

TOWARDS THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SUPPORTER LIAISON OFFICERS



TPDS

The TPDS project – towards a professionalization of the SLO role



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

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Contents

1 The role of the Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) in general	3
The Field of SLO's Work	3
Understanding the Role	3
Target Groups	4
SLOs as Facilitators	4
The SLO as a Fan	4
Built-in Conflicts	5
2 Fan work as professional action	5
Fan Liaison Officers	5
Transparent Dialogue	5
Concepts and Strategies	6
Collaboration with Fan Projects	6
Organisational Structures	6
Importance of Fan Work	7
Funding and Personnel	7
3 Occupational standards as a way to professionalization	7
Project Goals	7
Creating Occupational Standards	8
Essential Functions of the SLO Role:	8
Outlook	9
4 Towards an academic based education: the French pilot study	9
1 Country Needs Analysis: Status of SLO Implementation in France	9
2. Stakeholders	9
3. Action Plan	10
5 Towards an academic based education: the Swedish pilot study	10
1. Country Needs Analysis: Status of SLO Implementation in Sweden	10
2 Stakeholders	11
3 Action plan	11
6 Towards an academic based education: the Polish pilot study	11
1 Country Needs Analysis: Status of SLO Implementation in Poland	11
2 Stakeholders	12
3 Action plan	12
7 Conclusions for further work on SLO professionalization	12
Motivations	13
Obstacles and challenges in the process	13
Learnings	13
Gains	13
Possibilities	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Impossibilities	14
Summary	14

1 The role of the Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) in general

Football and its passionate supporters create a distinct environment, one that necessitates exceptional communication and collaboration between fans and the club. Within this setting, Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs) occupy a pivotal role, serving as the vital bridge that ensures a fair balance among all stakeholders. The responsibilities of SLOs commence wherever the interests of fans intersect with those of the club.

SLOs are much more than intermediaries; they provide a crucial interface connecting fans, club management, security authorities, and members of the media - facilitating and mediating dialogue in every direction. As integral staff members, SLOs work in close coordination with various club departments and continuously engage with a wide range of contacts and target groups, both throughout the week and especially on match days.

To effectively fulfill their duties, SLOs must enjoy broad acceptance and recognition within the fan community. This requires not only in-depth understanding of the distinct fan groups and their unique dynamics, but also the ability to balance approachability with the necessary professional distance. Exemplary social and interpersonal skills are indispensable, as SLOs interact with a diverse audience - from young supporters and police officers to high-level club executives. Diplomacy is essential across a spectrum of situations, whether preparing for a match or responding to challenges that may arise. SLOs are adept at resolving conflicts and maintaining constructive relationships among all involved parties.

The role of an SLO is not rooted in traditional vocational training; rather, it is a specialized profession that increasingly demands formal qualifications or completion of a university degree. In addition, both theoretical and practical knowledge of group dynamics - particularly regarding youth and subcultures - are invaluable assets. Since 2017, SLOs have also had the opportunity to participate in the specialized certificate program 'Fan and Spectator Management' of FH Potsdam and University of Kassel (Germany), further underscoring the profession's growing complexity and importance.

The Field of SLO's Work

Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs) and their sphere of responsibility should be recognized as an integral element of club operations. Effective networking and cooperation with other departments - especially organization, media, and security - are essential foundations for their success. Crucially, the support of club leadership is central: SLOs must be regarded as the primary contacts and authorities for all fan-related matters.

Although SLOs are employees of the club and subordinate to club management, it is vital that they are empowered by clear guidelines, equipping them for the demanding role of mediator and enabling them to act with authority and expertise.

Understanding the Role

The role of the SLO comes with diverse expectations that must be carefully balanced in day-to-day activities. Even in dealings with fans themselves, attention must be paid to the varying interests, needs, and characteristics of the different supporter groups.

Core tasks such as mediating and translating between fans, club officials, police, and security require not only diplomatic finesse but also a clear sense of their remit and limits, both for themselves and among all partners. Frequently, lines of conflict arise from a lack of clarity regarding the SLO's precise role and responsibilities.

