

## Promoting equity and employability using live briefs *by Lucy Cokes*



'Live briefs' are used in Higher Education programmes, and I suggest that they can help promote equity and employability if they are used in very specific ways. The use of live briefs takes place not only in the creative industries, but also across more practical or core subjects in HE. and has many parallels with a wide range of other teaching tools.

Live Briefs have been part of my teaching to students on the Creative Advertising degrees at Falmouth University for the past 10 years, with the last four years using live paid briefs as part of assessment. Done right I passionately believe that live briefs, with their ability to test students through an authentic task, develop creative problem-solving skills, and in turn, enhancing student satisfaction, are a valuable tool.

### **How live briefs are usually used**

A live brief is defined as "a type of design project that is distinct from a typical studio project in its engagement of real clients or users, in real-time settings" (Sara, 2006, p. 1). Often, lecturers believe they are assigning 'live briefs', but frequently these are merely 'simulations' or 'mock briefs' using either outdated, or fictional client briefs which lack a genuine and immediate client need. Distant cousins of live briefs include the use of case studies in teaching, or the use of authentic tasks. However, I believe that the use of a live brief should be the unrivalled method to enhancing students' employability skills and prospects at university in comparison to these other approaches. Typically, live briefs are sourced through lecturers' professional networks and are presented to students most frequently as an extracurricular opportunity. These opportunities have often resulted in students securing paid or unpaid placements at agencies or being offered full-time positions post-graduation. By not fully embedding these live opportunities into assessments, there is an inadvertent disadvantage to those already disadvantaged.

### **How live briefs could be used**

Live briefs can be, with effort, integrated into the students' assessment brief for their modules. Students are often asked to deliver a pitch to the client as part of their assessment with one of the ideas chosen by the client. The winning students should ideally be paid for their time, with full guidance from tutors acting to provide feedback and project manage the process. Course leaders need to use caution when explicitly stating a particular module will contain live paid briefs, as they are often hard to come by. Instead, it is suggested that modules be designed in such a way they can be 'plugged in' when accessible.

There are many challenges in using live briefs, these include:

- Planning in good time prior to start of a module.
- The need to fit timings with pre-established assessment deadlines.
- Additional time required for lectures to source the live briefs and manage the 'clients'.
- Potential administration constraints with invoicing 'clients', paying students and suppliers.

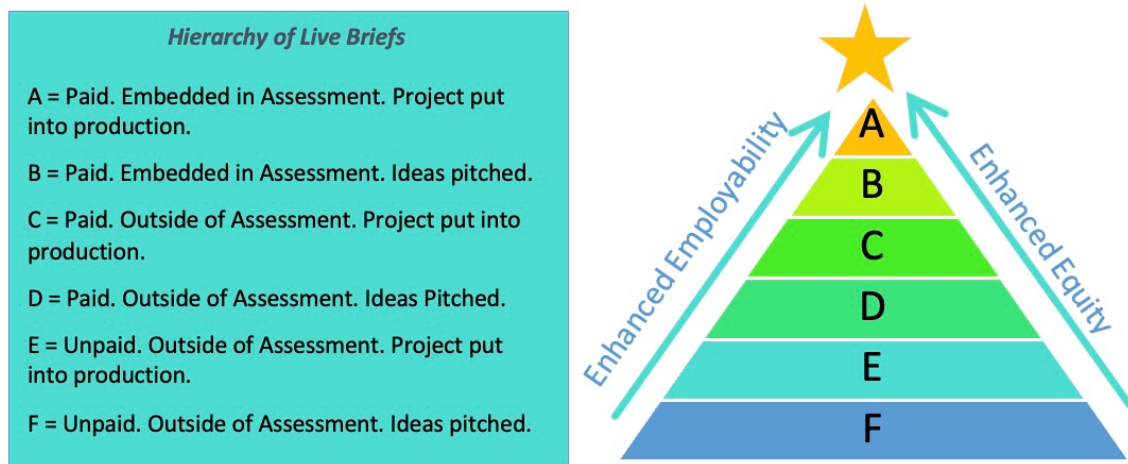
Live briefs seem particularly well-suited to non-profits, small businesses, or government agencies. Experience has shown that these types of organisations tend to see the partnership with a university and students to be more cost effective, providing social benefits, whilst also being able to be more flexible around the module deadlines.

Organisations benefit from bringing their projects to the university, as they gain a dedicated fresh set of minds working on their problem. The same clients often come back year after year. Chris Thompson of Safer Futures shared that he "...thought the standard, confidence and professionalism of the student pitches and research was exceptional."

The hierarchy of live briefs has been produced to assist lecturers in deciding how best to use live briefs in their teaching and push for the gold star of having paid opportunities embedded into assessment. This is a call for a shift in culture and attitudes toward the use of live briefs, so we are not inadvertently decreasing social mobility in the UK through their use.

### Live Brief Hierarchy

The hierarchy has been designed to help lecturers navigate the options whilst considering the ever-increasing demand for improved employability equity.



*Figure 1: Hierarchy of the use of Live Briefs in University Teaching.  
Ranked based on perceived equity and employability status.*

Working on live briefs enhances the students' employability by improving general employability skills, and providing the ability to include this work in their portfolios and CVs. The approach of using live briefs outside of assessment does not provide equal opportunities to students from diverse backgrounds. Less privileged students often work nearly full-time during evenings and weekends to support themselves financially while studying. Indeed, 55% of UK students now work an average of 13.5 hours a week meaning they have less availability to participate in extracurricular assignments (BBC, 2023). The Social Mobility Commission has noted that "unpaid internships are damaging for social mobility" (Milburn, 2017). I see a parallel between the use of extracurricular briefs and unpaid internships, so I advocate that we discourage the use of unpaid extracurricular briefs, as they reduce our chances of 'levelling up' in the UK.

### The Gold Star of Live Briefs

Justyna, BA Creative Advertising graduate, shared her thoughts on working on a paid live brief. "It gave me more motivation to produce the best possible work. But it was mainly because I was excited about the opportunity to actually make a campaign, still as a student. It was a great way of getting work experience and seeing how the industry works. I believe that the campaign I made is one of the most valuable experiences on my CV".

Embedding live briefs into briefs assessment, producing work for clients, and compensating students for their contributions present significant challenges. However, I believe incremental improvements to the existing practice of utilising live briefs outside of formal assessment without remuneration should be pursued. The deliberate consideration of these options and the effort to implement such changes will gradually shift the culture and attitudes toward the use of live briefs among both

university academic staff and external organisations. This progressive adaptation will enhance the integration of live briefs into the curriculum, ultimately benefiting the student experience, learning and employability whilst simultaneously resulting in clear knowledge exchange advantages for the external organisations.

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## **References**

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