

Experience Abroad Reflection: Confronting Colonial Legacies in Global Research

Introduction

My journey as an international student, born in India, raised in Singapore, now studying in Toronto, took on profound meaning during my participation in the Laidlaw Scholars Programme. This reflection examines two transformative summers that fundamentally altered my understanding of global research dynamics, power structures in academia, and the complexities of ethical leadership development across cultural divides. Through fieldwork in Vanuatu investigating disaster recovery mechanisms and subsequent development of cross-cultural leadership programming, I encountered the uncomfortable reality that even well-intentioned academic work can perpetuate the very colonial structures it claims to critique.

The overarching theme of my experience was powerfully captured in the words of one Ni-Vanuatu community leader who told me: "You have come here to learn from us, but will we ever learn what you discovered about ourselves?" This question haunted me throughout both summers, forcing me to confront the fundamental inequities embedded in traditional research paradigms and international development work.

Summer I: Fieldwork in Vanuatu - Encountering Systemic Inequities

The Research Goal and Initial Expectations

In May 2023, I traveled to Vanuatu as part of the Reach Alliance research team to investigate the Unblocked Cash Project (UBC), a blockchain-powered disaster recovery initiative implemented by Oxfam. Our mission was clear: evaluate the effectiveness of digital cash transfers in enhancing community resilience and document best practices for humanitarian aid distribution. I approached this assignment with academic rigor and genuine humanitarian intentions, expecting to contribute to scholarship that would benefit vulnerable communities facing climate disasters.

What I encountered was far more complex than any theoretical framework had prepared me for. Vanuatu, despite being among the world's most disaster-prone nations, revealed communities with sophisticated resilience systems that had sustained them for generations. The Ni-Vanuatu people demonstrated collective problem-solving capabilities, resource-sharing networks, and adaptive strategies that far exceeded anything described in development literature. Yet our research framework positioned them as beneficiaries to be studied rather than experts to be consulted.

Key Stakeholder Insights and Cultural Discoveries

Our extensive fieldwork involved multiple stakeholder categories, each offering distinct perspectives on disaster recovery and community resilience.

Traditional Leaders and Community Networks

Village chiefs and community councils revealed governance systems that seamlessly integrated traditional authority with modern aid distribution. These leaders didn't simply "implement" the UBC program, they adapted it to existing social structures, ensuring that blockchain technology served community values rather than disrupting them. One chief explained how NFC cards were shared among extended family networks, transforming individual aid into collective support systems. This wasn't program deviation, it was cultural intelligence that our evaluation metrics failed to capture.

Local NGO Partners and Implementation Staff

Organizations like the Vanuatu Red Cross and local Oxfam staff provided crucial insights into the practical realities of humanitarian work. They described constant tensions between donor requirements for individual accountability and community preferences for collective resource management. These implementers had developed sophisticated strategies for navigating between external expectations and local practices, yet their expertise was rarely acknowledged in program documentation or academic publications.

Program Beneficiaries and Community Members

The 24,000 individuals who received UBC support shared stories that challenged every assumption I held about vulnerability and resilience. Elderly recipients described using their NFC cards to support young families, while people with disabilities leveraged newfound financial independence to contribute to community projects. Women spoke about how digital payments allowed them to maintain traditional reciprocity networks while accessing new forms of economic participation. These weren't simply program outcomes, they were expressions of cultural values that predated any external intervention.

Government Officials and Policy Makers

Meetings with the Natural Disaster Management Office (NDMO) and provincial administrators revealed the complex political dynamics surrounding foreign aid interventions. Officials expressed frustration with being excluded from program planning while bearing long-term responsibility for community welfare. Their concerns about aid dependency and erosion of local capacity-building efforts highlighted fundamental tensions between emergency response and sustainable development that our research framework inadequately addressed.

The Uncomfortable Recognition of Academic Extraction

As I documented these rich insights and prepared to analyze them through established academic frameworks, I began recognizing a disturbing pattern. Despite my genuine commitment to highlighting community strengths and program benefits, I was participating in a familiar form of knowledge extraction. Communities were sharing sophisticated understandings of resilience, adaptation, and social organization that had developed over generations, yet our research treated these as raw material for academic processing rather than complete knowledge systems deserving recognition.

