Leadership in Action: a summer with Cairo University

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For my LiA, I spent around six weeks as a research assistant at Cairo University. At the Faculty of Economics and Political Science (FEPS), I had the privilege of shadowing a Professor of Political Science. Working in the heart of Cairo, I had an opportunity to apply everything I've learned about ethical leadership and research with Laidlaw to a real-world setting. A move away from what I had been used to academically, I focused on international development and gender equality. Although I had anticipated most of my time to be desk work, my time at Cairo University came with so many opportunities to see research in action and join a community of academics dedicated to furthering global equality.

The Societal Impact: contributing to sustainable development goal (SDG) on the ground

Upon arriving in Cairo, I went to the Cairo University campus to meet the professor I was shadowing and the other academics in the faculty. The Faculty of Economic and Political Science at Cairo University oversees a variety of degrees in politics, economics, statistics, sociology, international development and gender studies to both undergraduate and master's students, although I was mainly paired with work for the graduates. My experiences there were diverse, with lots of zoom calls when the air conditioner was down at the office, but also lots of incredible opportunities to watch presentations on research that has a tangible impact on the future of development.



Posters I found around the FEPS campus of the SDGs – a brilliant coincidence!

One of the key contributions was research for a literature review on the politicisation of women's sports in the global sphere. I collected a range of studies, provided an annotated bibliography and was able to build up a profile of the topic to help the academics I was working with identify a gap in the literature. Some of this meant sifting through what felt like a myriad of papers but additionally picked up the responsibility also coding to produce a Zotero citation style to help reference the

literature, since the required format hadn't been made public on citation software yet. This was all to help the work of researchers at FEPS, using my academic background from Oxford and Laidlaw's research training to assist academics in approaching key questions in international development. Although the field was new to me, what I appreciated about the discipline was that the bulk of the papers being produced were written to help explain and solve real issues of poverty and inequality in Egypt, including groundbreaking primary data on the lived experiences of marginalised groups. This was quite a switch from my studies, as a History and Politics student we generally looked at historical materials or abstract debates. Working with an institution that explicitly aimed to address SDGs of reduced poverty, reduced inequality and gender equality was really important in motivating me to make the best contribution possible.

The example of leadership that I enjoyed the most was leading a session on academic writing to a group of post-graduate students at FEPS. Many of the students had come from a professional background and found it difficult to adjust their typical policy-report style of writing to academic papers. I led a two-hour workshop on structuring social science papers, with a particular focus on how to present one's findings and write a discussion to showcase the core argument of the paper. I found that lots of the students were not familiar with this structure, and many struggled to differentiate between the results section of a paper, and the discussion. Alongside explaining the core features of an academic paper, I also dedicated time to academic writing, giving examples of common phrases and sentence structures that may be useful, particularly as they all knew English as a second language. After this presentation, I made sure to send them resources that they could refer to after my internship ended. This included detailed slides, a recording of the workshop, and links to useful online resources, both in regard to structuring a paper, but also academic vocabulary.

Whilst I had been very nervous, I was incredibly glad to hear from the students that they had found it very useful. I was very glad to have spent so much time in leadership training with Laidlaw, as it was a large responsibility that demanded strategic organising. For example, throughout my presentation, I made sure to frequently stop, ask if I need to slow down, if I have been clear and if anyone has any questions. Before Laidlaw, I think I might have waited until the end of the workshop to open up for questions, but I was conscious that leadership means being aware of how to best reach and help your audience, alongside being constantly reflective of your own approach. It also demanded lots of humility, at times where I wasn't sure what students were asking or what the context of their question was, I made sure to defer to the professor who was sitting in on the workshop. This would normally feel quite embarrassing to me, but I felt it quite necessary to get a second opinion of someone more familiar with the students' work and the demands of their research. Overall, the workshop was something that I was really glad to have led, it was an example of me not only working towards SDGs of reducing poverty, inequality and gender disparity through research, but actively contributing to improved education myself.

As a research assistant, I was also on standby for smaller tasks as well. This was anything from copy-editing articles that were being sent out to be peer-reviewed before publishing, formatting bibliographies, or updating contact lists of peer reviewers. The smaller tasks, like this, reshaped my understanding of leadership and impact. By lifting the administrative burdens and using my own experience from Oxford, I was able to support the academics at FEPS as they worked towards the SDGs. I learned that impact is not always measured by the visibility of my own contribution, but by the value it brings to a wider collective effort.

Ethical Leadership Application: A self-aware analysis of how managing friction, ambiguity, and cultural nuances in an unfamiliar setting

Although I was born in Egypt, I have lived in the UK since I was 2 years old and had never visited the country without my family with me. Despite having visited Cairo countless times growing up, I was still incredibly nervous at the idea of navigating such a bustling city by myself. Cairo University was daunting in a different way, the course that I was supporting was for master's students, so I definitely felt rather worried that my contributions would be lacking in comparison. Additionally, although I'm quite comfortable speaking Arabic, I typically speak with family, so I was really worried that I wouldn't be as confident when speaking with the people who work there. I made an effort to shape up my Arabic before going, but there were definitely times where I made mistakes out of nervousness.

