

LiA Reflective Report: Advancing Human Rights Through Education and Digital Advocacy in South Korea

My Leadership in Action project took place with PSCORE, a Seoul-based NGO working to improve the human rights situation in North Korea, support North Korean defectors, and advocate for peaceful reunification on the Korean peninsula. Before arriving in South Korea, I had outlined several areas in which I expected to contribute during the internship: researching and writing about North Korean human rights issues, producing digital content for PSCORE's public outreach, and supporting educational activities involving North Korean defectors and their communities. Alongside these practical objectives, I wanted to develop my understanding of ethical leadership within a cultural, political and professional environment that was very different from those I was familiar with.

These aims remained relevant throughout the nine weeks, although the way in which they materialised was broader and less predictable than the original project outline suggested. Some aspects of the internship developed directly from my planned objectives, while others emerged in response to PSCORE's changing priorities, events taking place during the summer, and opportunities to engage with the organisation's work beyond my day-to-day responsibilities. This became one of the most valuable aspects of the LiA. Rather than simply measuring the experience against a fixed set of tasks, I had to consider how the underlying goals of the project could be pursued effectively within the reality of a working NGO.



Societal impact and contribution to PSCORE

A substantial part of my work at PSCORE involved communications, research and public awareness. During my first week, I researched subjects including North Korean football, the DPRK constitution and questions surrounding reunification. Throughout the internship, I continued contributing to the organisation's research, writing and social media output.

This work demonstrated the relationship between detailed background research and public-facing advocacy. North Korean human rights is an area in which political sensitivities, differences between available sources and the experiences of individuals all need to be considered carefully. Producing accessible content therefore involved more than simply summarising information. It required deciding what was most relevant, verifying information where possible, considering the context in which it would be received and presenting complex topics clearly without oversimplifying them.

One example was content surrounding Gwangbokjeol, Korea's National Liberation Day. Addressing the anniversary required recognising both the shared historical significance of liberation from Japanese colonial rule and the very different political trajectories subsequently experienced by North and South Korea. Later in the internship, I also worked on communications relating to PSCORE's visit to the United Nations Human Rights Office in Seoul, where we learned about the work of the DPRK Accountability Team and wider efforts relating to documentation and accountability for human rights violations.



Experiences such as these strengthened my understanding of how communications work contributes to **SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions**. The connection is not that a single article or social media post directly changes a political system. Rather, public communication forms part of a broader advocacy process through which organisations such as PSCORE document issues, raise awareness, engage international audiences and contribute to longer-term conversations around accountability and human rights.

My contribution was therefore one part of a much larger organisational effort. I found this a useful way of thinking about societal impact. Before the LiA, I was already conscious that meaningful social change is rarely attributable to one individual or one project. Working within PSCORE gave me a much clearer practical understanding of what that looks like within an NGO. Much of the organisation's work depends on accumulated contributions: research being completed accurately, events being organised, social media remaining active, written material being produced, relationships being maintained and people being willing to take responsibility for the smaller tasks that allow larger projects to function.

My direct engagement with communities connected to PSCORE complemented this communications work. During my first week, I participated in an arts and crafts workshop involving children from North Korean defector families. I later took part in another workshop with children and travelled to Namwon as part of a programme involving North Korean defector teachers.



These activities were somewhat different from the regular English-language teaching I had originally anticipated. Nevertheless, they remained closely connected to my broader objective of contributing to educational and community support. They also gave me a more varied understanding of **SDG 4: Quality Education** and **SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities**. Formal language teaching is one form of

educational support, but opportunities for communication, confidence-building, participation and positive interaction can also contribute meaningfully to an inclusive educational environment.

The language barrier was particularly relevant during activities with children. My Korean remained limited, and this meant that communication sometimes relied on demonstrations, simple language, gestures or help from Korean-speaking colleagues. Rather than preventing me from participating, this required me to pay closer attention to how people were responding and to adapt the way I communicated.

It also highlighted an important distinction between intending to communicate clearly and actually being understood. This is not unique to working across different languages, but the language difference made it much more visible. I became more attentive to non-verbal responses and more willing to change my approach rather than simply repeat an explanation in the same form.

The community-facing parts of the internship also encouraged me to think more carefully about the language commonly used around NGO work. Terms such as "support" and "empowerment" are useful, but they can become overly broad if they are not connected to the realities of the people and organisations involved. My role as an intern was to add capacity to existing work, learn from those already involved and carry out the responsibilities given to me as effectively as possible. This gave me a more grounded understanding of what responsible contribution can look like within an established organisation.



