

## Laidlaw Leadership in Action Impact Report, 2021

### Introduction

With this report I aim to evaluate the 6-week-long internship at Think Pacific (TP) that I undertook as part of my second summer as a Laidlaw Scholar. My project consisted of working on a Fijian zero-waste delivery system with a small team of four Laidlaw scholars, in collaboration with a Fijian social enterprise, Fusion Hub (FH).

### Project description & Solution evaluation

As part of my Laidlaw Undergraduate Research & Leadership Scholarship, I was to complete a so-called 'Leadership in Action' (LIA) project, that is: an internship with a duration of 6 weeks. This I undertook working together with two companies: Think Pacific, a UK-based charity that strives to support the Fiji National Development Plan in close collaboration with the Fijian Government; and Fusion Hub Fiji — whom I met through TP —, a Fijian NGO that works towards tackling the global waste crisis, encouraging sustainable living, and supporting female empowerment. My team of four was commissioned to develop a model for a zero-waste delivery system that is readily implementable in Fiji. To do this, we analysed pre-existing delivery companies' — both ordinary and zero-waste — business models and fused some of their solutions with the classic milkman delivery model. Our proposed delivery system is coupled with an extensive training scheme that focuses on economically empowering women and also seeks to involve local communities.

Our proposed model offers a solution that tackles three key issues: waste crisis, gender inequality, and rising unemployment. The solution can minimise waste production whilst implementing a delivery system akin to those of industry-leading companies like Deliveroo and UberEats. It has the potential to help Fiji's fight against soaring solid waste-related pollution even after COVID-preventive lockdowns are eased. Furthermore, it also falls in line with current trends of sustainable living and the ever-growing demand for home delivery services.

The training programs that complement the model will not only ensure access to locally and ethically sourced goods, but also ameliorate Fiji's gender inequality and unemployment situation by providing accessible training for women in urban and remote areas alike, thereby helping them become economically independent. In addition, our model also takes into consideration the need for active engagement with local communities in order to forestall the deepening of the urban-rural divide, one of the core issues of unsustainable societies.

The model has the advantage of being open to future expansion — in terms of product range, covered delivery area, container design, cooperation with other local businesses, etc. — without a need for substantial changes in its structure or the business model in general. This flexibility renders it less prone to unforeseeable economic and societal changes in the future.

## Personal development

After the first, academia-focused year of my scholarship, this year's industry-centred internship provided a most beneficial opportunity to utilise my newly acquired / ameliorated skills in a different environment. Having spent the past three years of my life in an academic environment, this meant that I had to stretch myself considerably and work outside my comfort zone.

### / Leadership

This internship project was the perfect opportunity to put into practice what I had learnt about leadership during my time as a Laidlaw scholar as well as to reflect on my own leadership style.

In our team we had a system in place where every week it was a different person in charge. Initially, this meant designing the current phase of the project, moderating group meetings, having the final say when making decisions, assigning tasks to other teammates etc. However, as time went by, the weekly leaders' job was gradually reduced to administrative tasks, such as proposing plans for the forthcoming week, scheduling meetings, liaising with the organisations, or evaluating the weekly progress. This, in my view, is the perfect sign of an efficient and well-balanced team, for I strongly believe that in an ideal company, especially when it is relatively small in size, the leaders' scope of duties dwindles, and the role becomes predominantly administrative, if not redundant.

It was most rewarding to realise post factum that, unbeknownst to us, our team ended up progressively transcending the leader's role, whereby all plans and decisions were made collectively without the slightest sense of hierarchy. This is not to say that there were not instances of disagreement; initially I experienced some difficulty when trying to live up to the standards that I had set for myself, but with a little extra attention and self-reflection I succeeded in overcoming my shortcomings. This was true to the group as well: the more we listened and understood each other's character the less frequent our contretemps became.

