

THE LAIDLAW LEADERSHIP & RESEARCH SCHOLAR
PROGRAMME

There and Back Again: A Laidlaw Scholar's Journey

Reflections on my Leadership in Action

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**AUCKLAND
RUGBY**



Next-Generation Leaders
for Global Good



This report captures the reflections of my self-proposed Leadership in Action (LiA) while in placement at Auckland Rugby Union (ARU), New Zealand. The LiA was to apply my research from year 1 of the scholar program; whereby I assessed the Social Return on Investment (SROI) of grassroots rugby in Auckland, focusing on the impact of ARU on its affiliated clubs and their surrounding communities

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Reflections on My Leadership Journey: A 6-Week LIA at Auckland Rugby Union

After completing six weeks interning with Auckland Rugby Union (ARU) as part of my Laidlaw LiA, I find myself reflecting on the lessons learnt, the experiences shared, and my personal growth. My placement in Auckland, New Zealand, as part of a self-proposed LiA for the Laidlaw Leadership & Research Scholarship Programme, has been transformative; providing an invaluable opportunity to immerse myself in a new culture, explore leadership through action, and contribute to the local communities.

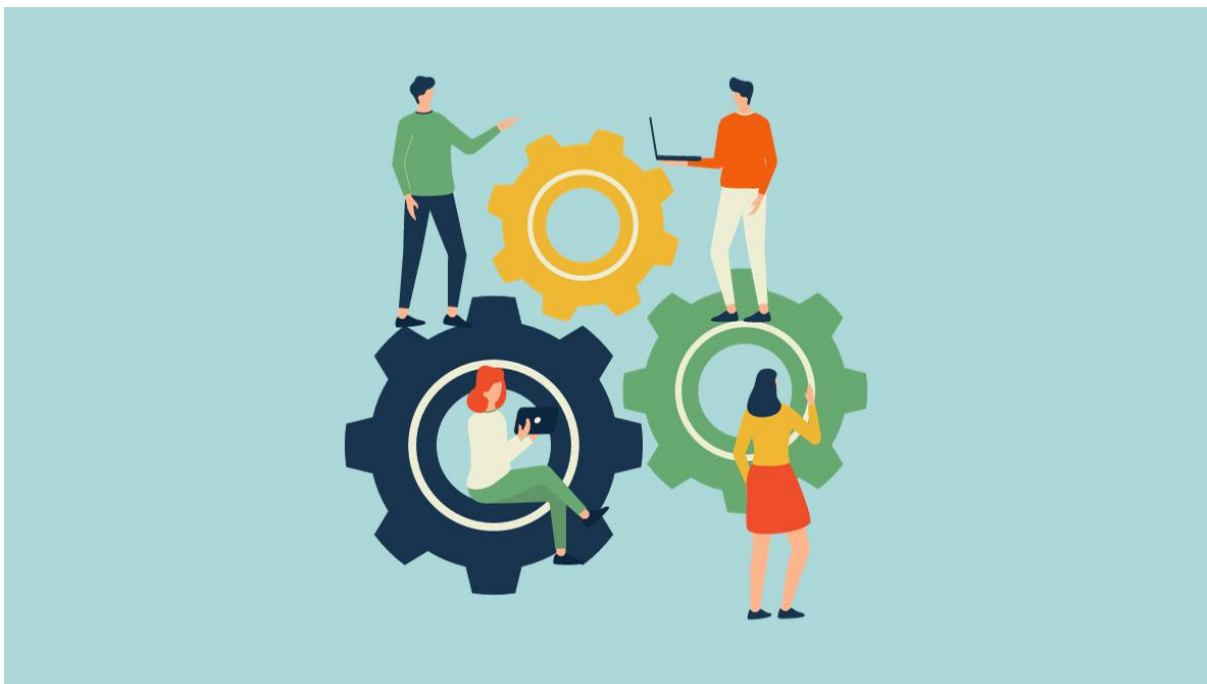
The Project: Measuring Social Impact



My primary responsibility during my LiA was to assess the Social Return on Investment (SROI) of grassroots rugby in Auckland, focusing on the impact of ARU on its affiliated clubs and their surrounding communities. This involved conducting fieldwork across the Auckland region, visiting various sports and community clubs to gather data and testimonies from players, coaches, volunteers, and community leaders. The goal was to measure the social value grass roots rugby clubs provides to their communities, particularly in terms of health, youth development, and social cohesion.

