

Cambridge Career Case study: Aliyah's Summer Internship in Education Policy

Hi, my name is Aliyah Irabor-York. I am an incoming second-year student, studying Education, Policy and International Development. I spent my summer interning at various organisations/firms. My most recent and favourite internship was at the Edge Foundation, an independent, politically impartial foundation, inspiring the education system to give all young people across the UK the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to flourish in their future life and work. My role was as a Research and Policy Analyst. I worked across the team, leading research projects focused on schools, HE, FE, Technical education and skills. I also was involved in writing a summary for their skill shortage bulletin, that was part of the research they led with Youth Employment UK's, national Youth Voice Census. Alongside this, I led my own piece around forms of youth participation and created a report with a set of policy recommendations to engage more with children and young people as a strategic method to transform policy in a genuine and relevant way.

What were you hoping to get from your experience?

At the beginning of my first week working at the Edge foundation, I met with my line-manager and set out some clear goals for my internship. I created a solid list of objectives that I wanted to gain from the experience including direct experience with managing my own project and learning the necessary skills for this sector. I was keen to learn more in depth about the mechanisms behind effective policy making.

How did you find the opportunity?

I am the CEO and founder of Pupil Power, a national movement of young people reimagining education. As part of my work facilitating transformation in the system, I interviewed the Executive of the Edge Foundation, Olly Newton about Policy making and youth voice during lockdown, where I challenged Olly with the final question: what is your pledge of embedding young people in policy? And since then I have supported projects quite closely at Edge. I want to say that networking and tapping into genuine relationships you've built can be helpful for looking for internships/work experience. Are you attending an event? Think about questions you could pose to people in the room, be brave and intentional. Create a LinkedIn profile and connect with people you could learn from, but equally, people who are willing to learn from you.

What was a typical day/week like?

A typical week would consist of a whole team briefing, to align personal projects across other teams (including, research, comms and engagement). This was also a chance to update the team on the political landscape and news. I worked at Edge during the new appointment of the prime minister and cabinet reshuffle, these changes were significant in influencing our policy agenda and overall strategy. Depending on the day and my workload with my core tasks, I was often invited to join other teams' meetings to get insight into what work they are doing. I have even been invited along to the Board and trustee meeting which gave me the chance to learn about the strategic and financial side of policy.

Highlights and challenges

Edge has close internal connections to the Department for Education (DfE) and Parliament. Some of my highlights include my day at the DfE, gaining insight into how the civil servants deliver the T-level (new qualification), supporting the team present evidence around 'Careers advice' in schools at the House of Commons, Education select committee.

The challenge sometimes can be understanding that policymaking can be very bureaucratic, and this can mean that it can take years before a direct impact is felt. Therefore, taking the opportunity to support the 'practice' in education can feel rewarding and a more efficient way to making change (on a local level).

What have you learnt?

I learnt more about the importance of involving all stakeholders in the decision-making process. Typically, you'd expect to only influence those with the most 'power', i.e.. Politicians. Although, the Edge foundation is great at creating an intersection between all that concern education. My experience of being in direct contact with MPs during my time at the House of Commons or organising spaces for them to engage in discussion proved the power in engaging with people on the ground and senior level. During my experience here, I organised and chaired a roundtable with a Liberal Democrats education spokesperson, Munira Wilson MP and young people. The roundtable was a powerful way to feed in youth perspective directly to politicians with power.

What advice you have for other students with similar interests

Advice I would give to other students with similar interests is to explore and really hone into the specific area of policy that you are most interested in. Use your studies and extra-curricular opportunities to narrow this down. Understanding that you are passionate about Education is helpful but what policy exactly? Perhaps start by reflecting: if you could change one thing about education, what would it be? Edge highlights the importance skills and technical education; which I believe supports the transformation of education more broadly because it creates a new narrative that not only 'academic' roots and achieving all 9's and A's is a measurement of success.

What you're planning next...

I plan to apply to the Summer Diversity Civil Service programme to gain even more experience in direct policy making and learn more about whether the Civil Service is for me. In the future, I aspire to be at the centre of leading policy creation and implementation. Whether that be leading work a part of an existing firm, creating my own or becoming the future Education Secretary of State. In the short term, I plan to create a network during my time studying at Cambridge to connect students, academics and policy makers at Cambridge (keep an eye out for that, if interested!)

Aliyah Irabor-York January 2022