

Leadership in Action – Social Integration in Istanbul

Introduction

Istanbul has a distinct sociocultural context, being a diverse metropolis which is home to many refugees, particularly Syrians, but also Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians and Africans. Istanbul is a hub for refugees because of employment opportunities, social diversity and relative safety, but these same factors produce crowded neighbourhoods, cultural friction, and unbalanced integration outcomes. Many refugees in Istanbul are not temporary, they settle in the city while some retain plans of moving onward to Europe. Refugees in Istanbul can face constrictions as a result of local asylum laws, limiting their ability to move work and access services, as well as language barriers. The city's diverse population can lead to the social exclusion of refugees, partially due to a lack of integration between refugee and local Turkish communities.

Istanbul&I was founded by a group of friends in 2016, originally envisioned as a storytelling platform bringing communities together in Istanbul which then developed into an official NGO and the city's first youth social impact group. The organisation focuses on social integration and promoting community, learning, awareness and developing skills. For me, Istanbul&I's importance lies in how it strengthens social cohesions in a city marked by diversity, inequality, and large refugee populations. By creating a welcoming space for young people of all backgrounds, the organisation fosters belonging, intercultural communication and civic engagement. Its community is a space where volunteers collaborate on humanitarian aid, women's empowerment, cultural events, and crisis response, including rapid mobilisation after the 2023 earthquake. This combination of grassroots action and inclusive ethos makes Istanbul&I a significant actor in Istanbul's social fabric, helping bridge divides and support communities often excluded from formal systems.

The placement I conducted

I completed a 6-week placement with local NGO Istanbul&I, working directly with the events coordinator to organise and coordinate a range of events for the community, all maintain a focus on Istanbul&I's objectives, to promote community and social inclusion. Coordinating events was my primary focus, however I was also able to engage with a range of the organisation's existing volunteering projects including at an animal shelter, a non-profit called 'Sokak Lambasi' (literally meaning 'street lamp') which provides daily hot meals to people living on the street, and also volunteer as an English-language mentor for Syrian refugees based in and around Istanbul. The events that ran over summer at Istanbul&I included a running club, and advanced English conversation club 'Chai talk', two culture events (Sudanese and English), language exchange events (Turkish, English, Arabic, French), potluck fundraiser for Palestine, meditation and soap making. This was in addition to the volunteering projects, and

meeting with organisations for future partnerships and events, including a meeting with a representative of Kenyan political delegates, who wanted to meet with youth from Istanbul.

How has the project been impactful or important – how it will be sustained

Istanbul&I is entirely led and run by volunteers, with no full-time staff members, meaning that the board including exec as well as all the coordinators and volunteers have jobs, studies or other commitments alongside running the organisation. This meant I was in a unique position in that I was able to make a full-time commitment over the summer.

While the first couple of weeks was spent getting a feel for the organisation, its members and partnerships, I was keen to ensure that the work that I did over that summer was not temporary, which meant that new project coordinators needed to be found. The events coordinator Abdelrahman and I worked closely together throughout my placement, and we were successful in finding someone to take over my role. It was also the organisation's first time hosting a summer placement especially one from outside of Turkey and full-time, so while this brought its challenges, it meant I was able to meet with HR coordinator and now co-executive coordinator Todd Johns after my placement, to discuss the challenges. This ultimately resulted in Todd producing a handbook which would be presented to future scholars or interns, stipulating agreed working hours, expectations, weekly check-ins and a code of conduct.

The events that I attended and coordinated over the summer were clearly impactful for the community, and it was interesting to get an insight into how cultural and social events can promote social integration, particularly between Turkish residents and migrants and refugees in the area. By engaging the Istanbul community in events and volunteering, the work I completed contributed to the organisations mission, creating a safe space for young people, and empowering youth through volunteering. The social impact projects allow volunteers to give back to the community, start important discussions and develop personal and professional skills. In a saturated job market, Istanbul&I also provides opportunities for young adults to gain professional leadership experience through places on the board and coordinator roles.

The way Istanbul&I functions is different to organisations I have been involved in previously. This organisation believes that youth and disadvantaged communities can be empowered through volunteering. Therefore, instead of a situation like one I have seen before where there is a clear dynamic between the volunteer and the community they are volunteering with, Istanbul&I adopts a dynamic where the community can step up within the organisation. While some of the projects adopt a more traditional approach, such as the meal programme at Sokak Lambasi, many of the projects run this way which I found to be beneficial.

