

Reviewed Article

From Participation to Practice: Embedding Experiential Human Rights Education Through the Model UN and the UPR Project at BCU

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Abstract

This article presents a reflective and practice-based analysis of the Model United Nations (Model UN) and Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Project at Birmingham City University, highlighting their role as an innovative approach to human rights education within legal studies. Against the backdrop of ongoing debates about curriculum reform and experiential learning in UK legal education, the article examines how simulation-based teaching methods can enhance students' engagement with international human rights law, diplomacy, and accountability. Drawing on pedagogical theory and critical reflection, it explores the project's design, intended learning outcomes, and potential to foster legal and civic competencies such as critical thinking, advocacy, and global awareness. It argues that initiatives such as Model UN and the UPR Project enable law students to move beyond abstract legal theory toward practical, values-based learning, preparing them for roles as globally aware, socially conscious legal professionals. The article concludes with recommendations for embedding experiential learning into the human rights curriculum as a strategy to enhance student engagement, civic literacy, and the professional relevance of legal education.

Keywords: Experiential learning, legal education, human rights, Model United Nations, Universal Periodic Review, clinical legal education.

1. Introduction

Legal education in the United Kingdom is undergoing a significant period of transition. The introduction of the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE), the growing emphasis on skills-based learning, and renewed calls for curriculum reform have prompted legal educators to rethink traditional approaches to pedagogy. Against this backdrop, human rights law, a subject often taught in doctrinal, text-heavy formats, presents both a challenge and an opportunity. How can law students be taught to engage critically, practically, and ethically with issues that are at once global, contested, and deeply human? This article argues that experiential learning provides a powerful framework for bridging the gap between legal theory and practice in human rights education. It explores two innovative initiatives at Birmingham City University (BCU) that exemplify this approach: a Model United Nations (Model UN) programme embedded in undergraduate and postgraduate law teaching, and an extracurricular Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Project coordinated by the university's Centre for Human Rights. Both

initiatives place students in simulated or real-world roles that demand critical thinking, research, advocacy, and collaboration. They create space for law students to engage with the processes of international law not as abstract observers but as active participants.

The Model UN programme at BCU is taught to undergraduate (LLB) and postgraduate (LLM) law students using the fictional but realistic crisis in the state of *Shunibia*, a conflict scenario that raises questions of sovereignty, intervention, and human rights accountability. The undergraduate simulation is framed around the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), emphasising diplomacy, peace and security, and the legal dimensions of humanitarian intervention. The postgraduate version draws on the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), encouraging students to engage with international human rights law, soft law instruments, and state reporting mechanisms. Both versions of the simulation aim to equip students with transferable skills and expose them to the complexities of international decision-making, law, and politics.

Alongside this curriculum-embedded approach, BCU also supports the 'UPR Project at BCU' (UPR Project), an extracurricular initiative that enables students to contribute to stakeholder reports submitted to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).¹ Operated through the Centre for Human Rights, the project recruits under- and postgraduate law students as research assistants, trains them in international human rights methodology, and credits them on reports that are ultimately cited by the United Nations. While not assessed or credit-bearing, the project functions as a co-curricular space where students collaborate with academic staff on real-world outputs, gaining insight into legal research, international advocacy, and the role of civil society in human rights monitoring.

This article presents a reflective and practice-based analysis of these two interlinked initiatives, situating them within the broader literature on legal pedagogy, experiential learning, and human rights education. It draws on educational theory, including the work of John Dewey, David Kolb, Donald Schön, and Paulo Freire, as well as critical legal scholarship on student-centred and values-driven learning. It also reflects on the institutional context in which these projects have evolved, including the challenges of resourcing, assessment, and alignment with professional standards in legal education.

While the article does not include formal student evaluation data, it is informed by the author's direct teaching experience and reflective practice over several years of running these simulations and co-leading the UPR Project. The focus is not on empirical measurement but on conceptual insight: how do these pedagogical interventions work, what do they aim to achieve, and what can they offer to wider conversations about the future of human rights law teaching?

The reflections presented in this article are informed by over a decade of teaching experience in international law at BCU. The author currently serves as the module convenor for the LLM International Human Rights module and has taught on the LLB United Nations Law and Practice module and its predecessor courses since 2014. She is also a core contributor of the UPR Project team at BCU's Centre for Human Rights. Since 2019, the UPR Project has submitted 53 stakeholder reports to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); the author has led 30 of these which underscores her substantial role in shaping the project's output.² Over 100 students have been involved as research assistants across these reports, each credited for their contribution. These

¹ The UPR Project at BCU is led by Dr Alice Storey, Dr Amna Nazir, and Professor Jon Yorke. For more information on the project see <www.bcu.ac.uk/research/law/centre-for-human-rights/consultancy/upr-project-at-bcu/country-specific-consultancy>.

² *ibid.*

experiences provide the foundation for this reflective, practice-based study of how experiential learning can be integrated into human rights legal education.

The structure of the article is as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of experiential and critical legal education, highlighting their relevance to human rights law. This is followed by section 3 which offers an in-depth account of the Model UN programme, including its design, structure, and simulation of the Shunibia crisis. Section 4 turns to the UPR Project, discussing its rationale, process, and significance as an extracurricular research opportunity. Section 5 offers pedagogical reflections on both initiatives, while Section 6 addresses the practical and institutional challenges of sustaining experiential models of teaching. The article concludes in Section 7 with recommendations for embedding simulation and student-led research more systematically into the human rights law curriculum.

2. Theoretical Framework: Experiential Learning and Critical Legal Pedagogy

Pedagogical innovation in legal education often begins with a question: what does it mean to *learn law*? Traditionally, legal education in the UK has emphasised doctrinal knowledge, case analysis, and the passive absorption of legal rules. While this model has its strengths, particularly in developing technical precision and analytical reasoning, it often struggles to engage students in the real-world application of law or in the moral, political, and social dimensions of legal practice. This is particularly true in the context of human rights law, which is normative, internationalised, and often abstract in undergraduate or postgraduate curricula. Experiential learning offers a pedagogical alternative, one that places student activity, reflection, and personal engagement at the centre of the learning process.

Experiential learning is rooted in the work of educational theorists such as Dewey, Kolb, and Schön. Dewey emphasised the idea that education must be grounded in experience, not simply passive experience, but experience that prompts active reflection, problem-solving, and engagement with the world.³ Kolb developed this further in his experiential learning cycle, which identifies four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation.⁴ In legal education, this translates into a cycle where students encounter legal problems in context (e.g., through a simulation), reflect on their responses, connect those experiences to broader legal principles, and refine their skills through further application.⁵

Schön's concept of the "reflective practitioner" is also vital here. He argued that professionals do not simply apply knowledge; they navigate uncertainty, make value-laden judgments, and learn through practice.⁶ Law students, therefore, should be trained not only in what the law *is*, but in how to think critically and ethically about the law in action. This reflective process is integral to shaping professional legal identity through simulated experience.⁷

³ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (Macmillan 1938).

⁴ David A Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Prentice Hall 1984).

