

“You can’t be everyone’s cup of tea, and that’s OK” – A Leadership Reflection on my LiA and Laidlaw Experience

Throughout my time here in Mexico City, or *CDMX* as the locals call it, I have been challenged physically, mentally, and culturally. Compared to the person I was before starting my Laidlaw journey, I am a more open-minded, adventurous, and independent person.

The research, LiA, and events throughout the year have attributed to various aspects of my personal growth. The first steppingstone was the research summer of 2022, where the first signs of my leadership development began to show. Whilst my sense of independence and intellectual curiosity were definitely piqued during my research, only during my LiA in Mexico was I thoroughly challenged in such a way. My first encounter with such challenges was as soon as I disembarked the plane, and was immediately faced with rain, warmer temperatures, large crowds, and a lack of phone signal. This albeit minor interruption was a signal to me that I needed to take things as they came, as a perfectionist and anxious person, I could waste my time in Mexico worrying about things, but I did not. The lesson of having an open mind continued throughout the programme, from the start when I first met the roughly twenty-five scholars and learned everyone’s backgrounds, field of study, and interests, right to the ending closing event, meeting all of our organisations and volunteers for the final time. None of the personal growth throughout the experience would have been possible without the amazing MakeSense team, whose infectious positivity was a driving force throughout the work, cultural trips, and days off. The scale of the experience was made evident to me in the first week, when we travelled to Xochimilco, the agricultural district of Mexico City, engaging in eco-tourism by kayaking whilst picking up plastic and rubbish in the canals as we rode by. This initial experience involved engaging with the local communities, discussing their issues and insights, and sustainable ways to solve them, not to be saviours, but to empathise with these communities, and engage culturally. The most memorable moment in terms of cultural sensitivity I will remember is visiting the Mazahua people in Estado de México, an indigenous community facing their own unique and difficult issues. The visit was not to build a school or teach them English, but to actually listen to their voices and understand them as a community, not just to pity them and take photos. Our training on FPIC (Free Prior Informed Consent) was extremely important, as it made me think about how we interact with different communities, and how we gain valuable knowledge and experience from them without exploitation.

As someone who can be considered sceptical of corporate-style jargon and training, I was pleasantly surprised about how applicable the leadership training we received from MakeSense was. I was first introduced to the concept of 'design thinking', which involved a focus on user-centred design, trialling prototypes, and feedback-based improvement. Whilst this training focused on my project specifically, which was designing a social media campaign for a recycling startup, I feel I can use these methods for different projects going forward. One prime example of leadership training which was a highlight of the experience was the leadership camp at Las Estacas. This camp involved being put into groups with people we may have not talked to yet, having to build rafts, compete in physical challenges, and truly rely on each other in different situations. In the backdrop of an idyllic tropical forest, we raced, swam, and held a campfire together, truly getting to know each other in a context outside of work. Whilst those two days were extremely fun, only in reflection do I notice the skills I built on those days, those of cooperation, friendliness, and leadership.

The main bulk of the work in our office was done in teams, with different projects requiring a variety of skills. My team, working for the aforementioned startup Cacalli, consisted of three team members, who each brought a different skill to the table. My teammate Katie acted as our main liaison with the company and our volunteers, as well as being our 'creative lead', expertly designing and planning our stall for the *Carnaval de Impacto*. Andrew took lead on video editing, making a professional video to display both at the carnival and on their website in the future. I took the lead on the social media and graphic design aspect, making approx. 20 Instagram posts for Cacalli to use. On the whole, the work was challenging, and required a lot of multitasking, research into the company and what they do, as well as public outreach with potential customers. Working with a Mexican company who gave us true creative freedom was a breath of fresh air, appreciating our input and giving us direction on what they would find the most useful. I could not have completed the task without the support of my team, who were there to encourage me and give feedback on my work, as I gave my own feedback on theirs.

Meeting people from across the world, both scholars and otherwise, was such an enriching experience, from simple things such as our differing views on aspects of Mexican culture, to the deeper questions like our views on community, death, and religion. These enlightening discussions truly made me realise that I have much more learning to do, and many more people to meet, and this LiA experience is only the springboard for my intellectual curiosity. One true

highlight for me was a discussion in which I questioned the nature of how people in Mexico view their colonial past, as being from Ireland, perceptions of colonial legacy area very emotive subject for me and most people from my home. These deep issues which are often off-limits for most civil discussions were talked about freely, and made me question my own ideas of what my identity is, and my place as a person on this planet.

