



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Experience Abroad Reflection

The Unsimulated Self: Navigating Absence, Assimilation, and Authentic Presence Abroad

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August 25, 2026

There is no conceivable simulation, workshop, or preparation that can replicate the profound personal transformation that occurs when you live completely isolated in an unfamiliar cultural environment. Stepping off the plane on May 16th and navigating a space where the language cadence, cultural distinctions, and daily operational rhythms are entirely foreign strips away habitual safety nets I learned I took for granted in my first summer's research project. In Canada, my independence is often cushioned by familiar institutional frameworks, intuitive social instincts, and immediate proximity to my support networks. Abroad, that scaffolding completely disappears.

This reflection documents a six-week journey of cultural immersion and self-discovery during my Leadership-in-Action placement with the European Brain Council (EBC). Rather than centring this piece around the technicalities of the LiA itself, my intention is to identify and hone the implications of the global environment and cultural change on not only my project, but also my character. This reflection endeavours to explore the human, cross-cultural, and emotional architecture of the entire experience.

Admittedly, upon arrival I was still somewhat blanketed from the trials and tribulations of solo existence in a foreign country; my father accompanied me in the days before my LiA officially started, and we were able to explore Brussels together and get a better understanding of the culture. I would argue that this may have made it harder for me to adapt on my own after his departure, because I was able to experience the emotional ease of my support system in this new environment, so experiencing that lack of support when he left felt exponentially more difficult in comparison to if I had been isolated from the start. When it did eventually sink in that I was really and truly on my own, I felt myself go into a sort of survival mode. I did not feel a full sense of comfort on my own until I had overcome an insecure housing crisis, which deserves a paragraph of its own. Importantly, the 'comfort' I established with myself was not merely a result of the physical security provided by new accommodation, but the confidence I had instilled in myself by being able to overcome that experience completely alone.

Frequently, it is not so much the rare, histrionic experiences, but the everyday interactions that reinforce the notion of being an 'outsider' in an environment. Whether it's being unable to articulate your coffee order fluently enough in French, avoiding wearing certain clothes as to not appear a 'foreigner' (or the reverse, wearing new clothes to appear 'local'), or advocating for your food allergy in a culture where its awareness is essentially non-existent. What was initially perceived as depressing isolation in my empty apartment quickly morphed into a personal refuge; returning to myself when my external environment begs a certain performance. Navigating this allowed me to draw a clear distinction; adapting to a new cultural environment does not have to mean disappearing within it. I can still represent myself authentically, and I found this served me well in my LiA. Bridging the skills I developed in my professional development thus far and the distinct resources provided by EBC ultimately served the best benefit for the mutual cause: brain health advocacy and advancement. Neither EBC's nor my individual contributions could've created the global impact that we achieved in collaboration for this project.

In exploring authenticity within a new cultural context, I want to challenge the assumption that total assimilation is the true mark of courage. As creatures of habit, we

instinctively lean on familiar routines for comfort when everything else around us shifts. Yet, I discovered that an unexpected form of bravery lies in preserving the rituals of home when you are the only one practicing them. During my first few weeks, I felt a distinct sense of self-consciousness simply walking through the streets with an iced coffee; a casual North American norm that felt glaringly out of place against European café culture. Choosing to hold onto that small pleasure became more than just a preference, but an exercise in self-trust. Navigating a global space with authenticity isn't about performing flawless conformity; it is about developing the confidence to exist between worlds without losing sight of the everyday anchors that keep you whole.

Conversely, this experience revealed European workplace norms that I am eager to integrate into my everyday life back in Canada. By blending the strengths of my new environment with my existing habits, I developed a far more harmonious approach to living and working. At the European Brain Council, and within European professional culture more broadly, I witnessed an admirable commitment to work-life balance: when the workday ends, work truly stops. Whenever I initially mentioned tackling project tasks during evenings or weekends, my colleagues actively discouraged me. This required a fundamental mindset shift; in my previous academic research summer, overtime and weekend hours were not just normalized, but implicitly expected.

In North American academia, an unchecked culture of constant availability often fuels chronic burnout and procrastination under the anxiety of never doing enough. My time in Brussels redefined my understanding of true productivity: it is not measured by relentless exhaustion, but by addressing responsibilities with focus during working hours while deliberately protecting time for cognitive and physical recovery. While I recognize that institutional expectations vary across global contexts and cannot simply be dictated to future employers, I can take personal accountability for how I operate. I can set intentional boundaries, deliver rigorous results within defined hours, and refuse to sacrifice my well-being for the illusion of achievement. Working myself to exhaustion earned me no medals last summer; in contrast, leading with sustainable rest allowed me to engage with my work far more deeply, creatively, and purposefully.

