



**EMERGING
CLUB
LEADERS**



BUCS
British Universities
and Colleges Sport

EMERGING CLUB LEADERS IMPACT REPORT

This report provides an overview of the impact of the
BUCS and FA Emerging Club Leaders programme
2025/26



CREAS
SPORTS CONSULTING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Emerging Club Leaders 2025/26 created a practical bridge between university learning and football club environments. This season there were 54 students on the programme from 12 different universities, volunteering across 24 clubs in roles that included media and marketing, fan experience, fundraising and sponsorship, community engagement, operations and facilities. In total, these participants contributed over 2800 hours of volunteering to this network of football clubs.

During these placements, students were not only observing club operations; they were producing content, organising mascots, creating sponsor materials, improving matchday engagement, supporting compliance documentation, running surveys, interviewing players, building newsletters, developing event concepts, and helping clubs tell stronger stories.

"Football is built on far more than ninety minutes. My time on this programme showed me the invisible layer that makes it all possible and why it matters."

Throughout the programme, students shared that they were developed personally and professionally, as well as impacting their connection to football:

78% of students agreed that the experiences and skills gained through the placement would help their future career.

74% agreed that they now have a greater understanding of the importance and role of volunteering in football

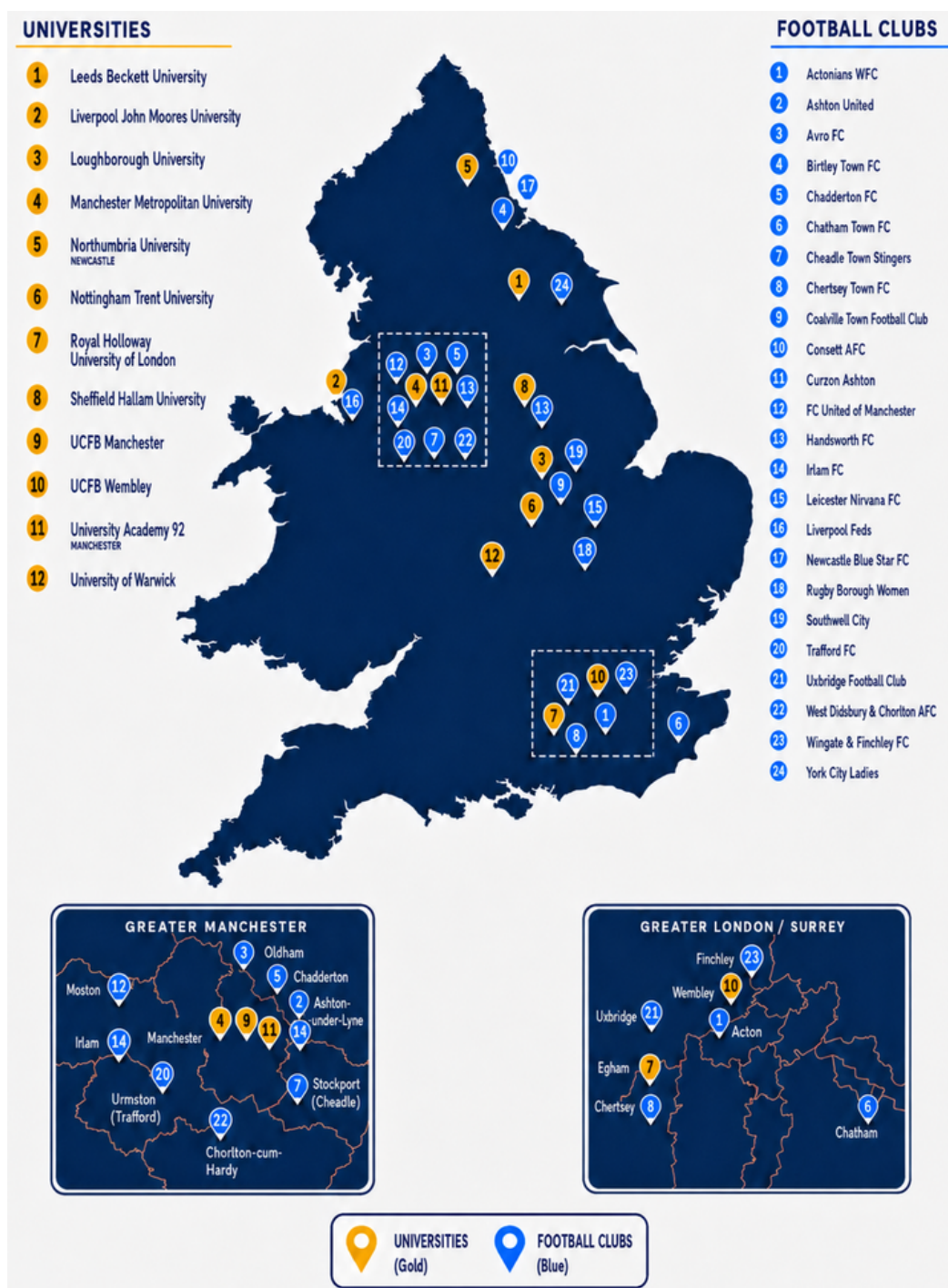
96% of participants agreed that they planned to stay involved in football moving forward.

