

## **EXPERIENCE ABROAD REFLECTION**

### **Rise Academy, San Francisco**

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The Laidlaw Scholars Programme is renowned for its emphasis on developing leadership skills through projects that engage with communities outside the scholar's immediate cultural or geographical context. This approach is rooted in the belief that stepping into unfamiliar environments challenges scholars to adapt, learn, and develop a global perspective on leadership and service. By immersing oneself in a different community, a scholar can gain invaluable insights into diverse worldviews, cultural practices, and the socio-political dynamics that shape other societies. This process fosters personal growth, cultural humility, and a deeper understanding of global issues, which are essential qualities in effective leadership.

However, this model of leadership development is not without its challenges and ethical considerations. Engaging with a community that is culturally or geographically distinct from one's own raises questions about the ethical implications of such interventions. When a scholar, who may be perceived as an outsider, enters a community to propose solutions or implement projects, there is a risk of being seen as imposing external values or perspectives. This dynamic can lead to resistance, skepticism, or even resentment from the community, especially if they feel that their cultural norms and traditions are not being fully understood or respected. It also brings into question the potential for cultural insensitivity or a lack of contextual awareness that could undermine the project's objectives and sustainability.

In recognizing these potential pitfalls, the Laidlaw Scholars Program emphasizes the importance of cultural humility, empathy, and ethical leadership. Scholars are encouraged to approach their projects with a deep respect for the communities they engage with, prioritizing the perspectives, needs, and values of those communities over their own preconceived notions or agendas. This requires not only an understanding of cultural differences but also an acknowledgment of one's own cultural biases and the willingness to challenge them. It is through this process of self-reflection and open engagement that scholars can build genuine relationships with the communities they serve, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

In my own experience with the project, these considerations were central to my approach. While the project involved working within the Shia Muslim community in San Francisco, a community that I was not entirely an outsider to, I was acutely aware of the need to navigate the delicate balance between introducing new ideas and respecting deeply held cultural and religious values. The ethical challenges of proposing a sex education curriculum—an inherently sensitive topic—in a conservative religious community were

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significant. The potential for misunderstandings or cultural missteps was high, especially given the diverse cultural backgrounds within the Shia community, which includes Iranians, Pakistanis, Indians, Arabs, and Westerners, each with their own traditions and interpretations of Islamic teachings.

What allowed me to navigate these challenges with a measure of confidence was my personal connection to the community. My mother, being Shia, and my early exposure to the Indo-Pak Shia community, provided me with a foundational understanding of the cultural and religious context in which I was working. This background meant that I was not approaching the community as an outsider trying to impose foreign ideas but as someone who had been part of that cultural milieu from a young age. I had attended religious gatherings, participated in Muharram commemorations, and engaged with the community's values and traditions throughout my life. This familiarity allowed me to empathize with the community's concerns and to approach the project with the sensitivity and respect that it demanded.

The commemorative activities during this period are not just religious observances; they are deeply ingrained cultural practices that shape the community's collective memory and identity. For the Shia community, Muharram is a time when the values of their faith are most vividly brought to life through storytelling, poetry, and ritual reenactments of the events at Karbala. These activities reinforce the lessons of loyalty, courage, and the importance of standing up for justice, even in the face of overwhelming odds.

Recognizing this, I made a deliberate effort to immerse myself in the Muharram observances at the Saba Center. This was more than just a gesture of respect; it was an opportunity to connect with the community on a deeper level, sharing in their grief and reflection. I attended majalis (gatherings for mourning), where religious leaders and poets recounted the tragic events of Karbala, drawing out moral and spiritual lessons that are relevant to contemporary life. These gatherings were emotionally charged, with participants often moved to tears as they remembered the suffering of Imam Hussain and his family. Being present in these moments allowed me to experience firsthand the profound sense of solidarity and spiritual resilience that Muharram fosters within the Shia community.

Volunteering during Muharram also provided an avenue to build trust and rapport with community members. The Saba Center was bustling with activity, as families came together to prepare food for communal meals, organize charity drives, and participate in the rituals of mourning. By assisting with these efforts—whether it was helping to distribute food during communal iftars (meals to break the fast) or coordinating charity efforts—I was able to demonstrate my commitment to the community and its values. These actions were not just about contributing to the logistics of the observance; they were about showing that I respected and valued the traditions that were so central to the community's identity.

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Participating in the Muharram activities also provided me with valuable insights into how the community's values could be integrated into the curriculum. The themes of justice, dignity, and moral integrity that are emphasized during Muharram are directly relevant to discussions about gender equality, consent, and respectful relationships—key components of the sex education program. By framing the curriculum in a way that resonated with the moral lessons of Karbala, I was able to present sex education not as a secular or foreign concept, but as an extension of the community's own ethical teachings. This approach helped to bridge the gap between modern educational needs and traditional religious values, making the curriculum more acceptable to the community.