What impact has the LiA project had on you? Have you achieved any of the smart goals set out at the beginning of the project?

Working in such a diverse city and organisation allowed me to develop my interpersonal skills. I was also able to use some of my Arabic-language skills from my degree during the Homework Help project, working with children from refugee backgrounds, predominantly Syria, to deliver interactive online sessions.

Before travelling to Istanbul, I set a series of smart goals as per the project outline. For the most part I was able to achieve all of these goals, although some of them shaped up differently to how I would have expected.

Target 1: Attend as many of the existing social projects that exist within in the NGO. They happen weekly so I will have 6/7 opportunities to attend each of them through the 6-week placement. The social projects include the Homework Help Project (teaching English to Syrian refugees living in Istanbul). Animal shelter project, and the homeless shelter project.

I was able to attend all the volunteering/social impact project that run steadily at Istanbul&I which was key to the diverse experience that I had during my stay. My original vision for the LiA was based on my existing interest in asylum policy and refugee experience in the UK, and I wanted to investigate how this experience differs outside of the UK. However, the nature of Istanbul&I as a community centre allowed me to engage more broadly with a variety of challenges facing the city, including the lack of infrastructure for stray dogs and cats, homelessness and lack of youth in civic engagement. One barrier I encountered was that the social impact projects, like hot meal distribution at Sokak Lambasi, clashed with the social events as many of Istanbul&I's events and volunteering take place over the weekend, in order to increase engagement from the community who have work and studies. In an effort to make sure I could attend as many of the projects as possible, this meant that the weekends were very long days, sometimes being flexible to leave Sokak Lambasi early, leaving time for long commutes around the city!

Target 2: Help to re-instate some of the events that are no longer being run in the NGO due to lack of coordinator volunteers. This will take a couple of weeks to prepare, a couple of weeks of delivering the events and then finding volunteers to ensure the projects are maintained.

I was able to reinstate the Language Exchange Event (LEE) in French, English and Arabic which was successful. I found that the period was somewhat short for organising advertising and trying to get a reputation for an event. I did run into some issues where I

had meticulously planned the session for the people who had signed up based on their linguistic knowledge, only to find that the people who attended were different, or some people who had been integral to the plan didn't show up. While I have quite a bit of experience delivering language classes, mostly in French, I had always done 1-1 teaching, so this was an adjustment to a group setting, especially one that I was trying to make as collaborative as possible, therefore relying on attendees more than I would in a traditional language class. However, I found that this kind of thing is important to bear in mind when event planning, and I was able to be flexible and adaptable in order to still deliver an enjoyable and educational session. Unfortunately, I was unable to find someone to take over the LEE project in my absence, especially as I was limited by much of the student community being away for summer. That said, I believe that I trialled a new structure for the LEE, which will hopefully be beneficial to the next coordinator.

Target 3: Plan and execute some of my own events, the NGO mentioned wanting to run a British culture night as part of their culture night series. This will take several weeks to plan, and find venues etc. Only one or two events will be possible.

I was able to plan and execute my own British culture event, drawing on the experience from assisting with the Sudanese culture night when I first arrived in Istanbul. The concept was quite daunting to me at first, especially as I wasn't quite sure what aspects of British culture the community would be interested in. I also found that it was very challenging to plan an event in a new city, especially as Istanbul & I were not long after having to give up their community centre, meaning finding venues was an ongoing task. However I was able to successfully deliver the event, preparing a presentation, afternoon tea and a Maypole dance!

Target 4: Keep a weekly account of the activities, challenges and lessons. Complete every Monday.

This was honestly one of the most challenging targets. Managing my own schedule and time management during such a busy experience, navigating a new city with its long commutes, a new language, meeting people, navigating accommodation and getting my head round the organisations dynamics meant that what I had originally planned to be a neat weekly round-up was more of a notebook full of sporadic thoughts, observations and to-do lists. In hindsight, a weekly blog might have helped me to reflect on my achievements of the week, and may have helped the overwhelming feeling of never quite feeling finished. However, through the event tracking and advertisements I was able to keep track of the hours I was spending planning and attending events and projects and I can feel proud of the work that I did while I was there. In the future, I

would try to stick to my timescale, maybe scheduling in a specific hour at the end of each week to reflect. Easier said than done, as after a couple of 12 hours days dashing around Istanbul I felt more like rest than reflection!

