

6 weeks with Voluntario Global, Buenos Aires – Isabel Westbrook

The non-profit organisation I spent 6 weeks supporting for my LIA is called Voluntario Global, established in 2006 by founders Valeria and Armin. It encompasses a variety of different projects across Buenos Aires, so volunteers can decide where to focus their efforts; examples include the laundry co-operative in the city, the soup kitchen in Villa 21 or the nursery in Villa Hidalgo. I was drawn to the English school in Pablo Nogues, whilst also dipping into the community garden project at MILPA as I stayed on the grounds. As a result of both of these experiences, I was given the chance to learn from others and engage in cultural exchange; recalling our training from the Oxford character project and from being surrounded by inspiring individuals during my time in Argentina, I would argue that humility and a willingness to learn are essential for leadership and I hope I can carry forward everything that Voluntario Global has taught me in my daily life and in the future. A word that I learned in Argentina was “anécdotas” - I hope to include anécdotas throughout this report to recreate as best I can the eye-opening experience I had.

Something that fascinated me was Voluntario Global’s perspective on volunteering. Valeria emphasised that our impact as volunteers was not to be measured by achieving a drastic transformation in the community, but by learning from each other and sharing aspects of our culture that everyone can take away. By achieving this in small increments, the impact is long term for both sides. I especially believe that I can carry forward the kindness that was showed to me by complete strangers, and I know that my own stories and willingness to meet everyone there was appreciated by those I met. An example of this includes presenting my hometown when helping the community at the health centre during their morning cooking/gardening sessions. I presented my life back home and explained why I had travelled so far despite hardly knowing the language, and everyone seemed really interested. Likewise, they showed interest and were asking me questions despite the language barrier; they still made me feel so welcome. In order to promote the project, I regularly contributed content to Voluntario Global’s social media outlets such as Instagram. It was nice to support another volunteer, Analia, whose role was to organise Voluntario Global’s social media presence; she was also present at MILPA each week. I plan to make a LinkedIn post and post on the Laidlaw Scholar’s network.





My time at the school, my main project, reinforced this exchange too. I made lifelong friendships with the other teachers who I learned so much from, and could also offer an insight on different opportunities that they might be interested in such as teaching English abroad. This extended to the students; they enjoyed meeting volunteers because I could teach them unique things about the English language from a native speaker which they really appreciated. It was also fun to share how different aspects of our lives were so different, from weekly routines to holidays and school schedules. By the end of the project, I achieved my SMART objectives as set out at the beginning and more - I helped improve the students' English by the end of the six weeks, and also for myself learned so much about the culture in Argentina. I also learned more about volunteering in this context and the importance of education was reinforced throughout, as this was a huge passion to everyone involved in the project.



The leadership attributes that I've developed are building relationships and networks, working collaboratively and across boundaries, learning continually and leading without authority. As mentioned previously, one of the things I feel most excited by is the relationships I've built with friends in Argentina. I believe this will continue for a long time and we are already making plans to meet again. I worked collaboratively across boundaries constantly, in multiple situations. Firstly, practical tasks at MILPA required this as we needed to communicate across languages when doing activities such as gardening or cooking. As a result I picked up a small amount of vocabulary and the other volunteers warmed to me as they could see I was trying.



Likewise, our coordinator's English certainly became more fluent as we spent time together (he has also become a good friend). It was so nice to see that people can still come together and display good intentions despite not speaking the same language. This connects to leading without authority. I was able to guide and help the students and lead activities without enforcing a strict boundary between our roles in the school. A particularly enjoyable class was my last session at the school, where I decided to do a presentation about some English history. Everyone found it engaging and I definitely think my public speaking skills have improved - it was the perfect environment to practice because everyone there made me feel so comfortable. Furthermore, when I led lessons it made me appreciate the balance between working efficiently and being organised that teachers need to perfect.

Secondly, multiple boundaries at the school needed to be overcome; the students' levels of English varied so I wanted to support them as best as possible. I wanted the boundary between student and teacher to be relaxed because I knew my primary function there was to represent my language and help students improve in small areas. I particularly enjoyed learning about their aspirations, and was able to get to know them when conducting one-to-one speaking test practice. It enabled me to appreciate how a person's aspirations can certainly be affected by the examples that they see in their life and what they've been told they can do. For example, one boy wanted to pursue a career in science - specifically anything related to astrology - whilst one girl wanted to be an administrator. Both dreams are valid and I would argue are steered largely by what they've been allowed to believe. I hope that whenever I need to lead in my life, I can promote seemingly endless possibilities for anyone to aspire to. Saying this, I also now do not view one career aspiration as more worthy than another, because a variety of external factors dictate this more than anything.



It is therefore worth elaborating more on how specifically being in Argentina changed my perspective on careers. It was good to compare the culture there to how we view career prospects in the UK; arguably, because a larger percentage of people here have more opportunities to pursue a career in whatever they like, we all experience (I believe) a subtle feeling of being ranked against each other by prestige. Perhaps it is our breadth of choice that encourages this. In contrast, a larger number of individuals in Argentina remain undefined by their job. No one really judges each other based on this as there are things in life that are more important such as family, and due to the current economic and political situation that is forcing professionals out of their jobs, no one can afford to define their identity by their job. I believe this is reflected in the words we use in each language to describe a degree - what we call a degree in the UK is called a “career” in Argentina. This is because I don’t believe students have the luxury of choosing any degree and still be given opportunities to get a secure job in any field, as we are able to with humanities. The degree for them, as it is still for many in the UK, is purely a means to securing a job in the future. I have no doubt that there are exceptions to this, but any exception would more likely be among the more privileged.

