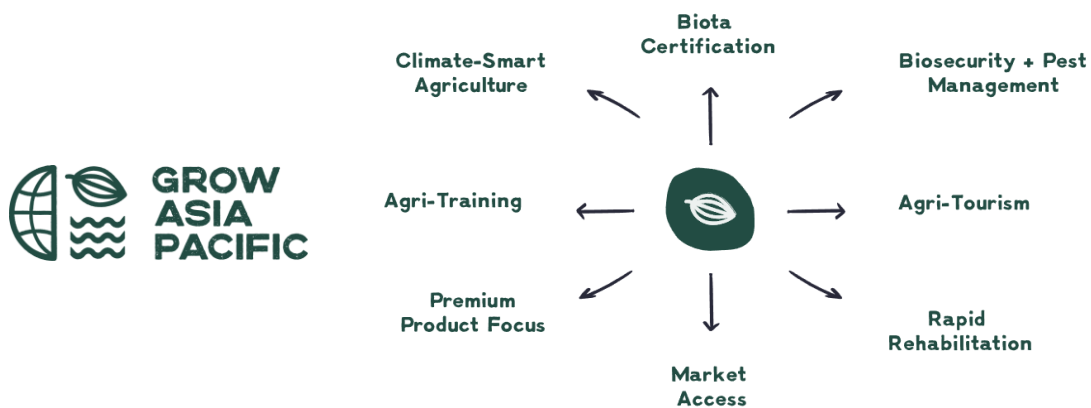


## From Kiwi to Cacao: My Leadership in Action Experience with Grow Asia Pacific

### **Description of Project:**

Grow Asia Pacific (GAP) is a New Zealand NGO and charitable trust which aids and supports the ethical and sustainable farming practices of primary sectors in the Asia Pacific Region. GAP have many branches in their tree, with current aid projects in Samoa, Vanuatu, and the Philippines. The overarching aim of my LiA was to assist the GAP team in their ongoing projects. This involved spending a week in Samoa supporting a colleague with an internal evaluation of the Samoan Cacao Livelihood Improvement Program, working in the Rautini trade house to perform quality control testing on incoming cacao beans, representing the company at Chocstock and helping to facilitate the Samoan agritourism initiative.



Above is a figure demonstrating the services and expertise that Grow Asia Pacific provides in the Asia Pacific Region.

### **The Stakeholders:**

The prominent stakeholders of my LiA are the subsistence farmers and primary industry workers in the Pacific, in particular the Samoans I worked with directly. Other stakeholders I also worked with were the Samoan Ministry for Agriculture, The New Zealand High Commission for Samoa, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs & Trade, and the Ministry for Primary Industries.



## The Experience:

I feel every scholar probably comes out of their Leadership in Action project struggling to find the words to truly encompass the experience. I could never have imagined I would arrive back in England feeling I have learnt as much as I have about international development, sustainability but most prevalently life itself. No number of books or inspirational quotes will replace physically putting yourself into a situation that is out of your comfort zone and going through the motions of getting through each day, when often you don't have any prior knowledge to aid you. It really is a game of thinking on your feet and learning through experience.

Having studied geography for the past 10 years, we have often discussed so called 'international development' and the aid projects that encompass that. I remember reeling off place specific detail from flashcards for case studies during my A-Levels, yet nothing could have prepared me for the challenges and barriers to implementation that I witnessed during my LiA. Whether it be language barriers, cross-cultural difference or protocol, it is suffice to say that working in international development requires a great deal of patience, determination and compassion.

One of the greatest lessons I took from the project is what it means to be courageous. When I left for New Zealand, many of my family and friends commended my bravery. To a large extent their words were true, as I have never felt more alone or out of my comfort zone and the experience taught me a great deal about myself and the person I wish to be. Yet it also showed me that courage and bravery are measured very differently around the world. I remember meeting a girl of my age in Samoa whilst we were visiting members of the community, and her story really made me rethink how I view my own life. This young lady had taken part in a training course funded by the program and facilitated by Wintec, so we asked her how she had used her new knowledge to find a job and improve her quality of life. She explained that two weeks prior her father, a farmer within the Samoan Cacao Livelihood Improvement Program, had committed suicide by ingesting the pesticides intended for use on his crops. Not only this but her mother is handicapped, requiring constant care and her siblings had left for New Zealand so other than her husband, who she had married at a very young age, she was entirely on her own. She also pointed out that there are no jobs, such as those in hospitality, on the island of Savai'i and she would not be allowed to work on farms. In more words she essentially said that she was stuck in her life, much like many other women and girls in Samoa, and no amount of training or encouragement could change that. I thought back to the many people at home who praised me for travelling so far to take part in this incredible opportunity, yet suddenly I realised that as much as it took a great deal of courage for me to leave home, it takes women across Samoa and the Pacific a great deal of bravery to remain at home.



