

# End-of-Programme Reflection

## Laidlaw Scholars Programme

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When I first applied to the Laidlaw program, it was through a friend's recommendation. After taking two years off from school, I returned with passion, curiosity, and a hunger for knowledge. I became deeply focused on disinformation and its impact on migrants. I read, I researched, I debated with my peers. But eventually, a kind of dissatisfaction crept in. I kept learning, but I couldn't shake the feeling that my knowledge was trapped in the walls of academia. I could write papers, I could share ideas online... but the reach felt limited. I wanted to see what change looked like in practice, not just in theory. Laidlaw gave me that chance. It was a bridge between research and action, between thinking about problems and actually doing something about them. And somewhere along the way, I realized the program was doing more than helping me make an impact. It was reshaping how I see myself. The way I move through the world. The way I think about leadership.

One of my biggest leadership strengths I discovered and strengthened within myself is the ability to create safe spaces where people feel seen and heard. In Medellín, I leaned on both technical and non-technical skills to make this possible. On the technical side, I used research and program design, which entails analyzing news content, mapping patterns of disinformation, and shaping workshops that were both structured and flexible. On the non-technical side, I relied on empathy, active listening, and adaptability. These were just as critical, if not more so, because they allowed me to connect with the teens on a human level, to relate through universal emotions, and to respond in real time when sessions did not go as planned. Though I also found myself stretching in new ways. For instance, stepping into facilitation required me to balance authority with humility, to guide while also letting go of control. Public speaking and teaching in Spanish, though not my strongest skill, forced me to push past discomfort and depend on translation through body language, tone, and the support of local facilitators.

What surprised me most was the theme of resilience. Plans shifted, obstacles appeared, and not everything went the way I thought it would. But instead of collapsing, I found myself adjusting, adapting, and finding new ways forward. Resilience, I learned, is about staying steady, leaning on others when needed, and being willing to learn + adapt from whatever comes. Though with the knowledge and experience I've gathered

from this chapter of my life, there are lessons I know I'll carry for years. Hard work builds momentum, and consistency opens doors. But timing matters too; some things only align when they're meant to, not when you try to force them. Holding both truths, the discipline to keep showing up and the patience to let things unfold has given me perspective I didn't have before.

Even so, living in Medellín taught me that resilience cannot just be understood in abstract terms. It exists in the liminal space between danger and hope, invisibility and presence. For the teens I worked with, voice was always precarious: speaking could draw unwanted attention, yet silence risked erasure. In that in-between, resilience meant finding ways to keep going, to laugh, to draw, to dream—even when the structures around them seemed designed to suppress. Voice within liminality is fragile, but it is also generative: it opens the possibility of becoming otherwise, of refusing the narratives imposed by gangs, by the state, or even by outsiders who flatten the city into stereotype. Now, for me, the lesson was clear. Leadership is not about resolving liminality, as if it were a problem to fix. It is about recognizing its power as a site of resilience and accompanying others as they navigate it. To lead, in this sense, is to create spaces where voice can emerge safely and to affirm that even in the most precarious conditions, presence matters.

On a larger scale, the internal changes I witnessed in myself began because of the people around me—my team, my cohort, and my supervisors at UofT. In particular, You Jia played an important role. She helped me recognize the value I bring. In a traditional academic setting, professors often focus on sparking conversation and pushing critical thinking, but You Jia went further. She helped me see my potential in terms of what I could do beyond academia, and that shifted how I viewed myself. Also, it was in New York that I also began to understand the importance of networking. That's where I met Tony, who later became my collaborator at Casa Tres Patios in Colombia. The experience I had in Medellín was transformative, but it would not have been possible without that connection. Looking back, I see how each piece was connected: the mentorship I received, the relationships I built with my cohort, the opportunities to travel and exchange ideas, and the way those encounters carried me forward into a project that challenged me deeply and changed the way I see myself.

Overall, with the leadership trainings You Jia provided, alongside the monthly Oxford sessions, I can see now how everything prepared me for Medellín and for the future that's about to come. Moving forward, I want to continue to act as a global citizen by carrying these lessons into every context I enter. To me, this means listening first, recognizing how histories of inequality shape the present, and ensuring that my work amplifies rather than overshadows local voices. Ethical leadership, I've learned, is less about grand declarations and more about small, consistent actions: being transparent,

being accountable, and being willing to question my own assumptions. In this way, I hope to keep building spaces where people feel seen and where leadership becomes a shared practice rather than a position.