

# LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

ALSALUS: Mobilising healthcare equity using a public-private partnership

LiA Reflections — Laidlaw Scholarship Programme, Summer 2



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# Introduction



Hi! I am Katherine, an incoming third year Human Scientist at the University of Oxford and Laidlaw scholar. For my Leadership in Action project, I spent six weeks at INCAE Business School in Costa Rica. Located just outside of the capital city and province of San Jose, I was based on campus, staying in a lovely 'casita' about a 5 minute walk away from my office, the cafeteria which served delicious Costa Rican food (fried plantain and gallo pinto being firm favourites), and the hub of networking, teaching and development that goes on here.

Specifically, I was working in the Cátedra Strachan de Inversion Social, the branch of the School focused on social investment, with large parallels to the Laidlaw Foundation as it centres on researching and producing materials about successful leadership within social investment and philanthropy in Central America!

Living and working in Costa Rica has been such a fulfilling experience. I have learnt so much; not only about healthcare development, public-private partnerships and breast cancer, but also about kindness, cultural respect, humanity and how I fit into this vast web of life!

I would like to emphasise my thanks to J. Ignacio Sánchez and Profe Andrea Prado for their guidance and support throughout my six weeks here. These thanks extend to all my colleagues at INCAE too, for organising hikes and sharing their travel experiences, for creating such a friendly campus and for patiently practising in Spanish with me. Living alone in a foreign country for six weeks is not an easy experience, but everybody here has made it an experience I will never forget and always carry with me.

I am also incredibly grateful to the Oxford SDG Impact Lab and the Laidlaw Foundation for the opportunity to be part of the inaugural cohort of Laidlaw Scholars in Oxford these past two years. It has been an inspiring and thought-provoking experience, and taught me lots about myself in multiple dimensions. I feel that the programme has highlighted to myself who I am and how I can support and strengthen my values, character and passions.

*Leadership themes: humility, integrity, courage, accountability, drive, transcendence.*

ENTRO LATINOAMERICANO PARA LA COMPETITIVIDAD  
Y EL DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE



# Project outline and ALSALUS

INCAE runs the CAHI Jeffe Fellowship programme – a programme specifically tailored to leaders working in healthcare development. Under this programme, innovators are guided through project development and sustainable business to improve healthcare equity in Latin America. My project focused on creating a usable teaching resource for this programme, centred on a case of a public-private partnership for development. There are currently limited teaching cases available regarding this very important arrangement, with INCAE using a case from over 20 years ago. In business teaching, it is important that students have the opportunity to apply theory to real-life examples that they can relate to. To integrate this into my case project, discussion of public-private partnerships for development centred on ALSALUS, a mobile mammography unit in Costa Rica.

ALSALUS' mission is to improve access to breast cancer screening for women in rural communities in Costa Rica. Breast cancer is an increasingly prominent challenge for Costa Rican healthcare services due to the nascent aging population, wide inequality between different provinces and rural-urban areas, and changing lifestyle habits. Cases are increasing, yet the health system is already overrun and shaped by inequalities in mammography unit distribution which mean women in rural areas consistently lose out on early detection and thus the chance of improved survival prospects. Furthermore, rural areas tend to have poor infrastructure and transport connections, and along with significant financial and time poverty experienced by many rural women, these limitations mean access to breast cancer screening is negligible for these women. Consequently, healthcare inequity has proliferated in Costa Rica.

Inspired by these challenges, ALSALUS brings screening to women in their communities, operating via a fixed route with local health and community leaders notified in advance such that women have time to prepare. I was really inspired to learn about the centrality of a definition of health that does not just encompass the woman's physical status – ALSALUS was designed to alleviate constraints on emotional, financial and social health such that wellbeing was produced holistically. This included communication in Indigenous languages, culturally specific engagement with local leaders and recognition of the importance of accessibility. This is an important message to get across in the process of health promotion and creation, and it was an honour to work on this case and convey this, alongside other critical messages for sustainable health development, through my project.

Through the case I produced, I was also able to discuss the emerging use of AI in healthcare, specifically whether the partnership should and could integrate AI into their work. I found this to be incredibly thought-provoking, encapsulating both logistic and ethical tensions that will undoubtedly be important for the CAHI fellows to incorporate in their own work.

The output of my project has been to produce a teaching case study, appendix with diagrams and infographics, and an accompanying teaching note to guide professors leading the class. These will be published in the Harvard Business Review to increase access, and the impact my research can have in other business and healthcare programmes.

# Life on campus!



A typical Costa Rican breakfast:

- gallo pinto (rice and beans)
- huevos revueltos (scrambled eggs)
- huevos fritos/rancheros
- platano maduro (fried plantain!)
- black coffee
- papaya

Having grown up in the UK where food culture is rather globalised, I really found it fascinating to be in a culture with such a fixed way of eating. Lunch and dinner are typically very similar foods to this as well! I really began to see the value food can play in identity, and as someone looking to work in global health in the future, I am grateful for this exposure because culture-specific nutrition and awareness is imperative for respectful policies.

It was rainy season throughout my 6 weeks here. Most days there were amazing storms, pounding down rain at 2-4pm like clockwork!



Me, outside my office at 6pm. I was surprised how early the sun sets here!

