

## **My experience with the Laidlaw foundation**

Being in the 2020 covid cohort year, I found out about the program like everything else was done that year, online. I think what initially caught my attention about the program was the ability to have that independence with your own education and research. As a naive fresher in her first week of university I was just seeking something new to try and a way to embrace my newly found independence. I'm not going to lie here but when I first looked at the Laidlaw program, applying to even now, I think I'd struggle to give you a clear universal definition of what it is but I think that this is the beauty of unique scholarship, it has definitely been what I have made it, and I like to think that I have made the most out of it !

## **My first summer**

Gosh that feels like a lifetime ago now...

I know for my first summer of research I started at the end, even before I liked to plan ahead, and my question was what can the Laidlaw Scholarship teach me about me? And oh boy am I glad to finally have the answer.

When I entered my first summer, I did not have a research plan, granted I had my application, but my application was basically word vomit of all the ideas that were floating round in my head, I didn't know what I was going to get as my final piece, which in all honesty i'm glad because that would have just been boring. In fact, my final piece is something which I know I have such a great passion for and that I want to take forward into whatever my future will be.

Let's look at my actual project now...

My first challenge, a research question, and the answer to this deserves to be awarded to my supervisor aka my lifeline in the first summer. When I first met with my supervisor way back in 2020 all I had as I said were my ideas. I was just a first-year uni student who was pretending to be independent in her first attempt at being away from home, I had no clue how to make a research project. Luckily for me there was a staff member just as passionate as me about widening participation who had a lot of advice for me. This was where my first leadership quality to add to my skill set was gained because of the Laidlaw scholarship, what is it you may ask? Well, leading up and starting my first summer I sent draft, after draft, after draft, of a proposed project to my supervisor. For months we formed a tag team by me sending him a proposal and him sending me his feedback of 'be more specific!'. I learnt pretty early on that you cannot research everything there is to do with widening participation, therefore there had to be something so personal to me within this broad topic, that I would want to create a research project out of it, and there was. I am a big believer in studying what you know, and what I knew was only what I had experienced myself. This was of course being widening participation student, being in Durham for their Supported Progression programme, after my A - levels were cancelled in 2020. Using my personal experience and my supervisor's academic experiences our team work finally made me a project looking into the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on widening participation and the A level scandal of 2020.

This was a very ambitious project to start with being so contemporary there was to say the least a limited amount of secondary sources that I could have drawn on. I was faced with a challenge, or maybe an opportunity to get creative. I think it is brave to admit when you understand that you have 'bitten off' a little more than you could perhaps do but I was still determined that this was not going to stop me, thus it was time to think outside the box, yet another leadership quality. My critical thinking transformed into creative thinking. What I wanted initially was to focus on the student experience of those widening participation students who like me were 2020 A level graduates. There was not a chance I could do this, so I created a comparison instead. I dug into the past of widening participation and created almost a timeline of events up to the summer of 2020 results. It was here I started my own primary research; this was a survey which I advertised on social media. Being that it was my first independent primary research I have to say I don't think I did half bad. Results were collected and that gave me the job of analysing. I did this first by learning tips from my supervisor, then engaging with my own content. The results which I found I did not like, and I do not mean I thought them not useful, but instead they upset me. Student after student were declaring to me how let down, they had been by the education system and how much lack of support they had received during the pandemic that had now hindered their academic future. I was determined something must change!

Therefore as part of my final pieces of the summer I wrote a blog titled 'those considering access to higher education programmes from an old widening participation student to a new one.' This was due to my conclusion being that the stigma still surrounding these programmes invites imposterism into these students' careers. Therefore, I wanted to write about my own experiences, this was completely personal, no references required. I was committed that potential WP students would have something positive to read as I knew that was what I wanted 2 years prior to this. A further thing I have done to put my leadership skills into action based on my research project outcome, has been to undertake a role where I mentor students who were basically me in secondary schools, working class and state school educated, who are not encouraged to enter into higher education as it is "not for us". This is because my other conclusion was that there was not enough advertisement and encouragement for students to become part of Widening Participation programmes, and I believe there should be as they are such a valuable resource to help minorities gain access to those higher education institutions, they would never believe possible. Thus, I was more than willing to spread the word myself.

## **My second summer**

Leadership in action, when I first started with the Laidlaw scholarship, I had no idea what that meant at all, but I am very glad I do know! To sum it up in a sentence, I have just embarked on the best summer of my life! Thanks to the Laidlaw foundation and ThinkPacific, this summer I had the opportunity to spend 6 weeks in a Fijian village completing a Youth and Community project. I do not think I will ever fully be able to describe in words my time spent in Toga village, in Nadroga province as it was quite like nothing, I ever experienced but the memories, friendship and the amount of relatives I made will last forever!