⁵ Lawrence Susskind and Jason Coburn, 'Using Simulations to Teach Negotiation: Pedagogical Theory and Practice', in Michael Wheeler (ed), *Teaching Negotiation: Ideas and Innovations* (PON Books 2000), 63–64.

⁶ Donald A Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Basic Books 1983).

⁷ Richard Grimes and Jenny Gibbons, 'Assessing Experiential Learning – Us, Them and the Others', (2016) 23:1 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education.

In the last two decades, experiential education has gained traction across legal education globally. In the UK, the Legal Education and Training Review (LETR 2013)⁸ and the development of the SQE⁹ have renewed focus on employability, practical skills, and reflective competencies. In this context, experiential learning is no longer confined to legal clinics or professional training programmes. It now includes mooting, negotiation, mediation, placements, and increasingly, simulation-based learning, a form of experiential learning where students adopt professional roles in constructed or real-world scenarios.¹⁰ Simulations are especially powerful in fields like public international law and human rights, where traditional case-based teaching may not adequately capture the complexity of law in its operational setting.¹¹

Alongside experiential learning theory, this article is informed by critical legal pedagogy, a field concerned not just with how students learn law, but *what* they are taught and *why*. Critical legal pedagogy is rooted in a dissatisfaction with legal education as overly doctrinal, depoliticised, and detached from questions of justice, identity, and power. Scholars such as Bell Hooks, Paulo Freire, and Stephen Brookfield have argued that education must be transformative, dialogical, and grounded in learners' lived experiences.¹² In legal education, this has led to increasing interest in decolonising the curriculum, challenging the myth of legal neutrality, and teaching law as a human, value-laden enterprise.

Human rights law is uniquely well-positioned for such an approach. It is a subject that demands ethical engagement, transnational thinking, and critical reflection on both the power and limits of law. Yet, human rights can also be taught in narrow, technocratic ways, reduced to treaty provisions, case law, and institutional architecture, often without space for students to reflect on context, critique, or lived impact.¹³ Experiential learning provides a way to reintroduce those dimensions. When students simulate the UN Security Council or Human Rights Council, they must grapple not only with legal frameworks, but with geopolitics, diplomacy, and the inherent tensions between sovereignty, justice, and human dignity.

The use of simulation in legal and human rights education has been explored in recent scholarship. Augustine Hammond and Craig Albert contend that "the MUN can enhance student skills, especially higher ordered skills that are essential to employability"¹⁴ and Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe argue

⁸ Jane Ching, Paul Maharg, Avrom Sherr, and Julian Webb, 'Legal Education and Training Review: A Five-Year Retro/Prospective' (2018) 52(4) *The Law Teacher* 384–96.

⁹ Dawn Jones, 'Legal Skills and the SQE: Confronting the Challenge Head On' (2018) 53(1) *The Law Teacher* 35–48.

¹⁰ Ben Waters, 'A Part to Play': The Value of Role-Play Simulation in Undergraduate Legal Education' (2016) 50(2) *The Law Teacher* 172–94.

¹¹ Victor Asal and Elizabeth Blake have argued that "this sort experiential learning allows students to apply and test what they learn in their textbooks, and often helps to increase students' understanding of the subtleties of theories or concepts and draw in students who can be alienated by traditional teaching approaches." Victor Asal and Elizabeth Blake, 'Creating Simulations for Political Science Education' (2006) 2(1) *Political Science Education* 1-18, 2.

¹² See Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge 1994), Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Seabury Press 1970), and Stephen Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (Jossey-Bass 1995).

¹³ On the importance of reflexivity in human rights education, see, for example, Aiofe Duffy, 'Applying Critical Pedagogies to Human Rights Education' (2025) 29(2) *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 382, 396. See also Julian Webb, 'Where the Action Is: Developing Artistry in Legal Education' (1995) 2 *International Journal of the Legal Profession* 187, 188

¹⁴ Augustine Hammond and Craig Douglas Albert, 'Learning by Experiencing: Improving Student Learning Through a Model United Nations Simulation' (2019) 16(4) *Journal of Political Science Education* 441–58, 458.

that simulation promotes “authentic learning,” where students apply knowledge to meaningful tasks with real-world relevance.¹⁵ In the context of law, simulations also provide what Elizabeth Mertz calls “the hidden curriculum”, the implicit learning of legal language, reasoning, and authority. By designing simulations that foreground critical engagement, educators can shape that hidden curriculum to promote ethical awareness, empathy, and global citizenship.¹⁶

Simulation as a Bridge Between Skills and Values

One of the most powerful aspects of simulation is its ability to merge skills-based learning with values-based reflection. In a typical Model UN simulation, students are not simply performing legal analysis; they are also negotiating, persuading, representing conflicting interests, and often confronting uncomfortable realities (e.g., human rights violations, refugee crises, or post-conflict justice scenarios).¹⁷ These simulations allow law students to confront the ethical and political aspects of law, what can be viewed as the “moral texture” of legal reasoning.

Moreover, simulation creates space for interdisciplinary and intercultural learning. At BCU, students participating in Model UN or the UPR Project come from a range of backgrounds and sometimes disciplines. The simulations demand that they consider comparative legal systems, regional politics, and non-Western legal traditions.¹⁸ In this way, experiential learning fosters global legal consciousness, an awareness of how law operates differently across cultures and institutions, and how international law both enables and constrains human rights protection.¹⁹

Finally, simulation learning resonates with the shift toward student-centred and collaborative education. In contrast to traditional lecture formats, simulations place responsibility for learning in the hands of students. They are expected to prepare, take ownership of roles, and work collectively to generate outcomes.²⁰ This aligns with contemporary understandings of effective pedagogy as dialogical, participatory, and co-constructed, especially in fields like law, where professional success requires teamwork, adaptability, and ethical judgment.

Taken together, experiential learning and critical pedagogy offer a compelling foundation for reimagining how human rights law is taught in universities. They shift the focus from rote learning to reflective practice, from legal certainty to professional judgment, and from passive reception to active engagement.²¹

¹⁵ Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Expanded 2nd edn, ASCD 2005).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Mertz, *The Language of Law School: Learning to “Think Like a Lawyer”* (OUP 2007).

¹⁷ Daniel McIntosh, The Uses and Limits of the Model United Nations in an International Relations Classroom (2001) 2(3) *International Studies Perspectives* 269-280, 270-271. See also Anthony Bradney, *Conversations, Choices and Chances: The Liberal Law School in the Twenty-First Century* (Hart 2003) 43–45.

¹⁸ Weir and Baranowski highlight the value of simulations in fostering active learning and enabling students to engage with international politics through non-Western perspectives. See Kimberley Weir and Michael Baranowski, ‘Simulating History to Understand International Politics’ (2011) 42(4) *Simulation and Gaming* 441-461.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Simon Obendorf and Claire Randerson, ‘The Model United Nations Simulation and the Student as Producer Agenda’ (2012) 4(3) *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences* 1–15; William W Newmann and Judyth L Twigg, ‘Active Engagement of the Intro IR Student: A Simulation Approach’ (2000) 33(4) *Political Science and Politics* 835, 835. See also Wilson Chow and Firew Tiba, ‘Too Many ‘What’s’, Too Few ‘How’s’ (2013) 4(1) *European Journal of Law and Technology* at 7. Section 3.3.2 Law Clinic.

