

Leadership-in-Action Reflective Report

Amplifying the voices of New Zealand's creative youth with YANZ

By Ekaterina Keyzerova

Email: ml23ek@leeds.ac.uk

Host Organisation: Youth Arts New Zealand

Supervised by Matthew Penhaligon



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1. Introduction & Project Context

1.1. What Was My LiA?

As part of my Leadership-in-Action placement through the Laidlaw Programme, I worked at Youth Arts New Zealand (YANZ) in Auckland, New Zealand.

Many young creatives face structural barriers to progressing their creative practice into sustainable opportunities. Talent alone is often not enough to enter the creative industries: young people may lack visibility, professional networks, knowledge of available pathways, practical industry experience, or access to paid opportunities to develop their work. YANZ is New Zealand's leading charity dedicated to empowering and nurturing youth creative talents by tackling these structural barriers that prohibit their creative practice from progressing into sustainable opportunities. Therefore, the issue my LiA sought to engage with was the difficulty many young creatives face in turning creative ambition into sustainable professional opportunities.

YANZ operates within the gap between being creative and knowing how to navigate the infrastructure surrounding a creative career by creating different entry points into the sector. YANZ offers an interconnected suite of arts programming, community relationships, and resources which form an ecosystem through which rangatahi¹ can build confidence, experience, relationships, and professional skills at different stages of their creative journeys. My LiA therefore focused on strengthening and communicating the work already taking place at YANZ and their partner organisations. Through storytelling, communications, event engagement, interviews, and documentation, I sought to make these pathways more visible while capturing the experiences of young creatives who had already moved through them. This allowed me to explore what meaningful support for emerging creatives looks like in practice, and how an organisation such as YANZ can act as a bridge between creative ambition and professional opportunity.

My project title was *Amplifying the voices of New Zealand's creative youth with YANZ*, and my role within the organisation was a *Community Engagement and Media Intern*. This project contributes to several of the **UN Sustainable Development Goals**, two of them being *Reduced Inequalities* and *Sustainable Cities and Communities*.

1.2. What Did I Originally Hope to Achieve?

My project with YANZ sought to **equip**, **activate**, and **advocate** for young creatives by creating accessible, youth-informed resources and storytelling content that reflect their successes and needs and elevate the visibility and influence of YANZ's work. Across my various LiA goals, I aimed to amplify youth creative voices by documenting and sharing the experiences, stories, and aspirations of rangatahi involved in YANZ programmes and events. This included supporting accessible creative pathways by helping communicate the opportunities Youth Arts offers young people, contributing to community-led engagement by

¹ *Rangatahi* is a Māori word that means the younger generation, youth, or teenagers.

supporting events and finally, leaving behind useful resources that would help the organisation strengthen its storytelling around youth creativity in Auckland.

The goal I defined as a success prior to my placement was to ensure that more young people are able to break the entry barriers into creative industries by elevating the visibility and influence of YANZ's work.

My original SMART objectives were:

1. Create 5–10 social media content pieces (e.g. reels, infographics) to promote pathways for young creatives in New Zealand.
2. Produce 3–5 interview-led creative resources (written features and/or short videos) explaining the barriers young people face when entering creative industries and spotlighting the opportunities YANZ already offers to overcome them.
3. Develop an impact report reflecting feedback and documentation from past and current YANZ events, with suggestions for future improvements.
4. Spend a minimum of 3–4 hours per week on direct community interaction, observe all events and sessions taking place at YANZ during the six-week placement, and co-facilitate/co-host one towards the end, if possible.
5. Provide feedback, reflection, and evaluation based on my findings to support YANZ's future projects.

