

From Research to Ethical Global Citizenship: My Laidlaw Scholars Journey

A reflection on two years of transformation through research, leadership development, and confronting uncomfortable truths about global inequity.

Introduction: The Journey I Didn't Expect

When I first applied to the Laidlaw Scholars Programme, I thought I understood what leadership meant. As an international student who had navigated multiple educational systems, from India to Singapore to Toronto, I believed my cross-cultural experience had prepared me for global citizenship. I expected to conduct research, develop some professional skills, and add a prestigious program to my CV. What I didn't expect was to have my fundamental assumptions about research, development work, and ethical leadership completely dismantled and rebuilt.

The Laidlaw Scholars Programme exceeded my expectations not by confirming what I thought I knew, but by revealing how much I didn't know, particularly about my own role in perpetuating systems I claimed to want to change. This reflection examines how two years of intensive research, leadership development, and global engagement transformed my understanding of what it means to lead ethically in an interconnected but unequal world.

Experience: When Reality Disrupts Expectations

The Shock of Recognition

My most profound learning came not from success, but from the uncomfortable recognition that my well-intentioned research in Vanuatu was reproducing colonial patterns I had only understood theoretically. Standing in Port Vila, interviewing communities with sophisticated disaster recovery systems, I realized I was participating in knowledge extraction, gathering insights from some of the world's most climate-vulnerable communities to benefit primarily Global North institutions and my own academic career.

This realization was particularly jarring given my identity as someone from the Global South. I had assumed my background would insulate me from perpetuating colonial dynamics, but instead discovered that my position within Canadian academic institutions made me complicit in systems of inequality regardless of my origins or intentions. The irony was inescapable: I was studying a blockchain aid program designed to address colonial aid distribution while engaging in colonial knowledge production.

Adapting to Uncomfortable Truths

The challenge wasn't just intellectual, it was deeply personal. How do you continue research when you recognize its problematic nature? How do you maintain relationships with communities when you're uncertain how they'll benefit from your work? These questions forced me to develop new approaches to ethical engagement that went far beyond traditional research ethics protocols.

Interestingly, similar ethical dilemmas arise in my engineering background working on semiconductor IP. When developing technology that could be used for surveillance, military applications, or that might exacerbate digital divides, the same fundamental questions emerge: Who benefits from this innovation? What are the unintended consequences? How do you maintain integrity when the applications of your work extend beyond your control or original intentions?

In both contexts, international development research and semiconductor engineering, I learned that technical expertise comes with ethical responsibilities that can't be resolved through individual good intentions alone. The systems that determine how technology gets deployed often operate independently of the values of those who create it.

I learned to begin interviews by explicitly discussing power dynamics, to share preliminary findings with communities for their feedback, and to acknowledge the limitations of my ability to ensure reciprocal benefit. This transparency was uncomfortable but necessary for maintaining integrity in cross-cultural research relationships. Similarly, in engineering contexts, I've learned to advocate for ethical impact assessments and to engage with questions about end-use applications rather than claiming technical neutrality.

Experiences That Continue to Influence Me

Two moments from my Vanuatu fieldwork continue to shape my approach to all international work:

First, when a community elder asked me, "You have come here to learn from us, but will we ever learn what you discovered about ourselves?" This question haunts every research project I consider, forcing me to examine whether knowledge creation processes genuinely serve the communities whose expertise makes them possible.

Second, witnessing how Ni-Vanuatu communities adapted blockchain technology to fit their existing social networks rather than changing their practices to match the technology. This demonstrated that resilience isn't something communities lack and need to develop, it's something they possess in abundance but that often remains invisible to outside observers operating within colonial frameworks.

Changed Ambitions

My experience fundamentally altered my career aspirations. Initially focused on traditional development work or policy research, I now prioritize supporting community-controlled initiatives and using academic platforms to challenge rather than legitimize existing power structures. This shift isn't just professional, it reflects a transformed understanding of how change happens and who should control change processes.

Team: Learning from Unexpected Encounters

The Global Laidlaw Community

The programme connected me with scholars from disciplines and backgrounds I would never have encountered otherwise. Working alongside peers researching everything from renewable energy to mental health interventions in post-conflict contexts taught me that leadership challenges are simultaneously context-specific and globally interconnected.

