



## **A Model United Nations simulation as a catalyst for experiential learning in higher education**

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### ***Abstract***

This opinion piece argues for the transformative value of Model United Nations (MUN) simulations, particularly SimONU, in higher education as a powerful means for experiential learning, global citizenship education, and Learning Development. Drawing on observations from the SimONU event hosted by a European higher education institution in partnership with the United Nations Regional Information Centre (UNRIC), the article highlights the pedagogical, social, and developmental benefits of engaging students in structured, role-based international diplomacy. This piece is grounded in educational theory and explores how such simulations foster essential skills including research, negotiation, collaboration, and critical thinking in higher education contexts, while simultaneously offering inclusive, context-rich learning environments. The piece concludes with a call for broader integration of experiential, globally oriented pedagogies within higher education to better prepare students for the complexities of a multipolar, interdependent world.

**Keywords:** experiential learning; Model United Nations; Learning Development; global citizenship; higher education pedagogy; student engagement; SimONU.

### ***Introduction***

In an era marked by geopolitical instability, climate crisis, and rising calls for educational equity, universities are increasingly asked to prepare students not only as professionals, but as engaged global citizens. This imperative invites a reassessment of pedagogical approaches that move beyond conventional classroom boundaries. Among these, Model United Nations (MUN)-style simulations stand out as a powerful yet often underexplored

framework for experiential learning. MUN-style simulations involve students role-playing as delegates to debate global issues (Shellman and Turan, 2006). Originally designed to teach diplomacy, the format now spans many disciplines.

SimONU is a French-language adaptation of the MUN format, developed in collaboration with the United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe (UNRIC). The initiative brings together students from multiple European institutions to simulate real-world diplomatic negotiations (UNRIC, 2024). It exemplifies how structured, immersive simulations of multilateral diplomacy can significantly enrich the student learning experience. While inspired by traditional MUN formats, SimONU introduces key adaptations. Delivered in French and hosted by public European institutions, it prioritises inclusive participation and accessibility. With a focus on collaboration over competition and built-in reflective practices, SimONU offers a more equitable, context-sensitive model of MUN-style simulation.

By blending simulation with collaboration across diverse institutions, SimONU offers a compelling model for immersive learning. Over the course of one-day simulation, students are challenged to step into the shoes of diplomats, defending national interests, proposing solutions, and negotiating alliances around a shared global issue. In the instance I observed, the agenda focused on improving equitable access to essential medicines, vaccines, and treatments in developing countries.

Participants follow formal UN protocols, deliver speeches, engage in moderated and informal negotiations, and ultimately vote on draft resolutions. If adopted, these are treated as simulated UN resolutions and serve as tangible outcomes of a process that blends research, argumentation, diplomacy, and cooperation. Through this immersive experience, students develop confidence in public speaking, strengthen their negotiation and teamwork skills, and deepen their understanding of multilateral cooperation in pursuit of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

### ***Interdisciplinarity and critical engagement with global issues***

SimONU is not confined to a single discipline; it is inherently interdisciplinary, blending Political Science, International Relations, Economics, Sociology, and Environmental Studies. This allows participants to connect classroom knowledge with global challenges

such as climate change, human rights, and sustainable development. By simulating debates on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), students gain a more nuanced understanding of interconnected global systems (UNESCO, 2015). As Engel, Pallas, and Lambert (2017) argue, MUN-style simulations support both theoretical and professional learning, helping students engage in complex reasoning and reflective debate across disciplines.

Such interdisciplinary immersion encourages critical thinking about both content and process. Students begin to question not only what decisions are made in global forums, but how and why they are made. This reflexive stance fosters curiosity and prepares students for a globalised knowledge economy (Barnett, 2000).

Moreover, this learning is not a top-down transfer of knowledge. The DIP approach (Dialogic, Inclusive, and Participatory) developed by Patel et al. (2018), argues that Learning Development thrives when students and staff are co-agents in the learning journey. SimONU exemplifies this approach by positioning academic staff, student organisers, and participants as co-creators of the learning experience. From research briefings to moderation and feedback, the simulation becomes a shared intellectual endeavour that blurs traditional pedagogical hierarchies while enriching academic and digital literacies.