Ethical leadership in practice

Ethical communication was one of the challenges I had explicitly anticipated in my original project plan, and it became a consistent theme throughout the internship. Human rights organisations often need to communicate individual experiences in order to make larger political and social issues understandable. At the same time, the experiences being communicated may involve trauma, vulnerability or significant personal risk.

This creates a tension between producing engaging public content and preserving the complexity and dignity of the people whose experiences inform it. North Korea is particularly susceptible to sensationalised coverage, while defectors can sometimes be presented primarily through their most traumatic experiences. Working in an organisation directly engaged with these issues made the ethical questions surrounding representation considerably more concrete.

Accuracy remained essential, but I became more conscious that responsible communication involves more than factual accuracy. Context, privacy, tone, consent and the purpose for which information is being shared all affect whether communication is ethical.

This related closely to the Laidlaw attributes of **curiosity** and **humility** that I had identified before beginning my project. Curiosity encouraged me to investigate topics beyond the most immediately

accessible explanations and to understand the background necessary to communicate them responsibly. Humility was equally important because the internship placed me within a context containing expertise and lived experience very different from my own.

Prior to the internship, most of my understanding of the Korean peninsula had necessarily come through reading, research and media. Those sources remained important, but experiences during the summer added political, geographical and human context that could not be reproduced in exactly the same way from a distance.

Our visit to the DMZ was particularly significant in this respect. Seeing the border from an observatory, visiting the Third Tunnel and the museum relating to people abducted during the Korean War, and hearing directly from a recent North Korean defector made issues I already knew about feel much less abstract. The visit did not replace previous knowledge so much as add another dimension to it. It made the consequences of division more tangible and reinforced how closely historical events, political structures and individual experiences remain connected on the Korean peninsula.



The same was true of visiting the United Nations Human Rights Office. Learning about the work of the DPRK Accountability Team helped connect the topics we discussed at PSCORE to wider international human rights mechanisms. It gave me a clearer sense of how the work of NGOs, testimony from victims and defectors, documentation, international institutions and public advocacy can interact, even though each operates at a very different scale.



Another important aspect of ethical leadership emerged through responsibility within the organisation itself. During the later part of my internship, the person who had been leading the social media team left PSCORE. As a result, I became more involved in keeping track of posts, scheduling content and ensuring that communications work continued smoothly.

This was one of the clearest examples of Leadership in Action during the project, although it was not something I had planned before arriving. It required greater independence and initiative, particularly

when priorities were not always explicitly set out. At the same time, it was important not to equate taking initiative with acting without consultation. I had to judge when I could reasonably make a decision myself and when it was more appropriate to ask for guidance.

This refined my understanding of the Laidlaw attribute of **courage**. In my original objectives, I associated courage partly with engaging publicly with difficult human rights issues. During the internship, I found that it could also take much more ordinary forms: accepting greater responsibility, making decisions with incomplete information, asking questions when clarification was needed and being willing to change something when feedback suggested a better approach.

I found this balance between independence and consultation particularly relevant in a small NGO. Smaller organisations often require people to move between roles and respond quickly when circumstances change. The experience made me more confident operating within that kind of ambiguity without feeling that every decision required either complete certainty or complete independence.



Cultural understanding and global citizenship

Living and working in South Korea for nine weeks was an important part of the LiA experience. Beyond learning more about the country itself, I had the opportunity to work in an environment that was international in its own right. PSCORE's team included colleagues from Korea, China, North and South America, and several European countries, so collaboration regularly brought together different cultural, academic and professional backgrounds.

This made the internship a particularly valuable experience of multicultural teamwork. I was already accustomed to studying and working alongside people from different backgrounds, but PSCORE offered a more sustained international working environment in which we were collaborating towards the same organisational goals. Over the nine weeks, I became more confident in adapting my communication to different working styles, coordinating tasks across an international team and finding approaches that worked effectively for the group as a whole.

The experience also gave me a more practical understanding of what global citizenship means. Rather than seeing it simply as knowledge of other countries or cultures, I came to associate it more strongly with the ability to participate constructively in international environments. At PSCORE, this meant listening to colleagues with different areas of expertise, communicating clearly across language differences and contributing to a shared objective despite the variety of backgrounds represented within the team.



Living in Seoul added another dimension to this. Before the LiA, much of my knowledge of South Korea and the Korean peninsula had naturally come through reading, research and media. Spending an extended period living and working there gave me the opportunity to place that knowledge within a much richer everyday context. My understanding developed not through any single moment, but through daily life, conversations with people I met, visits connected to PSCORE's work and the experience of becoming familiar with Seoul over the course of the summer.