Students repeatedly described the programme as their first step into football, a way to access the behind-the-scenes environment of clubs, and an opportunity to build a portfolio of real work in the game. Clubs and club representatives described value where students were proactive, reliable and able to take ownership of defined projects. The strongest examples were not isolated single tasks. They were cumulative: a media officer producing weekly content and building an under-21 media team; a fan experience officer turning fan insight into mascots programmes, activity packs and improved matchday experiences and an operations officer producing compliance documentation that saved senior club staff lots of time.

INTRODUCTION TO THE EMERGING CLUB LEADERS PROGRAMME

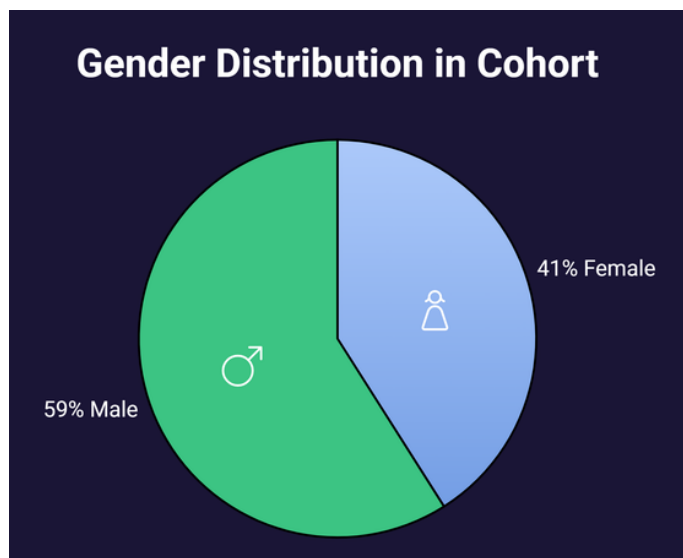
The Emerging Club Leaders 2025/26 programme, delivered by BUCS, has been designed to support and upskill student leaders to complete a volunteer placement in non-league football clubs. Through a series of workshops, mentoring, and their club placements, the programme aimed to strengthen the club workforce and build a greater affinity to volunteering in football across the student network.

Below is a map of the 12 universities and 24 football clubs that took part in the programme:

