

## **Leadership in Action (LiA) Report**

### **Wake Up Japan – East Asia Peace Project, Summer 2026**

#### **Introduction: Project, Context and Experience**

Over the summer, I completed my Leadership in Action placement with Wake Up Japan, a non-profit organisation working to encourage civic participation, international dialogue and peaceful relations. I joined its East Asia Peace Project in Japan, where my work centred on civil society diplomacy, historical memory and regional cooperation, particularly between Japan, China and South Korea.

I arrived with an academic interest in international relations, foreign policy and peacebuilding, but the placement let me see how these issues operate in practice. My work developed over the six weeks rather than following one fixed project from the beginning. I researched post-war reconciliation and youth engagement, helped prepare and facilitate dialogue activities, represented the organisation at the Asia Next Forum in Fukuoka, engaged with academics, students, campaigners, businesspeople and policymakers, participated in programmes on Japanese war memory and ultimately researched how historical memory and national identity affect contemporary East Asian relations.

Our final project focused on collective East Asian identity. Across our conversations, we repeatedly noticed that the idea of a shared East Asian, or even Asian, identity was less familiar than we expected, despite considerable economic, social and cultural interconnectedness across the region. We therefore investigated how national identities and competing historical narratives shape regional relations and considered whether civil-society interaction could help create stronger foundations for cooperation. I synthesised academic research and the perspectives encountered during the placement into a final presentation for Wake Up Japan. Our subsequent discussions focused on how these insights could become actionable and inform future programmes rather than simply remaining an academic output.

Throughout the placement, I worked with and learned from a wide range of people and organisations. It meant that much of what I learned came through conversations and hearing different perspectives, rather than simply through the research we conducted. It also made me more aware of how much work people with far greater experience of the region and the issues we were exploring were already doing.

This shaped how I approached my own role. Six weeks was never going to produce major change in something as complex as regional relations, but it allowed me to contribute to work that was already taking place. I could bring my own research, ideas and facilitation skills while learning from the people we worked with. By the end of the

placement, I had a much more realistic understanding of how our work fitted into the organisation's longer-term aims and where it could actually be useful.

### **SMART Goal Evaluation**

Before the LiA, I set four broad SMART goals: contribute to Wake Up Japan's peace and commemoration work; develop useful recommendations around youth engagement and peacebuilding; strengthen my ability to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue; and produce a final research output that could be useful to the organisation. I also wanted to develop personally by becoming more confident communicating across cultural and professional differences and by gaining a more grounded understanding of East Asian international relations.

I achieved these goals, although not always as I originally expected. My contribution to dialogue and commemoration work became particularly tangible through the Asia Next Forum and the August 15th programme. At the Forum in Fukuoka, I co-designed and facilitated interactive workshops and helped lead roundtable discussions concerning regional cooperation, peaceful relations and political agency. The event brought together young people, academics, policymakers and businesspeople from across Asia. This tested my ability to communicate with people whose experiences and expertise differed significantly from my own and required me to adapt to conversations rather than simply deliver prepared material.

The August 15th programme provided a very different form of learning. We visited Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery, the Yushukan Museum and Yasukuni Shrine on the anniversary of Japan's surrender. The day made abstract questions about historical memory immediately visible. August 15th can signify defeat, mourning and reflection in Japan, while in Korea it represents liberation from Japanese colonial rule. At Yasukuni, the presence of anti-shrine peace activists and nationalist counterprotesters further demonstrated that historical memory is contested not only between states but within them. This experience strengthened my understanding of the context in which Wake Up Japan's peacebuilding work takes place and gave greater substance to the research that followed.

My goal around youth engagement also evolved. Early research into UK-Japan reconciliation had made me interested in the role of people-to-people exchange, including how reconciliation moved beyond formal post-war settlements towards cultural, educational and youth relationships. During the placement, however, I became more interested in the wider question of why regional relationships remain difficult despite extensive interaction. This eventually led us towards collective identity. Changing direction was not a failure of the original goal; it reflected what we were learning from the placement.

