

LiA Reflective Report

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Introduction

Between the 1st of August to the 14th of September, I spent 6-weeks living alone in Melbourne, to volunteer with the charity Big Group Hug. I think that it has been one of my biggest achievements so far and I am so proud of myself for both travelling alone and trying my best to make a difference in the short time that I was there for. This report will describe what I spent my time doing, and my learnings from my Leadership in Action project with Big Group Hug.

Big Group Hug & Who They Help

Big Group Hug are a non-profit organisation operating in Melbourne, Australia. Their primary focus is reducing child poverty in Victoria, and they do this by providing essential aid to families with children aged 0-16 years old. These essentials include things like clothing, cots, prams, baby-formula, toy packs etc. In doing this, they help to support over 7,000 children per year, with the help of their volunteers (of which there were 300 of in the past year).

Big Group Hub is run by a team of both employees and volunteers who carry out tasks such as promotional activities within schools, sorting/boxing up clothes, cleaning donations, sewing, managing volunteers or creating social media posts. During every week, teams of employees and volunteers work across Big Group Hug's three sites in Thomastown, Airport West and Tarneit, with there also being flexibility for some tasks to be done from home. Big Group Hug also take on interns from around the world, and during the first half of LiA I got to work a bit with Graham who was volunteering as a part of one of his university modules in America.

In my time at Big Group Hug, I also worked alongside Bernadene, their CEO. Bernadene was a key part of my LiA journey as she offered me transport to various locations. During these car journeys we had many conversations about where I was with different projects and ideas that each of us had, as well as getting to know each other. I really enjoyed learning about Bernadene's journey to becoming Big Group Hug's CEO and found hearing about her experiences in various roles very inspiring. She also allowed me

to attend a couple of her BNI (Business Network International) meetings, which gave me insight into the real-life networking and growth of the various organisations that were represented by individuals there.

Projects

Tarneit Baby-Wear Sale

Originally, the main project that I was assigned to was a baby-wear sale at Big Group Hug's Tarneit Hub. This was proposed due to there being an excess of baby clothing across the warehouses, meaning that they were running out of space.

I began to plan the sale by deciding dates, how the room would be organised and the pricing of items. I then made a project plan and timeline to send out to everyone involved. Additionally, I talked to Rachael, who manages Big Group Hug's social media content, about the themes and type of posts that I would like her to create. With this, she made some lovely designs.

I also had to begin to find some volunteers to help run the sale. There was not sufficient volunteer resourcing the Big Group Hug volunteers to help out. Therefore, I got in touch with another charity, Youth Projects (of which I had met one of their group leaders Tiia, who had visited Big Group Hug in my first week). Youth Projects is an organisation who helps young adults to build employability skills and gain experience in various areas. This meant that working with them to find volunteers was going to be mutually beneficial for both parties. However, I did experience some struggles in getting information from Tiia to confirm whether there would be volunteers available or not, as she had some uncertainty about whether they were allowed to send their group to help host events or not.

In the end, this wasn't a problem as the baby-wear sale didn't go ahead. This partially due to the uncertainty that there would be people available to help me to run the event (as I had planned at least five people would be needed at a time, to set up, tidy and actually process payments). Although the main reason was because of there no longer being an excess of babywear, they had to give so much out in one week that there was a shortage! This experience taught me that being a good leader doesn't always mean fighting to complete every task you start, as sometimes the most efficient thing is to just stop and start on something new.

Craigieburn Pop-Up Sale

In my third week of my LiA I was thrown into a week of retail work! Big Group Hug had been given the opportunity to take a storage room full of left over stock from a popular girls-wear brand that had shut down in Craigieburn Central (a shopping centre on the outskirts of Melbourne). Bernadene, Graham, other employees/volunteers, and I had to organise through the endless pile of clothes, set up the shop and aim to sell all items for

\$5 each in just one week! It was a crazy week and brand-new experience for me as I have never before worked in retail. I learnt a lot about resilience as the days were long and repetitive, especially when a shelf that I had organised was constantly messed up every time a new customer entered the shop.