Target Groups

The make-up of a club's supporters - inside the stadium and beyond - is highly diverse and ever-changing. SLOs serve as accessible contacts for all fans, addressing requests from active supporter groups, fan clubs, official fan organizations, and individuals alike. Their overarching aims are to broaden the club's fan base, support fans in their needs, and help foster a lively, positive atmosphere in and around the stadium.

To succeed, SLOs must be attuned to the expectations and perspectives of each fan group and help mediate any disputes that arise within the fan scene. Communication and partnership with the active supporter community are particularly pivotal, especially on match days.

Active supporters approach SLOs with concerns or questions, and SLOs also coordinate with security partners and other SLOs to manage or anticipate activities. Focusing attention on targeted groups such as ultras presents another layer of challenge. Where possible, SLOs work as part of a team, with each member acting as the primary contact for different fan groups (such as fan clubs, ultras, fan associations, or departments).

SLOs as Facilitators

SLOs perform a vital function as key facilitators between a variety of stakeholders, orchestrating communication and coordination on multiple levels. Much of their work unfolds outside match days, as they gather, process and communicate essential information in collaboration with security staff, event managers, and fellow SLOs. Their efforts include providing updates on stadium arrivals, logistical planning, and details of fan events, all of which can influence travel, the movement of fan equipment, and other logistical factors.

The heart of the SLO's role is to accompany and support fans for both home and away fixtures, striving to ensure a positive and memorable football experience. This responsibility ranges from organizing travel to away games to overseeing the smooth coordination of all stakeholders on match day - security personnel, police, guest and home SLOs, and external fan projects.

Institutionalized meetings - such as pre-match security briefings and so-called 'curve talks' on match day itself - form part of their regular routine. SLOs are also called upon to mediate and de-escalate tensions when problems arise, using their trust within the fan scene to resolve conflicts, though such situations can be highly demanding.

Even outside the unique pressures of match days, SLOs remain closely attuned to the fan community, exchanging views with groups, clubs, and individuals, monitoring trends and sentiment, and remaining a vital point of liaison with club management and internal departments on supporter matters.

A nuanced understanding of fan culture - and the reasons why certain club policies (from marketing campaigns to kit color) might be met with approval or resistance - is something SLOs uniquely bring to club structures. They serve as seismographs, sensing and anticipating potential conflicts before they erupt, and can, in turn, communicate management decisions regarding choreography, ticket pricing, or sponsorship in a way most likely to be accepted by fans.

The SLO as a Fan

Accepting a SLO position is always accompanied by a shift in role: SLOs must be well-established, connected, and respected within fan circles, but they must also step back from participating as typical fans. Whether full-time or volunteer, becoming an SLO means adopting a new set of responsibilities and loyalties. Recognizing and navigating these new boundaries is one of the job's central challenges.

This transition impacts how SLOs are viewed by clubs, fans, and security services: For fans, they remain approachable contacts, mediators, and representatives; for police and security personnel, SLOs act as vital partners in ensuring match day safety; for the club, they bring expert insight and a direct link to the supporter community.

It's essential in their day-to-day work that SLOs are tangible and trusted in all these roles - distinguishable not only by visible markers such as badges or jackets, but even more by their professionalism and communicative presence. Personal engagement, confidence in dealing with police, stewards, and supporters, and a transparent approach to what they can and cannot do, underpin their credibility and effectiveness.

Built-in Conflicts

The multifaceted and mediating nature of the SLO's work inevitably gives rise to areas of tension. Although awareness and recognition of the SLO role have grown significantly in recent years, misunderstanding and ambiguity can still characterize much of their everyday experience.

SLOs are deeply involved in organizing the security and logistics of match days, building trusted partnerships with security officials within the club. Yet, their influence is often limited - they do not wield executive authority over police or security services. While they may encourage positive behavior and help steer the atmosphere through dialogue, the success of such interventions cannot be guaranteed.