²¹ *ibid.*

Alongside these broader theories, scholars have also developed human-rights-specific models of experiential education. Notably, Jocelyn Kestenbaum, Esteban Hoyos-Ceballos and Melissa Del Aguila Talvadkar propose a “Catalysts for Change” model that identifies several features central to effective human-rights pedagogy.²² This includes student ownership of projects, collaboration with external stakeholders, multi-modal advocacy practices, structured reflection, and the sustainability of learning initiatives.²³ Although developed in the context of formal human-rights clinics, their model resonates strongly with the types of experiential approaches explored in this article. The ‘catalysts’ they identify reflect an understanding of human rights learning as active, participatory, and grounded in engagement with real or simulated legal processes, reinforcing the pedagogical principles outlined above. As such, the model offers a useful conceptual complement to wider theories of experiential learning and critical pedagogy.

In the next sections, this article applies these frameworks to two practical examples: the teaching of Model UN simulations within the law curriculum at BCU, and the extracurricular UPR Project coordinated by the Centre for Human Rights. Both initiatives seek to embody these principles in context-specific, creative, and student-centred ways.

3. Teaching Model UN at BCU: Security Council and Human Rights Council Simulations

Model United Nations (Model UN) simulations have long been used in international relations and political science to expose students to the structures and processes of global diplomacy.²⁴ In recent years, legal educators have increasingly adopted the format as a means of deepening students’ understanding of international law, legal advocacy, and policy-making.²⁵ At BCU, Model UN simulations have been developed and adapted specifically for legal education, embedded into the undergraduate (LLB) and postgraduate (LLM) law curriculum. These simulations use a custom-designed scenario, the Shunibia crisis, and are tailored to reflect the functions of two distinct UN bodies: the Security Council and the Human Rights Council.

While Model UN-style simulations are well established in international relations teaching, their systematic integration into UK legal education remains relatively limited. Some law schools, such as the University of Essex²⁶ and SOAS,²⁷ incorporate elements of clinic-style activity or human rights

²² Jocelyn Getgen Kestenbaum, Esteban Hoyos-Ceballos and Melissa C del Aguila Talvadkar, ‘Catalysts for Change: A Proposed Framework for Human Rights Clinical Teaching and Advocacy’ (2012) 18 *Clinical Law Review* 459-504.

²³ *ibid* 481.

²⁴ James P Muldoon, ‘The Model United Nations Revisited’ (1995) 26(1) *Simulation and Gaming* 27-35; Obendorf and Randerson (n 20) 3.

²⁵ MUN is “where the especially deep learning can occur”. Kirsten Taylor, ‘Simulations Inside and Outside the IR Classroom: A Comparative Analysis’ (2013) 14 *International Studies Perspectives* 134–149, 147.

²⁶ The “Human Rights Centre Clinic” at Essex has a module “HU902: Human Rights Clinic” (Postgraduate Level 7) - “concerned with the practice of human rights advocacy ... linked to the Human Rights Centre Clinic ... students apply this knowledge through actual engagement.” See University of Essex: Module Directory, ‘Human Rights Clinic - Module HU902’ <www1.essex.ac.uk/modules/Default.aspx?coursecode=HU902&year=23> accessed 19 November 2025.

²⁷ The SOAS LLB/LLM listing emphasises a Clinic working with students on “public interest cases ... research projects which aim to protect ... human rights.” The MRes law module catalogue lists “International Human Rights Clinic – 30 credits” and describes it as offering “practical work with cases, policy analysis, and research/advocacy briefs”. See ‘International Human Rights Clinic’ (SOAS University) <www.soas.ac.uk/research/research-centres/centre-human-rights-law/international-human-rights-clinic> accessed 19 November 2025.

simulation, and institutions including Kent²⁸ and Queen's University Belfast²⁹ have introduced small-scale crisis simulations within public international law modules. However, these initiatives tend to be occasional or elective rather than embedded systematically across undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. BCU's model is therefore distinctive in its scale, annual delivery, and integration with a parallel real-world UN-facing research project, positioning it as one of the more comprehensive experiential human rights frameworks currently operating in the UK context.

Designing the Shunibia Crisis: A Pedagogical Fiction

The Shunibia scenario was created as a fictional but plausible geopolitical crisis, offering students a rich environment in which to apply legal concepts and simulate diplomatic processes. Set in a contested region experiencing civil unrest, humanitarian violations, and complex regional tensions, Shunibia provides the ideal platform to explore core themes in international law: state sovereignty, responsibility to protect (R2P), human rights obligations, armed conflict, international cooperation, and accountability.

Importantly, using a fictional country allows educators to avoid real-world political sensitivities while retaining the structural and legal realism needed for meaningful learning. Students are encouraged to treat the simulation seriously, drawing on real legal instruments (e.g. the UN Charter, Geneva Conventions, ICC Statute, various human rights treaties) to build arguments and propose responses.³⁰ The Shunibia materials include background briefings, maps, human rights reports, and fictional news stories, all designed to mirror the complexity of real international crises.

Undergraduate Focus: The UN Security Council Simulation (LLB)

For LLB students, the simulation is situated within the final year human rights law module: United Nations Law and Practice, which is year-long, and focuses on the decision-making of the United Nations Security Council. Students are assigned roles as representatives of the P5 and elected members. Each role comes with a specific brief, including geopolitical interests, legal obligations, and historical context. Given the large size of the student cohort, and only 15 seats available at the Security Council, multiple MUNs take place with each state assigned a head of state and foreign minister.

Students are tasked with:

- Researching their state's foreign policy, international legal commitments, and recent UN positions;
- Drafting position papers outlining their approach to the Shunibia crisis;

²⁸ The module catalogue for the LLM/MA "International Relations with International Law" notes that students will "learn from leading experts using innovative teaching practices, like mock negotiations, crisis simulations, and interactive seminars to develop your capacity for independent thinking and incisive analysis." See 'Postgraduate PDip, MA: International Relations with International Law' (*University of Kent*) <www.kent.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/2025/47/international-relations-with-international-law/> accessed 19 November 2025.

²⁹ The LLM in International Human Rights Law at Queen's states its human rights research and teaching "provide[s] students with opportunities to practice their skills in projects run through our collaboration with the Global Legal Action Network and out of the QUB Human Rights Centre". See 'LLM International Human Rights Law' (*Queen's University Belfast*) <www.qub.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate-taught/international-human-rights-law-llm/> accessed 19 November 2025.

³⁰ See generally Hammond and Albert (n 14).

- Participating in a live simulation session where they deliver statements, negotiate with allies or rivals, and draft Security Council resolutions;
- Debating issues such as peacekeeping intervention, arms embargoes and sanctions.

The simulation encourages LLB students to apply doctrinal knowledge (e.g., Articles 2 and 41 of the UN Charter) in a dynamic, adversarial setting. Students confront questions such as: When does humanitarian intervention become lawful? How do geopolitical interests shape legal argument? Can consensus be achieved in the face of veto power?