### ***Learning by doing: experiential pedagogy in action***

Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) affirms that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, moving through a four-stage cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. SimONU exemplifies this cycle in practice. Students begin by engaging with the simulation as a lived experience; through structured reflection and debriefing, they develop conceptual understandings of diplomacy and negotiation, which they then apply as their strategies evolve throughout the day. This reflection draws on my full-day academic observation of SimONU. Witnessing the simulation in action offered insight into how students applied research and collaboration in real time, navigating complex negotiations and adapting their strategies throughout the process.

Unlike passive reception of information, students must actively investigate the political, economic, and cultural contexts of their assigned countries. This work aligns with educational best practices that emphasise active learning, contextual engagement, and reflexivity (Moon, 2004; Biggs and Tang, 2011). SimONU operates as a gamified exercise that scaffolds critical stages of learning: initial research, speech preparation, public speaking, diplomatic negotiation, and resolution drafting. As Matzner and Herrenbrück (2016) illustrate through their climate simulation study, MUN-style activities function as gamified learning environments that challenge students to improvise and adapt in real-time scenarios. Crucially, students operate not as themselves but as representatives of a specific nation, requiring them to set aside personal perspectives to understand and articulate external viewpoints. This role-based approach fosters empathy, critical analysis, and strategic thinking.

This model is strengthened by Crisp's (2018) findings, which emphasise the importance of incidental learning in professional contexts. SimONU mirrors this dynamic: in addition to pre-planned outcomes, students develop competencies through unanticipated challenges, improvisation, and peer collaboration. Reflection tasks embedded in the preparation and debrief phases are crucial to ensuring this learning is consolidated and recognised as part of their academic and personal growth. While this piece focuses on student learning, it is important to acknowledge the collaborative academic work involved in designing such simulations (Matzner and Herrenbrück, 2016).

### ***Soft skills in practice: communication, negotiation, and collaboration***

The pedagogical value of simulations extends to the cultivation of essential graduate attributes. Employer-valued skills like communication and teamwork are embedded in SimONU. During the simulation, students are required to deliver speeches, engage in caucus sessions, and co-author draft resolutions. These activities mirror real-life diplomatic processes and teach students to collaborate across linguistic, cultural, and ideological boundaries (Saunders, 2014).

The LEAP framework (Learning, Engagement, Achievement, and Progress) (McIntosh and Barden, 2019) articulates how structured learning experiences like SimONU can scaffold personal and academic development. As students move through the stages of

preparation, performance, and reflection, SimONU mirrors the LEAP model's layered approach to learning. This process supports learners in gradually transitioning from dependence to autonomy, while building their confidence, competence, and ability to apply skills in increasingly complex situations.

Moreover, the simulation provides a psychologically safe space to practice high-stakes communication. Student feedback indicates increased confidence in public speaking and a better grasp of strategic language use in persuasive settings. These gains reflect broader research on simulation-based learning, which shows improvements in both cognitive and affective domains (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001; Krain and Lantis, 2006). However, the development of such soft skills does not occur without tension.

Collaborative activities can generate discomfort, especially when students engage with diverse perspectives and unfamiliar power dynamics. Arao and Clemens (2013) caution that 'safe spaces' may inadvertently suppress meaningful dialogue or reinforce dominant norms. Instead, they advocate for 'brave spaces' that encourage openness, risk-taking, and respectful challenge. This approach reflects the principles of dialogic teaching as articulated by Alexander (2008), who argues that meaningful learning occurs not through transmission of information but through extended, structured dialogue. In SimONU, students are required to articulate positions, listen actively, and respond constructively, engaging in the kind of purposeful talk that deepens understanding and nurtures critical and reflective engagement.