Even within club structures, the SLO's role may be misinterpreted - for example, if club management holds direct negotiations with fan groups without the SLO's knowledge or involvement. While open dialogue is generally desirable, bypassing the SLO undermines their position and effectiveness as trusted mediators.

2 Fan work as professional action

The professionalization of fan work means that cooperation between clubs and their fan communities is placed on a structured, transparent and professional foundation. This is achieved through the appointment of full-time fan workers, who act as mediators and contact persons for fans, as well as through the implementation of concepts and strategies that take into account the needs and wishes of supporters.

Fan Liaison Officers

Fan liaison officers are responsible for fan support as full-time employees of the club. They take care of the concerns, wishes and problems of fans, mediate between fans and the club, and contribute to a positive atmosphere in the stadium and around the club.

Transparent Dialogue

The professionalization of fan work encompasses much more than just structured workflows and formal qualifications. It represents an open, continuous and intensive dialogue between clubs and their diverse fan scenes. This exchange forms the heart of modern, contemporary fan work and creates a foundation of mutual respect and trust.

At the core of this dialogue are the needs, wishes, and even the criticisms of fans. To truly hear these voices, a variety of communication channels are needed: personal meetings, regular fan forums and discussion rounds, as well as digital channels such as social media platforms, interactive fan platforms, or newsletters that enable lively, direct interaction. Modern fan work is therefore always dialogical and varied.

This transparency and openness not only help clubs better understand the concerns of their fans and react early to issues or conflicts but also fosters a sense of belonging and identification. Fans thus evolve from mere spectators to true co-creators of club life. In this way, the professionalization of fan work creates a new foundation for sustainable, partnership-based relationships between clubs and their supporters, and plays a significant role in the development of a vibrant, inclusive fan culture.

Concepts and Strategies

Professional fan work is also demonstrated by the targeted development of well-thought-out concepts and sustainable strategies. The aim is to continuously improve fan support, proactively prevent potential problems and promote positive, respectful fan behavior. Thus, professional fan work does not just mean reacting to acute challenges, but above all acting with foresight.

This can be achieved by introducing innovative support models that cater to the different needs and lifestyles of fans - through dedicated services for different age groups, trained contacts for challenges, or programs that support inclusion. Preventive measures are also a core component of modern fan work, including anti-discrimination projects, violence prevention, awareness for diversity, or the establishment of trusted dialogue structures with security services and other stakeholders.

Strategies to promote a positive fan culture also include opportunities for fans to participate actively, joint events, and the clear recognition and involvement of fans as the club's core community. Thus, fan work is not simply a service, but rather a dynamic, collaborative process that enriches club life and strengthens it for the long term.

Collaboration with Fan Projects

Fan work gains considerable effectiveness and depth through close collaboration with actors like socio-pedagogic fan projects in Germany. These projects not only act as an additional, independent point of contact for fans, but also actively and expertly advocate for their rights, needs and interests. Fan projects in Germany often have years of experience in the field of social education with young people and bring valuable know-how in dealing with different fan cultures, conflict situations, and preventive work.

Through regular exchanges and joint actions, a network is created that enables diverse fan concerns to be addressed on different levels and synergies to be used. For example, events, prevention programs, or support services can be coordinated and made more effective. Additionally, both clubs and fans benefit from the independent perspective and mediating role of fan projects, which build bridges between clubs, fan scenes and society. In this way, both fan work and fan projects strengthen a democratic, inclusive, and lively fan culture.

Organizational Structures

The professionalization of fan work can also be reflected in the introduction of formal organizational structures. Clearly defined processes, areas of responsibility and accountability make fan engagement more transparent and efficient. The establishment of such structures allows processes to be better managed, resources to be allocated more purposefully, and flexibility in meeting a variety of challenges.

Formal structures - such as regulated communication pathways, designated contact persons, clearly defined areas of work, and a well-structured flow of information - provide reliability for both fans and staff. This minimizes duplication or misunderstandings and further raises the quality of fan work. At the same time, this enables systematic professional development opportunities and ensures adherence to common standards. Ultimately, professionally organized fan work helps to sustainably represent the interests of fans and raise collaboration with other stakeholders - both inside and outside the club - to a new, reliable level.