A key experience from this project was when a group of high-school students had some into volunteer. On this day it was just myself, Graham and Bernadene working at the shop and so when Bernadene left for her dinner break, I was put in charge. Although this was only for a short time, I found it quite overwhelming as I was already tired from working all day and a lot of the students were friends so rather than completing tasks they were chatting and messing around. To try and break up the group of boys I tried to give them all some direction by suggesting different tasks that they could do and more efficient ways of putting new stock out into the shop. However, I think that I could've possibly stepped up as more of a leader and had more trust in myself as I don't think I controlled the situation the best (especially when they all started to go on their phones and invite all of their friends to come into the shop to laugh at them). On the other hand, I also learnt that maybe I should have had more trust in the students. This was because Bernadene wanted to drop me off at the station to get back to the city (rather than staying until 9pm), meaning we had to leave the student volunteers in charge. I was worried about this and what would happen to the shop, and kept asking her if she was sure, but in the end, she returned to the shop, and everything was okay.

FutureFIT

After the baby-wear sale was cancelled, my main focus fell to FutureFIT: a new project being run in collaboration with Big Group Hug and ReadySet. ReadySet are another non-profit organisation in Melbourne who offer styling services and career advice to disadvantaged jobseekers of any age or gender. The FutureFIT project was created to offer a similar service, with the main objective being to provide interview-suitable clothing to young people (aged 15-24) from disadvantaged communities. Bernadene and ReadySet's CEO Cynthia launched the project in July and hope to also extend the services to offer interview coaching, CV advice and further styling services such as haircuts. They currently offer the styling service in a room at Big Group Hug's Tarneit hub, with ReadySet stylists coming in every Wednesday to see to any clients who have been referred. FutureFIT will also be offered as a mobile service to attend schools and community centres for those who cannot make it to Tarneit. To use the service, individuals must be referred through either a school, case worker, hospital etc.

My role within this project was to help come up with ideas for the next steps of FutureFIT, as well as ways to increase engagement as they hadn't had many client referrals since the launch. Bernadene and Cynthia were also looking to apply for grants to help to employ a programme coordinator who could begin to build networks with referral agencies and strengthen the programme, as well as look to apply for further funding. To assist with this, I had the task of creating a small business plan that could be

used for grant applications, and also as a document where the key goals, activities and logistics could be detailed. I study Biotechnology with Enterprise, so I was able to use my experience from the business side of my degree to create this business plan. I, again, worked alongside Bernadene to complete this plan to ensure all necessary information and sections were included. I also organised a call with Cynthia (ReadySet's CEO) to ensure that the business plans also aligned with her idea of what FutureFIT should be. Although I had previously created a business plan for one of my university assignments, this was an interesting experience for me to ensure it was suitable to be used in real life applications, and for a charity rather than a profit-focussed business.

Morning Tea

In my final week I attended Big Group Hug's first annual morning tea, where their achievements from the past year were presented, as well as a plan to achieve their goals in the coming year. I didn't help with planning the event as it was run by one of Big Group Hug's employees Maria, but I did help to set up the venue o the day. I really enjoyed attending and hearing about the next steps for Big Group Hug, it made me excited to keep in touch with them and see what further things they could accomplish.

SMART Goals

I purposefully didn't make my SMART goals too specific as I wasn't sure what my exact role at Big Group Hug was going to be. I am glad I did this, as Bernadene and the team there were so flexible in letting me work on different projects and I managed to get a lot of different experiences in my short time there. Because of this, I think I managed to achieve most of my SMART goals as most of them just involved incorporating myself into the organisation and achieving a few different things. One of my main goals was also to be able to talk to and learn from Bernadene which I did. I also managed to learn a lot about leadership from Bernadene which I am highly grateful for.

Leadership Skills

Below are some notes on things that I learnt about leadership throughout my LiA:

- **Ask questions:** throughout my experience I learnt to accept that I don't know everything, now can I control every single aspect of a project. Also, asking questions is a valuable way to network.
- **Knowing my strengths and weaknesses:** since I have just come out of my placement year, I have realised that I stopped analysing my strengths and weaknesses as much as I did at university (when I was more involved in various Laidlaw development sessions). However, I have remembered the importance of applying your strengths and identifying weaknesses that other people may be able to help you address.