A related challenge in this sense was hearing academic terms in Arabic for the first time. As I learned Arabic conversationally growing up and through media, most words to do with academia or academic concepts were new to me. I slowly picked up some new words, but this was definitely a real challenge, as I was often worried that I would fill in the gaps with what I assumed they meant, and therefore be projecting my own thoughts onto my understanding of other people. Most of the research I did was in English, so the impact on the work I personally produced was minimal. There was a session, however, where I had the privilege of sitting in on a master's thesis viva that was presented in Arabic, and did feel that I unfortunately did not grasp lots of the student's research because of the language barrier.

The main worry I had was my unfamiliarity with the field. Studying History and Politics in Oxford, I hadn't come across much work in International Development. The articles that I came across in my desk research were typically more science-based in their structure than what I was used to, and I had to familiarise myself with new frameworks and key terms. I found that the more I read, and the more I drew from my time as a Laidlaw Scholar, the easier it was to learn how to navigate a new discipline. I was put to the test towards the end of my project, when presenting to the graduate students. Teaching them how to structure a research paper, in particular how to present your findings and then form an argument in your discussion was incredibly daunting. I was very pleased that it went so successfully, and very grateful that I had done my summer research project with Laidlaw, which had provided me with the foundation for understanding this type of social science research.

I was also very wary of possible issues of positionality. Being raised in Britain, and only having ever attended English academic institutions, I wanted to make sure that I was aware of how my own experience might shape the work I did. This ultimately did not interfere with any of my research responsibilities, however, as many of my tasks were given to me on the basis that my supervisor wanted someone familiar with Western academia. Nevertheless, the research itself did require constant reflection on my approach, something that international development demands from any researcher, whether they be in an Egyptian institution or otherwise. Much of the field now emphasises the importance of an ethical, non-essentialist approach to the themes and issues that are studied, and this is something I feel Laidlaw had particularly prepared me for.

Although Egypt was, in many ways, a familiar country, the month and a half spent there was filled with new experiences, and with those experiences, new challenges. There were the general difficulties of living by myself in a new country, but the heat was particularly tough to deal with. Getting a bit sick became quite normal, as was finding ways to power through hot mornings and power cuts. I remember just half an hour before my big presentation there was a power cut, so I was fighting both the lack of air conditioner and the lack of WIFI to finalise my slides. Ultimately, however, I appreciated the opportunity to immerse myself in a new environment and adapt to face the challenges.





The Cairo University Campus – pictures taken on a very sunny day

The Research Connection: reflections on my Summer 1 research project

Our summer research project had included lots of literature on educational access both domestically and globally. This was something I saw first-hand during my time with Cairo University. Here in the UK, it's quite common to go to a university far from home, but in Egypt, this is relatively uncommon. Nevertheless, young people travel across the country to attend what is one of the most prestigious universities in the region. Despite having almost ten times the student population of Oxford, tuition fees are incredibly low, and I had many conversations about access to higher education during my internship that reminded me of my previous summer work. We had done a lot of reading on educational access and development, but it was really interesting to be working at an institution that was quite unique in its provision of educational opportunity in the Middle East.

The work I was doing with Cairo University was a bit more towards gender and development than our first year project. Indeed, when I was researching access to sport for women in the global south, I did realise just how much our first year literature was focused on youth in the Western world. Whilst class inequality appeared in both cases, the research on access to sports highlighted very different barriers to access, even when the sport itself was a school extra-curricular, highly similar to what we had researched in our first year. In contrast, however, the research on gender and sports typically focused more on the intersection of race, poverty and family gatekeeping, not only in how these may be institutional barriers, but further how these may impact the confidence of young girls in the global south. It was both useful to think of this in the context of the work we had been doing in first year Laidlaw project, particularly in regards to theories of the purpose of education and the importance of creative spaces, but did raise to me how we were thinking of barriers to educational access and achievement through a European lens. Doing this research made me think more about what our first year project would have looked like if we were approaching it from an international development perspective.

Concluding thoughts

In my first year of Laidlaw, our summer research centred around the fourth and tenth Sustainable Development Goals, Quality Education and Reduced Inequalities. In a very smooth transition, my summer with the Faculty of Economics and Political Science deepened my academic and practical understanding of these goals and brought in Gender Equality as a key goal to work towards.

Overall, the experience taught me that leadership does not always take the shape of directing a group of people. During my time with Cairo University, leadership meant working as part of a larger team, both learning from their expertise, and leveraging my experiences to contribute to efforts to better understand how we can build a fairer world. It empowered me to confidently centre purpose, empathy, resilience, humility and wisdom in my approach to leadership.