

Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Leadership-in-Action (LiA) Project

Singapore, in chapters

My Experience Abroad Reflection

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Cohort 2024**

Date: September 1st, 2025

[Template Retrieved from Laidlaw Scholars Programme](#)

The day my sister moved out for college was tough for me. As soon as my parents and I got home, I remember walking upstairs and staring at her empty bedroom. I wondered when I'd see it full again. It was still full, spatially, of the things that screamed her, but it lacked life. This made her move out day seem so abrupt, draconian and cruel. Why was it that on some arbitrarily chosen day, everything had to change? I took a long time to just grieve the loss of that normalcy, comfort and feeling of youth.

Her moving out forced me not just to grow up, but also recognize for myself that I was growing up. Because the thing about living with your siblings in your childhood home is that it's easy to slip into memories of primary school full of cartwheels in the backyard, dance shows for your parents and gossip after bedtime. Then you hurtle to the present and, almost cruelly, you see that things aren't so idyllic.

I didn't see how much I infantilized myself before she had moved out. I rarely thought of myself as a living breathing body of cells that needed to be cared for. I didn't see myself as someone who had certain needs, nor think about the need to provide myself with certain conditions to ensure I was at my best.

And isn't that such a primitive thing to realize? I feel very late to the mature train when I say this, but it can get stressful when you realize that you need to provide these things to yourself through thick and thin every day! It makes me think that during this LiA period, even when I'm facing my laziest day I'm being forced to be productive.

The biggest item (or more properly put, barrier) for me has been food. My parents had such a battle to get me to eat enough nutritious food as a kid, but the COVID pandemic turned me into someone who lives to eat. Which was great! Because my mummy's well-practised and confident hands as a cook combined with her huge heart meant that I've been spoiled in the food department for the last five years. One of my best memories from COVID is indulging in a bowl of tomato soup with cheesy bread with my whole family, letting the bread soak up the soup the way my heart felt soaked in satiety. I've also had delicious bowls of homemade ramen, vegetarian poutine, pan-fried okra, Indian-style lentil balls, spinach paneer subji, tofu stir-frys... my list could go on. But I would need to make another post about this.

But then I arrived at my LiA accommodation and was faced with new kitchen and no cook in sight. I'd pick up a pan at dinner time and think, what goes in what? When and in what order? And how it is even supposedly to taste like anything but salt? (Salt turned into my nemesis for my first couple of meals, because I'd put in too much and say "oh well, I have to eat this".)

But after encouragement from my housemates, overly long cooking sessions and learning to follow recipes the hard way, I found that my hands can turn raw ingredients into food. I excitedly take pictures of home-style meals to prove to myself that I can be a creator in many forms. I've also found that I can trust my intuition when it comes to cooking, which

makes me feel closer to my Indian heritage. If I cannot live at home or in India, I can cook like it!

Cooking was also a portal for me to learn to appreciate my upbringing. Through cooking, I realized that the sounds, words and flavours I'm used to are very "desi". This surprised me, as I always assumed my upbringing was so Western that it diluted out any of the "desi" in me. When my Indian housemates would make some reference to an Indian spice or dish, I swelled with a feeling of home. I realized then that you can introduce yourself to a culture in many ways, and that the lack of belonging I felt as an immigrant kid isn't necessarily my reality. I **do** know my culture, and I trust that I have the time to explore it.

Another item/barrier for me has been learning to be more porous to others. I was bullied growing up, so I've aspired towards being self-reliant and self-assured for as long as I can think of. But somewhere along the line, I became too self-reliant and assured that I grew very comfortable living my life in a rigid way. I had certain expectations around my what my habits or actions should look like. My time abroad forced me to live differently, inspired by each of the influences that I was surrounded by. It was incredibly empowering, because I started to see how I fit into the world around me. It made me see myself as an agent affecting change on the world every day, rather than being someone who absorbs the things that are thrown my way.

I kept a running reflection diary of the lessons I was learning and experiences I was having, in the hopes that my story in Singapore would reflect a linear journey of enlightenment and growth. Those, after all, are all the the "going abroad in university" stories I heard about from the people I spoke to. Reading it back, however, I see how each week presented unique challenges in their own rights. Each new sight, every MRT ride, every run club session, grocery trip, Google search for a Singlish term and connection was like a hurdle. But I they *do* tell a story. They tell the story of a 20-year-old trying to find her place in the world while simultaneously realizing it's much larger than she'd ever realized. It chronicles how the tiny moments in life can be formative, and that there's no justice done to our personal missions if we start to passively observe time go by. Every moment was like a drop of paint on a blank canvas, bleeding together to create my Singapore journey. I'm sharing my perhaps incomprehensible "diary" to show you, the reader that there's beauty in your mundane and value in the way you see the world.

