

Laidlaw Programme Reflective Report: LIA

Scholar Report

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Description of the LIA Project conducted:

This summer 2025, I have been sponsored by the Laidlaw Foundation to support a grass-roots educational venture named ‘Star Top Community School’. This educational venture is a community school located in a compound in Lusaka, Zambia. It aims to produce learners with academic excellence and build them spiritually and morally. Star Top Community School fills an educational gap within a specific area of the compound, to help displaced learners to reach their full potential. This project initially destined for St. Andrews scholars, was brought up to the attention of my cohort in University of Leeds in November 2024. I was assisted by the St. Andrews Laidlaw coordinator at that time, Catriona Wilson. Following on with, the new coordinator, Celina O'Connor. I had the pleasure to share some insights with a fellow scholar that followed on, in this project after me, Eoin David Williams.



{Picture: First arrival at the school}

How has the project you have been undertaking been impactful or important on you?

The project has been impactful due to the immense life lessons that I took from it. Firstly, starting from the concept of leaving a legacy. I had the opportunity to conversate

with the assistant head principal, Isaac. That time he explained to me, the objective of leaving a mark, which he mentioned with the word "legacy". Through his point of view and during the project, he mentioned that before leaving this life, it is important to leave a mark for the future generations. Leaving a legacy helps the future generations to understand what kind of people we have been. And how we have made a difference while living. Since then, I realised that I desire that people one day, when they will hear the name "Cothney", they will know what kind of person I have been. As a result of the good and impactful things done in my life, I want to be remembered. This has been the strongest concept grasp while I was there.

Throughout the different phases of the project, the aspect of building resilience, it has been impactful. Firstly, while working with kids. The resilience to teach from 7 in the morning, to 15 in the afternoon, it has been an incredible bootcamp for my patience. I was committed to keep my stamina and my energy on top, for all my sessions. This was to guarantee that my learners would stay connected and present during my teaching. In addition, prior to arriving in Zambia, in preparation for the project, my journey of building resilience began by being commissioned to bring elementary and story books, that I have packed and prepared from France. I went to public libraries, charity shops, university libraries to collect as many books as I could. I networked and connected with students, a faith organization, charities and university staffs in France, that were interested about my project and helping me to reach my goal. At the end, I managed to fill in a 20 kg luggage with books in French, Spanish and English, and donate them to the school. This part of the process, has permitted me to develop my confidence and support my language learning of French at the same time, while asking all the information's necessary about the books. Another impactful aspect of my LIA, it has been bringing a new perspective within the team of teachers. Often, I had conversation with the head-teacher to share my impressions and remarks about the school. Despite that, I always made sure to take into context the geographical position and cultural context of the school, before making certain remarks. This has strengthened my cross-cultural understanding about Zambian norms, and it has also been useful to collaborate effectively with the community by giving constructive feedback and ideas. At the end of the experience, I have committed myself to share on a file through a word document, all the materials used. Such as resources and strategies that I have applied, throughout my teaching journey in Africa.

The result of this approach was proven by the incredible improvements that the learners had, since my coming. Some of them started to write better, in line, and more confidently. And additionally, it was proven by the relief from the workload, that the teacher experienced. Overall, it was impactful bringing fresh perspectives and innovations. These were added values for this experience.



{Picture: Celebrating with the great team of teachers}

What impact has the LIA project had on you? Have you achieved the SMART goals as set out at the beginning of the project? (please give examples of how these SMART goals have been achieved)

The impact of the LIA on me, has been the stretch experienced on my adaptability. Adapting to a new country in another continent, abiding by different and new rules it felt very unfamiliar initially. For the first two weeks it was certainly challenging. I had to adapt to feel safe in an environment that normally, would not be classified as extremely safe from where I am from. Although, starting from the third week, I felt more empowered to face fears, for instance going out by myself and getting to know new people around.

In relation to the smart goals set with my coordinator, as set below. I have managed to accomplish the set of structured frameworks that permitted me to have a clear, actionable and achievable direction to follow prior, and during my LIA. For instance, the A. for the Action on my smart goal, served me to know what the necessary steps would be to know where and how to go about asking for books, in France. It was useful to guarantee commitment, and responsibility towards the commitment on ethical

engagement, in supporting the literacy of my learners for the present and the coming future.