In addition to its collaborative ethos, SimONU also introduces a competitive dimension that further enhances student motivation and performance. At the end of the event, two delegations are formally recognised: one receives the *Prix de l'Éloquence* for excellence in public speaking, and another is awarded the *Prix de la Meilleure Délégation* for exemplary overall contribution. These awards encourage students to refine their rhetorical abilities, teamwork, and strategic positioning. Rather than detracting from cooperation, this structured competition mirrors real-world diplomacy, where influence, persuasion, and recognition are central to effective engagement.

## ***Equity, access, and the democratisation of learning***

Despite its many strengths, MUN as a pedagogical tool is often associated with elite institutions or international schools. SimONU challenges this norm by fostering accessibility. Held in French and supported by public institutions, it opens participation to a broader demographic. However, questions of equity remain: who gets to attend, who feels entitled to speak, and which voices are amplified or silenced during the simulation? These are important considerations if we are to fully realise the inclusive promise of Learning Development (Thomas and May, 2010).

In the simulation setting described here, organisers made deliberate efforts to democratise access by offering preparation sessions, mentorship, and multilingual resources. This proactive scaffolding supports students who might otherwise be marginalised by language, background, or confidence levels. This emphasis on diversity and inclusion mirrors insights from Olender and Lisetto-Smith (2019), who view student diversity as an asset to inclusive peer-led learning.

## ***Implications for Learning Development practice***

While SimONU draws on the specific format of Model United Nations, its pedagogical design has significant implications for the broader field of Learning Development. At its core, the simulation reflects values central to Learning Development: active engagement, inclusive learning, critical thinking, and the cultivation of academic and civic literacies. These principles align with Hilsdon's (2018) definition of Learning Development as a practice grounded in inclusivity, empowerment, and active, reflective learning. As Johnson (2018) and Stapleford (2019) note, the field increasingly champions high-impact pedagogies, and SimONU contributes to this evolving culture of innovation.

Learning Developers are particularly well positioned to support or co-design simulation-based initiatives, including those situated beyond formal curricula. Their cross-disciplinary expertise and commitment to inclusive, student-centred learning make them valuable collaborators in experiential learning design. For example, MUN-style simulations can be embedded in academic literacies workshops, where students learn to argue from evidence, analyse multiple perspectives, and communicate persuasively within time

constraints. These competencies are not only central to diplomacy, but also fundamental to university assessment, employability, and active citizenship.

By fostering 'brave spaces' for open dialogue, simulations also support inclusive practice and intercultural competence (Hocking, 2010). This approach amplifies underrepresented voices and encourages respectful engagement across diverse backgrounds.

Simulations further offer opportunities to reframe assessment. Rather than relying on static outputs, Learning Developers can support dialogic, formative practices where students apply learning in real time. This aligns with approaches that foreground feedback literacy and assessment as a collaborative process of meaning-making (Akponah, Hassen and Higgins, 2024). SimONU also creates space for critical reflection, an essential component of transformative learning. Brookfield (2017) contends that both teachers and learners must regularly interrogate their assumptions, behaviours, and interpretive frames to avoid reproducing unexamined norms. Through role-play, students are invited to step outside their habitual perspectives and examine how power, culture, and identity shape their communication and decision-making.

In short, MUN-style simulations are not limited to Political Science or Business education. They represent a flexible and transferable model for Learning Development practice, offering powerful opportunities to scaffold student learning, support institutional priorities around engagement and inclusion, and reimagine what it means to prepare students for the demands of a complex and globalised world.

### ***Conclusion and call to action***

SimONU offers a bright illustration of how Learning Development can be reimaged through immersive, globally-oriented simulations. It brings to life the core values of Learning Development (student engagement, critical thinking, and inclusive practice) through experiential and collaborative pedagogy. At a time of global complexity and uncertainty, such approaches are not supplementary but essential.

Higher Education Institutions should integrate MUN simulations not as extras, but as core, credit-bearing components of Learning Development. Doing so affirms a commitment to

preparing students for employment but also for ethical, informed, and collaborative global citizenship.

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