

Academic Initiatives for Social Change through the Beautiful Game

A Masteral Catalyst to Formation of Ghana's Gold City Football Club

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Gold City Football Club, a Ghanaian third-division football club founded in 2023, and born out of academic discourse, has become a professional club with community impact in its core. This article seeks to inspire and promote the ongoing effort to create an impact through pedagogical methods. It underscores the critical role of crafting educational modules that encourage community participation, establishing meaningful partnerships between academic institutions and local organisations, and particularly developing business modules that look beyond just the bottom-line. By enriching the educational process, students are more likely to experience meaningful learning that can lead to positive outcomes. This pedagogical strategy enhances learners' comprehension and sensitivity towards societal challenges, while also fostering a lasting positive influence.

Educators possess a unique privilege to influence their students' outlook on the significance of community engagement and impact. By integrating real-world examples and community-focused projects into their modules, they can ignite a spark in their students to consider the broader implications of their scholarly endeavours, beyond standard assessments, dissertations, or report submissions. Take Kente, for instance, a mentee under the author's guidance for his master's thesis and a participant in the author's courses on Research Methods and Football Finance. The path traversed by Kente and his colleagues in the postgraduate degree (MSc) in Football Business exemplifies the conversion of scholastic theories into actionable ventures. Kente and his peers' journey in the MSc Football Business program is a testament to how academic insights can be translated into practical initiatives. In recent years, the role of sports in fostering social change has gained significant recognition. This article narrates how scholarly projects can act as a catalyst for driving societal progress, spotlighting the establishment of Gold City Football Club in Ghana, an initiative that originated from a master's thesis. This narrative is also backdropped against the author's unlikely story: the intriguing development of a Filipino-Australian academic becoming the CEO of a Ghanaian third-division football club.

Football is seen to have the ability to transcend cultural and social barriers, uniting people from diverse backgrounds. The concept of using academic projects to drive community development is not new, but its application in the realm of sports, particularly football, presents a relatively novel approach. This article explores one of the cases in which the potential of higher education to inspire students to contribute positively to society is realised. Moreover,

In 2022, Kente Kufour and his peers in the MSc Football Business program at a sports-focused university shared a common aspiration: to engage with the dynamic and profitable world of football, colloquially referred to as 'the beautiful game.' Their ambition was not merely to observe from the sidelines but to actively participate and carve out their own niche within this rapidly expanding industry, which has been experiencing a remarkable surge in investment and financial growth. This raised a question: **Is it possible for educators to instil the need to drive community impact in their students' future work?**



Fig. 2 (above): GCFC Founder and the team in Accra, Ghana, October 2024. (Photo by William Seshie, courtesy of GCFC, 2024)

Fig. 3 (right): Snap from GCFC "Justify" try-outs for the team. (Photo by William Seshie, courtesy of GCFC, 2024)



this article is clearly not just about football or sports; it is about harnessing academia's potential to drive forward progressive social agendas. It challenges traditional notions about the role universities play within their communities.

Kente's applied research project

Kente pursued his postgraduate studies at a university uniquely dedicated to the business of football, nestled within the iconic Wembley Stadium in London – the home of English national football teams. It was here that the paths of the author and the future founder of a Ghanaian football club converged. As a student, Kente engaged in

the author's Football Finance and Research Methods sessions and was also under the author's supervision for his applied research project.

For his postgraduate research project, Kente studied the phenomenon of young African football players, particularly in Ghana, and the complexities surrounding their migration stories. His field work delves into the viewpoints of key stakeholders regarding the trend of promising young African footballers aspiring to play in Europe. Entities such as the Ghana Football Association, club owners, coaches, football agents, legal advisors, Ghanaian professional football players, and local football academies (particularly in Accra, Ghana), were integral to this study. It explored the underlying reasons prompting



Fig. 1: Gold City Football Club crest, a Ghanaian third-division football club founded in 2023.

these athletes to seek careers in European leagues. Additionally, an analysis of Ghana's football scene provides context, examining how infrastructure, coaching quality, financial aspects, and league competitiveness influence migration choices. Current studies of sports migration reveal a particular pattern, especially among male athletes engaged in high-profile sports such as football, from peripheral nations to European countries where there is substantial financial support for the sport. Kente's findings aligned with existing literature and also shed light on the intricate web of issues and obstacles that migrating athletes encounter.