From week one, I knew that this project would challenge me in numerous ways, both professionally and personally: by working in a high performing environment, delivering a distinct and valuable piece of work, being out of my comfort zone, stepping up to deliver for communities, engaging with cultures I had little to no experience of, etc. The LiA and the data I collected were important as it would help ARU understand how their investment in grassroots rugby was shaping local communities and how to enhance this impact in the future.

Key Stakeholders



Working with ARU involved collaborating with a wide range of stakeholders. Firstly, there was the ARU team itself, which was extremely supportive and open to my contributions. Anna Petterson, Female Game Development Officer; Strahan McIntosh, Club Development Manager; and Caoimhe Hunt, Club Rugby Partner, all played a crucial role in guiding my work and helping me navigate the rugby culture in Auckland. Anna's background as a former New Zealand international cricketer and her passion for grassroots sports were inspiring and exemplified the passion for sports within NZ.

Other important stakeholders included the rugby clubs, and their communities scattered across Auckland. These clubs ranged from small community-driven

The third key lesson was **adaptability**. Every rugby club I visited had its own unique culture and set of challenges. Some clubs focused on developing young players, while others emphasized building stronger connections within their communities. Adapting to each club's context required me to remain flexible in how I conducted interviews, gathered data, and interacted with people. This adaptability has been one of the most valuable takeaways, reminding me that leadership is not about rigidly following a plan but responding to the needs and dynamics of the people you are working with.

The Experience: Immersion in an Unfamiliar Community



One of the greatest aspects of this LiA placement was being fully immersed in Auckland's rugby culture. Starting my placement at Eden Park, New Zealand's iconic rugby stadium, was both humbling and exhilarating. Over the six weeks, I was also fortunate to visit numerous clubs across the city, each with its own distinct identity. Many of the clubs I worked with were deeply connected to Auckland's Polynesian and Māori communities. This cultural immersion provided me with fresh perspectives, challenging my preconceived notions about sports and community engagement.

At first, I was apprehensive about how I would fit into such a different environment, however, being willing to step outside my comfort zone allowed me to gain a deeper

understanding of these communities and their relationship with rugby. Whether it was engaging with club volunteers or watching young athletes play, I saw how rugby acted as a powerful force for social integration, cultural pride, and community resilience.

The Impact of the Project and Its Sustainability



The results of the SROI study will have lasting implications for Auckland Rugby Union and the communities it supports. By qualifying and quantifying the social benefits of grassroots rugby, ARU is now better equipped to justify further investments in community rugby initiatives. The data collected provides a roadmap for how rugby can continue to drive positive social change, from enhancing physical and mental health to strengthening social bonds.

Sustainability is key to ensuring the project's long-term impact. One of the ways ARU can sustain positive outcomes is by maintaining close relationships with the community clubs. By continuing to listen to the needs and aspirations of these clubs, ARU can tailor its support to ensure that grassroots rugby thrives well into the future. Additionally, the SROI framework can serve as a model for future evaluations, allowing ARU to track its social impact over time.

Final Reflections: The Value of Stepping Outside Your Comfort Zone



Proof I really did go there and back again: a highlight from my time in New Zealand was a day trip to Hobbiton in Matamata.

As I wrap up my six weeks with ARU, one of the most important lessons I've learned is the value of stepping outside your comfort zone. This experience was not just about gathering data or completing a project—it was about personal growth. Being in an unfamiliar environment, I was forced to challenge myself, learn quickly, and adapt to new cultural and professional settings. This experience taught me that leadership is not about being the loudest or the most knowledgeable person in the room. It's about being open, empathetic, and willing to learn from others.

In conclusion, my time at Auckland Rugby Union has been an incredibly rewarding journey of leadership, community engagement, and personal development. I leave Auckland and ARU with a deeper understanding of the power of sports to create social change, and I carry with me the leadership lessons I've learned that will serve me in the years to come.