The clearest tangible output was the final research presentation. I analysed historical and political drivers of tensions between Japan, China and South Korea, assessing how competing national perspectives shape contemporary regional relations. I then translated a large body of academic research and six weeks of observations into a clear presentation for project members. I was particularly pleased that the final presentation led to a wider conversation about what Wake Up Japan could do with the research after we left. We discussed how some of our findings around collective identity, historical memory and regional cooperation could inform future projects, giving the work value beyond the presentation itself.

The experience also changed how I think about SMART goals. They gave the placement direction, but some of the most useful developments could not have been planned. Our focus on collective identity emerged because the same theme kept appearing in conversations. I learned that goals should provide structure without preventing a project from responding to better questions as they emerge.

### **Cross-Goal Reflection**

Looking across my goals, I think they were ambitious enough for six weeks, although I would now phrase some of them differently. A goal such as 'contributing to peacebuilding' is useful for explaining the wider purpose of a project, but it is difficult to measure and far beyond what one short placement can realistically achieve. The goals that worked best were those attached to something I could actually do, for example, facilitate a discussion well or engage with different perspectives.

There was also a clear progression across the six weeks. The first half of the placement involved a lot of listening and exploration. We were meeting people, participating in events, reading and learning about the organisation. At times I found it difficult not to have a fixed research question or final output already fixed. In retrospect, that period was what allowed the eventual project to make sense. Collective identity became our focus because it kept appearing across different parts of the placement rather than because we had decided in advance that it ought to matter.

Once we had identified that focus, the challenge changed. I am naturally inclined to keep researching when I find a subject interesting, and there was an enormous amount that could have been included. During Week 5 in particular, I had to become much stricter about deciding what was relevant to the presentation and what was simply another interesting direction. That was a useful lesson in the difference between academic curiosity and working towards an output for someone else.

If I were setting goals for a similar project again, I would still begin with clear aims, but I would build in a point midway through to review them and therefore treat a changing goal as a legitimate response to new evidence rather than automatically as a failure of planning or outcome.

## **Understanding the Wider System**

One of the biggest changes in my thinking came from seeing how many different people and institutions affect relations between countries. At university, international relations can easily become a discussion of governments, foreign policy, security and formal institutions. Those things obviously matter, but the placement made me much more aware of what sits underneath them: education, museums, public memory, civil-society organisations, personal relationships and the stories people grow up hearing about neighbouring countries.

This was particularly clear in the relationship between Japan, China and South Korea. Our research suggested that increasing economic and social connection does not necessarily create an equivalent sense of shared identity. The countries are closely connected, but historical memory and national narratives can still shape how people understand one another. I saw this in quite different settings, from our visit to the Korea Museum in Okubo to conversations with students from various Tokyo universities and the events surrounding August 15th.

The Asia Next Forum showed something similar on a broader scale. Bringing together people from different countries and sectors did not remove the disagreements or historical issues between their societies, but it created an opportunity for conversations that might not otherwise happen. I began to understand why Wake Up Japan places so much emphasis on dialogue. Its value is not that one discussion suddenly changes someone's worldview, but that repeated contact can make it harder to think about another country only through an abstract national narrative.

At the same time, the placement made the limits of this work very clear. Civil-society dialogue cannot by itself resolve disputes over history or overcome political tensions between states. Education systems, domestic politics, public narratives and foreign-policy decisions all shape what is possible, often over much longer periods than an individual project. Our own six-week timeframe was another obvious limitation. We could participate in conversations and contribute research, but we could not know whether any of those conversations would have a lasting effect.

This changed the way I thought about impact. Early in the placement, I probably thought about change too much in terms of visible outcomes. By the end, I was more comfortable with the idea that work can still be worthwhile even when its effect is difficult to isolate or not immediate. A workshop can give someone a new perspective, a meeting can begin a relationship, and research can give an organisation another way to think about a problem. These effects should not be exaggerated, but neither are they meaningless.