Importance of Fan Work

Professional fan work is a fundamental element for any modern club. It plays a key role in building and maintaining a strong bond between fans and the club. Through targeted, appreciative communication and active involvement of the supporter base, it not only strengthens emotional attachment but also fosters a positive, vibrant atmosphere in the stadium - a crucial factor in the communal matchday experience.

Moreover, fan work has an image-shaping effect, as a lively, respectful, and committed fan environment positively influences the public image of the club and signals openness and social responsibility. Professional fan work also fulfils a preventive role: by focusing on dialogue, information and early intervention, it contributes significantly to minimizing risks such as violence, discrimination, or unrest. In this way, fan work acts as a bridge between club and fan scene - ensuring safety, fostering unity and, in the long run, reinforcing the foundations of sporting and social values within club life.

Funding and Personnel

As fan work becomes more professional, demands on resources increase as well. To meet the many and increasingly complex tasks involved in fan support, not only are specialized staff required, but also adequate financial resources. Only with sufficient personnel can long-term concepts, individual support offers, as well as preventive and integrative projects be implemented effectively.

Additional investment in team training and ongoing education, in modern communication channels, and in expanding advisory and event services are essential to meet the rising expectations of both fans and club management. This is the only way fan work can operate at a high professional level, respond flexibly to challenges, and make its vital contribution to the stability of club life and the positive development of fan culture.

3 Occupational standards as a way to professionalization

The TPDS (Towards the Professional Development of SLOs) project, funded by the European Commission and coordinated by Football Supporters Europe (FSE) alongside academic and international partners, is dedicated to raising the level of professionalism among Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs) throughout Europe and South America. By strengthening the recognition, training, and standards associated with the SLO role, the project seeks to reduce incidents at football matches, promote safer environments, and improve the overall organization and effectiveness of football events on both continents.

Project Goals

The objectives of the project are multifaceted. First, the initiative aims to thoroughly assess the unique needs of clubs and organizations, with the goal of co-creating Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) use cases that are tailored to diverse national contexts. A central ambition is to enable the transfer and adaptation of proven SLO models to South America, facilitating broader international uptake. Equally important, the project seeks to develop well-defined, pan-European occupational standards for SLOs that will inform recruitment, management practices, and continuous professional development across the sector.

To promote excellence in training, the project will pilot customized SLO training modules in France, Poland, and Sweden, thereby establishing benchmarks for best practice in education and capacity-building. These training approaches and standards will then undergo careful evaluation and refinement through ongoing consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. By fostering this inclusive and iterative

process, the project aspires to achieve broad adoption of its outcomes and ensure a lasting, positive impact on the professionalization and effectiveness of SLOs throughout and beyond Europe.

Creating Occupational Standards

Occupational standards define the core responsibilities, essential skills, and performance benchmarks for Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs). The creation of these standards was a thorough process, beginning with an extensive review of existing national and international guidelines, as well as an analysis of SLO job descriptions. Furthermore, the process incorporated a collaborative functional analysis conducted with a so called 'Technical Working Group' consisting of experienced SLOs from across Europe. This collaborative approach ensured that the resulting standards are closely aligned with practical realities and reflect a broad industry consensus, thereby supporting both the professionalization and the effectiveness of the SLO role.

Essential Functions of the SLO Role

A professionally qualified Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) is far more than just a link between a football club's various stakeholders. The SLO embodies the central hub of communication, mediation, and trust - within the stadium, the club, the fan community, and beyond.

An SLO must be able to forge strong, lasting relationships with club staff, diverse groups of supporters, and external partners such as the police, media, other clubs, and various community organizations. These connections are vital for creating a climate of understanding and cooperation amid the complex interplay of safety, club organization, and the passionate emotions of football fandom.