These objectives developed over the duration of my project and can now broadly be understood through three interconnected ambitions:

- **communications and visibility:** creation of engaging content that would make YANZ's work and the creative pathways available to rangatahi more visible and accessible.
- **events and community engagement:** direct interaction with young creatives, documenting their experiences, gathering formal and informal feedback, and developing a better understanding of what participants value and need from organisations such as YANZ
- **sustainable resources:** creation of materials that would remain useful beyond my six-week placement, bringing together storytelling, participant perspectives, and evidence of impact in forms that YANZ could continue to use for communications, outreach, evaluation, and future programme development.²

2. From Plan to Practice

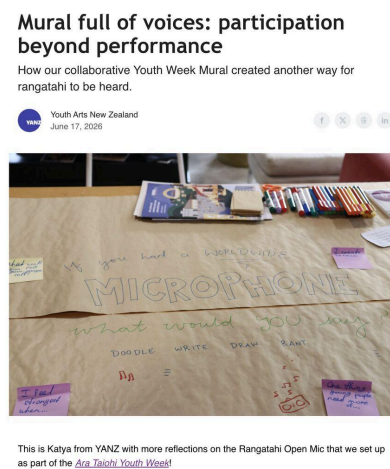
2.1. Communications and Visibility

A significant part of my six weeks at YANZ involved communications and storytelling. I supported several Instagram marketing campaigns for upcoming events, developed promotional copy and social media content, wrote newsletters for YANZ's mailing list, and created physical communications materials such as business cards and event resources. I

² I will be using these overarching ambitions (highlighted in bold) to guide my reflections and explanations of the responsibilities I have taken on during my LiA placement in the next section, *From Plan to Practice*.

had to learn to communicate information concisely while maintaining a tone that felt approachable, engaging, and consistent with YANZ's youth-centred identity.

Post-event communications became another important part of my work. Following the Rangatahi Open Mic, for example, I produced social media and newsletter reflections that combined event documentation, photographs, participant experiences, and acknowledgements of the people and organisations involved. Through feedback from my managers, I began to understand that communications for a community organisation are not simply promotional: they are also aimed at strengthening relationships, documenting organisational impact, and preserving the stories behind individual events. Writing for YANZ taught me to prioritise clarity, accessibility, and purpose, and to consider what an audience actually needs from a piece of communication.



2.2. Events and Direct Community Engagement

Attending and supporting YANZ events helped me understand the communities behind the content I created. I attended lunchtime pop-up gigs set up by YANZ as part of NZ Music Month, supported Rangatahi Open Mic and a Community Adventure Day at an Auckland high school, and planned and facilitated regular Freelancer Friday co-working sessions.

As one of Youth Arts' regular big events, the Open Mic was particularly important to my LiA because it allowed me to engage directly with both performers and attendees. Alongside supporting the event itself, I facilitated a collaborative mural for Ara Taiohi Youth Week around the prompt, *If you had a worldwide microphone, what would you say?* Participants were invited to contribute anything from drawings and doodles to poetry, lyrics, thoughts, and messages. Some initially approached the mural cautiously, but as the evening progressed, people began gathering around it, responding to one another's contributions and returning later to add more.

Attending events organised by YANZ and partner organisations across Auckland, such as the Emerging Artist Showcase, also gave me a broader understanding of the youth arts ecosystem in New Zealand. I was able to observe different approaches to creating spaces for young people and consider what makes those environments welcoming, accessible, and valuable.

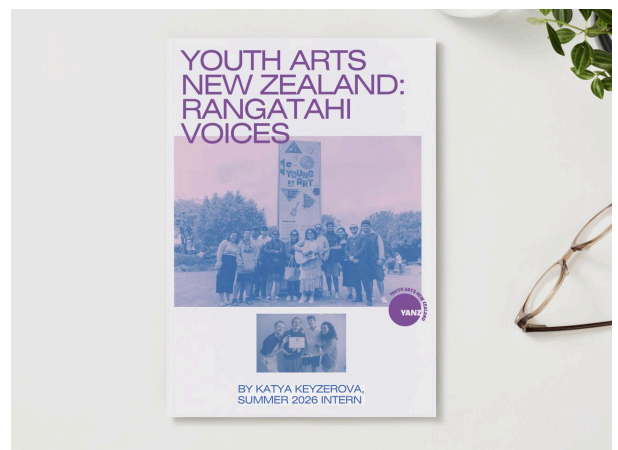


2.3. Rangatahi Voices

As the placement progressed, my managers and I decided that my final project would take the form of a zine, *Rangatahi Voices*.³ The idea emerged from a desire to create something more engaging and youth-focused than a conventional impact report while still documenting the influence of YANZ's work.

