

Football Clubs as Powerful Forces for Positive Changemaking: My LiA at Cambridge United Foundation

Laidlaw Scholars Leadership & Research Programme
Leadership in Action Placement Report

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**UNIVERSITY OF
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**CAMBRIDGE UNITED
FOUNDATION**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before diving into my report, I would like to acknowledge some organisations and individuals that have been vital to my LiA placement and my Laidlaw journey so far. First, I would like to thank the Laidlaw Foundation and the E-Lab team at Cambridge (especially Dr Lucy Rogers, our Laidlaw Coordinator) for making my Leadership and Research Scholarship possible. I thoroughly enjoyed my 6-week placement and look forward to completing an international research project next summer. Huge thanks must also go to Cambridge United Foundation for hosting me and providing so much support, trust, and valuable experience. Natasha Duggan, Vicky Neal, and Oliver Jones were particularly important colleagues who made my placement smooth, enjoyable, and impactful. I wish the Foundation all the best and hope that my time spent there was as valuable to the CUF team and the Cambridge community as it was to me.

INTRODUCING MY HOST ORGANISATION

Cambridge United Foundation (CUF) operates as the charitable arm of Cambridge United Football Club (CUFC), who currently compete in EFL League One, and was established to deepen the Club's impact in the community. CUF draws on the unique resources, relationships, and community reach held by the Football Club as it works to combat inequality in Cambridge through a range of programmes and initiatives. Among many others, these include walking football sessions, a PSA testing scheme, an annual 'sleepout' in support of local homelessness charities, in-school interventions focussed on tackling misogyny and violence against women and girls and in-school mentoring programmes.

The Foundation's work is vital, given that Cambridge is one of the UK's most unequal cities, with an 11.6-year life expectancy gap existing between those living in the most deprived and the most affluent areas (ONS 2021). CUF and CUFC are based at the Cledara Abbey Stadium in Abbey Ward - one of Cambridge's most deprived areas that is also one of the top 20% most deprived areas nationally. Nearby King's Hedges and East Chesterton also score highly across a range of deprivation metrics and exhibit stark inequality compared to many of the city's wealthier areas.

During the 24/25 season, the Foundation and Football Club generated over £27,000,000 in social value - a measure representing the wider positive impact that community programmes have on people's health, wellbeing, education, employment and social connection. This figure demonstrates how a football club's impact can stretch far beyond 90 minutes on a Saturday afternoon.

INTRODUCING MYSELF

Growing up in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, a city steeped in football history and culture, I have seen how important a football club can be to a community. My application to work with CUF was motivated by a genuine belief in the Foundation's mission and potential for effective changemaking. I was also motivated by a desire to combat inequality in Cambridge specifically, where need can often be overlooked due to the city's dominant, but not wholly reflective, reputation for affluence and privilege.

As a student at Jesus College, I have been consistently and almost exclusively exposed to the affluent side of Cambridge where formal dinners, black tie events, and academic excellence become almost routine. I am immensely grateful for my privileged position and the incredible opportunities I am afforded as a Cambridge student. However, I was eager to step out of the infamous Cambridge student 'bubble' and help make Cambridge, a city in which I am proud to spend time studying and living, a more equal place.

MY GOAL

Before beginning my placement, I settled on one broad goal that would guide my actions throughout: to make myself as useful as possible to the Foundation and the community it serves. As a result, I started my placement without an exact picture of what I planned to achieve. Lacking a fixed project/role was challenging at times, but the freedom I began with was extremely valuable as it pushed me to be constantly curious, flexible, and adaptable.

MY ROLE

I began as Partnerships, Fundraising, and Events Intern at CUF on 29 June. I had no charity-sector experience and no experience in partnerships, fundraising, or events. The prospect of undertaking a 6-week placement in such an unfamiliar environment was daunting, but extremely exciting!

I tried to listen a lot during my placement, particularly in the early stages, to learn about the Foundation and figure out quickly how I could be maximally useful. Thankfully, my colleagues were happy to bring me into meetings, tell me about their roles, and advise me on how I could find my place in the team.

