

LiA Blog-My Time in Melbourne

Project Title: FutureFIT: Expanding the Services of Big Group Hug

(Scholar: Elena Law)

Week 1

The Friday before last, I arrived in Melbourne to start my LiA project at Big Group Hug. BGH are a charity with aims to address the issues associated with child poverty by supporting families in need. This is done through collection of clothes, prams, nappies, baby formula, books e.t.c. These items are then sorted, packaged and collected by social workers who hand packages over to families. The charity has grown since starting in 2014, with 4071 requests being sent in last year. This is an unfortunate fact as it reflects how the cost of living in Australia is making it harder for families to afford basic essentials.

Big Group Hug is also involved in other projects to support people in need. For example, a project that I will be working on is a new collaboration with another charity, to provide clothing that 15–24-year-olds can wear to interviews. Also, BGH often holds various fundraising and exposure activities. This includes an event that I am leading, which is a spring baby-clothing pop-up sale (to raise some money and free up warehouse space- as there is an excess of donations for children aged 0-2).

I will talk more about these projects and how I will get involved in them in the following weeks... However, this week has been a chance to work in the warehouses and get to know how the charity works, as well as meeting lots of lovely volunteers. When learning how items are sorted and packaged, I have enjoyed the key message that the boxes created at Big Group Hug are meant to be a gift. This means that children are only handed items of sufficient quality, which is why sorting is an important job (you would be surprised by how many stained items are sent in, or things like second hand underwear). This has made packing boxes quite an enjoyable role. You are only given a child's age and gender, but I have liked picking out outfits and hoping that boxes I have made will help bring some joy to someone. I have also been really impressed by the number of initiatives to ensure minimal items are sent to landfill. Examples of this are that some clothing can be sent to refugee camps, as well as things like torn blankets which can be given to animal rescue centres.

I have also met with Bernadene (the CEO) and she has taken me to a BNI group meeting (apparently a popular networking organisation where groups meet on a weekly basis to collaborate and achieve a goal number of referrals). I have also started to chat with her about her ideas for opportunities I can be involved in, which is very exciting! As well as talking about me, I have really enjoyed getting to know Bernadene and her story. She has definitely become a very inspirational leadership figure for me.

As well as my LiA work, I have begun to get to know Melbourne and become accustomed to living on the opposite side of the world! So far, I'm loving it and have found a good park to run in (I'm training for the Manchester half marathon, in October, and have realised it's now time to fully commit!), been to an exhibition about photo-booths, tried Fro-Yo, and met some friends at a working holiday girls event!



Week 2

On my second Monday here, I had a meeting with some of the leadership team to discuss my next steps at Big Group Hug. After this meeting and speaking to Bernadene (Big Group Hug's CEO & my supervisor) during our day together on Tuesday, I am glad to say I have been able to create a clearer vision of how I can use my leadership skills and make the most of my LiA experience.

As mentioned in my last post, I have been given the job to host a baby-wear sale, using excess donations that are building up in the warehouses. With the dates confirmed, Thursday 4th-Saturday 6th of September, I have been able to start ticking things off. A project plan has now been created, including a timeline, descriptive brief and task-table so people know what they are assigned to and the desired deadlines. With the help of the leadership team, I have also been able to ensure the relevant people are involved. The current focuses of these plans are marketing of the event, and ensuring I have sufficient volunteers to set up and run the sale. In terms of promotions, it has been important for me to be in close communication with the digital marketing coordinator, Rachael. Once confirming details with the leadership team, I sent them to Rachael from which she has made graphics which will be posted on socials, sent to case-workers, and displayed in community locations. To ensure these promotional activities are carried out, I am making sure to pass on roles to relevant members of the team. One challenge that I have experienced here, is that most people work from home. With this, I am finding it more difficult to be listened to and understood, as I am sending everything through emails/Teams. I have been combatting this by planning my emails and ensuring that they are sent to all the necessary people, as well as hopefully having a team call when everyone is available.