This experience has cemented my belief that bravery is subjective. It can take a great deal of courage to fly to the other side of the world and takes a valiant person to live as Samoans do.

### **The Leadership Learnings:**

I don't think I will ever truly complete my journey to becoming the best leader I can be because every experience holds a new lesson and there are always areas that could be improved upon. Nevertheless, I feel my Leadership in Action project presented me with the opportunity to be a leader in sensitive and complex situations. I have always spoken about how I feel compassion is the core value to being a great leader and this is something I found to be a strength I possessed during my week in Samoa. I have always been aware that everyone's definition of leadership is different, yet before my LiA I had never had to work with someone whose leadership style contrasted so greatly with my own. I found this to be a learning curve as I had to conceal my frustration in certain situations, finding that my own approach of patience and kindness was more successful when conversing with Samoan locals. However, I took no negative feelings out of this situation as I felt happy with the result my own approach generated. I will continue to lead with compassion and develop my own unique leadership style, despite it not always aligning with that of others.

As much as workshops, books and meetings give you the foundations of good leadership in theory, physical experience lets you demonstrate that knowledge in practice and that is truly valuable. I am sure in the future I will be placed into similar situations where I have to put leadership theory into action and now I have experience to look back on in order to facilitate the skillset I have acquired.

### **Being Immersed in an Unfamiliar Community:**

My LiA presented two unique experiences of what it was like to be immersed in an unfamiliar community. Living in New Zealand for 5 weeks was scary at times, and I felt a very long way from home. I have also never experienced living in a city, so landing in Auckland not knowing a soul was quite alarming at first. I took my time with stepping out of my comfort zone, whether that be walking to the shops to get food for the first time or booking a trip solo so that I could see more of the area.

However, the first few hours in Auckland were nothing like landing in Samoa. Navigating my way through customs with an in-depth questioning by the Samoan border force, led to me finally emerging into the arrivals hall. It was here that I had to figure out which of the Samoans were transferring me to my hotel for the night, whilst being very aware of the significant language barrier. Eventually, I made it to my hotel and this was the first time I sat down and really absorbed how alone and far from home I really was. I have never been further out of my comfort zone than my week in Samoa, yet interacting with the locals and hearing their stories made me check my privilege. The people of Samoa are some of the most passionate, kind-hearted and warm humans I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. There were times I felt awestruck by the devotion they have to their farms, but more importantly the love they have for their families. I remember the Samoan Minister for Agriculture saying to me 'Cacao is life for Samoans'. Not only is Cacao a major source of income for Samoan communities, but it also holds an important part of social life through the drink Koko Samoa. Many families gather to drink this sugary, chocolatey concoction and it is the highlight of their day. We spoke to the chief of a family and explained that they are consuming around £11,000 of cacao annually. His response was that the drink brings his grandchildren joy, and their happiness is worth more than anything money can buy. Being immersed in Samoan culture for just a week taught me that a community brings great strength and money cannot buy the support and love of those around you.

### **The Impact:**

During my time in Samoa we carried out an internal evaluation of the Samoan Cacao Livelihood Improvement Program and found that the income and quality of life of the community had improved throughout the program, despite the challenges that were faced. Many local farmers stated that the development of Savai'i Koko, the packaging and distribution plant, provided them with a market to sell their cacao beans, thus increasing their income. Furthermore, the research I carried out to create the storyboards for the Ecotourism trail around Savai'i Koko aims to supplement the income of the community through the tourism it generates.

### **How it will be Sustained:**

The project in Savai'i has now come to an end, although Grow Asia Pacific will continue to facilitate and carry out similar projects across the Pacific islands. It is hoped that now Savai'i Koko has been established, farmers will continue to have access to a commercial market so their beans will continue to provide an income. The training facilitated throughout the program will aid the growth and sustainability of the Samoan's farms and increase their resilience to natural disasters and climate change. Furthermore, the agritourism initiatives set up will increase the income of the community and provide money which can go back into the development of Cacao farms.

