
A reflection on my time in Waisava & Vunimaqo, Fiji...

I have been fortunate enough to complete my Leadership in Action (LiA) in the Waisava and Vunimaqo settlements, in Ra province, Fiji. This was a centrally organised LiA, provided by ThinkPacific titled 'Health, Community and Youth'. I was warmly welcomed into Na Una and Ta Rupeni's home. I had a sister called Litia and a brother called Rupeni - namesakes are common in Fiji. Our cousin Vilisi also stayed with us sometimes. It really does feel like one big family in Fiji! I was also joined by two other scholars, Mariella and Ruchita.



My Fijian family: Ta, Vilisi, Na, Litia, Ruchita, Me, Mariella, Rupeni.



My cousin, Rupeni Lolo, and I petting our family cat, Drago.

The most special thing about my LiA was meeting the beautiful people of Waisava and Vunimaqo. Despite being 10,000 miles away from home, their kindness helped me to quickly settle in and feel supported. I was also pleased to see that many families had pets, the opposite to what I had been prepared for. I admire the community feel in the settlement, whereby each family helps one another out. For example, one family offered our family some greens for dinner. Another family would charge their phone at our house. As a leader, I would like to foster a similar selfless approach, whilst remaining aware of my own limits. As suggested by Maslow (1943) and considered in my Laidlaw research last summer, a sense of belonging is important to thrive and succeed, particularly in a new and unfamiliar environment. I had tried my best to

prepare, but realised there is only so much preparation you can do and remaining open-minded towards new foods and a new routine helped me adapt to this new situation. Reflecting upon my SMART goal to spend two hours educating myself on diabetes, I think that while this was useful, I was not in the group focussing on diabetes, so did not have a chance to share my knowledge in depth. I only realised once in Fiji that the charity, 'Diabetes Fiji', supported many aspects of physical health. Hence, some more research into the charity before departure may have been helpful.



Litia and me.

In Fiji, I developed a new support system to help maintain my well-being. To overcome the language barrier and navigate the situation, I showed my family some photos of my life in the UK. This helped to start conversations and form initial relationships. I developed a really strong bond with my sister, Litia. Her creativity, generosity, and ability to make others happy is inspiring. I will forever cherish the card games played with her, reading, and singing together. She has shown me the importance of strong family relationships. At times, I felt low and overwhelmed. I was brave in having open conversations with my Na and this brought me closer to her. This meant I felt comfortable telling her about any issues, including fatigue and sickness. This really helped, and I do believe that “a problem shared is a problem halved”. A conversation with Lionel and Agu

from Youth Champs 4 Mental Health (YC4MH) also helped me feel better during a challenging day. This experience has helped me to realise that as a leader, it is important to make sure that you and your team feel happy and healthy, to ensure that operations run smoothly. Using my emotional intelligence, I could recognise when others were feeling down, and I used this recognition to check in and offer support to others.

The culture course provided an insightful understanding of Fijian culture. We were taught how to make many handicrafts such as fans, mats, and kava bowls. I was amazed at the Fijian talent. Some of these skills were complicated to learn, but I persevered and remained determined to continue learning new skills. I visited the family farm, which provides their main source of income. I was curious about the crops growing and asked many questions. I also learnt some basic Fijian. Litia taught me the days of the week and numbers and we laughed over my questionable pronunciation. I also enjoyed attending church with my family.



Amelia helped me to make my fan.



Picking and eating sugar cane with my Ta and Mariella.



Picking sweet potatoes at the family farm.

On the final night, I performed three mekes (a traditional Fijian dance) alongside the other scholars living in Waisava. This took me out of my comfort zone, as I don't consider myself to be a dancer! However, I found that throughout my time in Fiji, I was challenged to do activities where I did not consider myself very good. Another example of this is playing volleyball. When first asked by the children to join in, I was worried that I would embarrass myself because 'I am not very good'. However, I realised that as a leader, this mentality is not an example I want to set. I challenged this mindset throughout my time in Fiji and this helped me immerse myself in village life.



This was taken just before we danced our mekes.



Volleyball in the village.

Despite being nervous about the difference in diet, I was curious to try their typical foods such as cassava and babakau. Mealtimes provided an opportunity for the family to get together. Large meals were also collectively prepared to celebrate special occasions. I also enjoyed the element of cultural exchange. I cooked pasta and garlic bread for the family. This is a staple meal for me, but Litia had never had pasta. She really enjoyed it, so I made it again another day. I was also intrigued by how similar the Fijian school curriculum is to the British school curriculum. I realised this whilst supporting one of the children with their biology homework. The child had a series of questions to complete. I supported her by rephrasing some of the questions and prompting her knowledge based off of her class notes.