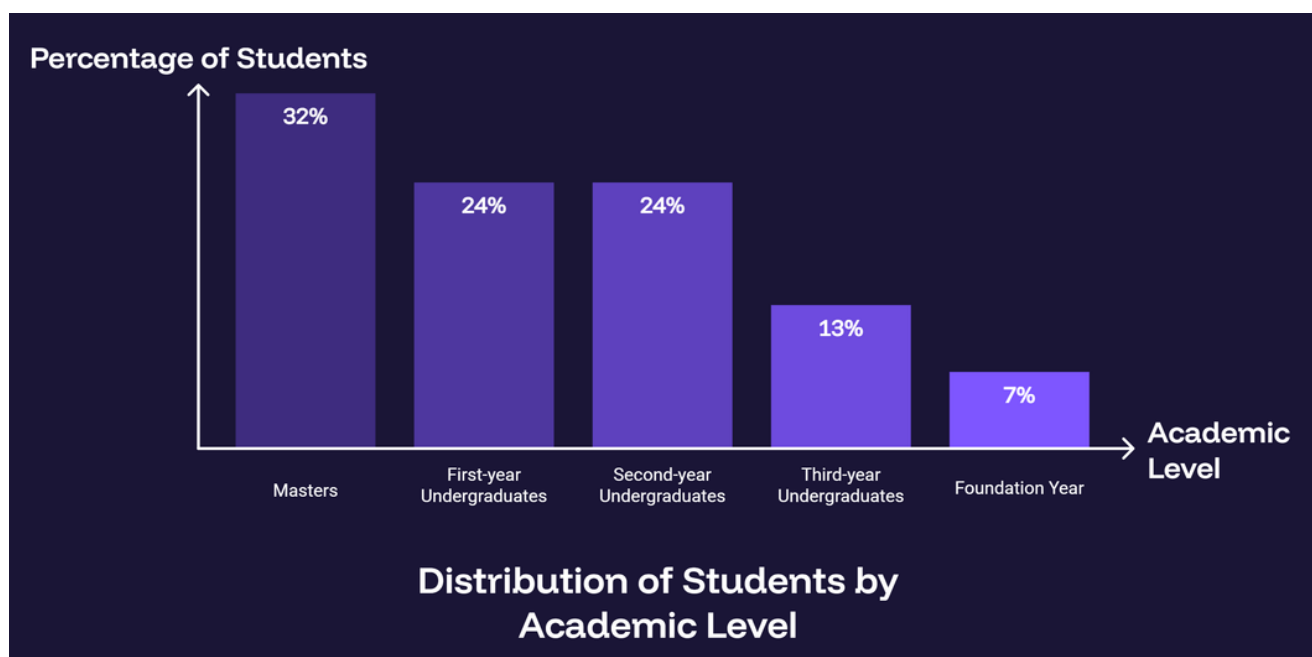


PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

The 2025/26 Emerging Club Leaders cohort brought together 54 students from across the university network, with a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate participants.



The cohort was 41% female and 59% male. This shows a broadly mixed cohort, while also highlighting how the programme continued to support the growth of female representation within the football workforce through their placements.



In terms of stage of study, this was highly diverse across the students as seen in the table above. This demonstrates that the programme appealed both to students in early in their university experience as well as those towards the end of their academic journey looking to strengthen this employability.

From an ethnicity perspective, the cohort was predominantly White British (65%). Around one-third of participants identified with another ethnic background, most commonly Asian British/Indian/Bangladeshi/Chinese (13%) or any Other White Background (11%).

IMPACT SUMMARY

Contribution of time

Across the programme, students volunteered over 2800 hours to their clubs collectively. Every month, the average hours volunteered by participants increased as we moved from November to April demonstrating how participants' contribution became more substantial and they were more embedded within the club environment.

66% increase in the number of recorded volunteer hours between the first two months of the programme (November – December) and the end of the programme (February – March).

Programme Outcomes



Students contribution to their clubs

Students felt they made a meaningful contribution to their clubs through fresh thinking, digital engagement and additional volunteer capacity. The most prominent theme was the introduction of new ideas and initiatives, with students bringing a different perspective to areas such as fan experience, community activity, commercial planning and matchday delivery.

Overall, the evidence suggests that students added value in two complementary ways: by helping clubs deliver immediate activity, and by bringing fresh ideas, skills and momentum that supported longer-term development.

What students developed

The programme had a particularly strong impact on students' transferable skills. Most respondents reported developing their communication skills, with 83% selecting this as an area of growth, followed by organisation at 74% and confidence at 61%. This suggests that the placement model was especially effective in helping students build the practical skills needed to operate in real club environments.

"The Emerging Club Leaders programme has helped me develop a more professional, strategic approach to football club operations, particularly in fundraising and sponsorship, and improved my confidence in taking initiative within my role."



BUILDING CLUB CAPACITY

One of the clearest impact themes is that students created additional capacity for clubs. In many placement environments, the day-to-day running of the club depends on a small number of staff and volunteers. Emerging Club Leaders gave clubs access to additional people who could take on focused work, progress tasks that had been waiting for attention, and provide energy around matchday, commercial, community and media activity.

Early in the programme students were getting involved in tasks such as: organising junior mascots, creating fan surveys, producing match highlights, planning event days, researching funding options, developing sponsor materials, producing operational documents and supporting website or social media updates.