My experience abroad taught me that the only thing that makes people different from one another is what we experience, not "who we are". We see the world differently, and we should share our lens with others. So, here's my view of Singapore.

Chapter One: Alright, here's everything I've been dreading

- Socioeconomic privilege: living in Little India (the “slum of Singapore” as it is locally known” and trying to think about what exactly is “deficient” here)
- Living standards; how to survive in a tiny room
- Eating a clementine at the mandir, feeling like my world was falling apart. But some cosmic force drew me to a North Indian Mandir in place surrounded by South Indian Mandirs, which showed me that I was being looked out for. While I'm not a particularly spiritual person, I felt connected to a spiritual power in my moment of desperation
- The lack of utility of a rain jacket – Singapore is rainy yes, but it's way too hot to wear a jacket! This week was the first and last time I used my rain jacket.

Chapter Two: Trusting the lion to burst from my heart, that one good (and evasive) spatula in hand

- Learning how to cook, connecting food to culture
- Realizing there are bigger things than a grade; through the PBSG roleplay. I decided to continue answering client's phone calls instead of preparing for my roleplay because I realized I would rather talk to/help the applicants than try to impress anyone with my roleplay
- Saying goodbye to people that mean a lot to you; my fellow PBSG interns leaving
- The kind security guard who watched us take group pictures in front of the State Courts; strict and kind aren't mutually exclusive
- My roommates suggestion I wear sandals to work on a rainy day; looking like a true beginning clutching my sun umbrella in the Singapore downpour

Chapter Three: Sweaty endeavours and my not-so-headphones

- Biking across the helix bridge
- Sweaty limitless endeavours – my biking to work disaster. I tried biking to the State Courts from my place in Little India, which saw me getting to the office 40 minutes late on a Monday. What a way to start the week... but at least I'd brought a shirt to change into because I anticipated getting really sweaty
- My noise cancelling headphones and the problems they'd cause – insulating myself from others without intended to

Chapter Four: Seeing the new and exciting, right when things are ending

- Ending at Pro Bono Singapore
- The tricky puzzles at lunch time
- New snacks with lunch – raiding the PBSG pantry
- Feeling appreciated by the PBSG team

Chapter Five: I know what I'm doing

- Starting my LiA with UWS: Starting something new means choosing to re-introduce yourself, and reinvent yourself too
- What does it mean to go crazy? My Monday journey at the Singapore Botanical Gardens, eating QQ Jelly in the mall and biking all along ECP to Marina Bay. I learned about the types of things I enjoy doing; they aren't "crazy". I learned that when I had the freedom to dictate each part of my day as I wanted, I got to see what really matters to me.
- The start of my LiA; the joy of being handed three drinks on your first day

Mid-way point interlude

Written on the bus after notetaking at a lawyer-client session in Geylang Serai

I'm getting in the rhythm but still a beginner. I'm most definitely getting settled in Singapore! In the sense that I know the basics, I guess. But I also no longer feel impending anarchy when I think about where I am, what I'm doing and the choice I made.

This week has been about me realizing my place in the world. As someone who was born and raised in the exact same city, I'm starting to realize that whenever I leave my home I'm entering into someone else's. Every person I've met here has a strong sense of home to the places that I only know the names of, and subsequently have a vastly different reality, definition of home and perception of the world.

I've also realized that I held many perceptions and misconceptions about the world. I used to see myself as having lived a very classic, ordinary life. When people told me about the experiences that shaped them in their lives, I would think of how rich their upbringings were and wonder where that zest was in mine. But coming here I realized that there is so much that makes me unique. Every experience I've had is one I've experienced very differently from others, and they've made me see the world very differently from others. I'm now starting to see that there's value in being the only person in the room to see an issue differently; while you shouldn't impose your beliefs on the entire room, you should make your voice heard.