From a pedagogical standpoint, the simulation addresses several learning outcomes:

- Legal reasoning: interpreting international law in a policy context;
- Oral advocacy: formulating and presenting persuasive arguments under time pressure;
- Negotiation and compromise: understanding law as a tool of diplomacy;
- Critical thinking: evaluating the limits of international enforcement mechanisms.³¹

While some students initially struggle with the performative and political aspects of the simulation, most quickly rise to the challenge. The structured briefings, role support, and guidance from tutors ensure that students are not overwhelmed, while reflective debriefs allow them to articulate what they have learned.

Postgraduate Focus: The UN Human Rights Council Special Session (LLM)

At the LLM level, the simulation shifts from questions of security and intervention to questions of accountability, diplomacy, and human rights enforcement. The simulation takes the form of a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, convened in response to the Shunibia crisis. Students are assigned roles as representatives of elected member states covering the different regions. This format allows students to explore both the legal content of international human rights obligations and the political processes through which states respond to alleged violations.

Given the small size of the student cohort, not all member states of the Human Rights Council are represented. Instead, each student is each allocated a country by teaching staff in a way that maintains the proportional voting balance of the United Nations' regional blocs.

In preparation, LLM students are expected to:

- Review the relevant international and regional human rights frameworks;
- Analyse Shunibia's human rights record using fictionalised reports and legal sources;
- Draft statements, resolutions, and responses reflecting their assigned roles and strategic objectives;
- Participate in a live simulation of a Human Rights Council special session, including formal statements, debate, and resolution drafting.

³¹ Ginn et al. demonstrate that participation in MUNs substantially enhances intellectual development. In particular, it cultivates advanced, employability-focused competencies such as critical thinking, collaborative teamwork, effective communication, problem-solving, personal growth, and the ability to apply knowledge in practical contexts. See Martha Humphries Ginn, Craig Douglas Albert, Lance Y Hunter, Kirsten Fitzgerald and Andrew Phillips, 'Modeling Student Success: How Model UN Programs can Enhance Performance and Persistence' (2015) 2 Questions in Politics 167–195.

This simulation places strong emphasis on legal accuracy, political realism, and persuasive communication. Students learn to navigate the competing imperatives of state sovereignty, human rights enforcement, and international diplomacy, while applying human rights norms to a dynamic, evolving crisis.

This LLM simulation provides a more process-driven, legalistic experience, requiring students to demonstrate precision in applying international human rights law while also engaging in diplomacy and negotiation. The simulation covers rights such as: the right to life, freedom from torture and arbitrary detention, rights of minorities and indigenous populations, gender-based violence, freedom of religion and children's rights.

Pedagogically, the LLM simulation promotes:

- Advanced legal analysis: applying treaty law and UN standards to state behaviour;
- Soft skills: professional writing, questioning, and diplomatic critique;
- Interdisciplinary awareness: incorporating political, cultural, and development considerations;
- Empathy and perspective-taking: especially for those role-playing affected communities or civil society voices.

Students are also invited to reflect on the limits of the process: the voluntary nature of the process, the lack of enforcement, and the political theatre that sometimes characterises UN processes. These insights encourage critical thinking about both the promise and limitations of international law.³²

Pedagogical Design and Teaching Strategy

Across both simulations, the teaching design is scaffolded to ensure accessibility and intellectual rigour. Students receive structured preparatory materials, including role briefs and expectations; links to relevant treaties, cases, and scholarly articles; and guidance on diplomatic protocol, UN procedures, and public speaking.

Live sessions are facilitated by staff acting as moderators or chairs, ensuring the simulations remain structured, inclusive, and focused. After the simulation, students engage in reflective exercises, either in written form or group discussion, to process what they experienced and connect it to theoretical content from their modules.

The Shunibia simulation is intentionally flexible, allowing for adaptation year to year. For example, different thematic focuses (e.g. conflict and displacement one year, freedom of religion another) allow students to revisit evolving issues in international law, while still building upon a consistent pedagogical foundation.

In practical terms, the simulations occupy one full day (9am-5pm) of the LLB module and the LLM module. Due to the large cohort size on the LLB, multiple MUNs may be run concurrently. For LLB students, two preparatory weeks are dedicated to familiarising students with the UN system, state roles, and crisis background materials, followed by a week of structured in-class drafting and a final live simulation week. The LLM module compresses this timeline due to smaller cohort size and higher levels of prior knowledge, with one week devoted to substantive legal preparation and one week to the simulation. Lecturer support during these preparatory stages includes drop-in sessions, 1:1

³² *ibid.*

formative feedback, guided research templates and annotated examples of position papers. These practical delivery mechanisms ensure that the experience is structured rather than overwhelming and that students receive continual support both before and during the simulation.

Undergraduate vs Postgraduate Learning Dynamics

While the undergraduate (LLB) and postgraduate (LLM) cohorts differ in prior knowledge and analytical maturity, both groups benefit from the immersive, student-led nature of the simulations. Research indicates that experiential learning plays a crucial role in empowering students and fostering a sense of ownership over their educational journey.³³ LLB students often approach the Security Council with enthusiasm but limited familiarity with international law, and the simulation serves as an eye-opening introduction to the relevance of law in global crises. In contrast, LLM students tend to engage more critically, often drawing from professional or academic backgrounds that allow them to challenge assumptions and reflect on the politics of human rights enforcement.

Both levels, however, demonstrate that learning-by-doing fosters engagement and confidence, particularly among students who may not thrive in traditional lecture or essay-based formats. The Model UN format allows a wide range of learners to contribute, from skilled researchers to articulate speakers to collaborative team members.³⁴

4. The UPR Project at BCU: Research-Based Experiential Learning

While the Model United Nations simulations are embedded within the law curriculum at BCU, the UPR Project operates as an extracurricular initiative led by the university's Centre for Human Rights.³⁵ Though not credit-bearing or formally assessed, the project represents a highly impactful form of experiential learning. It enables students to contribute directly to international human rights monitoring processes, preparing stakeholder reports that are submitted to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and frequently cited in official UN documentation.³⁶ For law students, this constitutes a rare opportunity to engage in real-world legal research and advocacy, work with tangible, international visibility.

The Structure and Purpose of the UPR

The UPR is a peer-review mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council, through which all UN member states are periodically reviewed on their human rights performance. It provides a forum not only for states to assess each other's progress but also for civil society actors, including academic institutions, to submit "stakeholder reports" that inform the review process. These reports are considered by the

³³ Hammond and Albert (n 14); Jeffrey Perrin, 'Features of Engaging and Empowering Experiential Learning Programs for College Students' (2014) 11(2) *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* 1–12.

³⁴ Asal and Blake (n 11).

³⁵ <www.bcu.ac.uk/research/law/centre-for-human-rights/consultancy/upr-project-at-bcu>.

³⁶ To date, the UPR Project has been consistently cited in all OHCHR stakeholder summary reports. For a full list of reports, see <www.bcu.ac.uk/research/law/centre-for-human-rights/consultancy/upr-project-at-bcu/country-specific-consultancy>.