As the programme progressed, participants shared that they were involved in presenting commercial ideas to chairmen, producing reels with large reach, supporting compliance requirements, creating partnership strategies, and using matchday moments to generate digital engagement.

The programme appears to have worked best where student contribution became part of the club's normal routine. That routine could be weekly matchday support, regular content production, recurring newsletters, ongoing sponsor conversations or a planned event calendar. In those examples, the impact was not limited to one output; students became part of the way the club delivered activity during the season.

Case Study: Rugby Borough WFC

Izzy supported Rugby Borough WFC's ambition to progress by strengthening the club's behind-the-scenes readiness. Her work included developing a workforce development plan, recruitment policy, commercial roadmap and documentation to support Women's National League compliance and future promotion planning. The placement demonstrated the vital operational work required to sustain an ambitious women's football club.

STRENGTHENING MEDIA AND STORY-TELLING

Media and marketing was the largest student role group, and it became one of the most visible areas of club impact. Students created match reports, match highlights, player interviews, behind-the-scenes content, social media graphics, X live match commentary, TikTok content, Instagram reels and email newsletters. This work helped clubs communicate more consistently, engage supporters, profile players and make different parts of the club more visible.

Students did not simply post content; they developed a judgement about what moments mattered, how to capture them, how to adapt content for different platforms, and how to use football storytelling to create connection.

Case Study: Shivani at Coalville Town FC

Shivani joined Coalville Town FC as a Media and Marketing Officer, creating matchday highlight reels and promotional content materials for social media. New to football media, she developed practical editing skills alongside greater confidence in communicating with others and working in a club environment. Reflecting on her progress, she said: "The old me wouldn't have done this... right now, I think I'm a bit more confident than before."

Case Study: Dan at FC United of Manchester

Dan's second year at FC United of Manchester focused on improving how the club connected with supporters. He introduced more regular manager previews, interviewed every first-team player across the season and helped strengthen the club's weekly newsletter. His proudest achievement was creating and mentoring an under-21 media team, giving a previously underrepresented side a dedicated social-media presence and helping three students grow in confidence.

In summary, the media impact was not just about reach figures. It was also about connection. Player interviews helped supporters hear from those on the pitch. Manager previews gave clubs more regular narrative around fixtures. Academy and women's team coverage brought visibility to teams that might have otherwise received less time and attention. Match reports and highlights gave clubs a record of their activity and something to share with their community. In that sense, the media role supported club identity as well as fan engagement.

IMPROVING FAN EXPERIENCE

Fan experience and community engagement roles produced some of the clearest examples of visible matchday impact. Students helped clubs think about their audience, what those supporters experience, and how matchdays can become more welcoming for families, young people, community groups and new audiences. This included mascot schemes, activity packs, fan surveys, food and drink improvements, Her Game Too activations, local partnerships and community events.

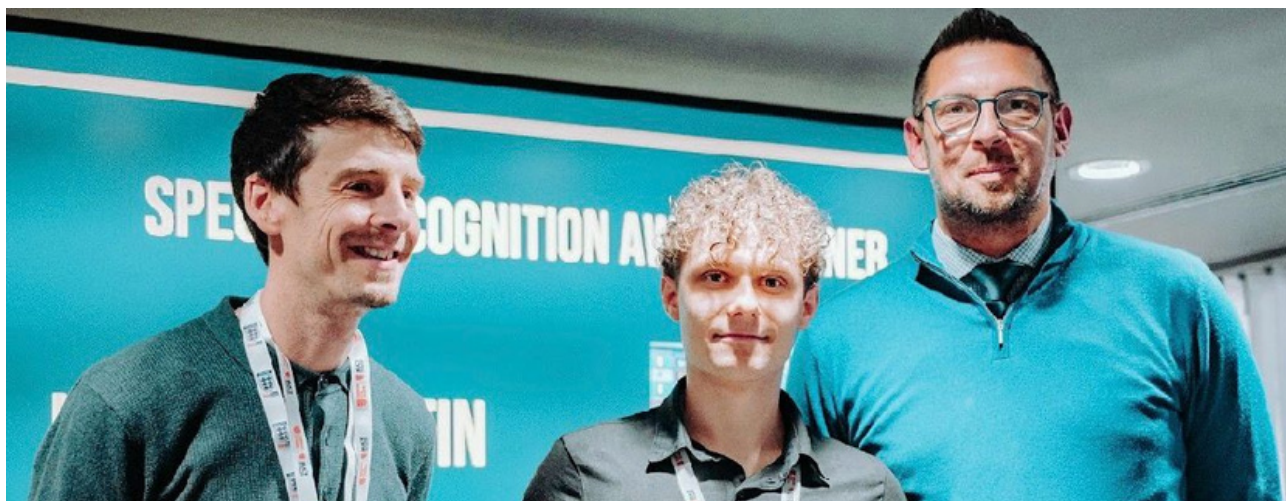
Through these projects, students were not only trying to bring people through the gate once; they were looking at how to make matchdays feel enjoyable, inclusive and memorable.