Example of **SMART** goals set for **LIA**:

S: Understanding the type of books to collect: Elementary book like 'The Gruffalo', story books, language learning (French). Range aged 2-13 years old.

M: Work from the week of the 1st of April to start to look out/collecting in person books.

A: Asking friends/ connections/ Universities staff, local libraries, where to gather books from.

R: I will aim to look out for books that can be donated to the school. Rather than being purchased. In extreme case, where the books being donated are of a limited amount, I and the other scholar in this program will split the cost of buying them online.

T: Each week during this month I will keep informed through local libraries to look out for elementary books.

What leadership skills do you believe you have gained/demonstrated during the LIA period? (please refer to the leadership attributes below)

During the LIA period I have demonstrated the leadership skill of 'collaboration'. As I mentioned working with teachers and having face-to-face contact with the primary carers (parents) of the children, made me feel obliged to engage in partnering for the bettering of the learners. Collaborating, before this experience, it meant for me to simply give a hand, but remaining distanced and independent during the commitment, to a certain extent. On the contrary, during this experience it worked oppositely. I felt that the teachers and I were a solid group, that could count on each other's. Despite all of us coming from different backgrounds, and me being the first one on this, there was:

- determination,
- communication
- engagement

Through comprehension, to support each individual teaching time, while flexibly respecting spaces and timings. For instance, when a teacher would run late with her lesson. As a fellow teacher, I knew what I needed to do to support my colleague. In such case, I would wait and not rush her. Moving forward, I would have been ready to take over from there. After the previous teacher finished with her teaching time, to avoid the learners from noticing too much; I would begin to shift my position to the blackboard and greet my pupils. In all this, there was still adaptability applied, since we had to

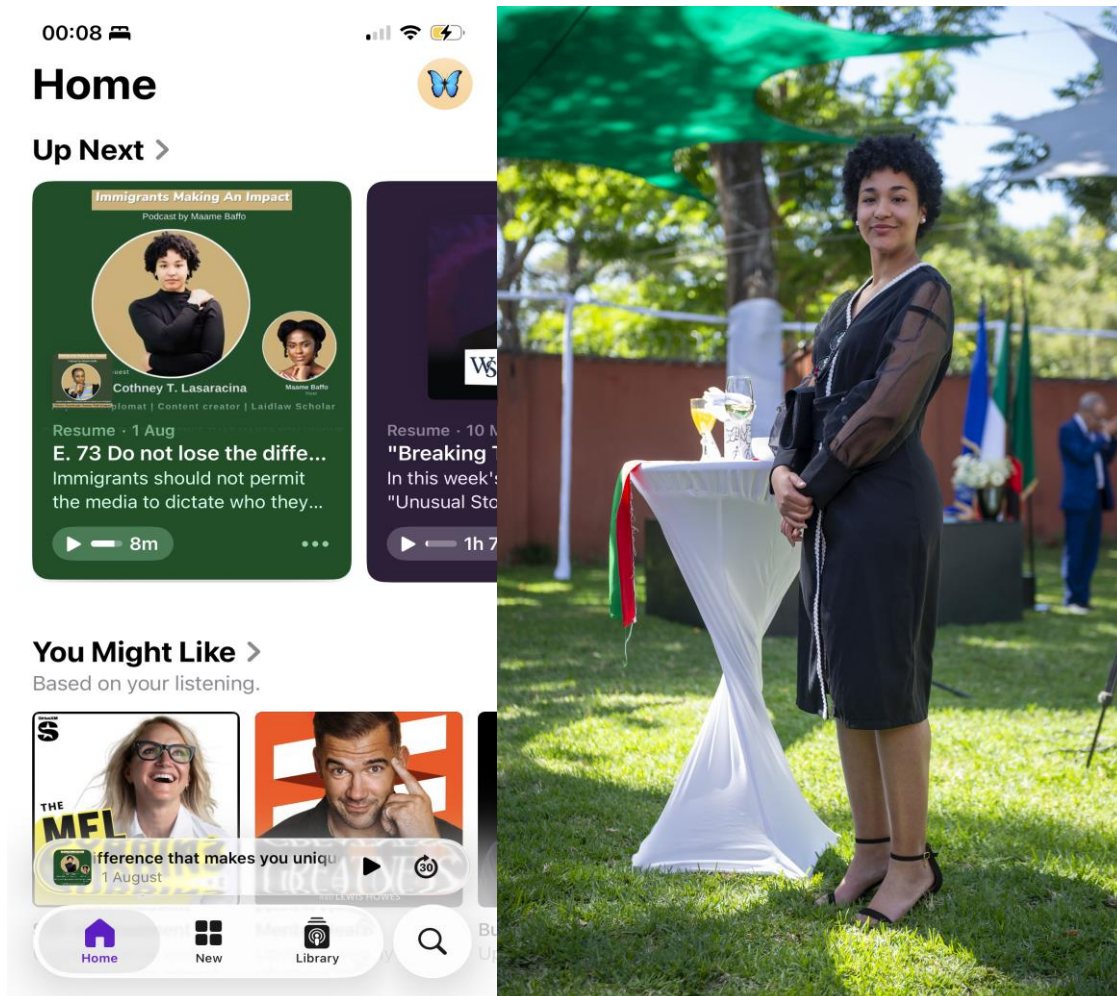
share blackboards, classrooms and materials between teachers. There would be 3 teachers, teaching in one class. Through this collaborative culture, I have learned that I could count towards other colleagues and build a professional rapport with them.