OHCHR in compiling its official summary, and the issues raised often find their way into formal recommendations.³⁷

The UPR Project at BCU contributes to this process by preparing stakeholder reports focused on countries undergoing review. These reports are authored collaboratively by academic staff and law students, who conduct research, verify claims, draft sections, and cite relevant legal standards. The reports are then submitted to the OHCHR within the designated window of the review cycle. To date, the UPR Project has submitted 53 stakeholder reports to 51 countries' UPR with all reports consistently cited by the OHCHR in its stakeholder summary reports. The author has served as lead author on 30 of the 53 reports submitted, representing the majority of the Project's entire stakeholder-report output.³⁸

Student Involvement: Research Assistants as Co-Producers

Students involved in the UPR Project are recruited through open calls circulated by the Centre for Human Rights and selected based on their academic engagement, interest in human rights, and capacity for legal research. Once selected, they are trained in:

- The structure and function of the UPR mechanism;
- Legal research methodologies appropriate for international human rights work;
- The documentation standards required by the OHCHR;
- Ethical and evidentiary considerations in stakeholder reporting.

Students are then assigned to country teams and thematic areas, for example, the death penalty, freedom of religion, women's rights, or the right to education.³⁹ Under staff supervision, they conduct desk-based research, cross-reference sources, and contribute directly to drafting. Their contributions are meaningful and acknowledged: student researchers are credited by name on the final submitted reports, which are frequently referenced in the OHCHR's summary of stakeholder reports.

This process reflects a co-production model of legal research.⁴⁰ Rather than treating students as passive learners, the project positions them as active contributors to knowledge that serves a practical human rights purpose. This aligns with pedagogical frameworks such as Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins' "students as partners" model, which calls for meaningful student engagement in research and curriculum development.⁴¹

Pedagogical Value and Impact

Although the UPR Project is not part of formal coursework, its educational value is considerable. It mirrors many of the objectives associated with clinical legal education, namely, developing research,

³⁷ For a detailed overview of the UPR mechanism, see Damian Etone, Amna Nazir and Alice Storey, 'Introduction' in Etone and others (eds), *Human Rights and the UN Universal Periodic Review Mechanism: A Research Companion* (Routledge 2024)

³⁸ For a full list of reports submitted see (n 36).

³⁹ See for example, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Obendorf and Randerson (n 20).

⁴¹ Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins, 'Developing Undergraduate Research and Inquiry' (HE Academy 2009) <www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/developing-undergraduate-research-and-inquiry> accessed 24 July 2025.

writing, and collaborative skills, while also fostering ethical awareness, international legal fluency, and confidence in professional communication.⁴²

From a pedagogical perspective, the project achieves several outcomes:

- Authentic legal research: Students work with real cases, policies, and international frameworks.
- Practical impact: Knowing their work may inform UN recommendations creates motivation and a sense of professional responsibility.⁴³
- Transferable skills: The project develops legal drafting, citation practice, and policy analysis.
- Professionalisation: Crediting students by name gives them a tangible achievement for their CVs and future academic or professional applications.
- Civic identity: Students come to see themselves as part of a broader movement for accountability, justice, and reform.

It is also worth noting that the project attracts diverse students, including those who may not otherwise engage with international human rights law in depth. The low-barrier, extra-curricular nature of the initiative, combined with its prestige and real-world relevance, makes it an inclusive platform for engagement, often helping to build confidence and interest among first-generation university students or those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Institutional Position and Challenges

The UPR Project sits within BCU's Centre for Human Rights, and while it benefits from staff expertise and university support, it also relies heavily on academic labour and goodwill. As an extracurricular initiative, it exists outside the formal timetable and workload allocation of most teaching staff, which can limit its scalability. Nonetheless, its growing profile and demonstrable impact, both in terms of student development and international recognition, provide a strong argument for institutional investment.

Importantly, the project complements, rather than competes with, the formal curriculum. It offers students an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills gained in modules such as public international law, international human rights, legal theory, and socio-legal research. This form of "research-informed experiential learning" allows students to build professional competencies while reinforcing their academic study.⁴⁴

BCU's model has also been recognised by peers and professionals working within the UN system. For example, it has been recognised as an example of best practice at the 52nd session of the UN Human Rights Council.⁴⁵ The repeated citation of student-involved reports by the OHCHR demonstrates that

⁴² See Ben Waters, 'A Part to Play': The Value of Role-Play Simulation in Undergraduate Legal Education' (2016) 50(2) *The Law Teacher* 172–94.

⁴³ According to Perrin, "In the experiential learning environment, working on projects with real-world implications increases student confidence and efficacy, which correlates positively to classroom skills as well as skills needed for future success in one's career". Perrin (n 33) 9.

⁴⁴ Hammond and Albert (n 14).

⁴⁵ See UN Panel Discussion - 8th Meeting, 52nd Regular Session, Human Rights Council <<https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1z/k1zpyl907n>>, at 32:10-32:47.

universities, even those without large research budgets or international partnerships, can contribute meaningfully to global legal processes.

5. Pedagogical Reflections and Impact

Experiential learning, particularly through simulations and real-world research engagement, creates space for law students to encounter international legal frameworks not only as intellectual abstractions, but as living, political processes. At BCU, the integration of the Model United Nations simulations and the UPR Project has had a transformative impact on how students understand, engage with, and apply international human rights law. While the initiatives differ in format, timing, and whether they are credit-bearing, both challenge traditional conceptions of legal learning and reposition students as active, engaged participants in the creation and application of knowledge.

Drawing on several years of reflective practice as a facilitator, this section discusses the pedagogical value of these initiatives, grouped under key themes that align with the aims of contemporary legal education: engagement, skill development, confidence building, ethical awareness, and professional identity formation. Although this article does not present formal empirical data, the reflections presented here are based on sustained observation, classroom experience, and informal feedback collected over a decade. As a legal educator and practitioner in the field of human rights, I have witnessed first-hand how simulation-based and research-led learning can reshape students' understanding of the law and their place within it.

Moving Beyond the Textbook: Human Rights as Practice

A recurring theme across both initiatives is the shift from human rights law as a purely doctrinal subject to human rights law as a site of practice, negotiation, and moral reasoning. In many traditional law modules, students are introduced to international human rights through treaty provisions, landmark cases, and academic commentary. While necessary, this approach can feel remote, particularly when students are unable to see how the law is implemented, contested, or undermined in practice.

The Model UN simulations bridge this gap by immersing students in legal argument and advocacy within a politically charged and dynamic environment.⁴⁶ Whether simulating the UN Security Council or a Human Rights Council special session, students are compelled to use legal reasoning in real time, adjusting their strategies, adapting to new information, and responding to competing perspectives. This form of “learning in action” mirrors the unpredictability and complexity of actual legal practice.⁴⁷

Similarly, the UPR Project allows students to participate in legal research that has a direct impact. By contributing to stakeholder reports submitted to the UN, students see how law is used as a tool for civil society activism, state accountability, and international diplomacy. The knowledge that their work is cited by the OHCHR is both a powerful motivator and a reminder that legal research is not merely academic, it is a practice with consequences.