The more I listened and observed, the more I began to understand how the Foundation works in a wide variety of ways towards the achievement of its overarching goal: tackling inequality and improving lives in Cambridge.

I determined that I could work most effectively towards my own over-arching goal by taking on a multi-faceted role with a range of responsibilities, mirroring the strategy of my host organisation. Moreover, I was able to make up for what I lacked in single-area expertise by being willing to engage wherever I was needed. As a result, I found myself gaining experience in a multitude of areas, many of which were new to me.

Community Engagement

I greatly enjoyed engaging with the community during my placement. Working with people of all ages in a range of settings developed my communication skills and showed me that CUF's impact is not limited to any specific demographic.

In my first week, I supported at the monthly Seniors' Lunch, chatting with and serving food and drink to over 70 elderly guests. The World Cup was in full swing at the time, which made for easy and entertaining conversation, helping me quickly connect with guests. It was inspiring to see how valuable social impact can be as simple as providing people a hot meal and a comfortable space to talk with others about football.

During my final week, I supported the delivery of the Holiday Activities and Food programme (HAF) which provides no-cost meals and physical activity sessions to local primary school children who receive free school meals. I was proud to support a programme that helps alleviate some of the pressure faced by parents/carers in low-income households. I greatly enjoyed working with children and was pleased to have had opportunities to work with both older and young people during my placement, helping me gain a broader perspective of Cambridge beyond the university student 'bubble.'

Fundraising, Events, and Partnerships

During the second week of my placement, I supported and attended one of the largest Foundation events of the year - the United for Cambridge (UFC) Summer Event, hosted at Jesus College.

The UFC Partnership is a network of organisations committed to tackling inequality in Cambridge. The network supports and facilitates the work of CUF and CUFC as members provide financial support, skills, expertise, and opportunities to network and volunteer.

The Summer Event successfully brought together a host of organisations and local leaders, with around 200 guests in attendance. I helped in many ways during the late-stage build-up. My willingness to offer support wherever it was needed made my impact greater than the sum of the specific outputs I produced. I worked with spreadsheets, drafted risk assessments, helped set up on the day, and created name tags which I distributed as I welcomed guests arriving at the event. This reduced friction and workload for my team and freed up colleagues with more experience to focus on more big-picture tasks. I learnt that effective leaders do not have to be at the forefront of every project and that knowing when to let better-equipped others take the lead is just as important as knowing when to step up oneself.

Engaging with the planning and delivery of the Summer Event was exciting and inspired me to get more events experience. Taking on greater responsibility in events and fundraising became a new personal goal. CUF provided considerable trust and freedom as they allowed me to create proposals for several upcoming events. I created proposals for two punting events (one of which I was pleased to see come to fruition last week) and left my team with a bank of ideas for a future UFC event that is set to take place in early 2027. I also researched strategies for increasing 'individual giving' on matchdays and beyond, drawing on methods used by foundations associated with other football clubs.

THE QUIZ

Early on in my placement, Natasha Duggan mentioned that BrewBoard (a local microbrewery and CUF/CUFC partner) were looking to host a Foundation-fundraiser quiz night at their city-centre taproom. As someone who loves attending pub quizzes (and has quietly always wanted to host one), this was very intriguing. I had mentioned these interests and aspirations almost in passing when getting to know my colleagues. Looking back, I realise how important it was to actively integrate myself in my workspace and make my ambitions and interests known. Without this kind of communication and self-expression, the quiz night opportunity might not have been presented to me as early as it was (or perhaps even not at all).

Liaising with BrewBoard alongside Natasha greatly improved my professional communication skills as I interacted with others in a new way. These conversations also improved my approach to creating event proposals as I gained insight into what questions are best to ask partners and which details are most important to iron out early on.

The World Cup was still in full swing and football fever was rampant. My colleagues and I planned a football-themed quiz for 17 July, two days after England's semi-final match against Argentina. However, the disappointing result of this match, along with an unsatisfactory number of sign-ups, prompted us to postpone the quiz and consider how we could improve our plan.

