

*Being Independent Doesn't Mean Being Alone: My LiA Reflection*

Over the past six weeks, I have been in Luxembourg for the Leadership in Action (LiA) section of the Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Scholarship. I have been working with the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH) at the University of Luxembourg, and the Department of Historical and Industrial Heritage in the City of Esch-Sur-Alzette. With C2DH, I have been continuing the research I began in the first year of this scholarship, assessing the impacts of digitising photographs on a community's awareness of their local history. Previously I focused on the city of York, and with C2DH I have been researching the impacts in the city of Dudelange. In Esch, I have been working with the heritage department to pilot an archival photograph project, which involves installing photographic boards around the city to highlight to the community how their surroundings have evolved throughout the last century.

I have thoroughly enjoyed working with both of these organisations, and have learnt so much in regard to both the research and practical applications of public history. This experience has confirmed for me that a career in public history is what I want to pursue, and has raised questions about whether this would best be suited in an academic or practical capacity. With both projects continuing after my departure from Luxembourg, I am grateful for this opportunity to establish professional relationships with longevity, and look forward to seeing the impact my work has on celebrating the histories of the relevant communities. Going into my LiA, I was conscious that I was working with the histories of communities I was not a part of, and that it would be inappropriate for my ideas and analysis to be implemented without this being compensated for. To this end, I collaborated with locals from both Esch and Dudelange to establish what they wanted out of the projects. For my research this involved translating and promoting a survey via the official social media of the City of Dudelange, and for the Esch project inviting members of the community to suggest locations for the boards, also via a post on the official social media of the City of Esch.

This placement has also given me the opportunity to visit new cities and countries that I wouldn't have otherwise, and allowed me to immerse myself in a culture different to my own. Over the last six weeks, I have gained confidence in my ability to enjoy my own company, my leadership capabilities, and in my language skills. It has, however, not been without its challenges. And whilst I have proven to myself that I am able to overcome struggles and seek help when needed, it would be misleading if I did not address how difficult these last six weeks have been.

There have been few periods in my life where I have felt as lonely as I have during my LiA. This may seem a bold statement to make, but I can say with surety that had it not been for my passion for the project I was doing, and the enjoyment I felt when working with the organisations previously mentioned, I would not and could not have stayed for the full six weeks. I am the kind of person who thrives of having people around them, be that socially or sitting independently in a busy room: my energy comes from being around others. This kind of environment has been very difficult to sustain during my time in Luxembourg. It is important to note that this is most likely due to unfortunate timing, the majority of students had returned home for the summer, and due to the length of my stay I was in a flat rather than a youth hostel, but this doesn't reduce the fact that I struggled. I went to social events: fêtes, bars, concerts, yoga classes, cafes. I even looked into online groups that are set up to solve this issue, but either people weren't interested in engaging with someone new or the groups are aimed at people aged 21+ or I simply didn't meet anyone.

I have always thought of myself as an independent person, and this presents challenges of its own in my day-to-day life, but this experience has taught me that being independent doesn't have to mean being alone, particularly in the context of leadership. Having a work-life balance, whatever form that

may take, is so important, and it is this constructive relationship between work life and social life that I have been lacking during my LiA. I am proud of what I have achieved during my time in Luxembourg, not only in terms of the projects I've worked on but also in my continuous attempts to ease the difficulty I was facing, despite them failing time and time again. I have surprised myself with the strength I've shown, but also in how I've dealt with the times of weakness.

This post on my time in Luxembourg would not be complete without acknowledging the support network I've heavily relied on in the UK, though it is thankfully not exclusive to my LiA period. Every individual who has messaged, called, or even shared photos of their pets has made this experience that little bit easier. Be that the Laidlaw team and scholars at the University of York, or my friends and family outside of the scholarship, my passion for the subject would not have carried me without the support and assurance they consistently offered. It allowed me to share in this experience with other people, and that made the feeling of being alone easier to bare. I have come out of this experience with a greater appreciation for the support network I have around me, and how using this doesn't diminish my independence in any way.

I want to make it clear that I have thoroughly enjoyed my work with C2DH and with the Department of Historical and Industrial Heritage, and that it is my experience with them that has confirmed for me that I want a career in the public history sector. I highly recommend working with either institution if an opportunity presents itself, and I am very much looking forward to seeing where the respective projects will lead. The LiA is intended to assist in the personal and professional development of the Laidlaw Scholar, and by that standard my LiA can definitely be considered a success. The lessons I have learnt from my time in Luxembourg have shaped both my personal and professional lives, and I am incredibly grateful to all involved for providing me with such an experience, however challenging it may have been.