Moreover, Muharram provided an invaluable context for understanding the diverse cultural practices within the Shia community. While the core religious observances were consistent, the way they were expressed varied among different cultural groups—Iranians, Pakistanis, Indians, Arabs, and those from the Western diaspora. Each group brought its own traditions, languages, and customs to the commemoration, reflecting the rich tapestry of the Shia faith. For example, the poetic recitations (nohas) and hymns (marsiyas) varied in language and style depending on the cultural background of the participants, yet they all conveyed the same underlying messages of mourning and moral reflection.

Navigating these cultural differences required a deep respect for the diversity within the Shia community and an understanding of how these differences could impact perceptions of the "Fitrah Fulfillment" project. It was clear that any educational initiative needed to be flexible enough to accommodate these cultural variations while remaining true to the core principles of the faith. By engaging with different cultural groups during Muharram, I was able to gather insights into how the curriculum could be adapted to meet the specific needs and sensitivities of each group, ensuring that it was both relevant and respectful.

Having this shared background also played a crucial role in building trust with the community. Many of the parents, educators, and religious leaders at the Saba Center and Rise Academy recognized me as someone who was familiar with their traditions and values. This recognition helped to dispel some of the initial skepticism about the project and opened the door to more meaningful and productive conversations. They did not see me as an outsider imposing an external agenda, but as someone who understood the importance of balancing modern educational needs with the preservation of cultural and religious integrity. This trust was essential in gaining the community's support for the project and in ensuring that the curriculum was developed in a way that was both culturally sensitive and educationally effective.

This experience underscores a critical lesson in leadership, particularly in the context of working with culturally diverse communities: effective leadership is not about imposing one's own ideas or solutions, but about listening, understanding, and engaging with the community in a way that is respectful and collaborative. It is about recognizing the value of the community's own knowledge, traditions, and perspectives, and working together to find

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solutions that are both culturally appropriate and impactful. This approach not only enhances the sustainability of the project but also empowers the community, making them active participants in the process of change rather than passive recipients of external interventions.

Moreover, this experience also highlighted the ethical dimension of leadership in cross-cultural contexts. Ethical leadership requires a commitment to respecting the autonomy and dignity of the community, avoiding the pitfalls of cultural imperialism or paternalism. It involves being mindful of the power dynamics at play and ensuring that the community's voice is at the center of any decision-making process. In the case of the *Fitrah* Fulfillment project, this meant continuously consulting with community members, incorporating their feedback into the curriculum design, and being open to modifying the project's approach based on their concerns and suggestions.

Convincing older board members and parents about the importance of sex education required a thoughtful and respectful approach. Many of these individuals had grown up in environments where discussions about sex were either minimal or taboo, and they often viewed such topics through the lens of their own cultural and religious experiences. To bridge this gap, I had to frame the conversation in a way that connected with their values and addressed their concerns.

One effective strategy was to emphasize the role of sex education in protecting and empowering their children within the context of their faith. I highlighted how comprehensive sex education, when delivered through an Islamic lens, could help young people make informed decisions that align with their religious beliefs. I explained that the curriculum would not only cover the basics of sexual health but also address important topics such as the sanctity of marriage, the importance of mutual respect in relationships, and the religious significance of consent. By framing the conversation in this way, I was able to show that sex education was not about introducing foreign ideas but rather about reinforcing and expanding on the teachings that were already valued within the community.

Another key strategy was to present data and research that demonstrated the positive outcomes of comprehensive sex education, particularly in preventing gender-based violence and promoting healthy relationships. I shared statistics from reputable sources, such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations, which showed that students who receive sex education are more likely to delay the onset of sexual activity, engage in safer sexual practices, and develop more equitable attitudes towards gender. By grounding the conversation in evidence-based research, I was able to appeal to the board members' and parents' concern for their children's well-being and future success.

I also made sure to address the cultural and generational differences that might influence perceptions of sex education. I acknowledged that older generations might have different views on the appropriateness of discussing such topics with young people, and I expressed

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my understanding of their concerns. However, I also emphasized the changing realities that their children face, particularly in a cosmopolitan city like San Francisco, where they are likely to encounter diverse perspectives and social norms. I explained that equipping their children with the knowledge and skills to navigate these challenges within the framework of their faith would ultimately help them stay true to their values while engaging with the broader society.

Throughout these discussions, I was careful to listen actively and respond thoughtfully to the concerns raised by board members and parents. I understood that building their trust was a gradual process, and I made it clear that their input was valued and would be incorporated into the final curriculum. By demonstrating empathy, cultural sensitivity, and a genuine commitment to the community's well-being, I was able to gain their support for the project.

Reflecting on this experience, I realize that my personal connection to the Shia community was both an advantage and a responsibility. It allowed me to navigate the cultural complexities of the project with greater ease, but it also placed on me the responsibility to ensure that the project was conducted in a way that honored the community's values and traditions. This experience has deepened my understanding of cultural humility and ethical leadership, teaching me that effective leadership in a global context is as much about building relationships and trust as it is about achieving tangible outcomes. It has reinforced the importance of approaching leadership with empathy, openness, and a genuine respect for the communities we seek to serve.