The irony became inescapable: I was studying a program designed to address colonial patterns in aid distribution while simultaneously engaging in colonial patterns of knowledge production. The communities I interviewed possessed deep expertise in disaster recovery, community mobilization, and technological adaptation, but our methodology positioned them as subjects rather than collaborators. This realization was particularly acute given my own position as someone from the Global South working within Global North institutional frameworks.

Cultural Competencies Developed Through Immersion

1. Deep Contextual Listening and Adaptive Communication

Working across multiple languages and cultural contexts required developing sophisticated listening skills that went beyond verbal communication. I learned to interpret silences, understand the significance of indirect responses, and recognize when my questions reflected assumptions that didn't translate to local contexts. Community members often responded to direct questions about program effectiveness with stories about family relationships or traditional practices, responses that initially seemed tangential but proved central to understanding how innovations were actually integrated into daily life.

This experience taught me that cultural competency requires abandoning preconceived frameworks and allowing community perspectives to reshape research questions. When elderly participants described NFC cards in terms of traditional gift exchange rather than financial transactions, they were providing crucial insights into how technology gains social legitimacy within existing cultural systems.

2. Recognizing and Navigating Power Dynamics in Research Relationships

Every interview highlighted the inherent power imbalances in international research. Despite efforts to create comfortable, respectful dialogue, I remained an outsider with institutional affiliations, research funding, and the ability to represent community voices in academic publications. Participants were generous with their time and insights, but they had little control over how their contributions would be interpreted, analyzed, or disseminated.

Learning to acknowledge these dynamics explicitly became essential for ethical engagement. I began opening interviews by explaining not just how data would be used, but who would benefit from the research and how community members could access final publications. This transparency revealed the limitations of traditional research ethics frameworks, which focus on preventing harm rather than ensuring genuine reciprocity.

3. Understanding Resilience as Cultural Preservation Rather Than Individual Adaptation

The most profound shift in my understanding involved recognizing resilience not as something communities lacked and needed to develop, but as something they possessed and actively maintained through cultural practices. When UBC participants shared NFC cards with non-eligible community members, they weren't violating program rules, they were preserving social cohesion systems that provided more sustainable security than individual aid could offer.

This insight challenged deficit-based development narratives that position Global South communities as vulnerable and requiring external support. Instead, I learned to recognize community responses to disasters as expressions of sophisticated risk management systems that had evolved over generations. This competency proved essential for understanding why some aid interventions succeed while others fail.

Confronting the Paradox of Well-Intentioned Harm

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of my Vanuatu experience was recognizing how my research, despite genuine humanitarian motivations, participated in ongoing colonial dynamics. The knowledge I was gathering would primarily benefit academic careers and institutional reputations in the Global North, while communities that shared their expertise would likely see minimal direct benefit from scholarly publications.

This paradox extended beyond individual research projects to encompass broader patterns in international development and humanitarian aid. Programs like UBC, while providing genuine benefits to recipients, also generated data and insights that enhanced the reputations and funding streams of implementing organizations and technology companies based in wealthy countries. The blockchain innovations that garnered international recognition for humanitarian efficiency had been developed through collaboration with communities that remained largely invisible in success stories.

Understanding these dynamics didn't mean abandoning cross-cultural research, but it required approaching such work with far greater humility, transparency, and commitment to reciprocity. It means recognizing that ethical research involves more than avoiding harm, it requires actively working to ensure that knowledge creation processes benefit the communities whose expertise makes them possible.

Summer II: Transforming Insights into Ethical Leadership Programming

The Challenge of Translating Critical Awareness into Action

My second summer focused on developing leadership programming that could integrate insights from my Vanuatu research into educational experiences for diverse international audiences. This work required grappling with fundamental questions about how to discuss colonial legacies in development work without overwhelming participants, how to center Global South perspectives without tokenizing them, and how to create space for critical reflection without paralyzing guilt among participants from privileged backgrounds.

The central challenge was designing programming that acknowledged the problematic aspects of international development work while still preparing leaders to engage ethically across cultural divides. This required developing new competencies in curriculum design, facilitation, and cross-cultural communication that could hold complex contradictions without demanding simple resolutions.

