

# Laidlaw Programme Leadership in Action Report

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Title of LIA Project:	Strengthening Legal Safeguards for Children in Real-life and Immersive Online Environments

## Introduction

The Leadership in Action (LiA) period represented a unique stage in my Laidlaw journey: it was an opportunity to move from researching an emerging issue in the abstract to applying my findings in a real-world context, embedded within a community that was at once familiar and unfamiliar to me. My project, *Strengthening Legal Safeguards for Children in Real-life and Immersive Online Environments*, sought to address the growing risks children face in both physical and digital worlds, particularly with the emergence of immersive online spaces such as virtual reality.

Over six weeks in Romania, I developed bilingual (Romanian and English) educational materials aimed at secondary school students, focusing on consent, boundaries, safety, and legal rights. I piloted these resources in a school in Bucharest, gathering feedback from students and teachers, while also consulting with legal professionals and law enforcement officers to ensure that the materials were grounded in law. The project was therefore both an educational intervention and a means of drawing attention to the legal and cultural gaps that exist around the recognition of virtual sexual assault.

In this report, I reflect on the scope of the project, the impact it had on the schools and professionals I worked with, and the lessons it taught me about leadership, cultural intelligence, and resilience. I also consider the personal and professional growth I experienced, and how this project has influenced my future career trajectory.

## The Project

The origins of my project lay in a clear gap: while conversations around online harms are slowly gaining visibility in some countries, Romania's legal and educational systems remain largely unprepared to deal with the phenomenon of virtual sexual assault. As immersive technologies such as VR headsets become more widely used by teenagers, the risks of sexual harassment and assault in these spaces increase. Yet awareness among educators, parents, and even legal professionals remains minimal.

To respond to this, I set myself the task of creating bilingual educational packs for schools that could be delivered in workshops or integrated into safeguarding programmes. Each pack contained a presentation, a handout for students, and a facilitator's guide for teachers. The aim was to provide clear, accessible information about real-life and virtual sexual assault, grounded in law but translated into a form that young people could engage with meaningfully.

Before creating these resources, I wanted to understand what students already knew about the subject. During my initial visit to Colegiul Tehnic Carol I, I distributed a Microsoft Forms survey to students to gauge their current knowledge of sexual assault, consent, and safety online. I then gave a presentation introducing myself, my research background, and the aims of the project. This introduction was important not only for transparency but also to build trust and rapport

with the students, encouraging them to openly take part in the project. Following this, I conducted a workshop-style session where students were invited to contribute ideas about what they thought would be the most effective way to create educational materials on the topic. Their input was invaluable, highlighting the importance of visual materials, clear examples, and interactive discussions rather than lecture-style teaching.

To ensure I also had a staff perspective, I gave the same survey to teachers and school staff. Interestingly, the results revealed that staff members were generally less aware than the students, both about the nature of virtual sexual assault and about methods of prevention. This finding reshaped my project. While I had initially planned to focus primarily on students, it became clear that staff also needed targeted support and resources. As a result, I concentrated much of my effort on creating a handbook specifically for staff, designed to strengthen their safeguarding knowledge and equip them to better support students.

The process of designing these materials was collaborative. I consulted Romanian lawyers and a police officer to gain a clearer picture of how sexual assault is treated in law and whether there is any scope for prosecuting virtual sexual assault. These conversations revealed that, while Romanian law does criminalise sexual assault and harassment, there is no explicit recognition of virtual offences. Professionals often regarded the issue as hypothetical, yet several acknowledged that as VR platforms expand, the law will eventually need to catch up. These insights shaped how I framed the resources: rather than focusing only on law, I emphasised consent, prevention, and the emotional harm caused by such experiences. In this way, I felt that students would gain the knowledge needed to protect themselves during this time where there is no legal protection offered to them.

I also worked closely with teachers to ensure that the language and tone of the resources were age-appropriate. For example, one teacher cautioned me against including overly graphic scenarios, stressing the need to balance honesty with sensitivity. This feedback was invaluable, and I adapted the content accordingly. The resources were therefore the product of negotiation between different perspectives: legal precision, pedagogical appropriateness, and cultural sensitivity.