Beyond merely building bridges, an SLO actively supports and empowers fans in their self-organization and advocacy efforts, ensuring that democratic participation and diversity within the fanbase are not only preserved but actively cultivated. Tirelessly serving as a communicator and translator between worlds, the SLO ensures that concerns, questions, and ideas are effectively conveyed between fans, the club, security authorities, and other stakeholders - whether through personal contact, digital platforms, or via the public sphere of the media.

A central part of the SLO's responsibility lies in both preparing for and accompanying football events, offering support and advice with a constant focus on safety, inclusion, and the early identification and management of potential conflict. The SLO's mission is to help create an environment in which the matchday experience is positive and respectful for all participants, while upholding the values of fairness and peaceful coexistence.

In addition, the SLO is committed to cultivating understanding and appreciation for active fan work, both within clubs and among external partners. By challenging outdated views and promoting modern pathways for fan engagement, the SLO acts as a true bridge-builder, always seeking dialogue in every direction to ensure that fans' interests are represented and the club's values are credibly presented to the greater community.

Finally, professional SLOs are expected to skillfully manage their own work processes and responsibilities, continually enhancing their own professionalism and integrity. They play an active part in the broader SLO network, sharing best practices and innovative ideas to enrich and advance the profession.

In this multifaceted role, the SLO stands as a key figure in the evolution of football and fan culture - a catalyst for respect, trust, and sustainable success within a vibrant community of supporters, clubs, and society at large.

Outlook

The upcoming phase of the project will be dedicated to the thorough development of comprehensive occupational standards for the Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) role. This will entail defining precise and nuanced criteria covering the full spectrum of performance expectations, core knowledge, and essential skills needed for effective practice in the position. These standards will not only articulate what exemplary performance looks like but will also serve as a clear reference for the training and evaluation of SLOs.

By establishing these detailed benchmarks, the project aims to create a robust and transferable framework that clubs and football organizations across Europe - and potentially beyond - can adopt. This framework will inform all stages of the SLO professional journey: from transparent and consistent recruitment practices to the design of high-quality training programs, to ongoing professional growth and reflective practice throughout an SLO's career.

Ultimately, these comprehensive occupational standards are intended to foster greater recognition, consistency, and professionalism across the SLO workforce, supporting the goal of safer, more inclusive and well-organized football events. By anchoring the role in widely recognized expectations and continuous development opportunities, the project aspires to elevate the effectiveness and reputation of SLOs at both the national and international level.

4 Towards an academic based education: the French pilot study

Country Needs Analysis: Status of SLO Implementation in France

Since 2016, the Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) - or '*Référent Supporter*' - has been progressively integrated into French professional sport through legislative action and the regulatory efforts of the *Ligue de Football Professionnel* (LFP), which mandates SLO appointments within top-tier clubs. A national training program initiated by the Ministry of Sports (2018-2020) further advanced SLO's professionalization via competency-based modules for SLOs across football, rugby, and basketball.

Despite these developments, the SLO function in France continues to face structural challenges. Most SLOs serve on a part-time or voluntary basis and often juggle multiple roles within their clubs, limiting their professional focus. Their position in the club hierarchy - typically reporting to the Safety and Security Director - remains ambiguous, sometimes undermining their effectiveness. Moreover, both institutional and external recognition of SLOs is still developing. Initiatives such as the National Supporters Institution (INS) aim to enhance stakeholder dialogue, but persistent gaps remain regarding the formalization, status, and inter-organizational integration of the SLO role.

Stakeholders

To obtain a nuanced understanding of the current context, the *Centre de Droit et d'Économie du Sport* (CDES) conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews in early 2024 with key stakeholders, including LFP officials, academics specializing in supporter culture and sports law, and seasoned SLOs. These interviews provided in-depth insights into current training and competency needs. This effort was complemented by a major national workshop in Paris in March 2024 - the largest of its kind - bringing together 38 SLOs from 34 clubs, alongside representatives from the LFP, law enforcement, academia, and non-governmental organizations. Workshop discussions addressed issues such as pyrotechnics, travel bans for away supporters, anti-discrimination efforts, and the evolving post-pandemic landscape. A participatory session enabled SLOs to review and provide feedback on CDES's proposed training modules, resulting in enthusiastic engagement and meaningful peer exchange.

