (Novčić & Šegota, 2012, 2014). The brand’s mission is to change consumer behaviour toward environmentally friendly sustainable consumption since its establishment in 2010. The mission is reflected in the brand’s slogan, “For your health and nature’s wealth”, and more than 4 million sold products worldwide so far (MyEQUA, 2018).

In 2020, the brief was provided by the Serbian brand Koozmetik. Established in 2012, the brand represents all-natural handmade cosmetics. All products are made from top-quality natural ingredients, following unique recipes and the highest production standards. Depending on the application, production technology, and product stability, all products belong to one of the three categories of natural products: 100%

natural, 99% natural, and 89% natural. These categories testify to the brand's mission of "less is more", i.e., making cosmetics significantly simplified in terms of the number of products, designs, and ingredients.

2 Employability Discourse in Higher Education

Extant literature on employability in higher education (HE) has focused on how different disciplines face a considerable challenge in terms of responding to the increasingly prevalent employability agenda in HE (Chadha & Toner, 2017; Clarke, 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Turner, 2014). Marketing degree courses are not an exception to this. Employability is not a new issue for higher education. As long as 1963, the Robbins Report highlighted the need for graduates to make an effective contribution to the labour market (Yoon, 2019). However, since the 1990s, there has been an unprecedented level of external pressure for HE to prove their graduates add value to the economy (Dearing, 1997).

The definition and the model of employability have shifted throughout history and continue to be contested. Initial employability models focused on developing knowledge and skills for a student to gain graduate-level employment and meet employers' needs (Turner, 2014). However, Holmes (2011) argued that the focus should be on action rather than skills. Indeed, many within the HE sector increasingly see the 'skills agenda' as narrowly conceived, relatively mechanical, and inimical to HE purposes (Yorke & Knight, 2006). For example, the 2006 Leitch Review of Skills pos-its more focused attention on employability while identifying the need to develop the so-called 'high skills' in graduates to facilitate businesses to compete in the global economy (Lee et al., 2016).

The most commonly accepted definition of employability is as follows: "a set of achievements, understanding and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation" (Yorke & Knight, 2007: 158). The term 'chosen occupation' indicates that employability is a wide-ranging and evolving narrative. According to Helyer and Lee (2014), today's graduates need to hone their profiles and evolve to suit changing circumstances because it has become increasingly difficult for many graduates to enter their 'chosen occupation' in recent years.

Currently, UK HEs need to publish data on graduates' employment rates, which shows how the employability agenda in HE is focused on the result of job realization (Lee et al., 2016). It indicates that the current employability agenda seems less concerned with developing employable graduates than employed graduates (Italics are the authors' emphasis). Here, what is undoubtedly clear is that employability is an ongoing debate that must develop with the market, society, and the global situation (Heyler & Lee, 2014). Employability thus concerns the government, graduate employers, higher education providers, students, and graduates alike.

In terms of the employability framework, the USEM account of employability (Knight & Yorke, 2004) is one of the most well-known and widely-used

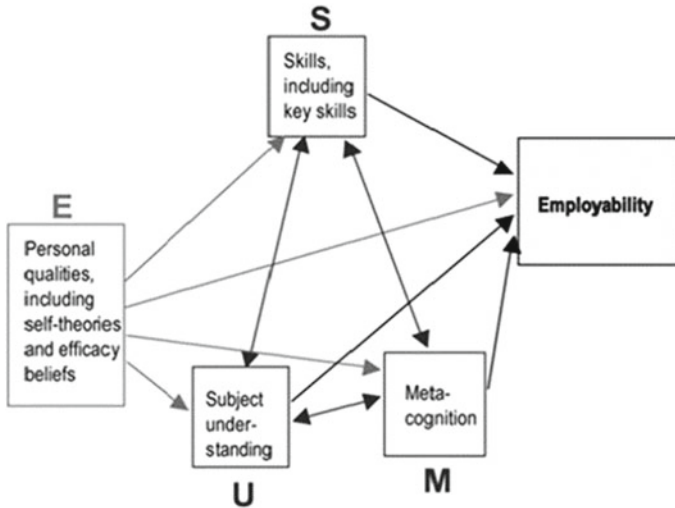


Fig. 1 USEM Model of employability. 2004 Source Adapted from Knight and Yorke (2004)

models in this field (Pool & Sewell, 2007: 278). USEM stands for the following inter-related employability components: understanding, skills, efficacy, beliefs, and metacognition (see Fig. 1).