The most immediate impact of the project was visible in the classrooms where the resources were piloted. For example, a group of sixteen-year-olds engaged in a lively discussion after the session, debating whether “things that happen in virtual reality really count.” One student argued that because “it is just a game,” it should not be taken seriously, while another countered that “if someone feels hurt, it is real.” This exchange demonstrated the very gap my project was trying to address: the lack of consensus among young people about the seriousness of digital harms. Teachers later told me that they valued how the workshop had opened a space for students to think critically and talk openly about an issue they had not previously discussed. One teacher expressed relief at having resources that approached the topic in a structured and legally informed way, remarking that “we often avoid these conversations because we don’t know where to start.” The bilingual nature of the materials was also praised, as it allowed schools with international links to share them more widely.

Beyond the classroom, the consultations with legal professionals had an impact by raising awareness. Although some lawyers were sceptical, framing virtual sexual assault as something too intangible to legislate against, others acknowledged that my project had made them reflect on the need for future reform. While my work did not result in immediate legal change, it contributed to the gradual process of normalising conversations about virtual harms in professional circles.

The long-term impact lies in sustainability. The resource packs and staff handbook can now be used independently by teachers or NGOs, and I established connections with educators and school leaders interested in adopting them more widely. This ensures that the project will not end with my departure but has the potential to grow in reach.

Reflecting on the SMART goals I set at the beginning of the project, I can say that I achieved them all, although not always in the way I first anticipated. However, I aimed to pilot the resources in at least two schools and gather feedback from students and teachers by 25 July 2025. This goal was only partially met: I succeeded in piloting at Colegiul Tehnic Carol I in Bucharest but was unable to secure access to a school in Târgoviște. Rather than seeing this as a failure, I reframed the challenge as an opportunity to disseminate in alternative ways. A key development was my collaboration with the head student at Colegiul Tehnic Carol I, who regularly gives presentations in schools on topics that are not formally taught in the curriculum. With my support, he has now begun integrating findings from my research on sexual assault and virtual sexual assault into his talks. This means that, although I did not personally deliver workshops in Târgoviște as planned, the project is reaching an even wider audience across multiple schools in Bucharest and beyond. By embedding the material into peer-led awareness initiatives, the dissemination of the project has exceeded its original scope, ensuring both sustainability and the growth of its impact.

The project was a constant exercise in leadership. Resilience was tested each time a meeting fell through or when schools hesitated to engage with sensitive material. I learned that setbacks are not failures but invitations to adapt, and that persistence often pays off. Collaboration was at the heart of the project. I had to work with lawyers, police officers, teachers, and students, each with their own perspectives and concerns. Negotiating these perspectives required empathy and influence. For instance, when one teacher expressed fear that parents might react negatively to discussions of sexual assault, I reassured her by emphasising the educational and preventative purpose of the material, rather than framing it in terms of trauma.

Cultural intelligence was equally essential. Romania is my home country, yet having lived in England for over a decade, I realised I was re-encountering it through fresh eyes. Topics such as sexual assault are often surrounded by stigma, and I had to be careful in how I introduced the subject. I found that framing it around empowerment and safety, rather than fear or danger, made both students and teachers more receptive.

Integrity underpinned all these actions. I was constantly aware of the responsibility of working with young people on sensitive issues. I deliberately avoided sensationalism and ensured that the materials remained trauma-informed, grounded in respect for students' experiences and emotions.

### **Personal Impact**

On a personal level, the project was transformative. It forced me to apply my legal training to complex, real-world problems and to communicate in ways that went beyond academic writing. I developed skills in facilitation, translation, and cross-cultural negotiation that I had not previously possessed. I also grew in confidence as a leader. Standing in front of a classroom of teenagers, introducing them to a concept that is not even recognised in law, I realised that leadership is not about having all the answers but about guiding others to ask questions and think critically. The project also taught me resilience in dealing with emotionally difficult material. Sexual assault is a heavy subject, and there were moments when I felt overwhelmed. My reflective journal and regular check-ins with my supervisor helped me process these emotions and reminded me of the importance of self-care in leadership.

## **Culture**

Immersion in Romania gave me insights into cultural differences that I had not fully appreciated before. In schools, I observed a strong emphasis on discipline and academic achievement, but far less attention to safeguarding compared to the UK. Teachers often told me they lacked the tools to address sensitive issues, which explained their enthusiasm for my project.