Due to my willingness to connect with others on a more personal and friendly level, I was exposed to experiences that wouldn’t have been accessible had I been simply a tourist. For example, one class that I led consisted of two students - Yaell and Millena - who also attend university. Throughout our classes, they presented to me much about the history and current celebrity culture in Argentina. In my last week, Milena showed me her university and gave me a tour. We had previously spoken together about Argentina’s history, specifically the dictatorship in the 1970s, where many people went missing. It was therefore particularly moving to see the foyer of her University that displayed portraits of students who had disappeared. Without our friendship I might never have felt so engaged and somehow a part of their history. I therefore think it’s especially important to create and maintain friendships like these - not only are they more meaningful as they disregard the extra effort it might take to communicate, but they can give you a different lens through which to see and experience a culture.

Another similar experience to this includes my visit to Dana’s teacher training college (our friendship is one of the best things to come from my visit to Argentina and we are still in contact regularly). She brought me in because her class is studying accents; this is because she is training to be a teacher in English and also loves literature like I do. As a result, linguistics is central to her course. As my accent is the standard British accent that they have previously studied, she wanted to bring me in - it was literally one of the most welcoming experiences I’ve ever had. Everyone showed me a kindness that I hadn’t seen for such a long time; they brought food and shared it with me and wanted to ask and know so much about my life in the UK. I felt really humbled actually, as I really don’t feel I deserved the level of praise that they showed me. So for me, this experience was impactful in my life because it makes me want to carry forward that kindness and sense of welcome to anyone that I meet. It also required me to be adaptable as I had to speak publically for a few hours and represent my home well whilst being an engaging speaker. Dana’s passion for learning across two different languages has also impacted my studies here at the University of Leeds; she, and the extended period of time away from studying my course, has made me appreciate the opportunities and fascinating subjects that I get to study here even more. I want to make the most of every class and assignment (and have been requested to tell Dana every piece of literature that I study!)



As a result of this experience, I feel my career plans have become more directional; I've learned that supporting NGOs feels most fulfilling to me, as does inspiring younger people and making them believe in themselves. I also really enjoy being abroad and immersing myself in a different culture and making friends - I feel that the more you experience this, the more your perspective broadens and it becomes more difficult to estrange from people and places that you grow to love. I therefore plan to explore options in NGOs, teaching or diplomacy; as well as this, I'd like to see how I could integrate any of these careers with being abroad and learning about more cultures. I hope to gain further experience of these options across the year and make the most of my final year at University.

Overall, I feel like one of the luckiest people on the planet that I was able to experience Argentina for 6 weeks, and more importantly, make so many good friends there that I know I will see again. The teachers and I are planning a roadtrip to another province as we speak. Something that will stay with me forever is the kindness that was shown to me on numerous occasions not just by friends but from strangers. I feel it has given me a new perspective on how to move through life and has forced me to appreciate even more every ounce of good fortune that I've been given in my life. I hope that in a leadership position I can carry this forward and also instil this into those I lead.

Scholar

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Project Leader

Please comment on your scholar's LIA period, what you consider to be your scholar's strengths and which leadership attributes (please refer to the leadership attributes below) you feel your scholar has demonstrated and is particularly skilled in. You could also identify areas which the scholar can develop further.

Isabel participated in Voluntario Global's English School and also stayed at Milpa, which allowed her to experience two different community projects and connect with a diverse range of people in the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

She consistently prioritized her learning and volunteering experience over tourism, which we highly appreciate as it reflects clarity of purpose and a genuine commitment to social engagement. Throughout her time with us, Isabel demonstrated key leadership attributes such as empathy, adaptability, and collaborative work. She approached each space with openness, actively contributing while also learning from others.

Isabel also showed strong cultural intelligence: she engaged respectfully with the local context, listened attentively, asked thoughtful questions, and adapted her communication style to build meaningful relationships with community members. Her curiosity and willingness to understand our culture and history showed not only cultural awareness but also a deep sense of respect.

At the English School, Isabel further strengthened her confidence in public speaking, group communication, and clear communication—skills that are often challenging to develop in a new environment and language.

Overall, Isabel's participation reflected not only her academic and personal dedication but also her potential as a socially conscious, culturally intelligent, and collaborative leader. We are grateful to have been part of her journey.

Leadership Attributes

Able to lead without authority

Able to convey purpose and build coalitions

Cultural intelligence and capacity for empathy

Honestly assess own knowledge/leadership style/preferences

Knows own limitations and acts accordingly

Learns continually

Speaks and writes clearly and confidently

Able to listen with understanding

Uses digital connectivity

Makes effective decisions in complex environments

Seeks out and fosters innovation and creativity

Strong intellectual ability

Turns ideas into action

Builds relationships and networks

Works collaboratively and across boundaries

Uses emotional intelligence to achieve this

Capitalises on the power of diversity

Able to navigate new and foreign situations

Uses this to build relationships and networks

Has energy and impact

Makes things happen


Able to analyse data and interpret results

Able to work and think independently

Prioritises activities and manages own time

Signature of Scholar Isabel Westbrook Date: 18.11.25

Signature of Project Leader


Milena Aylin Sapay

Date: 17/ 11 / 25