

Real challenges, a reflection to be taken with a grain of salt

London functions at a different pace. Hurried walking is the trademark of the City, not the Gherkin. A red light certainly isn't stopping a Londoner from crossing, and I am sure even the escalators run faster than the European average.

I am German. Germans love to follow rules, they love order and precision. Crossing at a red light in Germany is as much as a crime as slurping your tea in England. Only the rebellious may do it, or those, who had, according to every mother, not a proper upbringing. So while I find comfort standing on the right of the escalator, my consciousness still plays tricks on me for crossing City Road every single day at a red light. In Germany this could cost me my driver's license, as an innocent pedestrian!

While Cass may not be as British, it certainly reflects London. It reflects internationalism, contrary, creativity and diversity. There is precision in nowhere-to-be-found precision. And for a German, from the most German places of them all (Bavaria), this may or may not have been challenging. First year was filled with coursework that had no proper instructions. No precision. No guidelines. "You are learning to work with uncertainty and ill-structured problems!"; Well, I was certainly uncertain when I was walking through London to find an interesting architectural object for the Dérive, a "Storytelling" coursework. While there was no detailed instruction whatsoever, which gave my orderly brain anxiety, I have learnt to acknowledge that there can be precision in nowhere-to-be-found precision. By that, I mean many correct but diverse answers to one very open question. And individual ownership and collaborating as a team will get you there; another complete contrary, but the key to success.

Random, forced groups may have been one of the best experiences and greatest challenges at Cass. You meet people you probably wouldn't have met otherwise, and you experience situations that strengthen you as a leader and manager. The free-rider problem is not really a problem, but rather one of the best challenges you can overcome. At least in retrospective. I probably did not think that when the active group of four was writing an essay for five. You learn to negotiate, trust and collaborate with people you don't really know and build ownership for something that you don't really own alone. That is something I have learnt to appreciate more than anything in a professional environment. And on the way, you meet an interesting mix of people like a girl from Russia, who requires one full day to fly home or a

Thai who went to boarding school in New Zealand who recommended me islands only the locals know.

While I started to master multiculturalism, London as a city and home, groupwork and free-riders, I decided I wanted the full Cass undergraduate experience. The full experience comes with a placement year in industry and only those who really liked to be challenged, immerse on those. (At least I like to think so). Not knowing this would take me back to my home country, I found myself walking into an American investment bank a few months later, confident I could face everything and anything. Oh, how was I wrong. This is where the real challenge started: an open plan office is not the library (my concentration got that very quickly), a headset doesn't mean you work in a call centre, teamwork also happens here, but this time with some very senior people and no free-riders, multitasking is the greatest skill of them all and having a headache certainly doesn't mean you just stay at home!

Here I was in Germany again, waiting at every red light and spending hours on the escalator and in the office, and nearly daily I was fantasising about London and university life and how I certainly have not appreciated either one enough. Over the years, I have emerged into that global citizen everyone keeps talking about, and I was no longer fine with stores being closed on Sundays.

Back at Cass, full of impressions of the professional world, I'm trying to make the most of what I have left. The meaning of exams and other challenges has changed. They are no longer a challenge but an opportunity to learn and succeed. Four years with the full experience have changed me. I have lost my old identity and gained a new one. I am open-minded, collaborative and think sustainably. Nowadays, I roll my eyes every time someone asks if we can select our own groups.

I have come to understand that all this wasn't the real challenge. This was a trick. The real challenge will be, many years down the line, when there no longer will be real challenges. When the routine and stagnation happen. During my placement year, I joked to a colleague that she has been sitting at the same desk by the same window for the past 15 years. And slowly but surely, all jokes aside, I realise that that is the real challenge.