- **Cancelling plans:** sometimes it's necessary to cancel plans but it is important for it to be a well-informed decision that is communicated to everyone in a professional way.
- **Putting trust in people:** as a leader of a team, you can't control every single factor of a task, therefore you have to rely on people and refrain from micromanaging.
- **Removing expectations:** I have never volunteered with a charity before and found there were many differences in comparison to working for a business who primarily focuses on profit.
- **Balancing independence and teamwork:** especially when working from home I learnt to push myself and set my own goals. But it was also useful for me to make the most of the skills offered by individuals in the Big Group Hug team and not be afraid to ask for advice/help.
- **Mini opportunities to lead:** I found that six weeks is a very short time to lead a big project, but important leadership opportunities don't always have to be massive things. For example, when I led for an hour during the Craigieburn sale, or when Bernadene suggested for me to introduce a new volunteer to the FutureFIT programme (although she unfortunately did not make the meeting). There are always opportunities to lead in every day, you just have to seek them out.
- **Taking note of learnings:** as I didn't have very long at Big Group Hug, I have a lot of things I wish I'd done and people I wish I'd spoken to. Although I can't go back and do that, I am going to take this forward and make sure I use these learnings in future situations.

Cultural Experiences

Australia has a very similar culture to the UK, so it did not take me long to get used to the ways of living out there. My main struggle was the time difference and distance from the UK. As I am quite a realistic person, I don't normally miss people as I know that if I want to see them, I could easily reach them in a couple of hours. However, I was shocked as I started to feel homesick for the first time. To overcome this, I made sure to fill my time so that I wasn't just waiting for someone to wake up and reply to my texts. Additionally, I created a bit of a support system in Australia by making friends with a group of girls who were also on working holiday visas. This also gave me the opportunity to experience Aussie culture with other people (e.g. going to a footie game and seeing some koalas!!).

Future Plans

A main learning that I had from my LiA is that being employed for a not-for-profit organisation is an option! I never considered that a charity is not just run by volunteers and that there are also often paid roles available. I also learnt how valuable volunteering can be for those who have retired as a way to keep routine and purpose, and I think it would definitely be something I'd hope to do (although it will be a long time away...).

I still am unsure what exact direction I'd like to go in once I graduate. I know that I would like to go into work but am unsure on the industry or role. However, after talking to Bernadene about her experience and array of different jobs I have decided I need to do my research and pick something that interests me. Then, my path may (and probably will) change, and hopefully I will learn from different experiences and end up in just a fulfilling role as Bernadene is in one day!

I would also consider returning to Australia as an option one day since I really enjoyed my time there and everyone I met. I think that staying long-term would depend on whether I could get over the homesickness though. I also hope to keep in touch with Big Group Hug and help out if I can in the future, as they are such an amazing charity who help so many people in need.

Dear Elena,

What a beautiful and insightful reflection on your time in Melbourne — it was such a pleasure to read. I'm only disappointed we didn't manage to get you to the footy (note the spelling!). Today is Grand Final day and, as you might remember, the entire state practically stops to watch it. We even had a public holiday on Friday for the parade and celebrations — that's how serious we are about our AFL!

Thank you for inviting me to comment on your report. It really struck me that you have great instincts and sound judgment — I'd love to see you trust those more, especially in group settings. Confidence comes from practice, and sometimes that means stepping forward and giving things a go, even when it feels awkward. That's where the real learning — and growth — happens. The world is full of incredible people who will support you as you take those steps.

I also have a little exciting update to share — your contribution to the *FutureFIT Business Plan* has helped us reach the **finalist stage** for a major grant that could fund a full-time project manager for the initiative. We're one of four finalists for the *Impact100 Greater Melbourne 2025 Grant*, and I genuinely believe your work helped get us there.

The "for purpose" sector is vast and full of opportunities to do meaningful work. I hope you find a space within it that inspires you and allows you to make the difference I know you're capable of.



Warmest wishes,
Bernadene