Another challenge for this event is obtaining volunteers. Although Big Group Hug has many volunteers, they all have their own routines and lives, and often do not like to pick up things outside of their weekly plan/not in their local area. Fortunately, on one of my first days here, I was present during a meeting that Bernadene had with a local volunteer-group leader- Tiia. Tiia leads a group within another charity, Youth Projects. At Youth Projects, young adults are assisted with increasing their employability skills and gaining experience in different areas. This seemed a promising opportunity for a strategic partnership, where Big Group Hug can benefit from a new group of younger volunteers, whilst the volunteers at Youth Projects will have various opportunities that they can be involved in. However, Tiia has told me she needs to meet with her manager to check the guidelines with groups being involved in hosting of events. I am hoping that as Big Group Hug has sufficient insurance and support for volunteers during events this will be okay, but I will have to wait and see. This may pose a problem as I may have to find volunteers somewhere else...

Additionally, this week, I worked my first retail shift! A shop for a popular girls-wear brand 'Ally Fashion' has recently shut down at a shopping centre, and Big Group Hug have been given the left-over stock to sell. So, on Thursday myself and a team of 4 others were given the task of filling an empty shop with clothes (from this pile):



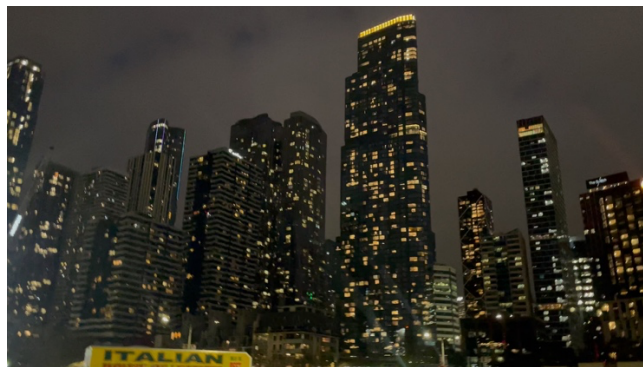
This was a different task to anything I've normally done. But by working together we managed to set up an okay-looking shop:



Finally, I also spoke further with Bernadene about FutureFit, a project being held in collaboration with another charity (ReadySet). This project was created to provide interview-suitable clothing and styling services for 15–24-year-olds who are struggling financially. Although the project has been set up, had a launch event, and been advertised, they have not yet had very many bookings. I have talked to Bernadene about some of the next steps, which include trying to increase bookings through greater promotion to young people. I will also be meeting with ReadySet's CEO, Cynthia, so that

we can ensure FutureFit aligns with both charity's missions. Bernadene has suggested I look into making a mini business plan to assist in the development of the FutureFit project (which I can apply some of the skills from the enterprise portion of my degree to!).

So, with the end of the second week I already have quite a few tasks that I am having to make sure I stay on top of! Hopefully next week I will have developed these projects further and had even more opportunities to use my leadership skills (which I would like to talk about more in my next post). Thanks for reading if you got this far, I will be back to update at the end of this week!



Week 3 & 4

After now being in Melbourne for over a month (which I am finding it hard to believe), I'm here to do a half-way update of what I've been up to and what I've learnt!

Most of my third week was taken up working in the shop that we had previously set up in week 2 (I now have so much more respect for retail workers). I switched between jobs of welcoming customers, cleaning up the store, bringing new stock out and working behind the till (my favourite being behind the till, as I didn't have to keep re-sorting the same shelf every time someone new came in...).

One of the most significant days included a large group of high-school students coming in to volunteer. On this day it was just myself, Bernadene (Big Group Hug's CEO) and another intern working- meaning that when Bernadene went for her dinner break, I was left in charge. This was a new leadership experience for me as I was already drained after being in the shop since 10am and then had to control a group of students who also didn't want to be there. I think I did an okay job of suggesting jobs for the boys to do (instead of throwing clothes at each-other) and telling them to get off their phones (after they'd invited half of their high-school in to laugh at them), but looking back I think it was a time I could've stepped up a bit and separated myself as more of a leader. I sometimes struggle to have the confidence in myself that I know what I'm doing and have the ability to control a situation, which I think comes with feeling 'too young'. I know that this isn't true and I have so many skills and experiences that allow me to be a good leader (sometimes I just need to consciously remind myself of that). On this day, I also learnt the importance of accepting you can't always control every aspect of a situation. Bernadene wanted to drop me off at the station to get back to the city, rather than having to stay at the shop until 9pm, but this meant leaving the high schoolers in control. I was so panicked and kept asking her if she was sure, I thought the shop would be up in flames by the time she returned! But sure enough, it was all fine.