Through the lens of the USEM model, all four inter-related components contribute to graduate employability. However, the pedagogical framework heavily relying on traditional case studies somewhat lacked skills (S) and meta-cognition (M). For example, as opposed to traditional case studies, live case studies and client-sponsored projects facilitate teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills. Besides, in response to live briefs, students can engage in higher-order thinking that involves active control over the thinking processes involved in learning. The latter is an excellent example of what is referred to as ‘high skills’ in the aforementioned Leitch Review. Tasks such as planning how to approach a live brief, evaluating progress toward completing group work, and critically reflecting on one’s practice are meta-cognitive in nature. Such meta-cognition activities enable students to take an active part in ‘learning by doing’, better understand themselves about learning, and develop employability for a better chance of acquiring their ‘chosen occupation’.

3 Sustainable Consumption in Marketing Education

In order to make the module as practice-oriented as possible, the authors’ embedded contemporary issues in marketing into the module. This was, and still is, tackling climate change issues with consumer behaviour to lower carbon emissions and waste.

Following the Climate Change Act 2008, the latter has been high on the UK government's agenda, as was the case with many other countries worldwide. Moreover, numerous calls have been made to change consumer behaviour to benefit the environment. Consumers are, however, often indifferent toward the effects of their consumption because, as human beings, we tend to relate to the issue if we see a direct impact on the individual while turning a 'blind eye' for something that is not happening 'in our backyard'. Furthermore, changing consumer behaviour is highly complex, diverse, and context-dependent (Young et al., 2010).

There is significant pressure on UK consumers, as they are seen as responsible for throwing away over a million tons of plastic by 2030 (Moss, 2018). Meanwhile, marketing communications are known to influence consumers' attitudes and behaviours, and therefore is seen as a tool to aid in sustainable consumption of the future. Therefore, it is vital to educate young marketing professionals about sustainable consumption and communication tools to change consumer behaviour. Considering the UK Department of Education's (DfE) initiative and demand for the educational institutions to meet the DfE policy on sustainability and education of young people, the authors re-designed the module to target postgraduate students whose chosen occupations will involve marketing communications.

4 Feedback from the Students

Listening to students, acting on students' feedback, and involving students in the process (Cook-Sather, 2001) is very important at the University of Greenwich. We 'listen to student voices' using the EvaSys student survey, which asks students to assess various aspects of the program's modules quantitatively and qualitatively.

Over the last three years, students have found this module helpful in enhancing the skills and knowledge they would need after graduation and challenging them to do their best work. Both could be attributed to students working with live briefs and international clients, creating an environment similar to the business environment they would enter after graduation. Students value that this module is "by far the most practical and most engaging" (student opinion, EvaSys, 2018/19) in the program. They recognize its employability agenda because "being able to work with a live brief gives a real insight to what students will be dealing with in the future" (student opinion, EvaSys, 2018/19). Moreover, they praised the teaching team for making the subject exciting and include viewpoints from a range of perspectives and backgrounds. They very often commented on teaching teams' characteristics, emphasizing making the content attractive, "bringing lots of personal business experience", which resulted in many students being "more passionate about marketing and advertising" (student opinion, EvaSys, 2020/21). Overall, one of the most frequent comments provided by students about the module, in general, is something along the lines of "this is by far my favourite class" (student opinion, EvaSys, 2019/20) and "I am looking forward to it every week" (student opinion, EvaSys, 2020/21).

However, the teaching team is not observing the module through ‘rose-coloured glasses’ as there is still room for improvement. Over the years, students have reported that working in a group is demanding and that many issues would be overcome if the module would run over more than just six weeks. Students reported that more time would enable them “better time management” (student opinion, EvaSys, 2020/21). Having more time to manage work in groups could also contribute to making informed choices grounded in objective research instead of being influenced by group members’ subjective opinions. Many students were struggling with setting boundaries between objective and subjective decision-making. Also, many complained about an opinionated individual taking the lead and steering the client pitch into a direction to demonstrate and develop their skills, with little room for others in the group to do the same. Better time management is essential for resolving such issues because students would have more time to improve their analytical skills, better understand a subject matter, and have stimulative debates informed by critical thinking (Gundala et al., 2014).