Developing Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Approaches

1. Creating Space for Multiple Ways of Knowing

Working with emerging leaders from different continents, educational backgrounds, and professional experiences taught me that effective cross-cultural education requires constant adaptation. Frameworks that resonated with participants from post-conflict contexts might alienate those from rapidly developing economies. Analytical tools that seemed inclusive to participants from majority cultures could feel exclusionary to those from marginalized communities.

I learned to design programming that could accommodate multiple perspectives simultaneously without requiring false consensus. This meant creating activities where participants could disagree, challenge content, and bring their own analytical frameworks rather than simply absorbing predetermined lessons. It required becoming comfortable with not being the expert in the room and instead facilitating learning processes where participants could learn from each other.

2. Addressing Positionality and Power Dynamics Explicitly

My own complex identity as someone from India working in Canadian institutions became a case study for helping participants understand how positionality affects perspective. By sharing my process of recognizing how my Vanuatu research reproduced colonial dynamics, I could model the kind of reflexive practice I hoped to encourage in others. This vulnerability was uncomfortable but necessary for creating authentic learning environments.

I developed skills in facilitating conversations about privilege and power without reproducing those same dynamics within the learning environment. This meant paying attention to whose voices were being heard, whose perspectives were being centered, and how to create opportunities for marginalized viewpoints to be valued rather than silenced.

3. Integrating Systems Analysis with Personal Reflection

The program design process required me to make complex theoretical concepts accessible without oversimplifying them. Ideas like structural racism, decolonization, and global inequity needed to be presented in ways that participants could understand and apply regardless of their previous exposure to these frameworks. This meant using concrete examples, interactive exercises, and reflection activities rather than relying on academic lectures.

I learned to balance individual reflection with systems analysis, helping participants understand how personal experiences connected to broader patterns of inequality. This approach prevented the individualization of structural problems while still acknowledging personal agency and responsibility within larger systems.

Navigating Cultural Differences in Learning Styles and Engagement

Working with participants from diverse educational traditions required developing flexibility in pedagogical approaches. Some participants thrived in collaborative discussion formats, while others preferred individual reflection followed by structured sharing. Some were comfortable challenging authority figures directly, while others expressed disagreement more indirectly.

I developed competency in reading group dynamics and adapting activities in real time to ensure inclusive participation. This meant having multiple versions of exercises available and being willing to abandon planned activities when they weren't serving the learning objectives. It required understanding that effective facilitation involves responding to participant needs rather than adhering to predetermined curricula.

Addressing the Sustainability and Scalability Paradox

One of the most complex challenges was addressing how leadership development programs themselves can perpetuate global inequities. Many international leadership programs inadvertently promote Western models of leadership while marginalizing other approaches. They often select participants who already have significant privilege, provide them with additional credentials and networks, and then position them as change agents in contexts where structural barriers remain unchanged.

I had to critically examine every aspect of our program design, from selection criteria to assessment methods, to identify where we might be reproducing rather than challenging existing power structures. This required ongoing dialogue with participants about program limitations and collective brainstorming about how leadership development could be reimagined to serve social justice rather than individual advancement.

Conclusion: Transformed Understanding of Global Engagement

My two summers abroad fundamentally altered my understanding of what ethical international work requires. Rather than simply developing technical skills or cultural awareness, I confronted the ways that well-intentioned academic and development work can perpetuate the very inequities it aims to address. This recognition has been uncomfortable but necessary for my development as someone committed to more equitable global relationships.

The Ni-Vanuatu communities taught me that resilience isn't something people lack and need to develop, it's something they possess in abundance but that is often invisible to outside observers operating within colonial frameworks. The participants in leadership programming taught me that authentic development requires creating space for multiple ways of knowing and being rather than imposing single models of effectiveness.

These insights have committed me to approaching all international work with greater humility, transparency, and accountability. This means acknowledging power dynamics explicitly, ensuring that benefits flow to communities being engaged, and remaining open to having my assumptions challenged by the people I work with. It means recognizing that privilege comes with responsibilities and that using it ethically requires ongoing learning and reflexivity.

My experience abroad didn't simply develop my cultural competencies, it transformed my understanding of what ethical global engagement demands. This transformation continues as I encounter new contexts, perspectives, and challenges, guided by the wisdom of communities who trusted me with their knowledge and the ongoing responsibility to use that trust ethically.