Bernadene and I decided to cancel the baby-wear sale due to an unexpected lack of excess baby clothing (however, my planning has not gone to waste as a sale is now going to be held by some volunteers at a later date), this meant my fourth week focus was on the FutureFIT project. I have slowly been working on developing the business plan, whilst making sure I'm aligning it to what Big Group Hug and ReadySet (the charities that are collaborating to create FutureFIT) want it to be. To make sure of this I had some chats with Bernadene and also organised a meeting with ReadySet's CEO Cynthia, who spoke to me about her ideas. I'm really enjoying this aspect of my volunteering as it really feels like I'm doing something 'proper'. I think my focus for week 5 now needs to be getting as much of the business plan done as possible, so that I can present my work to Bernadene and Cynthia next week (lots of to-do lists incoming...).

I actually really struggled during week 4 with homesickness and feeling down about things that have gone on in my personal life, meaning some days I struggled to even leave my flat. However, I spoke to my Mum on Friday and got some tough love, as she reminded me of what I'm here to do and that I need to make the most of the experience. She also reminded me that I'm returning to uni from my placement year when I'm back

home, and that I will have to push myself to get on with things if I want to do well in my final year, so I should start applying that mindset now to help at Big Group Hug. At the weekend, I then met up with some of my friends to make signs and go and support Juliette who was running her first 10k on Sunday. I told them how I'd been feeling, and after hearing some of their stories I was reminded that many people go through horrible things, but it doesn't mean you can give up on the good parts of life. I also really enjoyed watching everyone cross the finish line at the race on Sunday and was just thinking how all these people with different stories have just achieved this shared goal. With all of these positive ideas, I feel a lot better entering week 5 (my last full week here!) and am ready to persevere and get things done. :)

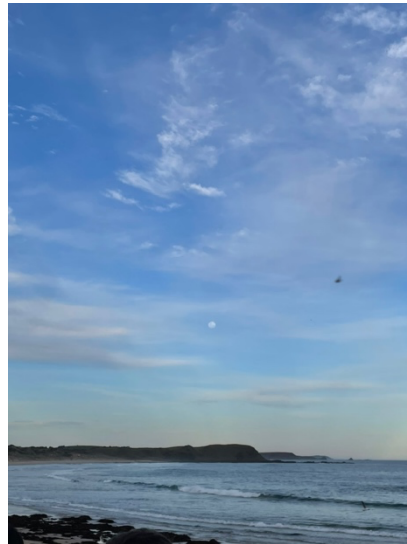


Week 5 & 6

In my final two weeks at Big Group Hug, I didn't have as many physical activities to attend. Therefore, I locked down and attempted to get the FutureFIT business plan done to the best standard in the timeframe left. This meant taking myself to the library to get things done, having Teams meetings with Bernadene (which helped me hold myself accountable and think about any final questions I had) and managing my time well. After sending drafts back and forth to Bernadene, I managed to complete a final version which was then used to apply for a grant to help the development of FutureFIT!

Additionally, I attended a final event: the Big Group Hug annual morning tea (although this year's was the very first one). I helped to set up and then got involved in conversations once people began to arrive. It was mainly targeted to people who donate to the charity, or those who they could form possible partnerships. I really enjoyed listening to Maria (one of the BGH employees) talking about everything that had been achieved in the past year, and what is to come. I also got a chance to speak to one of their main contributors about how he began donating to the charity, this was really interesting as it was Bernadene who introduced the charity to him. This again showed me the importance of always thinking about networking and making sure that I am having meaningful conversations. After this event, Bernadene dropped me off and I was done!

To conclude my blog about this amazing experience, here are some final photos of extra bits I got up to:



(Wine tasting & penguin-watching on a girls weekend away to Philip Island)



(Koala!! & a goodbye sweet-treat break at Tarneit)



(and some very random photos I took on a post-working from home walk).