The zine brought together many strands of my LiA in one project. I interviewed four young creatives who had been involved with YANZ at different stages of its history and explored their relationship with the organisation as well as their wider creative journeys. Their experiences demonstrated the variety and non-linearity of creative careers: from design and freelance work to music, event production and project management. I also interviewed Harrison and Chloe, the co-leaders of the organisation, to create a "Behind YANZ" feature exploring the organisation's beginnings, current work, and future direction.

I led the project from concept development and interview preparation through to interviewing, writing, editing, curation, and design. The result was designed primarily as a digital publication, while remaining printable so that physical copies could be shared with alumni, contributors, partners, and others interested in YANZ's work. In this way, the zine became both a celebration of the community and a resource that could continue to communicate YANZ's work after my placement ended.



³ The digital edition of the zine can be found here: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/f3010c752f.html#page/1>.

2.4. Adapting the Original Plan

One of the most noticeable developments during my LiA was the evolution of my original project plan. I had initially envisaged producing several separate outputs, including interview-led resources, surveys, social media content, and a more conventional impact report. Once I became embedded within YANZ, however, it became apparent that following the original plan would not necessarily produce the most useful outcome for the organisation, and was not realistic given the time constraints of the six-week project.

The zine provided a way of bringing several of these objectives together. It incorporated interviews and participant perspectives, documented YANZ's impact, communicated creative pathways, created promotional material, and left behind a resource that could continue to be used after my departure. Other elements of the original plan were similarly adapted according to emerging organisational priorities and the opportunities available during the six weeks.

Following this experience, I learned that effective leadership in a community setting requires more flexibility than I had previously imagined. Adapting my original objectives by responding to the contexts I encountered was therefore a way of remaining faithful to the purpose of my LiA.

3. Goals, Outcomes & Evidence of Impact

3.1. Evaluating Success

There were a few tangible indicators of success and reach during the placement, one of them being the number of people who attended events I supported in planning and execution. Thirty-five people attended the Rangatahi Open Mic I supported, while one of the co-working sessions I facilitated, Freelancer Friday, brought together fifteen people. According to feedback I received from the attendees, these initiatives have successfully created spaces where young creatives can make meaningful connections, develop confidence, access opportunities, and return over time.

Alongside supporting the Rangatahi Open Mic, I facilitated the Youth Week collaborative mural at the event, which provided an alternative way for attendees to participate without performing, and ended up as a success. By the end of the evening, a mural that had begun with only a few prompts and organisers' doodles had become filled with contributions. People returned to it throughout the night, responded to one another's messages, and naturally began conversations around the table.



My input was also valuable for a Community Adventure Day event at a local high school. I helped create promotional resources we brought to the school (e.g. business cards) and represented YANZ alongside the team while speaking to students about its opportunities. The organisers subsequently expressed an interest in having YANZ return for a similar event in the future, while the business cards and other materials we had prepared became tools through which young people could understand what Youth Arts offered and how they might become involved.



3.2. Organisational and Foundational Impact

Some of my most meaningful direct impact on YANZ and its ecosystem was arguably with the young creatives I interviewed for *Rangatahi Voices*. Interviewees were invited to reflect at length on their creative journeys, achievements, challenges, and relationships with YANZ. Their willingness to engage with the interview process, remain in contact, and be approached again suggested that the process had created relationships rather than simply extracted information for a final product. This became particularly important to me because ethical storytelling had been one of the principles underpinning my original project.

By combining interviews, organisational storytelling, design, impact communication, and information about YANZ into one digital and printable resource, the zine was designed to have a life beyond my six-week placement. This became tangible shortly after my LiA ended, when several printed copies of *Rangatahi Voices* were presented at Auckland Zinefest in July. Seeing the publication enter a public creative space beyond the context in which it was originally produced demonstrated that the project could continue reaching new audiences after my departure. The digital edition can similarly continue to be circulated, while physical copies can be shared with YANZ alumni, contributors, partners, and members of the wider creative community. In this sense, the zine became not only a record of my placement, but a reusable storytelling and promotional resource through which YANZ can continue celebrating its community and communicating its impact to future audiences and partners.