My cohort included individuals who challenged my assumptions about development, research ethics, and social change. A scholar I met at Leeds working on refugee integration helped me understand how displacement creates both vulnerability and resilience. Another scholar at the conference studying agricultural innovation showed me how traditional knowledge systems can inform technological solutions. These relationships taught me that effective global leadership requires ongoing learning from people with different lived experiences.

Collaboration Across Difference

Perhaps the most valuable skill I developed was learning to collaborate across significant differences in perspective, methodology, and worldview without requiring consensus or false unity. During leadership development sessions, I often found myself in dialogue with peers who had fundamentally different approaches to social change, some focused on policy reform, others on community organizing, still others on technological innovation.

Learning to find common ground while maintaining intellectual integrity requires developing comfort with complexity and contradiction. This competency proved essential for designing inclusive leadership programming that could serve participants from diverse backgrounds without imposing single models of effectiveness.

Professional Network as Learning Community

The relationships I built extend far beyond networking opportunities, they've become a learning community that continues to challenge and support my development. When I struggled with ethical dilemmas in my Vanuatu research, conversations with fellow scholars helped me think through alternatives. When designing leadership programming, their feedback helped me identify blind spots and improve accessibility.

This network has shown me the importance of surrounding myself with people who will challenge my thinking rather than simply affirming my existing beliefs. It's taught me that sustainable leadership development requires ongoing accountability relationships with people who share similar values but bring different perspectives and expertise.

Individual: Discovering Leadership Through Limitation

Recognizing Strengths in Unexpected Places

The programme helped me identify leadership strengths I hadn't recognized before. My ability to facilitate difficult conversations about power, privilege, and inequality emerged through necessity when designing cross-cultural leadership programming. I discovered I could create spaces where participants felt safe to examine their own assumptions while being challenged to think differently.

My experience navigating multiple cultural contexts, from India to Singapore to Canada, became a strength when working with international cohorts. I could help participants understand how cultural background shapes perspective while avoiding cultural essentialism or stereotyping.

Technical and Non-Technical Skill Development

Conducting research in Vanuatu required developing sophisticated interview techniques for cross-cultural contexts, learning to interpret non-verbal communication across cultural differences, and understanding how to build trust with communities who had legitimate reasons to be skeptical of outside researchers.

The programme also developed my analytical capabilities, particularly in recognizing how individual experiences connect to broader systems of power and inequality. I learned to examine local issues within global patterns of colonialism, capitalism, and cultural imperialism, a competency that proved essential for understanding why well-intentioned interventions often fail to create sustainable change.

Character Development Through Strategic Humility and Intellectual Honesty

The character trait I worked hardest on developing was what I now understand as strategic humility, genuine recognition of the limitations of my perspective and knowledge. Rather than positioning myself as an expert on development or leadership, I learned to approach cross-cultural work as an opportunity for mutual learning where I could contribute specific skills while recognizing that others possessed expertise I lacked.

This development was significantly influenced by the Oxford Character Project, which fundamentally reframed how I understand personal strengths and weaknesses. The biggest learning was recognizing that strengths and weaknesses are actually values that, in deficit or excess, can manifest as either vice or virtue. Nothing is inherently good or bad, it depends on the combination of values and how much of each you express in different contexts.

For example, my analytical nature could manifest as insightful critical thinking when balanced with empathy and humility, but could become destructive criticism when disconnected from relationship and care. My commitment to justice could drive meaningful social change when combined with strategic thinking, but could become self-righteousness when lacking in compassion or nuance.

This competency involved developing comfort with uncertainty and complexity rather than seeking simple answers to complicated problems. It meant acknowledging when I didn't understand something, seeking clarification from people with relevant lived experience, and being willing to revise my analysis when presented with new information.

The development was uncomfortable because it required moving beyond good intentions to examine how my work, regardless of motivation, participated in broader patterns of knowledge extraction and resource distribution. I had to learn to hold personal responsibility and systemic analysis simultaneously without using either to escape the demands of the other.

Habitualized Practices for Ethical Reflexivity and Accountability

I've developed ongoing practices of ethical reflection that have become habitual, what I now recognize as ethical reflexivity and accountability. This goes beyond individual good intentions to examine how my work participates in broader patterns of knowledge extraction, resource distribution, and power dynamics.