What activities you've been involved in to disseminate your project, including but not limited to attending conferences, producing posters, and promotion of the project and programme?

To disseminate my project in Zambia, firstly I have attended various events. This gave me the opportunity to provide promotions opportunities, for the school. From attending a diplomatic event at the Italian Embassy of Lusaka, to a safari tour at the National Lusaka Park, and local friend's house parties. They all culminated to be platform useful to disseminate the purpose of my project, as a Laidlaw Scholar. I have networked, and discussed with High Commissioners, Lawyers, Civil servants about what brought me in Lusaka, and the background of "Start Top Community School". Absurdly, some of my connections, managed to be great people with noble intentions, that helped me to take the school's name, to the Zambian minister of Education. This was the case, with a friend of mine, that I have connected with: he happened to be the Chairman of Tourism Council in Zambia. He collaborated with me, to disseminate the intention of my project by bringing it to those higher offices, because of his connections with governmental bodies in Zambia. Following on after, coming back from my project, I have been contacted for a podcast, called "Immigrants making an impact". (link: <https://youtu.be/ggxpFoF7rbw?si=smjPWbc9ol7FaZYj>)

During the opportunity, I have mentioned my intentions and desires to continue my commitment to help the school, and to see possible sponsorships rise and further help, to progress the work done in the school.

Additionally, I took part recently in the *Laidlaw: Durham conference 2025*, and I have been invited by the programme Director, Amy Moore to present the LIA project to the Laidlaw scholars, in two different, separate sessions.