Action Plan

- **Validation of Training Content and Structure:**
CDES will collaborate with the LFP in June 2024 to finalize the training module's content and structure, taking into account national regulatory and administrative requirements.
- **Course Accreditation and Funding:**
Upon validation, the training course will pursue *Qualiopi* certification (the national quality assurance standard) and establish a sustainable funding model to support ongoing delivery.
- **Training Delivery:**
The certified training will be offered to French SLOs as four two-day modules over the course of twelve months, utilizing a multidisciplinary instructional team and prioritizing peer learning and experiential knowledge sharing.

5 Towards an academic based education: the Swedish pilot study

Country Needs Analysis: Status of SLO Implementation in Sweden

Challenges:

The Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) role in Sweden is currently confronted with a range of significant challenges. One primary issue is the lack of a clearly defined and unified foundation for the SLO function across clubs. Due to varying club cultures, histories, employment arrangements, job expectations, and responsibilities, the interpretation and implementation of the SLO role differ substantially from one club to another. This diversity is further complicated by persistent misunderstandings and a lack of clarity regarding the SLO's mandate, not only among club staff but sometimes also at the leadership level.

Additionally, the nature of SLO work requires considerable flexibility, as the majority of meaningful engagement with supporters takes place during evenings and weekends, falling outside standard office hours. Measuring the effectiveness of SLO activities also poses a unique challenge, as their success is often evident only in the prevention or absence of conflicts, making concrete outcomes difficult to quantify. Finally, there is a need for clubs to view investment in the SLO function as a strategic and value-adding initiative for both club culture and security, rather than merely as an added expense.

Questions to ask:

The national workshop highlighted several key considerations for structuring SLO education. Among these were questions about the intended participants and the long-term sustainability of the program once the initial group of approximately forty SLOs has completed the course. Defining shared standards for the SLO role across diverse club contexts was seen as essential, as was determining suitable assessment methods for participants, many of whom lack higher education experience. Additional challenges identified included encouraging clubs to invest in the SLO function, choosing an appropriate academic level for the training, overcoming geographical and workload constraints, and designing a flexible delivery format that effectively combines online and in-person learning.

Academic knowledge:

The discussion on academic knowledge revealed a clear desire to integrate expertise from multiple disciplines into the SLO curriculum. In particular, participants emphasized the importance of incorporating perspectives from sociology, behavioral science, psychology, and social work. Additionally, there was a call to include insights from those with practical experience in policing - such as police officers, police students, commanding officers, and dedicated supporter police. Legal

knowledge was also highlighted as essential to ensure that SLOs are equipped to navigate the regulatory and procedural contexts in which they operate.

Stakeholders

Malmö University has developed a broad and well-established network centered around Swedish football culture, involving a diverse spectrum of relevant stakeholders. The discussion on SLO education has included input from university academics specializing in sports and supporter research; SLOs actively working within major football clubs; club officials responsible for international affairs, events, and security; and representatives from national supporter organizations and football unions. Additionally, the consultation has engaged representatives from the Swedish Football Association, the Swedish Professional Football Leagues, professional footballers' associations, and organizations with a European perspective on supporter issues. This multidisciplinary exchange has ensured that the development of SLO education is grounded in the expertise and experiences of individuals from across the Swedish football ecosystem, including practitioners, administrators, advocates, and researchers.

Action plan

The action plan for Malmö University's Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) education program is built on a systematic, multi-stage approach to professional development. It began with a thorough needs assessment involving SLOs, club management, fans, football associations, and security personnel to identify skills gaps and challenges within Swedish football clubs.

Subsequently, the program's objectives are being refined in alignment with Malmö University's existing curricula. The new training will emphasize communication, conflict resolution, safety protocols, inclusivity, and diversity, using a blend of case studies, role-play, and interactive methods to foster both theoretical understanding and practical competence.