These practices include: explicitly discussing power dynamics in cross-cultural relationships, seeking feedback from communities affected by my work, being transparent about who benefits from knowledge creation processes, and developing accountability relationships with people who can challenge my assumptions and blind spots. I'm committed to modifying approaches based on community input rather than simply documenting perspectives for external audiences.

These practices feel essential now, I can't imagine engaging in international work without them, and they represent a fundamental shift from viewing ethical behavior as individual virtue to understanding it as ongoing relational accountability.

Critical Thinking: Developing Systems Thinking and Structural Analysis

Research as Catalyst for Deeper Analysis

My independent research on the Unblocked Cash Project served as a catalyst for developing more sophisticated analytical capabilities. Initially focused on evaluating program effectiveness, I learned to examine humanitarian aid within broader patterns of global inequality and colonial legacy.

This shift required developing what I now recognize as systems thinking and structural analysis, the ability to analyze individual experiences within broader systems of power and inequality. Rather than viewing problems as isolated technical challenges, I learned to examine how local issues connected to global patterns of colonialism, capitalism, and cultural imperialism.

Academic Virtues Through Uncomfortable Questions

The programme developed what I consider essential academic virtues: intellectual humility about the limitations of my perspective, ethical reflexivity about my role in knowledge production, and analytical rigor that examines assumptions rather than simply applying established frameworks.

This analytical competency proved essential for understanding why well-intentioned interventions often fail to create sustainable change. It helped me recognize how individual actions, regardless of motivation, operate within structures that may limit or redirect their impact.

These virtues emerged through confronting questions I couldn't answer satisfactorily: How can research partnerships genuinely benefit communities rather than extracting knowledge for external use? How can individuals from privileged positions support rather than speak for marginalized communities? Wrestling with these questions without demanding simple answers has become central to my analytical approach.

The Ongoing Challenge of Ethical Engagement

My experiences left me with more questions than answers about how to engage ethically in international work. These persistent questions include: How can research partnerships be structured to genuinely benefit communities rather than extracting knowledge for external use? How can leadership development programs avoid reproducing the same inequities they claim to address? How can individuals from privileged positions use their access and resources to support rather than speak for marginalized communities?

These questions don't have simple answers, but wrestling with them has become central to how I approach any cross-cultural work. They've taught me that cultural competency isn't a skill to be mastered but an ongoing commitment to learning, reflection, and accountability.

Translating Skills and Experiences: The Value of Ethical Leadership

Articulating Value to Potential Employers

The Laidlaw Programme has equipped me with a distinctive set of competencies that I can articulate clearly to potential employers and graduate programs. Through conducting international fieldwork, I developed sophisticated research skills that encompass complex stakeholder mapping, cross-cultural interview techniques, and systems analysis of humanitarian aid programs within broader patterns of global inequality. This research foundation supports my ability to understand interventions within their full contextual complexity.

Complementing these analytical capabilities, the programme fostered crucial leadership development through designing and facilitating cross-cultural programming for diverse international audiences. This work required developing a sophisticated understanding of group dynamics, conflict resolution, and inclusive pedagogy, skills that translate directly to professional environments where collaboration across differences is essential.

Perhaps most importantly, the programme cultivated my capacity for critical analysis that examines individual experiences within broader systems of power and inequality. This perspective is essential for understanding why interventions succeed or fail in different contexts and enables me to approach professional challenges with systemic awareness. Alongside this analytical framework, I developed practices of ethical reflexivity, the ongoing examination of personal and professional complicity in systems of inequality, which I believe is crucial for sustainable social change work.

If I were to describe the programme's value to a younger version of myself in one sentence, I would say: "The Laidlaw Scholars Programme will teach you that ethical leadership requires not just good intentions, but the courage to examine how your actions participate in systems of inequality and the commitment to work for change even when it's uncomfortable."

Vision for Ethical Leadership and Impact

My vision for making impact as an ethical leader centers on supporting community-controlled initiatives rather than imposing external solutions. This means using my academic and institutional access to amplify marginalized voices rather than speaking for them, and working to transform systems of knowledge production and resource distribution rather than simply operating within them more sensitively.