Case Study: Emily at Chertsey Town FC

As Community Engagement Officer at Chertsey Town FC, Emily helped make matchdays more welcoming for children and families. She organised 102 matchday mascot experiences, including partnerships with Chertsey Juniors and local Scouts, as well as half-time penalty shoot-outs. Mascot matchdays saw ticket sales increase by 24%, demonstrating how family-focused activity can improve both experience and attendance. Emily reflected: "It's been amazing having such an active role in matchdays, and seeing what goes on behind the scenes."

Case Study: Jordan at Uxbridge FC

Jordan worked with Uxbridge FC as a Fan Experience Officer, using supporter feedback to identify practical opportunities to improve matchdays. His fan survey highlighted food choice and quality as a priority, leading to conversations and trials around serving food indoors and developing a more permanent hot-food offer. The experience gave Jordan insight into balancing creative ideas within the financial and volunteer capacity of a grassroots club.



INCREASED COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY

Fundraising and sponsorship roles gave students the opportunity to contribute directly to club sustainability. These placements were particularly valuable because many community and non-league clubs have limited commercial capacity currently. Students supported sponsor research, benchmarking of commercial packages, commercial brochures, business outreach, fundraising ideas, grant applications and matchday fundraising.

54% participants in the fundraising and sponsorship role shared that they helped to generate additional revenue for their club.

Even where income had not yet been realised by the end of the programme, students created assets, led analysis that clubs can use next season.

Case Study: Jack at Newcastle Blue Star

Jack supported Newcastle Blue Star FC as a Fundraising and Sponsorship Officer, helping prepare the club's commercial offer for the 2026/27 season. He benchmarked sponsorship pricing, developed a revised commercial brochure and identified 10 new sponsorship options, giving the club a stronger foundation for approaching partners. The club described Jack as "an outstanding addition to our club," and hoped to continue benefiting from his skills beyond the placement.

Case Study: Archie at Southwell City FC

Archie's placement at Southwell City FC focused on fundraising and sponsorship. He supported local-business outreach, helping promote sponsorship opportunities and demonstrated the value of investing in a community focused grassroots club. Through this work, Archie gained practical experience of relationship building, commercial communication and the role local partnerships play in supporting sustainable football clubs.

STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY AND FUTURE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Emerging Club Leaders had a strong employability impact. The programme gave students evidence that they had worked in football, delivered real tasks, communicated with club stakeholders and contributed to positive outcomes for the club whilst on placement. For students seeking football careers, this type of evidence can be difficult to access. The programme therefore acted as a bridge between the students aspiration and credibility.

78% of participants agreed that the experiences and skills gained through their placement will help them with their future career.

Many of the participants shared their future career aspirations in the industry with examples such as sports media, club operations, sponsorship, marketing, fan engagement, women's football and football development.

"It has been a unique experience working with a non-league club and getting started with gaining experience in football."

Case Study: Woody – Emerging Club Leaders Alumni 2025

Woody used his Emerging Club Leaders experience as a springboard into football journalism. Following his placement at Ashton United, he secured a Club Journalist internship at Salford City and later completed a two-week internship with The Telegraph. He credited the experience of working in a non-league club with preparing him for professional deadlines, communication and confidence in larger media environments: "It gets you prepared to work under pressure." He explained that the programme was his first opportunity to get his foot in the door within a football environment and where he could demonstrate his "willingness to volunteer and put in the hard hours."

