

## **Laidlaw Programme Leadership in Action (LIA) Reflection**

### **Scholar**

Name:	Ryan Oatley
Faculty:	School of Chemical and Process Engineering
Email address:	Pm22ro@leeds.ac.uk
Title of LIA Project:	Sports Volunteering

### **Project Leader**

Signature of Scholar: RYAN OATLEY Date: 15/09/2024

Signature of Project Leader VIVIANA HERRERA Date: 17/09/2024

#### *Comment:*

*Ryan helped as a sports assistance in a Sports centre participating in some planned and organised activities for children at social risk in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.*

*I would like to highlight the impressive leadership skills and exceptional attributes that Ryan demonstrated at the sports centre. His ability to inspire and motivate the team was truly remarkable. He not only leads by example, but also creates an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and encouraged to contribute.*

*The dedication and commitment that he demonstrates is exemplary. On top of that, his clear and effective communication ensures that everyone is aligned with the goals and objectives of the sports centre.*

*In short, Ryan's leadership at the sports centre was a valuable asset. His combination of skills, empathy, and clear vision for the future not only benefits the team, but also positively impacts all participants and the community at large. We deeply appreciate his dedication and for being a source of inspiration to us all!*

*We are really impressed with his participation and we wish him the best in his future endeavours.*

# Reflective Report on Sports Education Volunteer Program in Rio de Janeiro

## Introduction

My involvement in the Sports Education Volunteer Program in Rio de Janeiro, organized by International Volunteer HQ, was a profoundly transformative experience. As a student from the University of Leeds, I embarked on this journey with the goal of contributing to the well-being of local communities, particularly children and young people in low-income areas. My work aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal #3: Good Health and Well-Being, and I was eager to leverage my academic knowledge, leadership skills, and passion for sports to make a meaningful impact. This reflective report will detail my experiences during the volunteer program, the challenges I faced, the leadership skills I developed, and how this experience has shaped my future aspirations. The report will also reflect on the cultural insights I gained and how I navigated the complexities of working in an unfamiliar environment.

## Project Description and Objectives

The Sports Education Volunteer Program aimed to provide structured sports activities to children and young people in low-income communities in Rio de Janeiro. Sports, particularly soccer, are deeply ingrained in Brazilian culture, and they serve as a vital outlet for physical activity and social interaction, especially in communities with limited resources. The program sought to harness the power of sports to promote physical and mental well-being, foster teamwork, and provide a positive and supportive environment for participants.

Before my departure, I outlined several SMART objectives to guide my efforts:

1. **Specific:** Develop and implement a structured sports coaching program for local children, focusing on key skills and fostering teamwork.
2. **Measurable:** Increase sports participation among the target community by 20% over the course of the volunteering program.
3. **Achievable:** Develop a mentor-mentee system within the sports program, pairing older or more experienced participants with younger or less experienced ones, to foster leadership, responsibility, and peer learning among the participants.

4. Relevant: Integrate health education components into sports activities to contribute to the holistic development and long-term health of the participants.
5. Time-bound: Evaluate the impact of the sports program through regular assessments and provide a comprehensive report on achievements and areas for improvement by the conclusion of the volunteering period.

## Achieving the Goals and Overcoming Challenges



Figure 1 – The Christ the Redeemer Statue

Achieving these goals was both rewarding and challenging. The first objective, developing a structured sports coaching program, was a central focus of my work. I began by assessing the needs and interests of the participants, which involved spending time with them, understanding their backgrounds, and observing their interactions. Based on this, I designed a program that included soccer, basketball, and general fitness activities, with a strong emphasis on teamwork and communication.

The measurable objective of increasing sports participation by 20% was ambitious but ultimately achievable. Initially, the program attracted between 5 to 10 children per session. However, through consistent engagement, word-of-mouth within the community, and the integration of fun and educational elements, I was able to significantly boost attendance. By the end of the

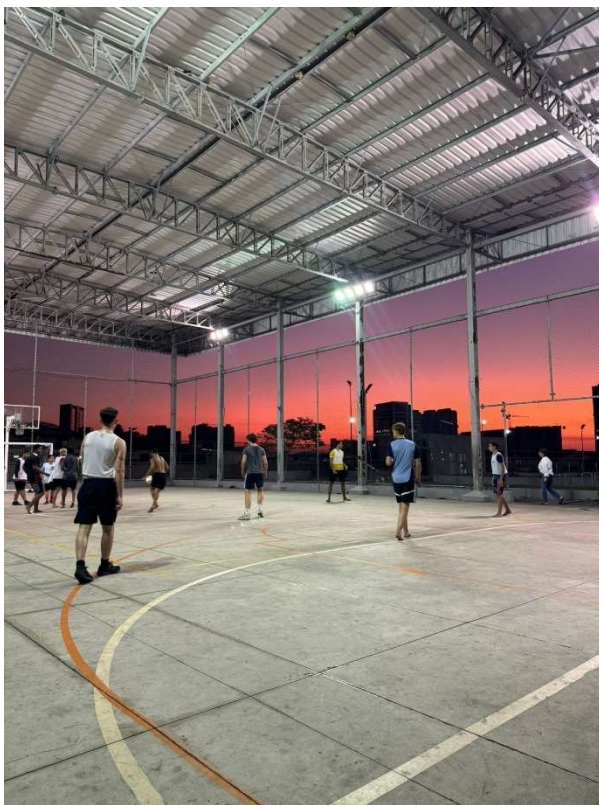
program, participation had increased to over 30 children per session, marking a substantial improvement. This increase in engagement not only reflected the growing interest in the activities but also demonstrated the trust and value the community placed in the program.