The legal culture was equally revealing. While UK discourse increasingly addresses online harms, Romanian professionals were more cautious, sometimes dismissive. These conversations underscored how cultural and institutional contexts shape the way problems are perceived and prioritised.

## **Future plans**

The project has sharpened my career ambitions and confirmed my commitment to a legal career. My ultimate goal is to qualify as a barrister, a path that demands strong advocacy, resilience, and the ability to analyse and respond to complex problems under pressure. Through this project, I developed and refined many of the qualities essential to that role. Leading workshops and engaging diverse audiences strengthened my advocacy and communication skills, while navigating cultural sensitivities and institutional barriers enhanced my problem-solving abilities. The challenges I faced, from logistical setbacks to addressing emotionally difficult material, required determination and drive, qualities I now see as central to my professional identity.

In the short term, I will continue disseminating my findings through the Laidlaw Network and academic conferences. Looking further ahead, I intend to bring the leadership, cultural intelligence, and advocacy skills gained through this project into my legal training, using them to build a career at the Bar where I can combine legal expertise with a commitment to protecting vulnerable groups.

## **Conclusion**

The LiA project was a defining moment in my Laidlaw journey. It challenged me to apply my academic knowledge to real-world contexts, to engage with communities in culturally sensitive ways, and to grow as a leader. By creating and piloting bilingual resources on real-life and virtual sexual assault, I directly impacted students and teachers, contributed to professional discourse, and laid the groundwork for sustainable change. Along the way, I developed as a leader, honing skills of resilience, collaboration, cultural intelligence, and integrity.

On a personal level, the project has deepened my commitment to law, expanded my leadership skills, and shaped my future aspirations. It has also shown me that leadership is not about imposing solutions but about listening, adapting, and empowering others. These lessons will remain with me as I continue to develop as both a scholar and a future leader committed to safeguarding children in both physical and digital environments.

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Finally, I wish to thank my fellow Laidlaw Scholars for their encouragement and shared sense of purpose, and my friends and family for their unwavering belief in me throughout this journey.

## Project Leader

Please comment on your scholar's LIA period, what you consider to be your scholar's strengths and which leadership attributes (please refer to the leadership attributes below) you feel your scholar has demonstrated and is particularly skilled in. You could also identify areas which the scholar can develop further.

During Roxana's Leadership in Action (LiA) period, she demonstrated a remarkable ability to translate academic research into real-world impact. Her project, focused on strengthening legal safeguards for children in real and immersive online environments, was both ambitious and innovative. By designing bilingual educational materials for students and staff in Romanian schools, she raised awareness of sensitive issues like consent, safety, and virtual sexual assault. Furthermore, she ensured that the resources created were culturally appropriate, accessible, and sustainable.

Roxana's greatest strengths lie in her ease of communication and engagement. Her resilience is also commendable as the project involved numerous challenges, from limited access to schools to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, yet she consistently adapted with creativity and persistence. Rather than perceiving setbacks as failures, Roxana reframed them as opportunities - an approach that ensured her work reached a wider audience than originally planned.

Collaboration was another key strength - Roxana engaged effectively with students, teachers, legal professionals, and law enforcement officers, navigating differing perspectives with empathy and influence. This collaborative spirit was complemented by strong cultural intelligence; although Romania is her home country, having lived abroad for over a decade allowed her to approach the context with fresh sensitivity and adapt their methods to local cultural realities.

In terms of leadership attributes, beside what I mentioned above, Roxana demonstrated integrity to an exceptional degree - especially evident in their trauma-informed and respectful approach to a difficult subject, ensuring students' wellbeing remained central throughout.

Looking ahead, one area for development could be broadening dissemination strategies further, perhaps by building more structured partnerships with NGOs and policymakers to complement her grassroots school-based work. This would allow her insights to influence systemic change alongside educational practice. Overall, Roxana's LiA period showcased both leadership maturity and deep commitment to safeguarding children in evolving digital landscapes.

Signature of Scholar

ROXANA-ANDREEA TUINEA-BOBE

Date: 15/09/2025

Signature of Project Leader

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Date: 19/09/2025