A SENSE OF BELONGING IN FOOTBALL

74% of participants shared they now have a greater sense of belonging in football

96% of participants plan to stay involved in football beyond the programme

Belonging was built through repeated exposure to club environments. Students met club secretaries, chairs, managers, media teams, players, volunteers, supporters and community partners. They travelled to games, attended matchdays and became known by people at the club. This helped transform football from an external industry they wanted to enter into an environment they had already started contributing to.

Belonging often developed as clubs trusted students with more responsibility. Participant, Dan at FC United Manchester, described how travelling to pre-season and away games helped people at the club see that he was committed for the long term. Over time, he became connected to more members of the club. Supporters began recognising him at games too. This type of belonging is significant because it came from contribution and consistency.

Shivani described being treated like one of the club community, even though she was new and younger than many people involved. Her club also supported her practically by giving lifts to away games, which helped her attend, contribute and be consistent.

74% of participants now say they have a greater understanding of the importance and role of volunteering in football.

This is a meaningful finding because the programme placed students inside environments where volunteering is central to delivery. Students saw the work that sits behind matchdays, events, content, facilities, fundraising and community activity. They learned that volunteering in football is not just help on the day; it is the planning, communication, responsibility, adaptability and commitment.

MENTORING SUPPORT

Every role had a mentor assigned to support the participants throughout their programme journey.

83% of participants shared that the mentor support enhanced their programme experience

65% of participants said that they applied the learning shared by their mentor into their practice at their club.

This was a new element to the programme for 2025/26 and has proved useful to participants due to the technical insight mentors were able to provide. Media students described using masterclass learning to improve editing, find/ create templates, understand different content formats and prepare to interview players. Fan experience students referenced playbooks and examples that helped them think about attendance, matchday experience and supporter engagement. Commercial students valued advice that supported sponsorship thinking in regards to packages created and professional communication. Across roles, the mentor element helped students feel that they were not navigating this new club environment alone.

PROGRESS FROM THE 2024/25 PILOT

The 2024/25 report positioned Emerging Club Leaders as a successful pilot, showing strong student impact, club contribution and enthusiasm for continued volunteering. The 2025/26 evidence shows the programme developing from a promising pilot into a broader, more mature placement model.

From 2024/25 to 2025/26, there was a percentage increase of **51%** more recorded volunteer hours across the participant network.

The year-on-year comparison shows that the impact has become more embedded and more varied. In 2024/25, the strongest pilot outcomes centred on students bringing new ideas, enthusiasm and social media support. In 2025/26, those impacts remained visible, but the evidence also shows more examples of students contributing to club systems, sponsorship generation, matchday experiences, community activations and legacy projects.

Therefore, the 2025/26 programme builds on the pilot from last year by showing not just that the model works, but that it can scale.

CONCLUSION

The 2025/26 Emerging Club Leaders evidence shows a programme that created meaningful impact for students and clubs.

At student level, the programme developed communication, organisation, confidence, understanding of football environments, community engagement, problem-solving, leadership and technical skills. It gave students a route into real club settings, helped them build tangible portfolio evidence and supported future involvement in football.

At club level, the programme built additional capacity. Students delivered over 2800 volunteer hours and those hours translated into outputs that clubs could see and use: content, interviews, matchday activity, fan surveys, mascot opportunities, sponsorship packages, commercial research, community initiatives and operational assistance. For clubs that rely heavily on volunteers, this additional capacity was valuable not only because it created additional time for senior staff, but because it brought new ideas and fresh perspectives.

The strongest case studies show that impact was deepest when students were trusted with responsibility and when their work became embedded in club life. Daniel's under-21 media team created a legacy beyond his own placement. Emily's mascot model created a repeatable family engagement approach. Jack's commercial benchmarking created a practical basis for future sponsorship work. Shivani's content gave the club greater reach and visibility as well as helping her build confidence.

The programme also contributed to the wider football workforce. Students left with clearer ambitions, stronger networks and a better understanding of how football clubs operate away from the game on the pitch. They saw the importance of volunteers in sustaining the game. This learning is valuable whether students go on to work in media, operations, sponsorship, fan engagement, community football, coaching, governance or wider sport.

"This programme has been the building blocks to get me into the world of football from having no experience at all."

"I would strongly recommend this programme as it provides an insight into non-league football that very many people simply don't get to have."