Establishing partnerships with local organizations was another critical objective. I reached out to local schools and community centres, presenting the program and discussing how we could collaborate to maximize its impact. These partnerships were instrumental in expanding the reach of the program, allowing us to access more participants and providing additional resources such as equipment and venues. The success of these partnerships was a testament to the importance of community engagement and collaboration in achieving sustainable outcomes. Integrating health education into the sports activities was a unique and impactful aspect of the program. During breaks and cool-down sessions, I introduced short discussions on topics such as nutrition, hydration, and the importance of physical activity. These sessions were interactive, with participants sharing their knowledge and asking questions, which helped reinforce the lessons and make them more relatable.

Regular assessments and feedback sessions were crucial for evaluating the program's impact and identifying areas for improvement. I conducted informal interviews with participants and

their parents, seeking their opinions on the activities and suggestions for future improvements. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with many expressing appreciation for the structured activities and the focus on health education. However, some suggestions included diversifying the sports offered and increasing the frequency of sessions, which I took into account in my final report. Despite these successes, the program was not without its challenges. One of the most significant hurdles was the language barrier. Although I had taken basic Portuguese classes before my trip, communicating effectively with the participants and their families was initially difficult. To overcome this, I partnered with bilingual volunteers and local staff who could help translate and facilitate communication. Over time, I also made a concerted effort to improve my language skills, which greatly enhanced my ability to connect with the community and deliver the program effectively.

Another challenge was the limited availability of resources, such as sports equipment and venues. To address this, I organized a small fundraising campaign and reached out to local businesses for donations. The response was positive, and we were able to secure the necessary equipment and access additional venues, which significantly improved the quality of the program.



*Figure 2 - Picture of the evening youth session, with Rio's beautiful sunset in the background*

## Leadership Development and Learnings

One of the most significant aspects of this experience was the opportunity to develop and demonstrate leadership skills. Leading without formal authority was a key challenge, as I was a volunteer in a foreign country, working with a community that did not know me. Building trust and establishing credibility were essential for gaining the participants' and local staff's respect and cooperation. I learned that leading by example, showing genuine commitment, and being consistent in my actions were crucial in this context. Cultural intelligence and empathy were also critical leadership attributes that I had to develop quickly. Working in a culturally diverse environment required me to be

sensitive to the local customs, values, and social dynamics. For example, I had to adapt my coaching style to align with the community's expectations and norms, which sometimes differed from what I was accustomed to. I also had to be empathetic to the challenges faced by the participants, many of whom came from disadvantaged backgrounds, and tailor the program to meet their needs.



*Figure 3 - The IVHQ Rio group in Rio's oldest favela, 'Morro de Providência'*

Turning ideas into action was another key learning from this experience. The process of designing and implementing the sports program required me to be creative, resourceful, and decisive. I had to think on my feet, especially when faced with unexpected challenges such as bad weather or last-minute changes in venue availability. This experience taught me the importance of being flexible and adaptable, while also maintaining a clear vision and focus on the program's goals. Building relationships and networks was essential for the success of the program. Establishing partnerships with local schools, community centres, and businesses not only expanded the reach of the program but also ensured its sustainability. I learned that building strong relationships is not just about formal agreements but also about fostering trust, mutual respect, and a shared sense of purpose. These relationships were crucial in overcoming challenges and ensuring the program's long-term impact.

## Cultural Experiences and Insights

Living and working in Rio de Janeiro was an eye-opening experience that provided me with a deep understanding of the local culture and the challenges faced by the community. One of the most striking aspects of Brazilian culture is the passion for sports, particularly soccer, which is more than just a game; it is a way of life. This passion was evident in the enthusiasm and dedication of the participants, who often saw sports as an escape from the challenges of daily life and a source of hope and inspiration. However, I also became acutely aware of the socio-economic disparities that exist in Rio, particularly in the favelas, where many of the participants lived. These communities often lack access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and safe recreational spaces, which makes initiatives like the Sports Education Volunteer Program even more critical. The experience reinforced the importance of addressing the root causes of inequality and providing opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their background, to thrive.

The experience also taught me the value of humility and the importance of approaching community work with an open mind and a willingness to learn. I realized that as much as I was there to teach and lead, I was also there to learn from the community. This mindset allowed me to build stronger connections with the participants and gain a deeper understanding of their needs, aspirations, and challenges.

## Impact on Future Career Plans

My experience in Rio de Janeiro has had a profound impact on my future career plans. Before this experience, I was focused primarily on pursuing a career in chemical and nuclear engineering, with little consideration for the social impact of my work. However, my time in Rio has opened my eyes to the importance of integrating community engagement and social responsibility into my professional goals. I now aspire to pursue a career that combines my technical expertise with a commitment to addressing global challenges, particularly in the areas of sustainable development. I am particularly interested in exploring opportunities to work on projects that leverage engineering solutions to improve the quality of life in underserved communities, both in the UK and abroad.

The leadership skills I developed during the volunteer program, such as cultural intelligence, empathy, and the ability to lead without formal authority, will be invaluable in my future career. I am also more aware of the importance of adaptability, resilience, and creativity in overcoming challenges and achieving meaningful impact. Furthermore, I plan to continue my involvement in volunteer work and community engagement, recognizing that these experiences are not only personally fulfilling but also crucial for developing the skills and perspectives needed to be an effective leader in today's interconnected world.

## Conclusion

Volunteering with the Sports Education Program in Rio de Janeiro was a transformative experience that has shaped my understanding of leadership, community engagement, and the role of sports in promoting well-being. The challenges I faced, the relationships I built, and the cultural insights I gained have all contributed to my personal and professional growth. This experience has reinforced my commitment to using my skills and knowledge to make a positive impact on the world, and I look forward to applying the lessons I have learned in my future endeavours.