Realizing this vision requires ongoing accountability to communities affected by my work, transparency about who benefits from knowledge creation processes, and willingness to have my assumptions and practices challenged by people with different lived experiences. These commitments shape how I understand the core concepts that drive ethical leadership.

Evolving Understanding of Moral Courage, Resilience, and Fairness

The programme has fundamentally shaped my understanding of moral courage, resilience, and fairness. Moral courage, I've learned, involves not just standing up for what's right, but examining how you might be participating in what's wrong, even with good intentions. This includes being willing to acknowledge complicity and work for systemic change rather than seeking individual absolution.

My conception of resilience has similarly evolved to recognize that communities already possess sophisticated resilience systems that often remain invisible to outside observers. My role becomes supporting these existing capabilities rather than imposing external models of capacity building. This shift in perspective has profound implications for how I approach professional collaboration and community engagement.

Fairness, meanwhile, extends beyond individual ethical behavior to encompass structural transformation. While individual ethical behavior remains necessary, I now understand that fairness requires working to transform systems that create inequality rather than simply operating within them more ethically.

Professional Trajectory and Goals

These evolved understandings inform my professional trajectory in engineering over the coming years. I want to work in engineering while creating spaces for people that look like me, women from the Global South, and bring concepts of ethical leadership to engineering firms, building on the emerging leaders program I created through the Laidlaw Programme.

In the next three years, I aim to complete graduate studies in engineering with research that genuinely serves community priorities rather than academic career advancement, while developing ongoing collaborations with communities I've worked with to ensure that knowledge sharing flows in multiple

directions. This foundation will prepare me to understand how engineering solutions can be developed with rather than for the communities they're meant to serve.

Within five years, I plan to establish myself within engineering firms where I can advocate for inclusive practices and ethical approaches to project development. This involves working to transform engineering institutions to be more accountable to Global South communities and ensuring that women like me have pathways to leadership roles. I want to create mentorship networks and leadership development programs similar to my emerging leaders initiative, but specifically designed for the engineering context.

Looking ahead ten years, I hope to have contributed to alternative models of engineering practice that challenge rather than reproduce colonial patterns of technological development and implementation. This means engineering solutions that emerge from community knowledge and priorities, rather than imposing external technical fixes. Throughout this trajectory, I'm committed to maintaining accountability relationships with communities that keep me grounded in ethical practice rather than simply good intentions.

Navigating Tensions and Building Confidence

My primary hesitation involves navigating the tension between working within existing systems to create change while not becoming co-opted by those same systems. The challenge lies in maintaining critical analysis while building the relationships necessary for institutional transformation, a balance that requires constant vigilance and community accountability.

Despite this challenge, I feel confident about several foundational elements of my approach. I'm committed to ongoing learning and accountability, willing to be challenged and changed by the communities I work with, and understand that ethical leadership requires sustained effort rather than individual achievements. These commitments provide a stable foundation for navigating the complexities ahead.

Resources for Continued Development

The Laidlaw network remains crucial for ongoing accountability and learning as I move forward. I'm also actively building relationships with scholars and practitioners working on decolonial approaches to research and development, participating in communities of practice focused on ethical international engagement, and maintaining connections with communities I've worked with to ensure ongoing reciprocity in learning relationships. These networks provide the support and accountability necessary for sustaining ethical practice over time.

Conclusion: Leadership as Ongoing Transformation

The Laidlaw Scholars Programme transformed my understanding of leadership from individual skill development to collective accountability for systemic change. It taught me that ethical global citizenship requires not just cross-cultural competency, but ongoing examination of how privilege operates and commitment to using access ethically.

This transformation continues as I encounter new contexts, perspectives, and challenges. The programme gave me not just skills and experiences, but a framework for ongoing learning that prioritizes community wisdom, acknowledges complicity, and works toward justice even when it's uncomfortable.

Most importantly, it taught me that leadership development is not about becoming someone who has answers, but someone who can live productively with difficult questions while working collaboratively toward more equitable solutions. This understanding will guide my approach to global citizenship throughout my career and beyond.

The communities in Vanuatu, my fellow Laidlaw scholars, and the programme facilitators all contributed to this transformation. I'm grateful for their trust, challenge, and support as I continue learning what it means to lead ethically in an unequal world.