5 Limitations and Future Research Avenues

Experiences of re-designing and delivering Developing Advertising and Promotional Strategies using live briefs are not perfectly positive. They have limitations and many benefits that need to be highlighted and further investigated.

Firstly, throughout our teaching of the abovementioned module, using live briefs and client work in the marketing education curriculum was exceptionally beneficial for enhancing student engagement. However, an in-depth understanding of students’ first-hand experiences is needed to investigate the benefits and challenges of problem-solving, collaborative working, presenting, consumer research, creative planning, media planning, concept development, testing, and pitching to the client. A better understanding of those experiences would contribute to higher satisfaction of prospective students in the future and open more avenues for qualitative research.

Secondly, live briefs and client work of non-domestic, sustainable brands in the marketing education curriculum also provide a stimulating learning environment for the teaching staff. While it is challenging to secure working relationships with new brands in different cultures, it has been one of the most stimulating learning experiences for the teaching team. This chapter provided some initial insight into the feelings of the teaching staff in their reflection on working with live briefs. However, more research is needed to fully understand and capture the learning and teaching experiences of the teaching staff and their motivation to use live briefs in the curriculum.

Thirdly, such live briefs increase graduate employability as the work environment simulates real-life situation. Both teaching and learning theory (i.e., the USEM model) and student feedback support this argument. As discussed earlier, employability is a wide-ranging and evolving narrative, which requires graduates to be more

resilient and adaptable. The recent COVID-19 pandemic poses an even further challenge in a job market where graduates often find themselves lacking in ‘experience’ that prospective employers require from them. With the pandemic challenging the delivery of learning experiences worldwide, new research is needed to address the impacts of the pandemic on student’s employability.

International, sustainable brands are often looking for opportunities to enter the UK market, which provides a unique opportunity for marketing educators and students. Our experiences show that the students find sustainable brands more relatable because of brand values and lifestyle. From the brands’ perspective, they can gain valuable insight into young consumers’ needs and wants in a foreign market. Working with sustainable brands through live briefs provides a mutually beneficial and highly effective learning environment in marketing education, enhancing the student experience and graduate employability. These propositions need to be further investigated to better understand the brand’s decision to collaborate with higher educators and students.

6 Lessons Learned

We present three lessons derived by critically reflecting on our experiences of re-designing and delivering Developing Advertising and Promotional Strategies.

Students feel more engaged with the module if they are presented with real-life experience. This module was developed to facilitate students’ understanding of theories and practices in advertising and marketing communications. It is perceived as successful and ‘a parade horse’ in the Department for engaging students with academic literature and industry brief. Enhanced student experience and high satisfaction with the module were well demonstrated for the past three years of running this module. Lately, many more modules were ‘enriched’ with live briefs in the Department, testifying successful teaching practices set by the authors.

Live briefs provide a stimulating learning environment for the teaching staff, too. The staff can diversify the curriculum by introducing (non)domestic, sustainable brands. Securing working relationships with international brands may be challenging; however, it can also be one of the most stimulating learning experiences: the staff can learn about new cultures, new brands, new production methods etc. and use newly acquired knowledge to discuss industry-led knowledge progression.

Lastly, it is strongly recommended that such a module allows an adequate number of contact hours and module delivery length. For the first two years, this module had to be delivered intensively in six weeks due to the timetabling issues. When we changed the module content across twelve weeks, it enabled students to have a more informed, analytical, and critical decision-making process. Group work was also more effectively organized; for example, allocating the team members based on their skillsets, preference, and compatibility into groups rather than leaving them to form groups based on convenience or friendship groups. It also allowed students to learn time management skills and organizational skills.

Acknowledgements This chapter draws on the authors' experiences of delivering the given module for three years since September 2018. Out of the three semesters across 2018–2021, the first year's experience was presented (Title: Working towards sustainable consumption) at the Chartered Business School (CABS) Learning, Teaching and Student Experience (LTSE) Conference, University of Manchester, on 14th May 2019.

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Clients/Brands' Websites

EQUA: <https://myequa.com/>
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Sustainability: University of Greenwich

<https://blogs.gre.ac.uk/greengreenwich/>

Additional Readings

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