The Scholars eating together after the dispensary opening ceremony.



Bev and I enjoying food at a farewell party.



Litia was intrigued by the pasta.



Our family enjoyed the pasta and garlic bread.

Furthermore, 'Fiji Time' provided a more relaxed environment and gave me time to reflect on my priorities back home. It has made me reconsider how I want to spend my time and demonstrated the importance of community. This self-growth and improvement in self-awareness will improve my ability to be a good leader.



Hammering a nail into the dispensary.

Building the health dispensary was physically demanding at times, especially on hotter days. Capitalising on the power of diversity was important because everyone had different skills. For example, I found myself working alongside another scholar and one of the Fijians. We worked as a team to dig the holes for the building foundations. The strongest person would break the soil, then the other two would remove the soil while the first person rested. This collaboration continued, allowing us to dig several holes. When

adding the foundation materials to the holes, I helped to lead the team by writing down all the measurements required. This meant that the wood was all cut to the correct length and inserted in the right holes.

I found the build aspect of the LiA most difficult. Injury and illness made the task even harder. Unfortunately, I injured my knee on our first excursion, and this limited my ability to participate in the build in the following week. At the same time, I was also struggling with illness due to the difference in water and diet. I also struggle with fatigue in general, which made the physical nature of the build even harder. Mentally, this was really challenging because I felt helpless at times. However, I was able to manage my energy by prioritising and managing my time. I was aware of my own limits and took rest when I needed to. Luckily, my Na was supportive of afternoon naps!

Reflecting on my SMART goal to communicate with the team at the start of each day so that we know the plan, I realise that this did not happen. I feel that we lacked the knowledge on the build process and simply relied on the build manager to tell us

what to do next. Every so often, I would check in with the build manager to check what the next steps were and to check that we were on track. Despite his reassurance, the build opening ceremony had to be delayed by a couple of days. External factors such as the rain affected our ability to stay on track. I also felt that low team morale affected our progress. My time in Fiji has taught me that I work best in a team that gets along. This is something that has also come up in my Laidlaw leadership coaching, that I am conflict averse by nature. As I move forward in my career, I need to prepare to be exposed to strong personalities who do not get on. I learnt that conversations with other people helped to relieve the anxiety caused by conflict in the team. Nonetheless, I remained resilient and determined and was motivated by the community to ensure the build was successfully completed.



Decorating the dispensary with the children's and scholar's handprints.



Celebrating the opening of the dispensary!

I enjoyed sharing my knowledge and interest in health with the community in the physical health and mental health workshops. In my career, I would love to work on improving the lives of others, especially through health promotion, so this task resonated well with me. I contributed my knowledge about high blood pressure with my sub-group and then presented this information to the wider group. I usually get very nervous when presenting but felt well supported by my Fijian friends to take one for the team and present the information. It was also a challenge to do this whilst keeping terms simple and avoiding jargon so that those with limited English could understand. Overall, I am really pleased with this experience, and it has increased my confidence in presenting.



Presenting about hypertension alongside Tui.

I also shared my perspective on the importance of understanding mental health during the mental health workshops, the wellness night and at my family home. I felt privileged to be able to introduce conversations on mental health to the community and hear from the charity, Youth Champs for Mental Health (YC4MH) during the workshops. It was not possible to ask every person I spoke to a question, as outlined in my SMART goals. Nonetheless, I did actively listen to everyone's views, and ask questions where appropriate. I was actually pleasantly surprised by how receptive the majority of the community were to mental health and was able to have productive conversations on mental health with my family. Unfortunately, I became quite upset during a couple of the workshops due to some of the topics being discussed, which surprised me. However, this led to further conversations with YC4MH and my Na which I am really grateful for.

Zita, Isha and I planned a wellness night for the youth. I encouraged that we take a more introductory approach to the session because we did not want to raise anything that could be triggering, without the support of trained professionals. During the session, I explained the practise of meditation in a culturally sensitive way. Whilst I like to listen to music to meditate, the community do not all have access to music. Therefore, I suggested that they could focus on the sounds of nature, which are abundant in rural areas. I also acknowledged that it can be difficult to get quiet time alone sometimes. Hence, I suggested that meditation can be done anywhere, for only a couple of minutes.