Kente's research work highlighted how the majority of stakeholders, particularly the young players, believe that migration enhances their development and exposure to higher levels of competition, effectively advancing their career. The research also underscores the pivotal support local communities offer to these athletes during the migration journey, with a call to strengthen existing support frameworks. The concerns for exploitation of these young athletes were also raised. Some stakeholders advocate for greater investment in educational and vocational opportunities for young players, emphasising the need for holistic support beyond football training. The unanimous view among Kente's interviewees is that educational and vocational assistance is crucial for the athletes' enduring success, providing them with the tools to thrive beyond their sporting careers. The perceived local economic benefits derived from such migrations, notably when players are transferred to European clubs, are significant and warrant attention. The creation of GCFC is a strategic response to these challenges, embodying the ethos of contributing positively to the founder's home community.

Through his fieldwork, Kente gained a deeper insight into the multifaceted challenges of football player migration in Ghana, as well as a broader appreciation for the diverse perspectives on the sport held by various local stakeholders. In Ghana, as in many other developing nations, the populace grapples with a host of social dilemmas such as youth unemployment, a scarcity of recreational amenities, and scant opportunities for community involvement. Being closely exposed to these issues fostered a sense of empathy in Kente, sparking his curiosity about potential solutions to these pervasive problems. Football clubs offer a regimented setting that nurtures young people, instilling values of teamwork, discipline, and a sense of communal pride.

As part of the masteral programme, the students complete an applied research project, offering an opportunity to apply theoretical learnings to real-world problems. These projects can also serve as incubators for innovative solutions to address societal issues. The inception of Gold City Football Club emerged from Kente's master's thesis, with the objective of harnessing the unifying force of sports to catalyse community development and engender social transformation.



Fig. 4: Medical screening for team players. (Photo by William Seshie, courtesy of GCFC, 2024)

Knowledge in Action

The narrative of Gold City Football Club is one of inspiration, a narrative that underscores the profound influence that academic endeavours can have when aligned with the passion and power of sport. This ongoing story is marked by every goal and every match, each adding to a growing legacy of transformation that reaches beyond the field and touches the lives of the local community members. It’s about building a lasting legacy that extends far beyond the boundaries of the football field.

The shared ambition within Kente’s postgraduate cohort mirrors a wider trend where the enticing economic prospects of football inspire participation and contributions to its growth. Many students specialising in Football Business aspire to be agents after their studies, motivated by the chance to tap into the sport’s lucrative market. In this vein, the Gold City Football Club in Ghana emerged from this entrepreneurial drive. It not only reflects the enterprising nature of the academic community but also acts as a catalyst for social change through sports. The club’s creation is a powerful example of how football can drive societal progress and community building, aligning with educational goals to harness the sport for the public good. Gold City Football Club’s establishment goes beyond being a mere entity; it’s part of a broader quest for social reform through football’s global appeal. This endeavour marries scholarly concepts with real-world practice, blending business acumen with core values like teamwork, leadership, and civic duty. The club’s inception signifies a shift in sports education, where football studies go beyond theory to engage with the sport’s concrete, impactful facets. It embodies a recognition of football’s capacity to not just entertain but also as a vehicle for meaningful social change.

The club proudly holds certification from the United Nations’ Football for the Goals initiative, affirming its dedication to the Sustainable Development Goals. Management is committed to providing staff with fair wages and fostering career opportunities for players beyond the field, including a range of training programs. Additionally, the club prioritises the mental and physical health of its players, alongside improving their football abilities.

Establishing Gold City Football Club

Gold City Football Club (GCFC) is dedicated to creating opportunities for young people to engage in sports, advocating for health and wellness, and cultivating a strong community spirit. Despite the considerable promise for beneficial outcomes, the club faces typical grassroots challenges such as obtaining financial support, complying with local regulations, and sustaining community-centred initiatives over time. Nevertheless, these hurdles also offer a chance to innovate and expand, ensuring that the club not only survives but thrives in its mission.

The inception of the GCFC heralded a new era in Ghanaian football, as the clubs’

founders actively forged partnerships within the local communities, aligning with individuals who shared the vision of nurturing homegrown talent. The recruitment strategy focused on enlisting players predominantly from underprivileged backgrounds, offering them chances they might not otherwise encounter to hone their football skills and join an academy. The club organised “Justify” try-out sessions, targeting male youth in Accra and its surrounding areas, recognising football’s role as a conduit for social mobility. These try-outs drew numerous aspirants, all vying for a coveted place in the GCFC first team, with the majority of these players concurrently pursuing their high school education.

The allure of the Justify sessions extended beyond the pitch, as participants were eager to integrate into a team that provided not just a spot on the roster but a comprehensive support system. This included player accommodations (through the GCFC club house), professional training and development programs led by certified coaches, welfare and well-being support staff, and a dedicated team cook overseeing their dietary needs. Such provisions set GCFC apart from other local youth football academies, offering a holistic approach to player development both on and off the field. This unique model underscores GCFC’s commitment to not only fostering athletic prowess but also supporting the overall growth and well-being of its players.

