

## **Deliverable 5: End-of-Programme Reflection**

I started my Laidlaw scholarship with a lab mindset to do careful work and get clean answers. My first summer ripped that script up. I was studying how a *NFKB1* gene variation affects premenstrual symptoms across different ethnicities. The big discovery wasn't in the data; it was a lesson in humility. The hardest moment was catching a mistake in my code for the reference genotype, after I had already built models I trusted. It felt incredibly overwhelmed and frustrated at first. I dreaded having to go into the thousands of lines of code and manually a couple hundred more. I learned that rigor is not a performance but rather a set of habits you hold when you are tired and when no one is watching. I placed more value on honest answers than on neat ones.

The Oxford Character Project gave me a way to work on my inner self without making it a performance. We talked about virtues like courage and humility, but the useful part was treating them like experiments. I found that the virtuosity app was a weekly reminder to check in with myself, and consciously be aware of the traits in myself that I want to work on, for instance humility to locate my lens before judging, justice to share credit and responsibility in public. Those words did not change me on their own, but they changed me once I tied them to visible routines.

The Leadership-in-Action in Kosovo shoved all those lessons into the real world. Our original plan for school trainings completely collapsed when approvals stalled. Here I accepted the constraint and changed the work. With the help of the team, we built a youth-centered inclusion and anti-bullying mural in Lipjan and redesigned the Kosovo Youth Council (KYC) website. Neither project needed me to be in charge, they needed me to make it easy for everyone else to lead. I learned to move between formal and informal authority, and to negotiate risk with municipal staff.

The global piece showed up in the details. I learned to work in Albanian without overcompensating for my vocabulary gaps, accepting that accuracy beats fluency, and that asking for the right phrase

can be an act of respect. I saw how context is everything, for instance Lipjan youth had appetite and momentum. That didn't make youth in Mitrovica wrong, it made it different. I carry this lesson now: symbolic wins travel fast, but procedural wins are what make them last. I learnt that not every project is one size fits all, but rather you must be adaptable when an unexpected frustration or challenge arises.

I met people I never would have otherwise including a municipal clerk who walked me through the unwritten rules of permits, an artist who showed me how color reads on a public wall from a distance, young people who were unflinchingly direct and, in being so, reminded me that diplomacy has many accents, and of course my incredible colleagues who guided and supported me the whole way through. I learned I thrive on teams that hold warmth and openness. I plan to keep these relationships alive for many years to come. I appreciate the LiA for giving me the opportunity to expand my network in, and see a different side to a country I have long called home.

The trait I pushed hardest on was cultural humility. I started asking myself, before judging anyone's tone or pace, "What rulebook am I even using?" - that one question has pulled me back from more than a few lazy conclusions. It also taught me about my own biases and forced me to recognise the position of power and privilege I was in.

I haven't been to the annual conference yet, though I plan to arrive with questions and leave with commitments. My next step is a role where public health and community-driven design meet. In three years, I want a small portfolio of projects that lower the cost of participation for the people who usually pay the highest price. In five, I want to be running a team that treats belonging and outcomes as the same problem. In ten, I want to be the person people call when a problem is stuck because I'm known to listen first, choose well, and build things that last.

What I learned from Laidlaw in a nutshell is that when the plan bends, character shows up in your process. Leadership is about making it easier for others to do their best work. I began with tidy expectations. I'm leaving with a practice I can defend.