

London, England – Experience Abroad Reflection

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As part of my Laidlaw Programme Leadership-In-Action experience, I had the privilege of being able to live in London, England and work for the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). This reflection will outline how I approached this project (looking through the lens of prior experiences travelling as well as the preparatory Leadership Sessions which addressed culture and conflict), how I found my place in London once I arrived there, and my boarder reflections on myself and my own confidence. I found that my initial nervousness with my lack of travel experience (especially lack of travel experience on my own and for longer than a week) was easily dispelled by the friendliness of the people I worked with, and the Londoners I made friends with while I was there.

My prior travel experience

Though I am thankful for the travel experiences I had prior to London, they were of a very different nature than the London trip. My family doesn't travel very much due to the scheduling constraints of my parents' jobs, so the few trips we had gone on had been short, usually tropical, and constantly supervised and organized by my parents as I was not old enough to dictate my own vacation experience. Though I was aware of the intrinsic international part of the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Programme when I was applying, a part of me was incredibly nervous about whether or not I'd be able to handle being out of my home city for longer than I had ever been away from it, alone, in a continent I had never been to in my whole life. To someone who had more opportunity to travel as a child, and to many of my friends at the

University of Toronto who were forced to get used to a new city because they weren't born in Toronto, these worries may seem quite childish. However, I believe that travelling smart is a skill that requires development – and I had not yet developed that skill. As such, I think this was one of the rare cases where my anxieties were well-founded, even if they are slightly childish. However, I didn't let these anxieties lead to helplessness and abandonment of my ambitions to continue in the Laidlaw Programme – regardless of what was to follow, I would figure it out and try my best to prepare for what I could predict.

My journey to London, before it started

My journey to London actually starts, in my mind, at the end of the first research summer's project, during the poster presentation attended by all the 2024 scholars and some prior scholars. While I was talking to a prior scholar, George Eilender, he mentioned that my work meshed well with the place he worked for in his LiA experience, which ended up being the ISD. He told me I could keep in touch, and that I should reach out in order to get a contact to set up my LiA at the ISD. While I was searching for an LiA placement in the few months following that conversation, I felt as though I always returned to the idea of the ISD and how well-suited their work was for the work I truly dreamed of doing in my future career. As a result, I got a contact from George, emailed the ISD, and was well on my way to getting my placement confirmed for my LiA project.

I had thought to myself that this was going too well. I had a placement set up, and all of the Leadership Sessions which showed us the many ways to navigate new cultures expressed skills already very familiar to me – empathy, respect, good listening to people from the local

community, etc. I felt like I was ahead of schedule, and I had months to spare before my LiA started. It is one of my longest-standing habits that I do not trust things which counter what my anxieties tell me, even if trusting these good things would benefit me. However, I quickly realized that I should be worried, but not about whether I could find an LiA placement; rather, I should have been worried about whether I could legally enter the United Kingdom!

My constant confusion while navigating the United Kingdom's travel visa system was the largest reminder of my lack of travel experience. Choosing a work visa, a charity work visa (which is different), or the new Electronic Travel Authorization (which apparently allows one to work under it) were all dizzying possibilities for someone who has never needed to apply for my own visas in my entire life. My Laidlaw advisors at the University of Toronto likely remember my panicked meetings with them, asking how I could better locate which visa I needed.

Just as I thought I had settled on the visa I needed to apply for, disaster struck – not only did I need to wait to apply for this kind of visa (which was expected when I settled on it), but I needed to check if my organization has the correct licence to issue that visa to work with them in particular, which, if absent, required a 3-month wait time to apply for. At that point in time, those three months would have taken a large chunk out of my LiA proposed timeframe. I had checked with my contact at the ISD, and they did not have the licence, and therefore, it seemed at the time that I wouldn't be able to go to London at all. I will admit, I absolutely panicked! It seemed like much of the effort I had expended to get this LiA placement set up was already crumbling down.

I was deeply saddened and disappointed in myself for not being able to figure this out sooner, as it possibly could have worked out if I had been more efficient navigating this system.

However, my confusion may have lead me to a dead end, but that dead end was not the only possible way forward. As it turns out, there was a visa I had not considered that I could use to enter the UK, which, blessedly, had been used by my peers with much less trouble than the visa I thought I needed would give me. I managed to get set up to go to London, documents and all, with enough time to spare to get myself ready for the journey mentally and emotionally.

My journey to London itself!

What was much less anxiety inducing, paradoxically, was actually being in London. For my work, I found I was easily comfortable talking to my coworkers, even with our very different life experiences given our places of birth and our different ages. Our greatest commonality was likely our language – the UK speaks a form of English that, while accented, is very understandable to someone who speaks English in Canada. As such, even though I prepared for some differences in what certain words mean between the two cultural uses of English, I didn't find very many that actually could cause conflict. Rather, most of the incongruencies were more funny than anything else, and the broader cultural differences were causal and funny topics of conversation between me and my colleagues. I had trouble most with how Londoners say their equivalent to “how are you?” which is “you alright?” To Canadians, “are you alright?” sounds as though the person being asked is doing something to warrant concern, whereas, in London, “you

alright?” is just how people you don’t know, such as storekeepers or new colleagues, greet people.

As for the culture of London, I was very worried that, without any friends in the UK, I would have nobody to speak to or show me around different neighborhoods. But, to my great surprise, the brand of extroversion that comes naturally to me was incredibly suited to London. I was lucky that one of my colleagues at the ISD was closer to my age and introduced me to some of his friends, and while I was initially afraid that my invitations to hang out after work would scare off these new friends with my over-eagerness (as, in Canada, you usually need to form acquaintanceships with people before you can properly ask to invite them to a hang out), it turns out that the people of London that I became friends with are always eager to find something to do after the workday is over. Similarly to how I never feel inclined to turn down an invitation to walk around a busy part of Toronto or get bubble tea, the people I met in London never wished to turn down an invitation to a pub for a quick pint.

I think the point of culture that I was able to learn the least about was, surprisingly, the political culture of the UK and Europe more broadly. I found that there was deep history that, even though I had read about it, was clearly grasped on a more experiential level by the people who had grown up in Europe and especially in London. London itself is littered with staggering bits of history on random street corners – you’ll encounter a building that hosted one of the biggest names in political history on your way out of a Pret A Manger, and you’ll hear echoes of a feud between two areas that ended centuries ago within someone talking casually about another

group of people. But I feel as though it was a point of incongruence between me and the local community that affected my work the most, as my work was in policy recommendations. I felt as though I was out of my depth speaking about the politics of a people that I was not fully acquainted with myself, and thus missed some of the gravity of political happenstances.

Conclusions and reflections

Overall, I believe this experience did wonders for my confidence as an international citizen, and it allowed me to experience a whole new part of the world with a dedication and purpose to improve myself and improve the world through my work.

I found that I was able to overcome barriers and insecurities even before I arrived in London, and thus felt prepared to overcome more once I arrived. However, my ease in integrating myself into some parts of London's culture merely instilled more confidence in me, as I felt comfortable seeing the differences between me and the local community not with any negativity, but rather with humor and lightheartedness. This experience has only heightened my curiosity about the culture of the area, and pushed me to learn more about the place I now hold so fondly in my memories, and hopefully in my future.