Coming into the village, I would say I felt awkward and out of place at first, this was a new culture and community I had to navigate my way around and no amount of prior articles read or YouTube videos watched could have prepared me for the real thing. In my first hours there I was given a new name, new clothes, and a list as long as my arms together of relative's names to remember and how I was related to them. It was a lot and from only being in my new home for the next few weeks, in a matter of hours all I wanted to do was hide in my room for the rest of the day like I would at home, but I didn't! In that first afternoon I was with my Fijian family, I had already thought back to all those games I used to play at primary school and did silly dancing around Nene and Tou's living room, I could do this.

As the weeks went on, I found myself settled, I'd found my routine and place in my little (well huge) Fijian family. Every new experience that came my way I embraced and enjoyed. We came to build a health centre for our village, so I found my non-existent (now existent) building skills. I put on my dancing shoes to be taught Meke (a traditional Fijian dance), and then my walking shoes to trek the mountain learning about the village's history as we went. My flip flops were always never far behind though as we learnt crafts such as weaving baskets, our family tree, playing or crossing the Sigatoka River (which I did actually lose a flip flop to). We went to rugby matches together, sand dunes, river safari's and somehow had 60 people pile into a 20-person truck. By the end of the 6 weeks, I was not just in the village I was part of the village. Never have I met a community more friendly and welcoming than Toga, and I am so fortunate and grateful to have been able to do my LIA there.

For the first half of our project, we built a health centre facility for Toga village. Now full disclosure I am no builder, so all was learnt on the job. We had a rocky start with materials being delayed and everyone getting into the swing of things. Under the watchful eye of our building manager and with the help of everyone on the team you start to see a piece of land become your building and it is a wonderful site. We faced problems as every team does but identified them before it was an issue. For example, often it was the case of too many hands and not enough jobs to go around, so we split into two teams one in the morning and the other the afternoon, meaning someone was never left without a task to do. This also meant whilst one team was building the other team was learning the traditions and customs of Toga. The villagers were also there to lend a hand, as they had more experience with this type of work than we did, I learnt so much from them. After a couple of setbacks from exhaustion and getting used to the heat the health centre was opened and received by the village, a couple of days behind schedule, but there was still enough Kava to go around.

The second half of our Leadership in Action was conducted by Alliance for Future Generations (AFG) . This is a young people led network championing a just, inclusive, and sustainable approach to the climate crisis in Fiji. The group led sessions that we attended with the young people of the village. I found these to be interesting as we were looking at the climate crisis from the Pacific point of view, a one I'd never looked through before. The AFG members were so clearly passionate about this cause I very much enjoyed hearing their thoughts. These sessions only took place in the morning, so our afternoon schedules were now free to take part in more of village life such as sports tournaments and seeing our families' farms.

In total my time in Toga village taught me a lot about leadership and how to develop what I already had going. I am aware that one of the vital aspects of leadership is communication and before this project I thought I had this perfected e.g. I could send clear instructions via email or WhatsApp. My time in Fiji taught me that this was just the tip of the iceberg, to communicate is to be able to talk, understand and others understand you from such a wide variation of backgrounds. To have new eye-opening perspectives and build relationships and networks even at the other side of the world is something I am proud of. To communicate cross culturally, cross language barriers and still with a smile on your face is one of the ways my leadership developed from my amazing Fijian teachers. Another aspect of my leadership that has been changed since my LIA is myself awareness and knowledge. Prior to this summer I was a big advocate of “I can do it myself”, this is probably coming from my Western influence of that we are too stubborn to ask for help. However, the Fijian community is so open that to not ask for help would be an even bigger mistake. This summer with the help of Toga I have come to understand myself more than I ever have before, I know my limitations and strengths and I am now not too awkward to admit when I need help or too modest to admit that I am actually really good at something. I think these are some of the bravest qualities a leader can have but know I will never be too afraid to ‘blow my own trumpet’.

**Vinaka Vakalevu Toga you have taught me so much!**



## **To end it all**

I don't know what to say apart from thank you here! To have been given this chance to participate in such amazing programmes with such forward-thinking members is something I would not have thought possible but a mere 2 years ago. To do it all again, I wouldn't want to as despite every mistake I made or late-night lack of motivation that I know we've all had at some point, my journey through the Laidlaw Scholarship has been perfect, because it has been mine! The skills, the attributes, the relationships, both personal and academic, that I have created are ones that I will take forever. I am so grateful that the Laidlaw scholarship gave me that start. I wrote in my application 2 years ago that I did not have a clue what I wanted to do in the future and to be honest I still don't. But I know whatever it is I'll be more Ambitious, Brave, Curious, Determined, Excellent, Fast and Good just like the water bottle said!