

Laidlaw scholars spend a lot of time reflecting on leadership. After all, it's right there in the title – the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship. However, it wasn't until I completed my LIA that I truly understood why it is so important to combine both theoretical reflections and practical experiences when developing leadership as a skill. While we often talk about leadership as a skill which can be discussed and reflected upon without reference to any specific context, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of 'good leadership' is impossible to divorce from practice completely. As such, leadership workshops and trainings are only useful if you have an opportunity to connect those insights to hands-on experience. My LIA allowed me to do just that – in particular, to connect ethical leadership and global citizenship to specific skills and experiences in my work. Below, I use two examples to explain how I practised global citizenship and ethical leadership in my LIA.

Global Citizenship

My understanding of the practical requirements of leadership has developed across all stages of the programme, but it was only through my LIA that I was able to finally connect these skills to the concept of global citizenship. My research project sought to investigate the relationship between personality traits, socio-economic advantage, and assessment type (teacher-assessed grades or examinations) among students who had completed the Leaving Certificate. This research involved designing a survey instrument to collect data from school-leavers, becoming familiar with new software, and learning new statistical techniques. I made many mistakes in the survey development and analysis, and in the process, I learned quite a lot from my research supervisors.

My LIA built directly on this experience, as my primary duty was data collection. However, I experienced the added challenge of carrying out this research in an unfamiliar context and as part of a team and an organisation. Working with Ghana Medical Help (GMH) meant that the goals of my LIA were not only academic. Instead, I became responsible for carrying out a project which needed to meet the requirements of the team and the organisation, and which needed to take account of the specific details of the S.H.E.E.P. project. Taking on this challenge has allowed me to better understand the benefit of the strategies and ideas about leadership we learned in our Leadership Development Sessions. In particular, the unfamiliar context has helped me to better understand how leadership relates to global citizenship and the importance of working with people from other places and cultures.

To work effectively in a culturally unfamiliar environment, leaders must be attuned to cultural differences, have excellent communication skills, and be ready to learn as they go. The importance of being aware of cultural differences in communication was most evident in the household section of the survey I carried out – family labels such as 'mother', 'father', 'brother', and 'sister' are often used by Ghanaians to refer to people to whom they are not biologically related, meaning it's important to prompt the respondent regularly, reminding them that we are using the terms in their biological sense. Another issue concerns gender roles – many of our respondents, who were all the female head of the household – were either uncomfortable or unable to answer questions regarding their husband's income, meaning it was important to be tactful during this portion of the interview. Overcoming these issues involved collaboration between myself and my partner, who carried out translation and interpretation during the surveys. It was important to ensure that we completely understood each other, and if there was even a possibility that a misunderstanding had occurred, we needed to exercise patience and attention to detail to ensuring the data we collected was accurate. While these practicalities may seem a world away from the lofty concept of global citizenship, it is through experiences such as these that leaders develop the ability to work cross-culturally and see the benefit of doing so. After all, global citizenship can only be made a reality through practice.

Ethical Leadership

My LIA experience also provided me with experience in practicing ethical leadership in my work. Having the opportunity to carry out an LIA is a privilege, and it is the ethical duty of any Laidlaw scholar to ensure that they use their stipend and travel fund in the most effective and ethical way possible. For instance, there are many potential ethical issues with someone from the developed world – especially a white person – carrying out an LIA in the developing world. Many overseas projects fail to deal properly with these issues, and at their worst become ‘voluntourism’, where the primary object of the trip is not in fact to benefit those in the community, but to provide a unique and ‘life-changing’ experience for the volunteer, often reducing the effectiveness of any interventions and sometimes leading to adverse consequences for the host community. This is not a reason to reject any LIA in the developing world, but it is a reason to carrying out thorough research into your partner organisation and the role which you will play in the proposed project. Ethical leadership in this context consists of choosing, researching, and carrying out your LIA in a way that deals with these issues, and which ensures that your work will bring the greatest possible benefit to those you hope to serve.

While reflecting on this project, and whether it was met these ethical standards, I considered the following questions: What is the nature of the organisation I am partnering with? Do they make a profit from their activities? Does their website/social media highlight the work they do for their community, or is it aimed at recruiting volunteers for short term voluntourism-style projects? Do they explicitly offer overseas volunteering projects for a fee? Do they aim to measure the impact and success of their projects, and adjust their work accordingly? What have they achieved in the past, and will they provide the necessary support to make the best use of your Laidlaw funding? To what extent do they work with the community, and is this a project which has been requested by the community or designed in conjunction with the community? Understanding the motivation of the organisation is crucial to understanding the benefit your project is likely to bring. After researching GMH, and speaking with its directors, I learned that GMH had a strong connection to the local community and that this project was designed with local knowledge and experiences in mind. I also had a very clear idea of my role – to operate as the on-the-ground leader of the monitoring and research aspects of the project.

Another important set of questions relate to the benefit that you, the Laidlaw scholar, can bring to your project. Most importantly, you should ask yourself: what is the counter-factual scenario? What would happen if I didn’t carry out this LIA? This is key to understanding whether your project will make a difference. For instance, if the goals of this project could be achieved much more effectively by donating your Laidlaw stipend and travel fund, then your project may need to be changed. Instead, you should seek a project where your skills and abilities are uniquely helpful. The best use of your Laidlaw funding will be in a project where you use your skills, because this is where you are best equipped to make a difference. For instance, if you study computer science and have no construction experience, don’t volunteer to build a house – let local builders take that role, and contribute in a way that makes sense given your abilities. I studied sociology and have experience with primary data collection, so my LIA was highly relevant to my abilities. I also knew from speaking with the project team that my project would add depth to their research and monitoring programme that they otherwise would not have been able to provide.

The most important part of my preparation for my LIA was answering these questions, and this turned out to be the most effective way for me to learn about ethical leadership. Ethical leadership is quite simple in one sense – it’s a matter of choosing the course of action which will bring the greatest benefit the greatest number of people. However, the difficulty lies in being thorough and

being ready to question everything about your project and your work. Being ready and willing to put in the effort is the first step in carrying out a truly ethical LIA.

Conclusion

Global citizenship and ethical leadership are two crucial concepts for future leaders to understand. Through my LIA, I was able to add first-hand experience to my theoretical understanding of those concepts, and in doing so understand better how they relate to me, to my abilities, and to my chosen career. Practising these concepts in my LIA has truly changed my perspective on leadership.