⁴⁶ As with the real UN, human interaction is imperative. See K Matthys and JHG Klabbers, ‘Model United Nations Online (MUNO): A Study of a Policy Exercise Using Internet Gaming’ in WC Kriz and T Eberle (eds), *Bridging The Gap: Transforming Knowledge Into Action Through Gaming And Simulation*, (Swiss Austrian German Simulation and Gaming Association 2004) 154-162.

⁴⁷ The MUN is “where the especially deep learning can occur”, see (n 25).

Developing Key Skills: Research, Communication, and Reflection

Experiential methods also promote a range of transferable legal skills that are central to employability and professional development⁴⁸. In both the simulation and the UPR context, students must:

- Conduct legal and contextual research under time constraints;
- Interpret and apply complex legal texts (treaties, conventions, resolutions);
- Prepare clear, persuasive written outputs (position papers, reports, draft resolutions);
- Engage in oral advocacy, whether through formal statements or informal negotiation;
- Reflect on ethical questions and the competing interests inherent in international legal processes.

These skills are rarely developed in isolation. Instead, the simulations and research work foster an integrated approach to legal learning, where knowledge, skill, and judgment reinforce one another.⁴⁹ Students report greater confidence in public speaking, improved legal writing, and a deeper understanding of international norms, even when working with fictional scenarios like Shunibia.

One of the most significant outcomes observed is increased student agency. When students take on the roles of diplomats, NGOs, or UN officials, they begin to see themselves not just as learners, but as potential actors within the legal field. This shift in self-perception is particularly valuable for students who may have lacked confidence or prior exposure to international law. Experiential learning allows these students to “try on” professional identities and envision themselves as contributors to legal and political discourse.⁵⁰

The fact that students are credited on reports, and in some cases later invited to co-present findings or support submission processes, gives them a real stake in the outcome and supports their growth as independent researchers.⁵¹

Engagement and Motivation

Perhaps the most immediate impact of both the Model UN and UPR initiatives is the visible increase in student engagement. Unlike traditional seminars or lectures, where participation may be limited to a handful of confident students, simulations create environments where everyone has a role, responsibility, and voice. Even students who are typically quiet or hesitant in doctrinal classes tend to find a space to contribute, whether through research, negotiation, or structured debate. Simulations and applied research generate emotional investment, competitive spirit, and collaborative energy.

⁴⁸ See Johnny Hall and Kevin Kerrigan, ‘Clinic and the Wider Law Curriculum’ (2011) 15 *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 25; John Andrew and John Meligrana, ‘Evaluating the Use of Role Playing Simulations in Teaching Negotiation Skills to University Students’ (2012) 3(6) *Creative Education* 696; Daniel Druckman and Noam Ebner, ‘Onstage or Behind the Scenes? Relative Learning Benefits of Simulation Role-Play and Design’ (2008) 39(4) *Simulation and Gaming* 465–496.

⁴⁹ Daniel McIntosh comments extensively on some of the benefits of the MUN. McIntosh (n 17) 274.

⁵⁰ Linda Kam, Michele Ruyters, Clare Coburn and Mary Toohey, ‘Get Real! A Case Study of Authentic Learning Activities in Legal Education’ (2013) 19(2) *Murdoch University Law Review* 17–32.

⁵¹ For example, for Ghana’s UPR, students presented their findings to members of the wider Law School as part of a research seminar.

This is particularly evident in the Model UN simulations, where even students with limited prior knowledge of the UN system or international law quickly develop an enthusiasm for their assigned roles and an investment in the outcome of the session. The role-play format, where students represent a range of states, requires them to adopt a perspective, justify positions, and respond to others in real time. The result is an energetic, often passionate form of learning that blends legal reasoning with political and ethical analysis.⁵² Many students report that it is the first time they have truly “felt like a lawyer” or understood how international law works in practice.

Similarly, in the UPR Project, students are driven by a clear, external goal: contributing to a report that will be submitted to the United Nations. This real-world consequence creates a sense of purpose and accountability that is sometimes absent in more conventional forms of assessment. Students take pride in their contributions, often working beyond what is required, researching late into the night, or checking back on their citations to ensure accuracy, not for a grade, but because the work matters. Students involved in the UPR Project routinely express pride in their contributions and interest in pursuing human rights-related careers, further study, or NGO work.

Values-Based Legal Education: Ethics, Empathy, and Critical Thinking

Both the Model UN and UPR Project offer fertile ground for values-based learning. In contrast to technical legal education, which focuses narrowly on rules and doctrine, these experiential initiatives foreground the ethical, political, and human dimensions of legal practice.

In the simulations, students are regularly confronted with competing values: national interest versus human rights, peace versus justice, procedural fairness versus political expediency. Role-playing forces students to consider not just what the law says, but how it ought to be interpreted, applied, or challenged. These moments of tension foster empathy and critical thinking, especially when students must argue from a perspective that differs from their own.⁵³

In the UPR Project, students encounter the fragility of international norms and the difficulty of obtaining credible information on human rights violations. They must balance thoroughness with conciseness, legal rigour with advocacy, and optimism with realism. These are the same tensions that confront legal professionals working in international institutions, NGOs, or policy roles.⁵⁴

By embedding these experiences in their legal education, students gain a more nuanced understanding of justice, one that includes, but goes beyond, legalistic reasoning. They learn to approach human rights not only as a body of rules, but as a contested, evolving practice rooted in human dignity, struggle, and power.

⁵² Students tend to respond positively to role-play simulations and, in some circumstances, even prefer simulation-based projects to traditional classroom approaches. See research undertaken by Paul Maharg and E. Li, ‘A Unique, Simulation-based Approach to Providing Students with Practical Legal Experience’, paper for the Georgia State Law: International Conference on the Future of Legal Education, 20 February 2008, [http://law.gsu.edu/futureoflegaleducationConference/Program\(Final\).php](http://law.gsu.edu/futureoflegaleducationConference/Program(Final).php)

⁵³ Obendorf and Randerson (n 20) 15.

⁵⁴ For example, see Maaïke Matelski, Rachel Dijkstra, and Brianne McGonigle Leyh, ‘Multi-Layered Civil Society Documentation of Human Rights Violations in Myanmar: The Potential for Accountability and Truth-Telling’ (2022) 14(3) *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 794-818.

One of the less tangible but arguably most important outcomes of these experiential approaches is the formation of a professional identity rooted in values, empathy, and global awareness.⁵⁵ Law students often begin their studies with a narrow understanding of legal careers, focused on domestic practice, litigation, or commercial work. Through participation in international simulations and UN-facing projects, they begin to see themselves as part of a global legal ecosystem, one that requires diplomacy, cultural literacy, and moral reflection.⁵⁶

This is particularly pronounced in discussions following simulations, where students reflect on the ethical dilemmas they encountered. For example, in one Security Council simulation, students grappled with whether to authorise military intervention in Shunibia in response to alleged human rights abuses, knowing that such action might violate state sovereignty and potentially escalate conflict. In the Human Rights Council special session, LLM students debated whether naming and shaming Shunibia would produce change or merely harden the state's defensive posture.

These moments, unscripted, uncomfortable, and deeply human, are at the heart of critical legal pedagogy. They invite students to move beyond abstract rules and consider the human cost of legal decisions, the power relations embedded in international law, and the tensions between legal ideals and political realities. In doing so, students not only become better analysts but more ethically grounded future practitioners.