# Leadership lessons and challenges

Looking back at my emotions when I arrived in Costa Rica is quite moving. On the surface, there was little time for fear – two days after a busy Oxford term I found myself sat in Heathrow, soon to be on the other side of the world! I'd said a fleeting hello and goodbye to my family and friends and it felt like those 48 hours were a period of constant movement: packing, unpacking, repacking. Those around me spoke of the excitement I must be feeling, how incredible it was I was doing this all on my own, of the varied and eye-opening experiences I was bound to have. I suppose that was what it seemed like: here I was, 19 and independent, off on the trip of a lifetime! Internally, however, I did not want to be independent at that moment. I was tired, sad that my reunion with my family and home friends was dangled in front of me, and nervous for the six weeks ahead. Of course, I was looking forward to completing my project as I've always been interested in public health, as well as getting to meet new people, but I was also daunted by the fact that this was going to be very outside of my comfort zone.

Now, normally I have no problem pushing my comfort zone, and actually rather enjoy it, which is probably why my family was so confused by my somewhat reserved excitement for the trip ahead. Here, I realised my first leadership lesson: above all, courage is the ability to trust yourself. I have felt like I've pushed myself in the past, but my feelings before coming to Costa Rica revealed to me that perhaps in many of those scenarios, I always believed I could do it. In my tired state, what was holding me back from true excitement about my trip was lack of self-belief: would I be able to survive six weeks without friends or family in-person, without a routine, speaking in a different language? How would I fit in at a business school, when I have no experience in this subject?

The answer came in the form of one of my favourite quotes by Charlie Wardle: “A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because its trust is not on the branch but on its own wings”. Even though I had no prior experience for the specific situation I was about to find myself in, I should have trusted in my ability to learn, and adapt to challenges as they come. Things might go wrong, I might be unable to communicate exactly as I want in Spanish, I might be confused by business-school jargon, and I might feel lonely. However, I know now that I can trust in my character that I will get through it. It is courageous to have that faith in yourself, especially now that we are consistently exposed to everyone’s successes in the media and notice the ways we are not like them, as if these are flaws. In the future, I would like to remember this lesson and allow myself to embrace courage amidst the fear and worry.

In my leadership style, this is important because I greatly value the fluid and dynamic nature of situations, and the necessary fact that being human is a constant state of learning. Tackling a problem with a team will always involve some uncertainty, and I believe this needs to be faced with excitement for the learning opportunities ahead, generating both respect and a sense of empowerment within the team. Letting yourself learn and leaning into this vulnerability also encourages others to create supportive environments. In my LiA I experienced this with my supervisor and colleagues patiently speaking with me in Spanish, helping my skills develop and my confidence grow. Here, I found that humility and courage go hand in hand.

Another lesson that I will carry with me from this trip is the importance of transcendence. I have often been praised for my drive and accountability, as these have given me a strong work-ethic and motivation to always complete tasks. However, through my research I realised that these traits can also leave me hyper-fixated when things do not go to plan. In my LiA, I faced many delays in trying to organise interviews with key stakeholders. This was greatly frustrating, as to me this seemed the crucial next-step in progressing my work. Nevertheless, this rigidity actually stopped me from making any progress at all, forgetting the autonomy I had and the ability to work around these obstacles. For creative and purposive work, I learnt it is valuable to take a step back and focus on doing things that are not the ‘best case scenario’ but are still helpful.

Throughout my LiA, I was inspired by the active collaboration central to my project. It was really motivating to see how the national health service, a private hospital/NGO, and a high-end supermarket came together to be more than the sum of their parts through strategic collaboration, allowing complex healthcare challenges to be targeted. Researching this public-private partnership meant I interviewed a wide variety of stakeholders of different perspectives, yet all were willing to share their information in the name of helping other leaders create other projects for sustainable health development. Typically, business is presented as cut-throat and competitive, and there is a general suggestion that leadership should follow this pattern too. Engaging with business and healthcare leaders whose priorities were different emphasised that I do not have to sacrifice my values and integrity to make tangible change.

Inspired by this, and starting to get comfortable speaking and listening to myself after multiple weeks alone (!), I began to focus more on who I am. I wanted to act with greater connectedness to my present values, away from the infiltration of social media and my own worries about others' opinions or indeed those of my past and future. Nature is often praised for its grounding capabilities, and going on this journey in Costa Rica certainly allowed me to enact this. I was fortunate enough to spend most of my weekends travelling to different parts of the country, engaging with local food, culture and wildlife. Practising being present is important in my leadership, as it allows me to address the situation at hand, developing attuned and relevant solutions.

Costa Rica is a small country, but in my short time here I experienced multiple different environments: the expansive, flat beaches of the Pacific coast, the crashing waves and delicious food from the Caribbean, the cloud forest of Monteverde, and the rainforest in La Fortuna next to a volcano! It was incredible to be surrounded by these landscapes and so many passionate people. I really got to understand how practices like the global food trade and ecotourism intersect with and shape communities here. From visiting coffee farms and local sodas (traditional Costa Rican restaurants) to white water rafting on nature's rollercoasters, I appreciated my position as a global citizen, and the ripple effects one's life can have on the surrounding world.

Ultimately, these professional and personal experiences cemented an interest in leadership for the community, whether it be local or global. My experience throughout my LiA affirmed my desire to complete a MSc and future career in public health, with a specific focus in health promotion to foster sustainable practices that aid both the patient and the infrastructure. I am extremely grateful for the opportunities provided to me by INCAE, the Laidlaw Foundation and the Oxford SDG Impact Lab, and look forward to a future of meaningful action that contributes to the inspiring work these institutions promote.

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