Adapting to European communication styles and workplace etiquette was another profound shift, yet one of the most rewarding dimensions of my placement. In Brussels, professional collaboration was deeply intertwined with authentic interpersonal connection. Coming from Canadian work environments where solitary lunch breaks were my default, my instinct was to keep to myself. However, on my very first day, my LiA supervisor and a colleague made a deliberate point of taking me out to find a place where I felt comfortable eating. That intentional gesture of welcome set the tone for the entire summer, establishing an atmosphere where colleagues were not merely coworkers, but a supportive community.

This consistent warmth challenged my perception of how I operate best. While I have historically viewed myself as an isolated, fiercely independent worker, I discovered that I actually thrived within a high-trust, relationally connected environment. Daily office rituals reinforced this mutual respect; each morning, our director greeted every team member individually with a handshake and a traditional kiss on the cheek. In stark contrast to past

environments where hierarchy meant going unnoticed, this practice signaled that every individual was valued as a person before a title. It reshaped my philosophy on ethical leadership, proving that genuine warmth, relational dignity, and mutual respect from authority figures elevate team culture far more effectively than rigid and impersonal corporate detachment.

This profound realization about relational leadership naturally forced me to confront the distinction between superficial cultural competence and genuine cultural humility. Before arriving in Brussels, I had approached cross-cultural readiness somewhat academically; as a checklist of etiquette, operational customs, and communication styles to be well-versed in and executed. However, true immersion quickly exposed the limitations of treating cultural fluency as a static skill set. Practicing cultural humility required a deliberate decentering of myself: pausing my reflexive instincts, recognizing the subtle arrogance of evaluating European systems through a North American lens, and holding back immediate judgment when organizational processes moved at a pace dictated by consensus and dialogue rather than unilateral speed. In a collaborative policy environment like the European Brain Council, this meant relinquishing the impulse to impose my own familiar problem-solving formulas and instead prioritizing the local wisdom, institutional memory, and established practices of my colleagues. Shifting from an evaluative mindset to one of active, open-ended inquiry taught me that effective global leadership is not about demonstrating cultural mastery, but about maintaining the humility to remain a continuous learner in every room you enter.

The commitment to humility directly informed how I approached ethical community and global engagement during my placement. Grounded in the ethical leadership principles cultivated through the Oxford Character Project and the Laidlaw framework, I was acutely aware of the risk of inadvertent paternalism; the subtle, well-intentioned impulse of an outsider assuming they possess novel solutions to existing structural challenges. To counteract this, I consciously anchored my contributions in co-creation and supportive facilitation rather than directional authority. Rather than entering the space with pre-packaged assumptions about how European brain health advocacy ought to be executed, I treated my role as an extension of the European Brain Council's existing mission. I prioritized asking clarifying questions, listening to the historical nuances of multi-stakeholder policy negotiations, and ensuring every deliverable I supported was designed to sustain and amplify the organization's long-term objectives rather than merely fulfill my own academic metrics.

Navigating this placement also demanded continuous critical reflection on my own positionality and privilege. Arriving as a fully funded international scholar provided me with immense access and intellectual flexibility, yet it carried an ethical responsibility to never mistake programmatic mobility for localized expertise. I had to balance the earnest desire to leave a tangible, meaningful impact with deep respect for the host institution's autonomy, rhythm, and established expertise. Recognizing that I was a temporary guest in an ongoing, complex European ecosystem helped me redefine what sustainable contribution looks like: it is not about claiming ownership over visible outcomes, but reinforcing the capacity of local actors who will continue driving advocacy long after my departure. Ultimately, ethical global engagement reinforced that authentic leadership is less about leaving your own personal footprint, and more about creating the space and support necessary for collective work to endure.

While I was actively refining these global leadership philosophies at work, my capacity for self-reliance was completely deconstructed and tested on the home front halfway through my stay, completely dismantling the delicate sense of stability I had worked so hard to build. Belgium enforces strict local housing regulations restricting short-term tourist rentals under 90 days, an administrative reality that was entirely absent on Airbnb's booking platform. Consequently, I received an abrupt eviction notice mid-stay. Navigating a sudden relocation in an unfamiliar city was already daunting, but managing the logistics completely on my own in the middle of an active workday pushed my emotional and physical endurance to its limit.

The physical reality of that day remains vividly etched in my memory. I had three heavy suitcases that I could not physically roll at once, and my building was located inside a cobblestone, pedestrian-only zone with zero vehicle access. I was completely stranded until a passing stranger offered to help me drag my luggage for a block toward the nearest accessible street. When my ride arrived, the driver either could not understand my plea for assistance through the language barrier or simply refused to engage, driving away and leaving me alone on the curb surrounded by my belongings. What made that moment intensely isolating was the profound absence of my support system; with the six-hour time difference, everyone I loved back in Canada was fast asleep. There was no parent or friend to call for immediate rescue. Every logistical hurdle, communication breakdown, and overwhelming surge of panic had to be absorbed, processed, and resolved by me alone.