Staff Reflections: Pedagogical Benefits and Institutional Contribution

From a staff perspective, these initiatives also enrich the teaching environment. The simulations are not easy to run, they require significant preparation, ongoing support, and facilitation skills, but they reward that effort with dynamic classroom interactions and a palpable sense of student growth. The energy in a well-run simulation is hard to replicate in traditional settings.

Likewise, the UPR Project has strengthened the Centre for Human Rights' research culture and outreach. It creates space for collaboration between students and staff, integrates teaching with scholarship, and positions BCU as an institution committed to public interest law and global engagement. That these reports are cited by the UN adds reputational value and serves as a reminder that legal education need not remain confined within the university walls.

Another notable impact is the external recognition both projects have received, which further reinforces student motivation and institutional pride. BCU's UPR stakeholder reports have been cited in OHCHR summaries, a fact that both staff and students highlight when discussing the project publicly.⁵⁷ The UPR Project was also a finalist for the Times Higher Education Award in 2021 for collaborative project of the year, further highlighting its reach and impact.⁵⁸ Students have gone on to reference their involvement in job interviews, scholarship applications, and postgraduate study statements.

⁵⁵ Desmond Manderson and Paul Redding, 'From Simulation to Situation: Experiential Learning and the Shaping of Legal Professional Identity' (2011) 19 Griffith Law Review 263.

⁵⁶ Obendorf and Randerson (n 20) 15.

⁵⁷ See 'Country Specific Consultancy' (BCU) <www.bcu.ac.uk/research/law/centre-for-human-rights/consultancy/upr-project-at-bcu/country-specific-consultancy>.

⁵⁸ 'Shortlist 2021' (*THE Awards*) <<https://the-awards.co.uk/2021/en/page/shortlist>> (select 'Birmingham City University' under 'International Collaboration of the Year'); 'University Nominated for Three Awards at Higher Education 'Oscars' (BCU, 10 September 2021) <www.bcu.ac.uk/news-events/news/university-nominated-for-three-awards-at-higher-education-oscars>.

Finally, both the simulations and the UPR Project promote a kind of personal transformation that is harder to measure but often most memorable. Students gain not only skills and experience but also confidence, curiosity, and a sense of agency.⁵⁹ They begin to understand that law is not simply something they study, it is something they can do, shape, and critique.

One student, reflecting on her time as a delegate in the LLB Security Council simulation, noted: “I never thought of myself as someone who could speak with authority about international law. But when I stood up, representing a country’s position, and responded to a critique, I realised I could do this. I could work in this field.”

These moments, though anecdotal, capture the essence of experiential pedagogy. They suggest that when students are given real roles, real challenges, and real responsibilities, they rise to meet them, and in doing so, reimagine their own potential.

Informal follow-up with past participants indicates that the initiatives also influence longer-term trajectories. Several former UPR Project researchers have progressed onto postgraduate study in international law, or work with NGOs and other organisations. Alumni frequently report drawing on their simulation or UPR experience during job interviews, with some attributing their career direction - such as pursuing human rights internships, PhD study, or legal practice with an international focus - to their early exposure to applied human rights work at BCU. These reflections suggest that experiential learning can have sustained impact on professional identity and career aspirations.

6. Challenges and Practical Considerations

While the pedagogical benefits of experiential learning are compelling, the practical implementation of initiatives such as Model UN simulations and stakeholder reporting through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Project is not without its challenges. These approaches require significant time, planning, coordination, and, importantly, institutional support. This section outlines some of the key barriers encountered in delivering and sustaining these innovations within the context of UK legal education, drawing on experiences at BCU.

Time and Resource Constraints

The delivery of experiential learning also requires lecturers to adapt their own pedagogical approaches. Staff move from authoritative sources of knowledge to facilitators of inquiry, modelling diplomacy, mediating conflict, and guiding students through uncertainty. This shift involves relinquishing some control over classroom outcomes and embracing unscripted moments, where legal questions emerge organically from simulation dynamics. Such an approach demands agility, reflexive teaching practice, and the ability to support diverse learners in real time - skills that are less central in traditional lecture-based delivery. This pedagogical recalibration is both rewarding and challenging, underscoring the need for institutional recognition of the additional preparation and responsive teaching skills required.

Simulation-based learning and co-curricular research projects are resource-intensive. They require staff time not only to design and deliver the activities but to prepare detailed background materials, manage student roles, provide guidance, and facilitate live sessions. This is particularly the case with

⁵⁹ Ginn and others (n 31).

Model UN simulations, where fictional scenarios such as the Shunibia crisis must be kept current and engaging. Each iteration often requires updates to reflect evolving global issues, and tutors must be prepared to moderate fast-moving discussions, manage conflict, and guide students toward legally grounded resolutions.

The same applies to the UPR Project. Although not formally part of any taught module, the work involved in supervising student research, editing drafts, and meeting OHCHR deadlines parallels that of preparing a small research publication. The project's success depends on committed academic staff who are willing to engage in this labour often beyond their formal workload models. Without dedicated funding or teaching relief, the scalability of such initiatives becomes limited, particularly in institutions already under pressure to do more with less.

This tension highlights a wider challenge in higher education: how to incentivise and support pedagogical innovation that sits outside conventional lecture-based delivery or standardised assessment regimes. While there is growing rhetorical support for student engagement and practice-led learning, these approaches often rely on hidden or undercompensated labour.

Curriculum and Assessment Alignment

Another significant challenge is aligning experiential methods with existing module structures and assessment regimes.⁶⁰ Model UN simulations are, by nature, performative and process-driven, focusing on participation, collaboration, and role-play. Yet university assessment systems tend to prioritise written, individual outputs, essays, exams, and problem questions, that may not fully capture the learning achieved during a simulation.

At BCU, this challenge has been addressed through reflective assessments which play a central role in embedding the learning gained through the simulations. In the LLB module, students submit their written Security Council speech (1000 words) and an analytical commentary (3000 words), the latter of which requires them to reflect and justify their state's voting behaviour and link their decisions to treaty law, UN Charter provisions, and state practice, demonstrating how legal and political considerations informed their interventions.

The LLM assessment combines a standalone reflective piece (1000 words), a more analytically-demanding commentary (3000 words), and an in-person assessment of students' negotiation and advocacy during the simulation. The reflective account requires students to evaluate their own learning, diplomacy, and strategy during the simulation. Across both levels, reflective work is embedded as one part of a broader assessment strategy, guided by rubrics that emphasise legal accuracy, depth of reflection, and the ability to connect experience to theory, aligning with Kolb's experiential learning cycle and Schön's reflective practitioner model. This ensures that simulations translate into demonstrable, assessable learning.

However, these approaches are not universally accepted across all modules or institutions. The broader challenge lies in persuading curriculum designers and assessment boards that simulations are not a distraction from "serious" legal study but a vital means of applying and deepening legal understanding.