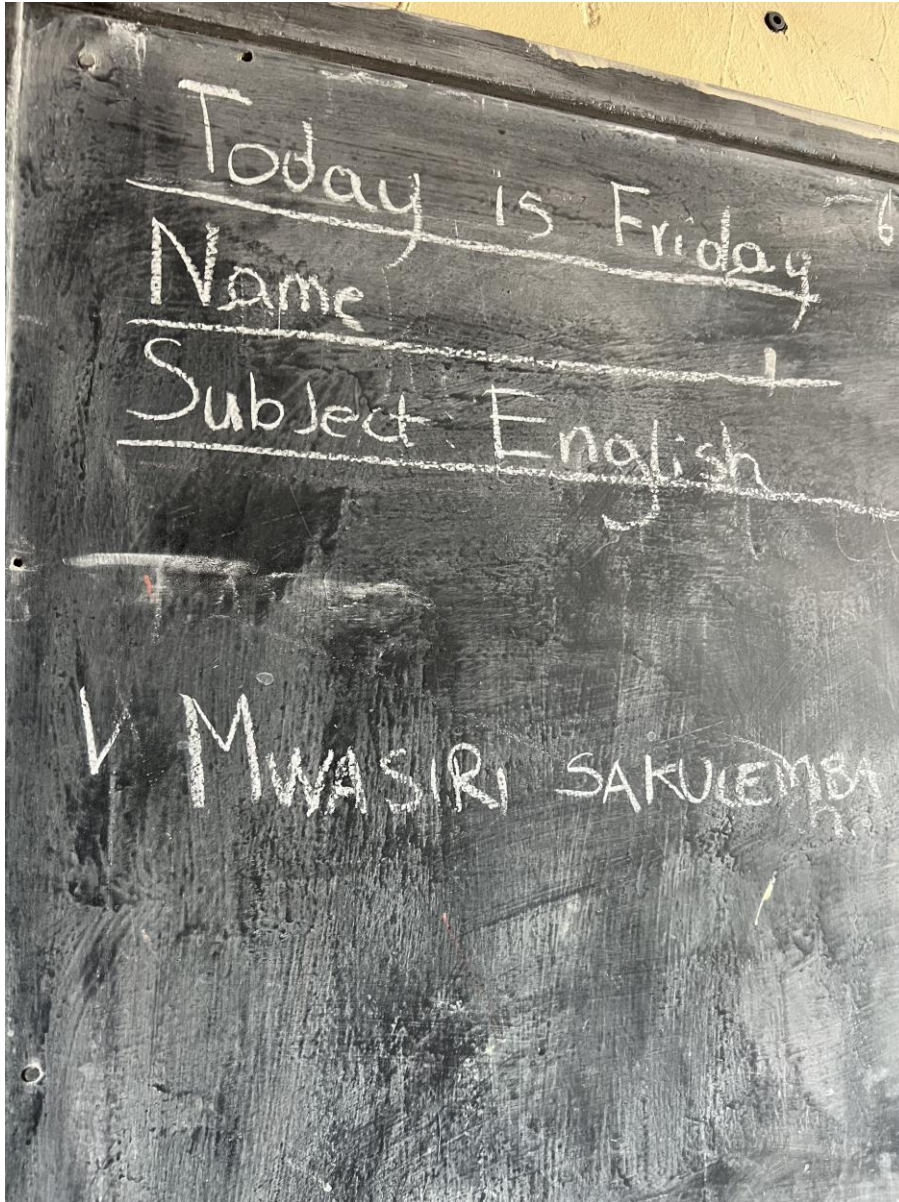


{**Picture 1:** Collaboration with Podcast ‘*Immigrants making an impact*’, mentioned my LIA experience & purposes; **Picture 2:** Diplomatic event at Italian embassy, in Lusaka, networked and disseminated my LIA}

Include elements of the cultural experiences differences you have learned about?

Some elements of cultural experiences that I have learned, for example: the use of local languages, present in various geographical areas, in Zambia. I discovered that in Lusaka, although English is the official language, people may use directly the dialect/ local languages depending on the area. In the area where I was, the language was called “chinyanja”. This was integrated in the curriculum at “Start Top community” too, to teach on a weekly basis, “chinyaja” to all the kids: from grade 2, to grade 7. I took part in those lessons, to learn it. Even during the time that I was accommodate by the Zambian family that I stayed with, the owners of the school. They took time to teach me some formalities in this local language, and how to use it around. I started to use it around, when I would take taxis, to go and buy groceries and to have a laugh with friends. Another cultural experience that showed a noticeable difference, was the friendliness of the locals. Coming from a European background, I became accustomed

to an individualistic, more reserved way of conducting my businesses. However, in Africa, people are very open and friendly to even chat with you, without knowing you. Even in places like Churches, which I visited after being invited by the Zambian Family. I have noticed a different level of warmth which I was not used to.



{Picture: 'Chinyanja' teaching moment from the kids 'mwasiri sakulemba'}

What is your future career or educational plans? Have these changed during your time as a scholar? (If so, please explain why).

My plans since the LIA, have been clearer. I was aspiring to be in a position of leadership, in politics. In my time in Zambia, through the opportunity such as the

diplomatic function, that I took part in, I have gained clarity and aspirations to become a diplomat or a leader for an intergovernmental organisation. Being a scholar, it has strengthened my credibility on this plan, and desire to really impact the environments that I am placed in.

