

Laidlaw Experience Abroad Reflection - A Month in Khao Lak, Thailand

Over the month I spent volunteering at the Foundation for Education and Development (FED) in Khao Lak, Thailand, I not only grew significantly in terms of my cultural understanding of education systems and their impact in other parts of the world, but also gained a deeper understanding about the socio-political situation in the Asia-Pacific region and its effects can permeate into other areas on the global scale.

FED works closely with Burmese migrant communities and is centred around the pillars of health, education, environment, and migrant development. With its mission being to “end the daily abuse to the rights of people of Myanmar”, these pillars interlock to provide holistic support for Burmese migrants in Thailand, many of which are displaced due to civil conflict with few resources and networks. My role with FED involved creating a comprehensive English curriculum and teaching it to a group of students as a part of their summer program in preparation for their GED exam, helping the organization to obtain funding through grant applications, and contributing to other organizational needs.

This opportunity contributed greatly to my personal growth in various ways. As I had never been to Thailand before, I spent a significant amount of time preparing prior to my trip; I read about cultural customs, basic linguistic skills, and the different foods and speciality traditional dishes. A factor that made me greatly push the boundaries of my comfort zone was transportation; I had to get accustomed to using a motorbike as my main source of transport, and this was something that took a lot of adjustment. I had never ridden a motorbike before, and was very nervous at

first. Luckily, I did not have to go on the highway to get from my accommodation to the learning centre as there was a backroad that I could use. However, following a weekend of heavy rain, the backroad became flooded and I was forced to go on the highway on my own for the first time. This was a very scary experience for me, especially given that the Thai highway was 6 lanes and not designed very well, with the only way to go in the other direction being to take a u-turn as there was a barrier separating each direction of traffic. The u-turns were very sparsely located, and crossing across all of the lanes gave me a lot of anxiety. I was glad when I overcame this fear and managed to get to the learning centre using the highway despite the flooding.

Something that I had not fully accounted for was the extent to which the cultural competencies I had studied would be truly applicable in my given environment. Khao Lak is a relatively touristy area, and the majority of places were meant to accommodate foreign travellers. In addition, I did not fully anticipate how much time I would spend working with Burmese people in particular, rather than Thai people. The majority of staff at FED were English or Burmese-speakers. Thus, my basic Thai was not particularly applicable to my day-to-day life.

Additionally, there were various interactions I had that definitely pushed the boundaries of my comfort zone. I was often mistaken as a Thai-speaker, which I had not expected. When I was asked where I was from and I replied by saying I was from Canada, many people expressed their surprise: “Oh, Canada? I thought you were Chinese or Korean or Thai!”. This would lead to an ensuing conversation about my ethnicity, where I would have to explain how my family had immigrated to Canada. Other times, storekeepers would assume that I could simply understand

what they were saying and did not realize that I was a tourist until I was not able to respond and could only offer a sheepishly blank expression.

These sorts of interactions happened almost daily, and were especially prevalent when I was with other students. For instance, I was fortunate to work alongside other student volunteers from other parts of the world, including Germany, Belgium, Mexico, and Canada. I spent a lot of time with a group of three students who were studying at UVic, as we had arrived in Thailand at roughly the same time and were from the same province. One day, when we had gone into the main town, a storekeeper asked us where we were from. When we told him that we were from Canada, he turned to me separately, and asked if I was from China, leading me to explain that yes, I was ethnically Chinese but was also from Canada like the other girls. Upon hearing this, he enthusiastically pointed to me and exclaimed: “Xi Jinping!”. I didn’t know how to respond to this comment. Although I didn’t often take offense from such interactions as they stemmed from a genuine curiosity, I had never experienced such a dynamic; while I didn’t look that different from the local people, it was the most foreign I had felt, knowing close to none of the language and being there for the first time. This made me do a lot of reflection about the cultural diversity that exists within Asia, which I had not experienced as I had not been to many other parts of Asia aside from Hong Kong to visit family.

The other experiences that I found particularly impactful stemmed from personal interactions between myself and the students who I taught English lessons to. They were all around my age, and were relatively recent migrants to Thailand from Myanmar. They had left their home country as migrants to seek safety and stability following the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, and some of

them were not documented. In addition to learning about their circumstances and how these had shaped their political views, their unwavering sense of hope and dedication to supporting their families back home despite the difficulties they experienced in their home country was nothing short of awe-inspiring. I admired how despite the traumas they had experienced and the extent to which factors out of their control had impacted their lives such as interrupting their education and leading to separation from their families, they held a continued resilience in trying to become more educated to gain credentials that would further their opportunities in their careers and other future endeavours.

While several of the stories told to me by students were very insightful, one of them stood out in particular. This story came to light while engaging in a “speaking circle” activity, where students were encouraged to ask questions to each other and answer in English to practice grammar rules in practice. My co-teacher and I had just taught a lesson on the past-tense, and were encouraging students to try to implement the lesson into the activity. When one of the students was asked “What is a special memory that you have?” they proceeded to talk about their experience at a border crossing and camp for internally displaced peoples, and how they found joy and contentment with their peers despite their circumstances. Hearing this student speak of their experience culminated in the realization of just how different my life was from those that I was teaching; it was difficult for me to grapple with the fact that the first “special” and positive memory that had come to mind had come from a time and place that was likely also associated with various dangers, risks, and uncertainties. This also made me realize the extent to which I take many privileges in my life for granted, including documentation, the ability to travel with a

strong passport, and being educated at a globally recognized university in a strong education system.

Going forward, I took extra time to be extremely careful when navigating such topics and considering any topics and prompts used in our lessons. I also came to realize the importance of letting the students share such stories about their personal experiences on their own terms, and building trust and rapport with them over time. In addition to ensuring that points of discussion in class such as writing and speaking prompts were very general and were not triggering, this meant that considering even how I answered questions that they asked about my own life. This experience, among others, heavily impacted my view of social mobility as it brought to light the systemic nature of many of the challenges that are faced by migrants; many policies inhibit their ability to gain social mobility, many of which are even intentional to some extent.

I left Thailand feeling extremely grateful for this experience, but moreover, I was inspired by the students' and staffs' resilience and perseverance. Despite the hardships they had faced and the ongoing uncertainties that they were to encounter, they only spoke of the hope that they had for their futures. I was also touched by the kindness and generosity of everyone that I encountered. On my last day, I was given a woven bag and a traditional Burmese scarf by the students and staff. I greatly treasure this experience and will hold all of the memories and connections I formed close to my heart. I hope that I can one day return to FED in the future.