Aside from the very-well planned and organised activities by the MakeSense team, my own excursions and adventures played a major part of my personal growth throughout this journey. From visiting the Anthropological Museum of Mexico, travelling around the historic centre, visiting Coyoacán Market, and climbing a 15,000ft volcano in Toluca, these moments of 'fun' still made me appreciate more and more things about Mexico and the worth of international exchange as a whole. Every day, I woke up with a feeling of excitement, about what the day would bring and who I would meet. The strong and diverse cohort of scholars and MakeSense staff were a great opportunity to branch out, gain understanding of different parts of the world, and view things in a global way, as I made friends and connections from people from Hong Kong, New York, The Philippines, and more. The more time I spent in Mexico, the more I didn't want to leave, whether it be my Spanish improving, getting to know the best places for food, specifically Jenni's Quesadillas, and even the coffee shop starting to know my name and order, it truly became a second home during this time. That is not to say, however, that the experience did not have its challenges, the main one being *traveller's sickness*, or as the Mexicans humorously call it, *Moctezuma's Revenge*, in reference to the last Aztec emperor taking his revenge on foreigners in Mexico. Truthfully, it was inevitable, and I decided to get used to the food straight away, as I was to be there for six weeks, it needed to happen. The MakeSense team were extremely helpful on the *single* day off I took throughout the experience, making sure I was ok and alive.

The overall cultural experience I gained in Mexico is something I cannot put a value on, as I have left Mexico a truly different person to when I arrived. In addition to the philosophical questions, I referenced earlier, the cultural experience also had its more nuanced moments, including my newfound love for the music of *Rosalía* and *Bad Bunny* and finding out potato chips and corn are much better with chilli sauce. On a more serious note, being a Laidlaw Scholar during my LiA brought into question my beliefs on why I was there, what a leader is supposed to be, and considering the privilege I have. A six-foot man in a suit, standing in front of a crowd after a charming but emotive speech, that's our modern perception of a leader in the West, whether we admit that's what we

think or not, we subconsciously associate leadership with assertiveness, power, and wealth. I tried my best to unlearn these ideas whilst in Mexico, as the people we interacted with had various ideas of what a “leader” is, from an inspirational Mazahua leader who would raise money to pay bail for those in her community who had been arrested, to the pair of Diegos I worked with on my project, who valued creativity and engagement more than anything. As my own views of leadership have been challenged throughout this experience, I believe this will help me in the future, whether it be in work, research, studies, or ordinary life, the exposure to various types of leaders challenging the mainstream idea will help me recognise leadership traits and emulate them in ways I did not think of before.

In the future, I hope to use my experience on this LiA to advise future Laidlaw Scholars on what they should expect on such an experience, and more importantly, to advise them on how they should go about their LiA in a culturally sensitive and beneficial way. Striking the balance between truly generating an impact on your LiA, whilst remembering this is not a saviourism ego-trip, but to truly contribute something that a local cannot already give. As obvious as such a lesson may sound, it is much harder to recognise in practice, especially given the confident nature that would naturally come with being a Laidlaw scholar.

To conclude my leadership reflection on the Laidlaw scholarship, I would sum up the main lessons I learned as cooperation, respect, and critical thinking. Cooperation is a necessity to be any sort of leader, otherwise, that would just be a dictator. From my leadership trainings, Hospitalfield residential, and LiA in Mexico City with MakeSense, I have worked in both small and large groups, with people ranging from my close friends to people who didn't speak my language. The invaluable experience this has given me will hopefully propel me forward in the future and prepare me for encountering and working with even more diverse teams of people. In regards to respect, I think it is evident how important respect is in being a leader, and how a lack of respect for others is detrimental to any type of teamwork. Especially throughout my time in Mexico with MakeSense, a respect for teammates and the communities we worked with was at the forefront of our projects and trainings. This focus on mutual respect is something I will take with me for the rest of my life, as only in Mexico did I hear first-hand the accounts of indigenous people and disadvantaged communities, and how they wish to deal with their issues, not to have people come in and do it for them. Lastly, critical thinking is a skill not just used in leadership but is applicable and beneficial to almost every situation. My development in critical thinking has come from a few different sources such as

the scenario training with our coordinator, our research summer, and once again my LiA. My project in Mexico was particularly open ended, which resulted in using the critical thinking skills to evaluate Cacalli's problem and come up with a few ideas on how we could sustainably reduce its impact, which is what was done.

I would like to finish this reflection by thanking Lord Laidlaw, the Foundation, the Laidlaw coordinators, and lastly my friends and colleagues who helped me along the way, it would have been impossible without them.