My own contribution therefore needs to be understood on that scale. I helped facilitate discussions at the Asia Next Forum, contributed research and questions throughout the

placement and produced a final project that gave Wake Up Japan another way of thinking about identity and regional cooperation. Obviously, I did not influence policy or alter the wider political relationship between East Asian states; instead, my contribution sat at an organisational and interpersonal level.

If this work were continued over several years, I think the most interesting question would be what happens after these encounters. Does repeated participation in cross-border dialogue change how they understand neighbouring countries? Do young people begin to think of regional cooperation differently? Future Scholars could build on our work by looking at these longer-term effects rather than simply measuring whether an event took place.

Sustainability also depends on the work remaining with the people who understand the context and will still be there after a placement ends. Wake Up Japan, and the people we met, already had their own priorities, experience and networks. Our final discussions were therefore important because they allowed the organisation to decide whether and how any of our research might be useful. I came away with a much better appreciation that contributing to change does not always mean starting something new. Sometimes the more useful role is to add to work that already has local knowledge, relationships and continuity.

### **Character, Leadership and the 3Cs**

Before the LIA, I probably associated good leadership with being decisive, taking responsibility and knowing how to move something forward. Six weeks in Japan did not make those qualities less important, but it showed me that they are only part of it. In an unfamiliar environment, working on issues I was still learning about myself, leadership often depended much more on how well I listened, adapted and responded to other people.

I first noticed this at the Asia Next Forum. We had spent time preparing our workshops and thinking carefully about the discussions we wanted to generate, so my instinct was initially to make sure we covered what we had planned. In practice, some of the best conversations came when participants took a question somewhere we had not expected. My role was still to give the discussion direction, but I became less concerned with controlling where it ended up. I found myself listening more carefully, asking follow-up questions and drawing connections between what different people were saying.

The same openness shaped our project. We arrived in Japan with ideas about what we wanted to investigate, but our eventual focus on collective East Asian identity only emerged because we kept hearing and noticing things that did not fit neatly within those original plans. '*Curiosity*' was therefore the Laidlaw value that shaped me most, but I

came to understand it as not simply a wanting to know more, but as a willingness to let new information change my thinking.

This was particularly important because of the subject matter we were dealing with. Conversations around colonialism, war memory and national identity made me very conscious that I was approaching these issues as a British student spending six weeks in Japan. I could contribute academic research, questions and an outside perspective, but I was speaking with people whose understanding was shaped by much longer personal, professional and national experiences. I became more conscious of the difference between contributing confidently and assuming expertise.

August 15th tested this most clearly. At Chidorigafuchi, the Yushukan Museum and Yasukuni Shrine, we encountered sharply different ways of remembering the same history. Rather than trying to resolve those interpretations, I found it more useful to ask why they existed and what their persistence meant. This strengthened my judgement about when evidence or my own position required caution.

The same lesson affected how I thought about our contribution more generally. I wanted the placement to be ambitious and to produce something genuinely useful, but I became increasingly conscious of how easy it would be to overstate what six weeks of work could achieve. This created a tension between being '*Ambitious*' and '*Good*'. I did not become less ambitious about the quality of our work, but I became more realistic about its place within what Wake Up Japan was already doing. By the final presentation, I was much more comfortable offering our research as something the organisation could question, adapt or build upon rather than feeling that we needed to arrive at a definitive recommendation.

There was a similar tension between being '*Curious*' and '*Fast*'. Once we settled on collective identity, I found the research genuinely interesting and could easily have continued expanding it. However, the final weeks required me to turn that curiosity into something coherent. Working independently across Tokyo, I had to decide which arguments mattered, which examples actually supported them and when another paper was no longer going to improve the presentation. This was probably where my '*performance capacity*' developed most. I became better at moving from understanding a complex issue myself to deciding what another audience actually needed from that research.