There was also a less expected form of organisational impact: my placement itself became part of YANZ's learning. As one of the organisation's early experiences of hosting a placement in this form, the six weeks provided an opportunity for the team to learn how an intern could be integrated into its everyday work, how projects could be scoped, and what forms of communication, check-ins and close-out processes were useful. Therefore, my experience has consequently helped inform how future internships might be structured. In this sense, my LiA's legacy involved making it easier for somebody else to build on what I learned rather than treating my six weeks as an isolated project.

3.3. Reflection on My Goals and My Impact

Looking across my original objectives, I believe they were appropriately ambitious in intention, although in retrospect they were perhaps too prescriptive about the exact outputs I expected to create before I had a complete understanding of the organisation and system I would be operating in. For example, my original plan proposed a conventional impact report. In practice, the zine proved more appropriate because it could simultaneously fulfil several objectives: documenting impact, centring participant stories, promoting creative pathways, producing interview-led content, and leaving YANZ with a sustainable communications resource, all while allowing me to put my creativity and other skills to practice.

My LiA did not create systemic change in six weeks; instead, I see my contribution as strengthening an existing ecosystem: documenting stories that might otherwise remain unheard, making opportunities more visible, creating spaces for participation, connecting people, and leaving behind resources and learning that YANZ can continue to use. My immediate individual influence on each participant was limited; however, my work noticeably strengthened YANZ's organisational capacity.

The sustainability of my LiA lies partly in the resources that remain at YANZ after my departure, including *Rangatahi Voices*, reusable communications materials, interviews, event documentation, and written reflections. I leave YANZ hopeful that the materials, relationships, and processes I contributed to can become foundations for work that continues long after my own placement has ended. There is also scope for future Scholars or interns to build on my work through further editions of the zine, continued alumni storytelling, participant feedback, or tracking how young people progress through initiatives and programmes offered by YANZ. However, long-term change ultimately depends on YANZ, its participants, partners, funders, and the wider creative sector continuing to develop accessible pathways for rangatahi.

4. Understanding the System & the Barriers

4.1. System

My LiA operated within a much wider system than YANZ itself: the youth creative ecosystem of Aotearoa, particularly Tāmaki Makaurau, where young creatives interact with arts organisations, venues, schools, event organisers, funders, audiences, professional networks, and the wider creative industries. Throughout the placement, I began to understand YANZ as an intermediary within this ecosystem, helping bridge the gap between

young people with creative ambition and the experience, connections, knowledge, and paid opportunities needed to develop that ambition professionally.

4.2. Barriers

Many of the barriers I had anticipated became visible in practice: gaining a first paid opportunity, knowing where opportunities exist, accessing professional networks, developing confidence, acquiring practical or administrative skills, and navigating the financial uncertainty of creative work. These challenges were reflected particularly clearly in the stories I collected for *Rangatahi Voices*. The creatives' experiences revealed that the barrier is often not a lack of creativity or ambition, but a lack of infrastructure connecting talent to sustainable opportunity.

At the same time, I became conscious of the limits of what YANZ, and particularly what I as a six-week intern, could influence. Wider issues such as arts funding, unequal access to networks, financial precarity, sector-wide accessibility, and long-term employment require sustained action far beyond an individual placement. Bigger change, therefore, seems most likely to emerge from sustained pathways that allow young people to move from initial participation, to confidence and skills development, to paid opportunities and professional networks, and ultimately towards greater independence within their creative careers.

5. Leadership, Character & Global Mindset

My understanding of leadership developed considerably throughout my LiA. The meaning of "amplifying youth voices" has definitely changed for me: I came to see that leadership is often about listening and creating conditions in which other people can contribute. The Youth Week mural exemplified this: my role was not to determine what participants should express, but to create an accessible space in which they felt comfortable expressing it themselves. This strengthened my **collaborative mindset**⁴ and reflected the character dimensions of **humility** and **collaboration**.

My confidence, **courage** and capacity for **communication** were also tested throughout the placement. At both the Rangatahi Open Mic and Community Adventure Day, I initially felt nervous approaching people I did not know and sometimes relied on colleagues to initiate conversations. However, once I focused on being genuinely curious instead of worrying about saying the "right" thing, conversations became much more natural. Similarly, working within YANZ challenged me professionally: I had to quickly learn its internal systems, experiment with unfamiliar design work, distinguish between the very different voices required for funding, social media, and newsletters, and become more receptive to constructive feedback. In particular, adapting my academic writing style taught me to value clarity and accessibility over complexity. This strengthened my **critical thinking** and **reflection**, while teaching me to exercise **judgment** by adapting my communication to different audiences and situations.