The UPR Project, being extracurricular, avoids some of these constraints but creates its own dilemmas. Because students participate voluntarily and without academic credit, levels of engagement can vary,

⁶⁰ Hammond and Albert (n 14); McIntosh (n 17) 274.

and the project must strike a balance between professional standards and educational inclusivity. While the non-credit model gives flexibility, it can also result in issues of student availability and workload clashes with assessed modules.

These challenges suggest a need for more flexible curriculum design frameworks that allow space for experiential and collaborative learning to be recognised and rewarded. This could include co-curricular transcripts, skills portfolios, or even elective credit pathways for sustained engagement in university-led research or advocacy projects.

Supporting Diverse Learners

Experiential learning environments demand a high level of student autonomy, interpersonal communication, and real-time decision-making. While these are important skills, not all students feel immediately comfortable in such settings. For example, some may experience anxiety around public speaking or struggle with the improvisational aspects of simulation-based diplomacy.

At BCU, this has been particularly evident in the undergraduate Security Council simulations. Students who are new to international law, unfamiliar with UN procedures, or unsure of their place in higher education may initially find the experience intimidating. This risk is especially pronounced for first-generation university students or those for whom English is not a first language.

To address this, the Model UN teaching team employs scaffolding strategies: providing clear role briefs, offering structured templates, assigning supportive groupings, and building in low-pressure activities (such as informal caucusing) before full simulation begins. Post-simulation debriefs are also used to demystify the process and affirm student contributions.

The UPR Project poses fewer performance-based pressures but introduces a different kind of challenge: students must engage in professional-level research and writing, often with limited experience. While this challenge is part of the learning process, it necessitates strong mentorship, clear expectations, and sensitivity to students' confidence levels.

These considerations reinforce the importance of inclusive design in experiential education. Simulation and research projects must be accessible, supportive, and adaptable, ensuring that all students, regardless of background or experience, can participate meaningfully and benefit from the opportunity.

Institutional Recognition and Sustainability

Perhaps the most enduring challenge is ensuring that innovative pedagogical practices receive sustained recognition and resourcing. At present, simulation-based teaching and co-curricular research projects often occupy an ambiguous space within university frameworks: valued rhetorically, but not always formally resourced or strategically embedded.

At BCU, the Centre for Human Rights has provided a supportive institutional home for the UPR Project, and staff involved in Model UN simulations have benefitted from peer recognition and external interest. However, these successes have required ongoing advocacy to maintain visibility and secure space within already packed curricula. Long-term sustainability depends not just on individual champions, but on institutional commitment, through workload models, funding for materials and coordination, and recognition in teaching excellence frameworks and promotion criteria.

There is a risk, in the absence of such support, that these projects remain precarious: reliant on goodwill, vulnerable to staffing changes, and unable to grow. The solution lies in embedding experiential learning more fully into strategic planning for legal education, recognising it not as an add-on or enrichment activity, but as a central vehicle for delivering professional, ethical, and globally literate law graduates.

The structural challenges of implementing these approaches mirror concerns identified by Nick James regarding the limited institutional support for vocational and student-led teaching practices.⁶¹ Paul Maharg has long advocated for a systemic shift to recognise experiential learning not as supplementary but central to legal education design.⁶²

Although resource constraints limit expansion, an “ideal” model would include dedicated administrative support, funded research assistant roles for alumni facilitators, and the development of reusable digital assets such as simulation videos, automated role brief generators, and interactive scenario maps. These would reduce staff time spent on annual updating and allow simulations to run with larger cohorts or across multiple modules. Smaller institutions could adopt a scaled approach: for example, running a single-session mini-simulation, focusing on one thematic issue (e.g., refugees, freedom of religion), or adapting the UPR model to a policy-brief format rather than a full stakeholder submission. Even in modestly resourced settings, adaptable experiential formats offer a foundation that can be expanded over time, enabling institutions to develop sustainable, high-impact models of human rights education.

7. Conclusion

This article has made the case for experiential learning as a transformative pedagogical approach in the teaching of human rights law within UK legal education. Drawing on two interlinked case studies at Birmingham City University, the use of Model United Nations simulations in undergraduate and postgraduate law teaching, and the Centre for Human Rights-led UPR Project, it has illustrated how simulations and co-curricular research projects can bridge the gap between legal theory and practice, foster professional identity, and empower students as globally aware, socially engaged legal actors.

Both the Model UN simulations and the UPR Project reflect the principles of experiential learning: active participation, contextualised problem-solving, reflective thinking, and value-driven inquiry. By simulating the dynamics of the UN Security Council and Human Rights Council in response to the fictional Shunibia crisis, students are challenged to apply international law in politically complex and morally ambiguous situations. These simulations move beyond rote learning to cultivate diplomacy, negotiation, legal reasoning, and ethical judgment.

In parallel, the UPR Project offers students a rare opportunity to engage in real-world human rights research and advocacy. Although extracurricular, its impact is no less significant: students contribute to stakeholder reports that are submitted to the United Nations and cited in official OHCHR

⁶¹ Nick James, ‘Why Has Vocationalism Propagated So Successfully within Legal Education?’ (2016) 6(1) *International Journal of Innovation in Legal Education* 1.

⁶² Paul Maharg, *Transforming Legal Education: Learning and Teaching the Law in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Ashgate 2007).

documentation. Through this process, they develop skills in research, writing, and critical legal analysis, and importantly, they begin to see themselves as active participants in global legal processes.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate the potential of experiential learning to transform the legal classroom. Students are not merely passive recipients of legal knowledge but co-producers of insight, argument, and action. They engage not only with the “black letter” law but with its limitations, contradictions, and possibilities. They gain confidence, competence, and, often, a new sense of purpose.

Yet as this article has also shown, realising this potential requires overcoming practical and institutional challenges. Simulation-based teaching is time- and resource-intensive. It demands staff creativity, coordination, and a willingness to depart from traditional lecture-based formats. Co-curricular projects like the UPR initiative require sustained support, clear ethical frameworks, and recognition within university structures. Without proper investment and structural integration, these innovative practices risk remaining fragile, dependent on individual champions rather than embedded in institutional culture.

For these reasons, this article concludes with three key recommendations:

1. *Embed experiential learning within core legal curricula*, not as an optional supplement but as a central mode of delivery, particularly in subjects like human rights law, where global context, ethical reflection, and procedural knowledge are essential.
2. *Recognise and resource staff innovation* in teaching and co-curricular engagement. Experiential learning should be supported through explicit workload allocation, seed funding, and recognition in promotion criteria, ensuring that staff are supported to develop, update, and sustain simulations and UN-aligned research projects.
3. *Create opportunities for authentic student participation* in legal research, international advocacy, and simulation-based exercises. This includes credit-bearing options, co-curricular transcripts, and opportunities for alumni involvement as facilitators or research mentors, ensuring continuity and scalability.

Legal education is no longer defined solely by the transmission of doctrinal knowledge. It must now prepare students to navigate an increasingly interconnected, ethically complex, and procedurally diverse global legal environment. Experiential learning, as demonstrated through the BCU Model UN and UPR Project, offers a compelling model for how this can be achieved, not only by teaching law but by enabling students to *do* law in ways that are meaningful, collaborative, and socially conscious.