Resource allocation is a priority, with qualified university staff and external experts in sociology, sports management, security, psychology, and community engagement integrated into the instructional team. Delivery will be tailored through a mix of in-person workshops, online courses, and practice-based learning, scheduled in coordination with SLOs and clubs for maximum flexibility.

To ensure sustained quality, the program will implement a robust evaluation and feedback mechanism, gathering regular input from participants and stakeholders to enable ongoing refinement. Certification procedures are being established, with the goal of securing formal recognition for graduates by football authorities, thereby enhancing the value of SLO qualifications.

Further elements of the plan include providing ongoing mentoring, advanced training, and networking opportunities, as well as strong advocacy for the importance of SLO education in club policies and national practice. By encouraging collaborative forums and knowledge exchange, Malmö University aims to support the continuous growth and effectiveness of SLOs within Swedish football.

6 Towards an academic based education: the Polish pilot study

Country Needs Analysis: Status of SLO Implementation in Poland

Fan culture in Poland has experienced significant evolution over recent decades. While the 1990s were marked by violence and aggression, the early 21st century saw the institutionalization of the supporter movement, with the formation of formal associations and a growing partnership with authorities. The organization of Euro 2012 catalyzed further developments, notably through the creation of the 'Supporters United' project, now active in 19 cities as a result of collaboration between fans, local governments, and football authorities.

Simultaneously, Polish football clubs have undergone modernization and professionalization, aligning their management practices with those of leading European clubs. This transformation, together with the increasing maturity of the fan community, led to the introduction of the Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) role into club structures in 2016. Since then, employing SLOs has been a licensing requirement, resulting in more than 50 clubs appointing SLOs. However, the relatively recent adoption of this role underscores the urgent need for specialized training to equip SLOs with the necessary knowledge and skills.

To promote the development of such training, the University of Gdansk conducted a needs analysis based on a national workshop with thirteen participants involved in football administration, as well as a series of in-depth expert interviews. This approach yielded nuanced, multidimensional insights into the duties of SLOs and the expectations surrounding their position, laying the groundwork for the next phases of the project.

Stakeholders

The national workshop included interviews with a range of stakeholders: SLOs from Polish football clubs across various league levels, students from the 'Sport and Social Change' course (which examines sport's role in social transformation and activism, with a focus on SLOs), the supporter coordinator at the Polish Football Association (PZPN), club executives with management experience at several prominent football clubs, social science researchers specializing in sport and fan studies, and representatives from the Gdansk local press.

The discussion yielded several important postulations regarding the role and significance of SLOs:

SLOs report persistent misunderstandings of their role among club leadership, underscoring the need for targeted management training. They recommend exchange visits with established foreign SLO teams to illustrate effective integration, and highlight difficulties with PZPN expectations and law enforcement, who often see SLOs as informants. Regular meetings among SLOs, as well as improvements to working conditions, are needed. Key training areas identified include legal knowledge, conflict management, soft skills, and communication.

Other stakeholders emphasize that the quality of the SLO's relationship with supporter groups is critical; relationships that are either too close or too distant can hinder independence or effective engagement. SLOs should ideally be respected members of the supporter community while maintaining their credibility within the club. Stakeholders also expect SLOs to contribute to fan culture beyond match days, requiring skills in project management and outreach to diverse groups. Mastery of soft skills and relevant legal frameworks is considered essential for effective SLO performance.

Action plan

The pilot training site will be developed in collaboration with, and with the institutional support of, the Polish Football Association, which has demonstrated openness to advancing SLO training. Given that the SLO role is relatively new within Polish football, there is an ongoing need for multidimensional competence development. The University of Gdansk will oversee the implementation, ensuring that the training modules adhere to academic standards. The roll-out of the pilot site will proceed in clearly defined stages as outlined in the project schedule.

7 Conclusions for further work on SLO professionalization

The following aspects rely on interviews with the three participating national groups from Sweden, Poland and France.