Travelling beyond the capital also broadened this experience. During my seventh week, I travelled to Jeju with friends I had made through PSCORE. Having spent most of the summer in and around Seoul, experiencing an area with its own distinctive history, landscape and atmosphere added another perspective to my time in South Korea. It gave me an opportunity to experience the country beyond both the professional environment of the internship and everyday life in the capital.



Overall, the LiA strengthened my confidence in working within multicultural environments and gave greater practical depth to my understanding of global citizenship. I left PSCORE not only with considerably more knowledge of South Korea and the issues surrounding North Korean human rights, but also with greater experience of collaborating across cultures and contributing effectively within an international team.

The connection between research and action

My LiA also encouraged me to reflect on the relationship between research and practical impact. My first Laidlaw summer had focused much more directly on research and the communication of findings. That experience developed my ability to work with evidence and think about how research can be presented clearly to audiences outside the immediate research process.

At PSCORE, the relationship between research and communication became more immediate. Research was frequently the starting point for something public facing: an article, a social media post, an educational resource or material supporting the organisation's wider advocacy.

The connection between my first and second summers was therefore methodological rather than necessarily thematic. Both required decisions about what evidence was reliable, what information was most important and how complex findings could be communicated accurately to a wider audience.

The LiA added another dimension because much of the material concerned politically sensitive issues and people whose experiences could not be treated simply as information to be communicated. Decisions about framing had an ethical significance alongside an analytical one.

As a result, I now think about research communication somewhat differently. Clear presentation is not simply a final stage applied once research has been completed. The way information is selected and framed can affect how the subject itself is understood. This makes communication part of the responsibility involved in using research rather than merely a way of publicising its conclusions.

Evaluating my original objectives

Looking back at my original project plan, some objectives were fulfilled very directly while others evolved in response to the organisation's needs.

My communications objectives became a substantial part of the internship. I researched North Korea-related issues, contributed written and digital content and became increasingly involved in scheduling and organising social media work. My objective relating to ethical communication also remained relevant throughout the nine weeks and ultimately became one of the strongest themes of the project.

The largest difference between the project plan and the final experience concerned education. I had originally expected regular English-language teaching to form a significant part of my role. Instead, my direct community engagement included children's activities, workshops and the programme in Namwon involving North Korean defector teachers.



I do not see this as a failure to meet the original objective. The objective had been designed before I had worked within PSCORE and could only reflect the information available at that stage. Once on site, the more important question was how I could contribute to the activities that the organisation was delivering.

This experience showed me that a project plan is most useful when it provides direction without limiting the ability to respond to opportunities that emerge in practice. My original objectives

remained a useful reference point throughout the internship, but some of the most valuable parts of the LiA, including the workshops, the programme in Namwon and the additional responsibility I took on within the social media team, were not things I could have anticipated in advance. Adapting to these opportunities allowed me to pursue the broader aims of the project in ways that were more relevant to PSCORE's needs at the time.

The final weeks were naturally quieter than some of the earlier stages of the internship. Much of my attention shifted towards completing remaining work, maintaining communications, preparing to leave South Korea and ensuring that responsibilities were handed over appropriately. Although these weeks generated fewer completely new experiences, they formed an important part of completing the internship responsibly. Finishing a project well is less visible than beginning something new, but continuity matters particularly within organisations that rely heavily on interns and volunteers.

Conclusion

My LiA strengthened my understanding of both societal impact and leadership by giving practical context to ideas I had previously encountered more theoretically.

At PSCORE, I saw how advocacy depends on a combination of highly visible and much less visible work. Public events, articles and campaigns sit alongside research, scheduling, editing, administration, relationship-building and consistent communication. My own contribution operated within that larger structure, and recognising this made my understanding of impact more realistic without making it less meaningful.

The internship also refined my understanding of leadership. Some of the most valuable moments did not involve occupying a formal leadership position. They involved responding effectively when circumstances changed, communicating across language and cultural differences, taking additional responsibility when the social media team changed and recognising when another person's expertise should guide my own decisions.

Most importantly, the experience added practical depth to my understanding of ethical engagement with complex international issues. Nine weeks in South Korea could never provide a complete understanding of North Korean human rights, inter-Korean relations or the experiences of North Korean defectors. What it provided was the opportunity to place existing knowledge alongside direct experience, professional practice and engagement with people whose perspectives were different from my own.

I began the LiA with clear objectives and a strong idea of the areas in which I hoped to contribute. I finished with those aims largely intact, but with a more developed understanding of what achieving them looks like in practice. Effective leadership is not simply a matter of having a plan or being willing to act. It also involves adapting to circumstances, evaluating one's role realistically, communicating responsibly and contributing to work whose significance extends far beyond any individual participant.