Target 5: Establish collaborations with partner organizations.

This turned out to be one of my favourite parts of the role in Istanbul, and I believe that the networking aspect of the role prepared me well for beginning the role of president of Leeds Student Action for Refugees. We organised events with a number of organisations including a creativity and culture organisation called Thera academy, an 'ex-pat' social group and a meditation organisation. We also met with a representation of Kenyan delegates who wanted to organise an event to gather opinions from Istanbul youth. This meeting highlighted to me how grassroots organisations and NGOs like Istanbul&I can be integral in establishing connections, not only within the city but internationally. This event unfortunately took place after I had left Istanbul, but it went successfully, and I was privileged to be involved in the initial discussions.

What leadership skills do you believe you have gained/demonstrated during the LIA period?

Throughout this placement I was able to have my first real experience of independent project management, seeing several events and collaborations through from their initial stages to completion. I was able to work with a variety of people, overcoming cultural differences and conflicts in order to provide a successful outcome.

As I mentioned with the LEE, the events often called for creative problem solving on the spot. I learnt a lot about the logistics of event planning, and how time-consuming and complicated it can be, especially when there is a lack of centre to work from.

I found that while I wanted to exercise my leadership skills and execute the vision that I had for my summer, it was important to recognise I had a lot to learn, and being in a new city meant I needed to be okay with asking questions and embracing challenges and mistakes as they came up, especially when navigating a new role and country.

What activities you've been involved in to disseminate the project, posters, promotion, conferences

During my time at Istanbul&I the events coordinator and I were responsible for communicating with the social media officer at Istanbul&I. I also created and shared my own posts to advertise the events, ensuring the most engagement with the events. I was also able to network and share about Istanbul&I's events to the residents at the digital

nomad hostel which I stayed at, which resulted in some of them attending the events, widening the community. Some were also generous enough to make donations, particularly to the Palestine fundraiser which I organised in collaboration with Istanbul ex-pats.

When I left Istanbul I met with the executive board, who were thankfully very complementary about my work, and invited me to return to the organisation after my studies. I hope in the future to return to the organisation, as it has ignited a passion for NGO work, and I genuinely believe in their vision of engaging youth in volunteering and promoting social cohesion.

I was able to speak to scholars at a recent Laidlaw session focused on LiAs, describing my experience on the LiA and answering questions on how to tackle the project and organise a self-defined project. My hope is that in the future another scholar might choose Istanbul&I for their Leadership in Action.

Cultural experiences and differences

Istanbul was one of the most overwhelming and stimulating cities I have ever stayed in and it was an adjustment from a smaller city like Leeds. Above all, getting used to a regular 2-hour commute on the train which wasn't even close to the longest commute I had heard of. I was very interested to see how the refugee experience in Istanbul is different, particularly as I have only ever interacted with refugees in a Western, British context. I found that refugees are regarded quite differently, partially due to the number of refugee and migrant communities in Istanbul. I was also intrigued to discover that from a legal perspective, refugees in Turkey can only come from Europe. The attitudes in Istanbul were varied, while communities within the organisation. Were cohesive, there is clear divides and tensions between communities in Istanbul, which really highlights the importance of the work of NGOs like Istanbul&I. More support is needed to provide basic infrastructure and opportunities for displaced people, but Istanbul&I is foundational in creating a sense of belonging for its members.

Future career and educational plans

My time as a Laidlaw scholar has been integral to my plans for the future. When I finished my research project I was very intrigued by further education and research, particularly within asylum and immigration policy. However, after having completed the LiA, I realised that my favourite parts of the research project and the LiA were when I could see the impact of the work that I was doing. This has encouraged me to look for work in grassroots organisations and NGOs, as I would like to gain more experience. I still intend on further studying for a masters in human rights, asylum policy and

potentially (one day) a PhD, however I have seen the positive change that this kind of work can ignite, and I would like to explore this further.