At the heart of Gold City FC’s philosophy lies a belief in the power of football to transcend cultural barriers, unite

communities, and inspire positive change. With each match, training session, and interaction, the club strives to embody the spirit of Ghana and celebrate its rich heritage on the global stage. By focusing on holistic player development, the club not only aims to produce skilled athletes but also well-rounded individuals who can contribute positively to society.

GCFC Players’ Experience

The intended societal impact can perhaps be mostly observed through the players’ perspectives. As the CEO of the club, the author met with the head coach (Gideon) and the team’s captains, Victor and Michael. A central theme in the discussion is the ambition of the players to excel in football and their commitment to personal development. Victor, the captain, articulates a clear desire to achieve success with Gold City, emphasising that while they have not yet reached their goals, he is confident in their potential. For instance, Gideon states, “We may not have won the championship yet, but I believe we have the talent and determination to get there.” This sentiment reflects a collective aspiration among the players to rise through the ranks and achieve recognition, showcasing their dedication to improving their skills. Gideon and both players express a strong commitment to their personal growth, indicating that their ambitions are not solely focused on individual accolades but are also intertwined with their journey towards professional football.

Football emerges as a profound passion for both staff and players, serving as a source of fulfillment and identity. They describe football not just as a sport but as a vital part of their lives, one that brings joy and purpose. One of the young players excitedly shared during a team call, “Football is my life; it’s what I wake up for every day,” highlighting the emotional and psychological significance of the sport. Michael, another player, stated that football is “not just a game, but a dream that I’ve chased my whole life.” Their reflections underscore how football serves as a vehicle for self-expression and personal achievement, framing it as a means to attain happiness and fulfillment.

A theme highlighted in the conversation with players is the robust support system provided by the Gold City Football Club. Players like Michael and Victor emphasised the importance of both on-pitch and off-pitch support, highlighting how coaches and administrators offer guidance that

extends beyond football. Victor mentioned, “The club has been there for us in every way, from training to providing for our basic needs, including regular medical screenings.” Such support allows players to focus on their performance without the distraction of financial struggles. This acknowledgment underscores the club’s commitment to fostering a nurturing environment for its athletes, which is crucial for their development and success.

Another interesting topic of discussion is the players’ recognition of the broader impact of their football careers on their families and communities. Both Victor and Michael articulate a desire to uplift their families and contribute positively to their communities through their success in football. Victor expresses this responsibility by saying, “Every time I step on the pitch, I think about my family and how my success can change their lives.” This highlights the interconnectedness of individual aspirations with communal well-being, illustrating how the players’ dreams extend beyond personal success to encompass a desire to effect change in their environments. Michael adds, “I want to be a role model for the kids in my neighbourhood, showing them that they can achieve their dreams too.” The dialogue between the CEO and the players also revealed a strong awareness of the community impact that football can have. Players and coaches alike recognise that their success can inspire and uplift their families and communities. Gideon articulates this by saying, “When we win, it’s not just for us; it’s for everyone who supports us.” This theme of community engagement highlights the broader social responsibility that comes with being part of a sports organisation. The players’ aspirations to contribute positively to their communities through their football careers reflect a deep understanding of the role that sports can play in societal development, reinforcing the idea that their achievements can lead to positive change.

GCFC is just one story ...

The narrative of Gold City Football Club is just unfolding, yet its influence is already evident in the young talents it has nurtured and the team it has inspired. Originating from scholarly discussions, the club’s inception has not only sparked enthusiasm for the sport within Accra’s community but has also been a benefit for local employment. While currently focusing on male youth, the club is actively working towards launching a parallel program for young women. It is noteworthy that the club’s leadership reflects diversity and a shared zeal for football, with key positions held by women: the chairperson, CEO, and sports director. Gold City Football Club, born from a master’s thesis, harnesses the power of sports to catalyse community growth in Ghana. The club’s core aim is to engage the youth, advocate for healthy living, and cultivate a strong community spirit. This club’s journey exemplifies the potential of academic projects to transcend scholarly boundaries and make a tangible difference in society.¹

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Notes

1 The author acknowledges participants from Gold City Football Club: staff and players who shared their stories. More importantly, the author thanks the founders of the club, Kente Kufour and his wife Dr. Sandra Bediako, for inviting the author to be part of this journey.

Fig. 5 (right): First Aid Training for GCFC players and staff. (Photo by William Seshie, courtesy of GCFC, 2024)