⁴ Note: referenced Laidlaw Capacities and OCP Character Dimensions are highlighted in bold in this section.

Working in Aotearoa also required cultural **humility**. Although adapting to life on the other side of the world felt relatively natural, entering an established community space as an outsider required more deliberate learning. For example, I had to familiarise myself with Te Ao Māori concepts and te reo Māori used in everyday organisational language. I learned to observe first, ask questions, and adapt my contribution to what YANZ and its community actually found useful, ready to amend my original plan. This directly addressed some of the challenges I had anticipated before arriving, including adapting to the local cultural context and balancing my own assumptions with the creative autonomy of young people in New Zealand. This strengthened my capacity for **global citizenship**.

My understanding of a global mindset has also been influenced by my LiA. The barriers I have observed around young creatives are not unique to New Zealand—they exist internationally—but their causes and potential solutions are shaped by local culture, relationships, and infrastructure. Therefore, I now realise that **global citizenship** requires recognising that global challenges manifest differently in different communities and approaching those communities with curiosity rather than assumptions.

6. Conclusion

My LiA at Youth Arts New Zealand, working under the project title, *Amplifying the voices of New Zealand's creative youth with YANZ*, has changed me immensely—both professionally and personally.

My contribution to YANZ's initiatives and programmes was small within the context of the wider creative ecosystem of Aotearoa. I could not address the structural challenges facing young creatives within six weeks. However, I strengthened the work of an organisation responding to them. Through event engagement, communications, participant conversations, and ultimately my final project *Rangatahi Voices*, I was able to document stories, make creative pathways more visible, facilitate participation, and leave behind resources that can continue to be used after my departure.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the LiA for me, however, has been a change in how I understand leadership and impact. Leadership has gained so many new meanings for me: asking and being curious before making decisions, adapting when a plan no longer serves its purpose, accepting feedback, and creating space for others. When reflecting on my leadership developments during the LiA, I have also noted the value of the Laidlaw 3Cs Model and OCP Character Dimensions being applied in practice, particularly in international contexts.

My LiA placement has given me new perspectives, meaningful connections, and a deeper understanding of how storytelling, youth voice, and creative community-building can come together in practice. The experience has reinforced my desire to pursue communications and storytelling professionally as a career, while making me more conscious of the responsibility that comes with representing other people's experiences. I leave the LiA with greater courage, humility, confidence, and curiosity, but also with a more nuanced understanding of global citizenship as the importance of being willing to learn from the community around me.

There is also a deeply personal dimension to what this experience has meant to me. Ever since I had to leave my home country seven years ago for political reasons and build a life elsewhere, the idea of “home” has not felt straightforward to me. I have had to rebuild belonging in three different countries where I lived: through people, communities, and contributions to communities I found myself in. The Laidlaw Programme has supported me at crucial stages of that process, but my LiA specifically gave me the extraordinary opportunity to build connections on the other side of the world. By the end of the placement, Aotearoa had become a place where I could genuinely imagine building a future. I am now considering returning to New Zealand after university and potentially making it my home.

For this reason, the impact of the Laidlaw Programme on me has extended far beyond the individual projects I have completed. At different stages of my life, it has given me the opportunities to enter unfamiliar spaces and gradually find belonging within them. My LiA has therefore left me not only with professional skills and a different understanding of leadership, but with an expanded sense of where I might belong and what kind of communities I hope to help build wherever I go next.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Harrison Sugrue and Chloe Bettina from Youth Arts New Zealand for so kindly hosting me for my LiA; to Matt Penhaligon and Rebecca Shaw for helping organise the placement and for being so supportive and patient throughout the whole process; and to the Laidlaw Foundation for making this possible. I feel incredibly grateful to have received the generous opportunity to pursue my passions abroad while working for a community-rooted organisation that aligns with my background, values, and future aspirations.



YANZ Team and Me at Piha Beach