Chapter Six: "A life of extravagant indulgence surrounded by stories, trails and ripe fruit"

- Going kiking with one of my best connections in Singapore, Niki
- Lots of apples and oranges as snacks!
- Starting out volunteering at KK Women and Children's hospital: Maybe there's no such thing as naturally being good with kids.
- Father's day and seeing the (mis)treatment of Singapore's migrant workers, then immediately texting Niki asking if I can intern at PBSG's Migrant Worker Law Center
- Ice cream as targeted pain therapy with my colleague Shambhavi after visiting Kranji Recreation Center

Chapter Seven: Am I a grain of sand on a beach or the tide that crashes against it?

- Nursing yourself to health and “self care” → I was feeling ill this week, and decided to take a sick day. I told my colleagues that it wasn’t so bad, but I still wasn’t feeling well. Normally I wouldn’t have taken a day off if I was only feeling slightly bad but would be worried that I’d feel worse the next day. I realized that I wasn’t acting protectively, but reactionary. I’d wait for things to get to their worse before I actually taking action.
- Walking slower, eating slower, disappearing slower → learning to slow down to stay longer, and be okay with that. Watching the rainfall from the porch, walking down Rangoon road looking at all the shops
- Home → “I could do anything. It was dizzying”. “I was connected by blood to no one in this world.” [Banana Yoshimoto’s kitchen and the definition of home]. Learning that freedom can feel like a liberating abyss, and that you have to sit with yourself in these moments
- “It’s a universal condition to not know everything about yourself” → my takeaway from the Airwallex workshop
- Infectious people → the MC from the Airwallex engagement who was so bold and so “herself”, that it made me smile.

Chapter Eight: On some level, you will always be the newbie

- Be a “first timer” with pride at the Fast and Free Run Club, and realizing that embracing being new fast can help you get through the feeling of newness faster
- My 5AM to 9AM Saturday run journey with Fast and Free; my one and only morning run with an amazing crew
- Realizing that Asia matters, Singapore matters, Singaporeans matter and Marginalized Singaporeans matter

Chapter Nine: Feeling what I’m used to, but not in the places I’m used to

- The Greek yogurt + Granola hijacking from the Bloomberg pantry (tasting the foods you are used to; how food can bring you back home), and laughing about it with my team
- Networking with people from Bloomberg only to think, Why am I talking to these people when they are half way around the world and people I’ll never see again? Why am I trying to make a good impression in front of people who don’t have a stake in my life? The answer: just because I can.
- Losing my voice at STEM Fest; from patrolling the back of the room shushing people during the GOH’s address to shouting instructions on how to put together the NFC key chains
- The painful goodbye to my best friend at KKH, Adyan. I want the world to hug and love this boy until I can come back to him

Chapter Ten: “Wait, things are getting good now!”

- The boy that does everything (to seem cool) from the ITE; the unexpectedly humbling UWS site visit
- Having to say goodbye, again. Why am I getting numb to my temporary existence in these places? Perhaps that’s life.
- Exploring Orchard Road with my UWS colleague Yaali, just so that we didn’t have to say goodbye yet

Chapter Eleven: Clawing through the last, painful stretch

- Starting at the Migrant Worker Law Center and shedding lots of tears because of the client’s stories
- Dinner with UWS work friends – it’s not over until it has to be!
- Who is “Madam”? → the men on the phone who’d call the MWC for help would call me Madam. Was it because I sounded white? Or mature? Or because I was a woman? Or because I was the one that might be able to help them? What does this mean for privilege, reinvention, an automatic global hierarchy and respect?

Chapter Twelve: Being a tourist with freedom, again

- Structures dictating wellness – weight lifted off my shoulders when I saw my sister in Singapore. I just felt less volatile
- Kindness comes in unexpected packages; my colleague at the MWLC taking me to lunch on my last day
- Mandir trips; I started going to the Mandir after work because they were on my way home. At this point, I realized that even though I don’t know “what I’m doing” at a Mandir

Chapter Thirteen (ish; a very short week): No way. We did it.

- The shoe struggle; trying to get shoes from the Nike store for my roommate as a thank you gift
- The painful second last day; saying goodbye to everyone, every sight that mattered to me (and not be burned by the intense 3PM sun in Tanglin)
- The slow last day
- Just do it (with your sister’s help); not being able to bring myself to book my Grab from my place in Singapore to the airport until my sister urged me to.
- Emotionally numb; this feeling of being a ghost, looking down at the life I’d built for myself and having to face that it indeed was temporary. As if I knew my life had changed, and I knew what I was leaving behind.