More broadly, the placement gave me experience of working in situations where different approaches were needed at different points. At the Asia Next Forum, I needed to facilitate and respond to other people; during the research stage, I needed to work independently and make decisions; and when discussing subjects such as historical memory, I sometimes needed to recognise that the people I was speaking to had knowledge that I did not. Learning to judge what was needed in each situation was

probably more useful than trying to follow one particular idea of what good leadership should look like.

### **Developing a Global Mindset**

Before going to Japan, most of my understanding of East Asian politics came from university and my own research. The LiA allowed me to compare that with what I was actually seeing and hearing while living there. In some cases, the academic ideas were still useful, but I became much more aware of how much context can be lost when studying relations between countries from a distance.

Historical memory was probably the clearest example. I already knew that interpretations of colonialism and the Second World War continue to affect relations between Japan, China and South Korea. During the placement, however, I encountered these issues in museums, conversations and commemorative events rather than only in academic literature.

Our final research into collective identity developed this further. I had expected the increasing movement of people, culture and commerce across the region to create a stronger basis for shared identity. Instead, we found that regional connections can grow while national identities and different interpretations of history remain strong. This was useful because it challenged an assumption I had brought into the project rather than simply confirming what I already thought.

Living in Japan also meant regularly relying on other people for context. Language barriers and unfamiliar cultural references meant I sometimes did not understand why something was done in a particular way. I became more comfortable asking rather than immediately interpreting it through what I already knew. This was particularly important in our project because six weeks was enough time to learn a great deal, but nowhere near enough to understand every aspect of the political and cultural context we were working within.

As a result, I think differently about what having a global mindset requires. Being interested in international issues is important, but so is being aware of how much your understanding depends on where you are looking from and who you have spoken to. The LiA gave me much more experience of testing what I had learned academically against different perspectives and changing my interpretation when they did not fit together. That is something I want to carry into future work in international relations, where being able to understand different perspectives without reducing them to broad national assumptions will be particularly important.

### **Impact, Sustainability and What I Will Take Forward**

By the end of the six weeks, our research had developed into something that could continue to be useful after the placement itself. The final presentation brought together

what we had learned through the Asia Next Forum, our meetings and conversations, the August 15th programme and our subsequent research into collective East Asian identity. Importantly, it also gave us an opportunity to discuss the work directly with Wake Up Japan and consider how some of the ideas could feed into its future programmes. The organisation could take the research forward in ways that made sense within its existing work, particularly around regional dialogue and cooperation, rather than its value depending on our continued involvement. This was important to me because it meant that the final output was not simply a record of what we had done over six weeks, but something that could remain relevant to the organisation after we left.

There is also scope for future Scholars to build on the work. I would be particularly interested in research that follows participants after cross-border dialogue or exchange programmes. Our project raised the possibility that repeated interaction could strengthen a sense of regional connection, but six weeks was not long enough to test that. Looking at how attitudes, relationships or ideas of identity change over a longer period would be a useful next step.

Personally, the placement reinforced my interest in international relations, foreign policy and geopolitical analysis, but it also changed what I find interesting within those fields. I enjoyed moving between the historical and political structures behind regional tensions, how people in the region understand them, and what they mean for an organisation trying to encourage dialogue and cooperation. I want to continue doing work that combines those elements rather than treating political analysis as something detached from the people affected by it.

Six weeks is a short period in relation to the issues we were studying, and I do not want to overstate what we achieved. However, the placement allowed me to understand East Asian relations beyond how I had previously encountered them through academic study. The research was an important part of that, but so were the conversations, events and people we worked with throughout the six weeks, which gave political and historical questions a context I could not have gained from a distance.

### **Concluding Thanks**

Finally, I want to say a huge thank you to everyone at Wake Up Japan for making the six weeks what they were. I am especially grateful to Misato for welcoming and supporting us throughout the placement, and to everyone who took the time to speak with us, involve us in their work and share their perspectives so openly. I have come away with so much from the experience, both personally and academically, and with some very special memories from the six weeks.