Motivations to work on an academic SLO course

The primary motivation for engaging in the pilot study to develop an SLO education course lies in the desire to enhance supporter culture and to advance the knowledge base of both SLOs and clubs. By contributing to improved educational opportunities, the project aims not only to foster a more positive and inclusive environment among supporters, but also to strengthen the professional competencies within football organizations.

A further motivation for participating in the pilot study to develop a course in SLO education is the desire to connect academic knowledge with practical experience. This pilot study offered an excellent opportunity to experience working not just as an academic, but as a practitioner and coach - engaging directly with people who are not part of the academic world. Ultimately, this initiative is a possibility for to expand own professional competencies and to meaningfully contribute to shaping future practitioners in the field.

Obstacles and challenges in the process

The most significant challenges encountered in this process have been ensuring adequate financial support for future courses, addressing the relatively limited number of national SLOs, and navigating the complexities of university administrative procedures. Each of these factors has presented substantial obstacles to the sustainable development and implementation of the SLO education program.

A further challenge encountered has been the nature of national fan culture, which is often characterized by a general lack of trust. This environment can sometimes feel hostile, making it necessary to overcome a degree of social distance and skepticism. The most important and difficult task, therefore, has been finding ways to build trust, encourage cooperation, and foster openness during interactions and conversations with members of the supporter community.

Learnings

- Drawing directly on the practical experiences of SLOs has proven invaluable in shaping relevant and impactful educational content.
- Lessons learned from the established SLO practices in Germany have offered important reference points and best-practice models that informed our own development process.
- The collective work carried out within the TPDS project itself has provided a solid foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities faced in advancing SLO education, allowing for a more informed and responsive approach.
- Examining fan perspectives from a practical - rather than purely academic - viewpoint has proven highly valuable and intellectually stimulating.
- There are many dedicated individuals across the European fan landscape who are actively working to foster change and strengthen connections between fans and organizations.
- This process has motivated personally; it inspired to apply for, and obtain, membership in the FSC, reinforcing the commitment to being more actively engaged in this field moving forward.

Gains

The greatest potential benefit of SLO courses for the current national situation lies in the advancement of professionalization within the SLO role. Although SLO positions already exist in clubs across the top divisions, there remains considerable scope for further development to ensure that individuals in these roles achieve a higher level of professionalism. Implementing formal training programs that culminate

in certification from the Polish Football Association would not only equip SLOs with essential skills and knowledge but would also provide a recognized credential. This, in turn, would significantly strengthen the professional standing of SLOs and contribute to the ongoing development of supporter liaison work throughout Poland.

Impossibilities

While the course aspires to lay the groundwork for long-term knowledge development and positively influence national football and supporter culture, as well as strengthen and professionalize the SLO role, there are inherent limitations to what can be achieved through a single educational program. It is unrealistic to expect that all challenges facing supporter engagement, or the full transformation of football culture, can be addressed solely through this initiative. Ultimately, this course serves as an essential foundation, but sustained progress will require ongoing commitment from clubs, stakeholders, and the broader football community.

Given the national context, it is unrealistic to expect that an SLO course alone can immediately influence the behavior of the most deeply engaged or hardcore fans, especially with respect to preventing violent actions. At present, SLOs do not possess the authority or power necessary to bring about such direct change. However, over time, as the SLO role becomes more deeply embedded within football clubs and its importance gradually recognized by the wider fan community, there is potential for SLOs to be regarded as significant and trusted figures. Ultimately, while immediate transformation is unattainable, the incremental integration of SLOs may foster stronger connections and communication between supporters and club leadership in the longer term.

Summary

This project is highly relevant for the national context, as it enables the adaptation and implementation of good practices and examples from countries such as France, Poland, Sweden and Germany. While these models cannot be adopted wholesale, there is notable goodwill and openness - particularly within the national football association and among clubs - to advance the professionalization of the SLO role. There are good reasons to be confident that the outcomes of this project will make a significant contribution to the ongoing development and strengthening of SLO professionalism.