Although this crisis deeply disrupted my workflow just as I was finally finding my rhythm, and temporarily shattering my confidence, it ultimately became the catalyst for an enduring inner shift. I managed to secure safe, alternative accommodations and successfully relocated myself, demonstrating an adaptability and grit I did not know I possessed. Enduring that acute vulnerability with no safety net demystified my fear of the unknown. I discovered that resilience is not the absence of panic in the face of sudden crisis, but the capacity to act decisively despite it. That afternoon fundamentally transformed my self-concept: moving forward, my confidence was no longer tethered to things going smoothly, but anchored in an unshakeable self-trust that whatever adversity arises, I have the resourcefulness and emotional stamina to carry myself through.

Surviving that crisis crystallized a deeper evolution taking place beneath the surface of my placement: the reshaping of my personal voice and its integration into my professional identity. Back home, my sense of self was largely anchored in familiar metrics: academic titles, institutional affiliations, routine social circles, and established competencies within predictable environments. Stepping into Brussels stripped away those conventional signifiers of credibility, forcing me to operate simply as an individual navigating an unfamiliar world. Outside that comfort zone, I had to confront who I was when deprived of routine validation. I discovered that authentic professional confidence does not stem from external titles or manufactured authority, but from an internal alignment between personal values, emotional composure, and the courage to bring an honest, grounded voice into every space I occupy.

This identity shift was reinforced daily as deliberate conscious adjustments hardened into permanent habits of mind. I habitualized the practice of listening deeply and asking exploratory questions before offering opinions, replacing the urge to provide immediate answers with a

commitment to understanding underlying context. Navigating linguistic barriers, complex policy landscapes, and unpredictable daily hurdles trained me to view disruption as an ordinary condition of complex systems requiring steady, adaptive action, rather than personal failure. Additionally, moving between solitary reflection and dynamic collaborative work ingrained the discipline of being fully engaged in the moment rather than anxiously anticipating future benchmarks. These traits are no longer situational tools I consciously deploy for a project; they have become the bedrock of how I process challenges, engage with diverse teams, and lead with clarity and integrity.

The competencies forged across these six weeks represent a permanent recalibration of how I will navigate my future academic and professional pursuits. Returning to Canada to complete my undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto, I carry a transformed relationship with rigorous work, boundary-setting, and intellectual independence. The unshakeable autonomy developed through solo living and travel, paired with an understanding of high-trust collaboration, will directly shape how I lead research teams, mentor peers, and approach the intense demands of my final undergraduate year.

Looking further ahead toward prospective graduate studies in Europe and a long-term career within global and biomedical health spaces, this experience bridges theoretical science with human-centered policy. Having navigated multi-stakeholder advocacy alongside European partners, I understand that the most pressing biomedical challenges require solutions that transcend national borders and rigid individual methodologies. In future graduate admissions essays, fellowship interviews, and leadership appointments, my value proposition is fundamentally redefined. I am offering more than just analytical proficiency or research execution; I offer proven adaptability in high-ambiguity environments, the cultural humility required to build consensus across diverse international coalitions, and the self-trust necessary to deliver impact when stripped of familiar support systems.

Ultimately, this journey has dismantled and rebuilt my understanding of global citizenship. Being a global citizen, to me, is not measured by geographic mobility or the superficial ability to mirror local customs. It is an active ethical posture characterized by curiosity over judgment, respect for institutional and community autonomy, and the courage to remain grounded in one's values while holding space for alternative ways of being. It means understanding that ethical leadership in a global context is not about imposing solutions from a pedestal, but about having the humility to listen, the character to facilitate, and the stamina to co-create sustainable progress.

Stepping into the unsimulated crucible of life in Brussels proved that genuine personal transformation cannot be prepared for. By daring to live completely alone in an unfamiliar place; confronting isolation, navigating eviction, and finding community within an international workplace, I learned that ultimately, leadership is not the mastery of an environment, but the mastery of oneself: cultivating the empathy to listen deeply, the resilience to endure ambiguity, and the character to serve with conviction.

I express my deepest gratitude to the Laidlaw Foundation and the University of Toronto Laidlaw Scholars Programme for their generous support, trust, and commitment to cultivating the next generation of ethical leaders.

I also extend my sincere thanks to my Leadership-in-Action supervisor and colleagues at the European Brain Council (EBC) for welcoming me into their team, sharing their institutional wisdom, and providing a deeply transformative professional and personal mentorship experience. Finally, I thank my family, supervisors, and fellow scholars whose ongoing encouragement anchored me throughout this journey.