I was curious to gain a deeper understanding of the perception of mental health, so I suggested that we ask for feedback from the youth at the end of the session. We asked them to write what they liked and disliked about the session, and what more they would like to learn. The feedback showed that the majority of attendees enjoyed the mediation practise. The feedback also showed that many youths struggle with bullying at school. We let YC4MH know about this. Unfortunately, they told us that this is common in Fiji. Nevertheless, I found YC4MH's stigma demonstration really powerful in showing how hurtful words can affect an individual. I hope that this demonstration reminds individuals to always be kind.

One individual also shared with me that they are bullied at school, so often do not go. At first, I was not sure how best to take this information forward. Therefore, I raised my concern with another scholar to see what they recommend. I decided to talk to the youth individual further to understand more about the situation. Whilst the language barrier made it difficult for me to fully understand the situation, I was able to realise that the young person had not told any family members. Therefore, I recommended that they tell their family, so that they receive some support. The young person seemed hesitant. Yet, I was pleased to hear a few days later that the family had been told. The family has offered to speak to their schoolteacher about the issue. This made me really happy to hear, and I am pleased to have been able to have an impact on this young person's life, through having conversations.

During my time in Fiji, I planned and led a yoga practise with the community alongside Will. I made this happen by communicating with the TP leaders to arrange

a time, and for this information to be shared with the community via the village headman. Yoga is a proven method of reducing stress, which can lower blood pressure, a priority for many in the community. Throughout the practise, I responded to the reactions of the community. For example, I made some poses shorter if I noticed the attendees were getting distracted. I also included a long meditation following positive feedback on meditation during the wellness night. We received positive feedback on the class and requests for another class.



The education table on the health checks day.

Furthermore, it was great to see the dispensary be used on the community health checks day. This day of health testing saw 170 people from the surrounding areas come to have a range of health tests. My role included educating on the risks of high blood pressure and high blood sugar and providing practical steps to improve health. For example, reducing the amount of sugar in tea to lower blood sugar. I was not able to answer every question, but I used the internet to answer

general questions and I signposted individuals towards more specialised stands, if necessary. I also encouraged my family to attend all the tests despite their hesitancy.



Presenting our Kindergarten / Evacuation Centre proposal.

Finally, I worked alongside four other scholars and three Fijians to develop a building proposal for a local kindergarten and evacuation centre. I wanted my support to the settlement to continue once I returned home. This task was challenging due to the language barrier and poor internet connectivity. However, I was inspired and energised to work on this project by the community. Stories about their experience of the category five cyclone in 2016 were upsetting. My Quintax report demonstrated that I take a personable approach, meaning that I like to make decisions based on my feelings. Hence, these stories have motivated me to prevent them from suffering a similar tragedy in the future. Moreover, I believe that early years education is so important, and want to make this education more accessible to the inspiring children of the settlement. This education can help the



The kindergarten would benefit children like Lolo.

brain to develop and pave the way for a successful life.

In developing the proposal, it was important to be curious. I asked lots of questions to help me understand why a kindergarten / evacuation centre is so important to the community. Our team went to every house in the settlements to carry out a research survey. Conversations about Cyclone Winston were difficult for the community and hard for me to hear. However, this understanding of the past was really important in developing a solution to the problem. Collaboration between scholars and the Fijians was important during these conversations. My Na was able to help overcome the language barrier, by translating our questions in English to Fijian. Our team was determined to make our idea a reality. Hence, we made a GoFundMe page (<https://gofund.me/eb8c55b1>) and set an ambitious target of raising £13,000. We were pleased to raise £1500 within the first 28 hours and have planned activities to raise the remaining funds.

I have already learnt so much from developing this proposal, especially from my peers. I have experienced personal growth as a result of the debates we have had while making the proposal. The opportunity to present information to the community has helped to increase my confidence in presenting. We continue to work to make this proposal a reality. Using digital connectivity, I liaise with my Na to provide her with updates and provide her with the opportunity to ask any questions. I have also learned from my experience of working with the Laidlaw Foundation. They have shown me the importance of understanding the small details of the project and encouraged me to do further research on education in Fiji. I have since composed and sent an email to the Fijian Ministry of Education and I am excited to see their reply.

I look forward to using my improved cultural intelligence, leadership skills and presentation skills in my placement year at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and in other future endeavours. I loved my stay in Fiji and have demonstrated an ability to navigate a new and foreign situation. I would like to go back and visit my family and the community one day. Moreover, I will cherish the memories made forever, and Waisava & Vunimaqo will always feel like a home away from home ♥