### / Teamwork

Throughout my LIA journey, I was lucky to have the chance to work with people from all corners of the world, which meant a great diversity, both culturally and professionally. Having to work across 5 time zones with people from markedly different backgrounds made me realise how incredibly uniform teams I am used to working with and how little flexibility is required of me in general.

Challenging though this diversity may have been at times, I feel I profited immensely from being exposed to such a working environment. I learnt how to be more aware of my own cultural biases; how to better recognise and adapt to the differences in people's work ethic and routine; how to appreciate and utilise these said differences; and how to make compromises so that each and every member of the team feels content and valued.

Besides having to actively collaborate with the two organisations and their representatives, the project itself was mostly team-based. I was fortunate to have an excellent group comprising radically different personalities and professional backgrounds, making it agile and quick to adapt.

## Communication

One of the most important areas where I had to better my skills was communication — both cooperative and presentational. This took me by surprise since I used to regard myself as an effective communicator. However, I soon saw that it was but certain types of communication — one-on-one or organisational — that I might think of as my strengths. Fortunately, during the 6 weeks that I spent working with my team, there was ample time and opportunity for me to understand what I am lacking in communication.

### / Cooperation

Effective communication between teammates is the primal foundation of teamworking. This not only consists of the exchange of ideas in a clear, prompt, and concise manner — which is a task in itself already —, but also an optimised workflow, where the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ are clear to all, and the different sub-tasks are connected seamlessly. This, however, requires excellent briefing skills, a deft understand of the logic behind others’ ways of thinking, and the ability to match other’s pace so that there is no time lost to unnecessary waiting. While I had no issue keeping up with the workload of the rest of my team, I did feel my briefing abilities inefficient and at times failed to comprehend why somebody acted the way they did. Looking back it seems to me that the former issue is mostly to do with my lack of experience, while the latter stems from insufficient attention and flexibility, both of which became the foci of my self-development plan for the second year of my Laidlaw scholarship.

### / Presentation

The supplementary side of in-group communication is the presentation of the group’s collective ideas to an external audience — be it a supervisor, a commissioner, or an independent listener. No matter how well a project may be handled, if the results are incomprehensible to the public, all the effort will come to nought.

Public speaking is a long-time nemesis of mine, and I am glad to have been made to practice it this time. Thanks to the constructive and most encouraging feedback of my mentors and peers, I gained appreciably more confidence when presenting to a wider audience — something that will no doubt come handy regardless of the direction of my future career.

## Self-awareness & -realisation

Having to complete self-assessment reports for both the Laidlaw Foundation and Think Pacific, I had the opportunity to reflect on my realised and unrealised strengths. This, on the one hand, armed me with confidence, for I felt comfortable that I would be able to use them to the benefit of my team and the project; on the other, it also gave me a reason to ameliorate certain skills that I had little experience using.

For instance, I know myself to be a good connector and organiser, which proved to be useful skills throughout the internship. However, I felt less at ease about presentation or decision making. While I surely have not become an expert in them, I still managed to better these skills and, what is even more important, is that now I can also see how I should further improve them.

## Mentoring

At TP I was fortunate to have an excellent mentor, who was always quick to explain should something be unclear; pull some strings if we got stuck in the intricate administrative system; give advice when I was unsure as to how a situation is supposed to be handled.

I used to think of myself as an independent worker and thought it unnecessary to be required to be in touch with a mentor. During the internship, however, I came to realise that an external source of personal feedback provides a matchless opportunity when it comes to reflective learning. I am immensely grateful for the help I was given for it made me realise many an important thing that would otherwise have remained hidden.

## Conclusion

During my internship at Think Specific, I came closer to understanding my working- and leadership styles, as well as strengths and weaknesses that were previously unknown to me. This helped me better realise my potential and thus be a more valuable member of my team. In addition, I also think that this experience made me more aware of the kinds of works that will enjoy and am fit to do. In the long run, I am hoping to continue working on the above-mentioned skills as well as to seek out such opportunities where I can use them consciously.