

## Leadership in Action and Final Reflection (Summer 2)

### *LiA: Vaccine Hesitancy in Migrant Communities - A Community-Based Approach to Increase COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake*

#### **LiA Project Experience**

My project this summer aimed to address the problem of vaccine hesitancy in migrant communities with a collaborative and community-based approach. This work was carried out as part of the ‘COVID-19 Vaccine Migrant Community Network’, founded by the HSE in collaboration with many migrant community organisations. I also had the opportunity to attend the Immunotherapy for Infectious Diseases Conference (IIDC) in Milan, an experience which enabled me to better address the complex question of vaccine hesitancy in this vulnerable group.

I travelled to Milan for the 2022 IIDC conference in Week 1 of my LiA experience. This was a comprehensive and influential conference, bringing together academia, small biotech, big pharma and regulatory bodies invested in the discovery of novel therapeutic strategies to combat infectious diseases. There was particular emphasis on the COVID-19 pandemic, and the importance of developing safe and effective vaccines in an efficient and time-sensitive manner. Over the course of the week, I had the opportunity to discuss my research on the T cell response to SARS-CoV-2 spike and nucleocapsid proteins, with leading immunologists and infectious disease experts. The topic of COVID-19 vaccine safety and efficacy also featured heavily over the course of the conference, which better informed the work I would do in relation to vaccine hesitancy and reduced vaccine uptake in vulnerable groups.

In the following weeks, after returning from the conference, I was introduced to colleagues in the HSE Communications Department and was informed on the work they had been doing up to that point. I also had the opportunity to hear from migrant community leaders, and was given valuable insight into the unique factors affecting vaccine uptake and confidence in their communities. I began working on developing the ‘COVID-19 Vaccine Migrant Community Network Toolkit’ which would be co-produced with migrant community leaders and act as a living document and an operational guide to provide practical support and strategies for understanding and addressing the unique barriers to COVID-19 vaccination that migrant communities may face.

The ‘COVID-19 Vaccine Migrant Community Network Toolkit’ was developed with contributions from the CDC, WHO and ECDC COVID-19 vaccine toolkits and handbooks. The toolkit serves to provide practical and accessible information about vaccine hesitancy and the different structural, behavioural and informational barriers to vaccination that community members may face. It also contains step-by-step information on building networks and initiating community-led action to address vaccine hesitancy and increase vaccine confidence. These include strategies for combating misinformation and creating awareness through small group discussions and one-to-one interactions.

Over the course of developing the toolkit, I had the opportunity to make contact with the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in relation to emerging data on vaccine uptake among migrant and refugee communities. This allowed me to gain a greater appreciation for statistical analysis and provided a valuable situation report for migrant community leaders. Also included in the toolkit were health service access information, COVID-19 vaccine rollout updates, and information on COVID-19 case, ICU and death numbers. This comprehensive situation report will hopefully prove to be a useful informational tool that can be regularly updated over the coming months.

Over the course of my LiA experience, regular meetings were held with the wider COVID-19 Vaccine Migrant Community Network to share updates on the work being done to date and to re-emphasise the importance of continued collaboration and partnership. Several community leaders delivered fascinating presentations on the important work that they have been carrying out over the course of the pandemic, and gave a unique insight into the different factors affecting vaccine hesitancy and uptake in their communities. These valuable contributions informed the framework of the toolkit and allowed me to structure the document in a way that would reflect their experience and provide practical advice and information.

Towards the end of my LiA experience, I had the opportunity to present the toolkit at the September COVID-19 Vaccine Migrant Community Network meeting. This allowed me to give an executive summary of the toolkit's contents to community stakeholders and to highlight areas where their continued input would be hugely valuable. During the meeting, Dr. Chantal Migone, a Public Health Medicine Specialist, emphasised the importance of increasing routine childhood vaccination uptake in migrant and refugee populations, and that the learnings from the COVID-19 Vaccine Migrant Community Network can hopefully be employed to address this important issue.

Overall, my Leadership in Action project has been a fantastic experience and one that has pushed me outside of my comfort zone. Hopefully, moving forward, the work that I undertook as part of the network can be built upon for the benefit of future vaccine networks and initiatives.

### **Leadership and Laidlaw Programme Reflections**

When I first considered applying for the Laidlaw Scholars Leadership & Research Programme, I had only a vague idea of what I thought constituted good leadership, or what qualities I might seek to exemplify as a leader. Now, over a year and a half later, reflecting on my leadership development has become almost second nature. Through personal development plans, essay writing, feedback from supervisors and peer-to-peer conversations, I have had the opportunity to learn about my own leadership style and skills on a regular basis.

Surprisingly, having experienced an immersive and comprehensive leadership programme over the past year, I have come out with so much more that I would like to delve into moving forward, than I would have previously thought. I have discovered new perspectives on leadership development, beyond the cliché archetypes that are so frequently discussed. This has allowed me to challenge my own beliefs, discover new ways of thinking and develop valuable and versatile skills.

One of the most important messages that I have taken from my time with the Laidlaw programme, is that leadership development is a continual process and good leadership emerges not only from innate qualities but from critical self-reflection, awareness and integrity. Many leadership concepts that we have gleaned over the past 18 months are not necessarily ‘new’ and may even seem simple at first. But if this were the case, why do we not see these qualities put into practise more frequently? Good leadership can take many different forms and there is no one correct way to lead; good leadership does not have a formula or set of instructions to follow. However, a quality which I think is universal among good leaders is self-awareness, an understanding of your strengths and weaknesses. This forms the basis for integrity and credibility.

The importance of self-reflection is relevant not only from a leadership perspective but also with regard to personal ethics. Many leaders who we would deem to be unethical are not necessarily ‘bad people’ – this was something we discussed during London Business School’s masterclass with Daniel Effron, where he spoke about the psychology of unethical behaviour and the various factors at play in situations where our personal ethics may be compromised. This reminded me that we all have ‘ethical blind spots’ which allow us to violate our values without realising it and in order to become effective and ethical leaders, we need to have the ability to critically reflect.

Through continued reflection on different leadership styles and methods, I have come to the understanding that good leadership does not generally fall entirely into one category i.e. authoritative, affiliative or coaching. Each style has its benefits and drawbacks, and there is a skill in knowing when to take a different approach. Good leadership requires us to exercise judgement, situational awareness and adaptability. This complexity highlights the importance of continual reflection and personal development. Having actively observed many different leadership styles over the course of my Laidlaw programme experience, I have come to the conclusion that these different approaches share many common values which are necessary for effective and ethical leadership.

My experience of leadership in research and subsequently leadership in action, has made an invaluable contribution to my personal development. This has been compounded by the insightful and engaging leadership activities that the Laidlaw programme has provided me with over the past 18 months. From public speaking to conflict resolution, the variety and depth of the workshops provided by the Laidlaw programme is truly impressive, and has had a considerable impact on my understanding of leadership, ethics and personal development.

Having reflected upon my original Personal Development Plan, which I constructed in June 2021, it is remarkable to see the different ways in which my perspectives and views have changed. The experience of carrying out independent research, publishing a paper, and engaging in public speaking assignments and community work, has been transformative and something which I will carry forward in my career and personal life.