I was disappointed, having spent a lot of time writing and advertising the quiz. Despite this, I chose to view the challenge as a comma, not a full stop. I reflected on my over-arching goals and reminded myself that the quiz would be rescheduled, not cancelled, and that planning the original quiz had not been a waste of effort, as the experience I gained would allow me to organise a better event and raise more money for the Foundation.

Whilst writing the new quiz (typical pub quiz style with 4 rounds and a picture round), a new challenge presented itself when we could not find a host. Both proposed candidates were unavailable on the night. I volunteered to host the quiz myself, capitalising on the opportunity to take on a unique kind of responsibility and avoid a potentially stressful last-minute search for a quizmaster.

The event took place on 13 August and was a success. Those in attendance greatly enjoyed the quiz, with some teams scooping up prizes on the night. Around £200 was raised for the Foundation and the quiz allowed a potentially repeatable event format to be tested. Organising the quiz night taught me that setbacks shouldn't be seen as failures and that adaptability is a crucial trait in leadership.

Reflections

The importance of flexibility and curiosity

My role and work at the Foundation were flexible. My goals, and the ultimate goal of the Foundation, however, were not. I learnt from my LiA experience that, when working towards an ambitious objective, one's actions should be flexible and adaptable, whilst one's overarching goal remains resolute and unwavering. My flexible approach was valuable because it allowed me to support my team effectively in a multitude of ways despite my lack of specific expertise in one area.

Importance of teamwork and communication

Teamwork and communication were vital throughout my placement. The Foundation office, to me, was a place where staff felt comfortable conversing and

building relationships, allowing them to function more as teammates than merely co-workers. My colleagues frequently asked how others were getting on and helped each other when things were busy, whether by supporting at HAF sessions or spending extra time proof-reading others' grant applications. This level of visible teamwork inspired me to actively seek out responsibility and opportunities to support colleagues facing pressure and deadlines. Following a conversation of this sort with Oliver Jones, I was given opportunities to write short articles for the Foundation website and to co-write the UFC monthly newsletter for July.

Football clubs as important forces for positive changemaking

Before beginning my placement, I was aware of how deeply a football club can impact a community. However, one of my biggest takeaways was a newfound understanding of how *broad* this impact can be.

For example, I observed the planning and delivery of CUF's second PSA (prostate-specific antigen) testing day, before writing a website article following the event's success. I saw the Foundation partner with MyPSA and secure funding from NHS Central East Integrated Care Board, using its reputable brand to build effective partnerships with organisations not typically associated with football clubs. 114 local men attended the event, which had been fully booked well in advance. I was impressed by how CUF increased older men's engagement with preventative healthcare by leveraging the unique access the Football Club brand has to the trust and attention of many individuals in this demographic.

I also observed how Foundation programmes positively impact participants in a multidimensional way. For example, CUF's walking football programme allows adults and older adults to engage in physical exercise, improving their cardiovascular health. But, these sessions also allow people to regularly get out of their houses, build camaraderie, and socialise over tea and biscuits, improving their mental health and contributing to their holistic wellbeing. Seeing the true breadth of the impact of community programmes during my placement made me even more motivated to work on fundraising projects that would support their continuation.

Conclusion

Although my LiA seemed intimidating at first, my six weeks working with CUF became extremely valuable, rewarding, and enjoyable. I was able to develop my existing communication skills, and my experience reinforced my belief in the potential football clubs have for positive changemaking in communities. However, I was surprised to learn just how broad this impact can be. Having this breadth revealed to me was inspiring and enlightening. I also learnt a lot about leadership. The importance of flexibility, curiosity and communication are lessons that stand out as my time at CUF taught me how one over-arching goal can be approached in a diverse range of ways. I look forward to remaining in touch with the CUF team and to watching CUFC compete in EFL League One at the Cledara Abbey Stadium this season!



Natasha Duggan and I at the Cledara Abbey Stadium.



Oliver Jones, myself, and Natasha Duggan at the CUFC players and staff BBQ.