

Digital Skills, Big Ambitions and a Change of Plan in Ahmedabad

Shrey Patel · Laidlaw Scholars Leadership in Action Report

For my Leadership in Action project I worked with the Lions Club service network in Ahmedabad, India, to help young people aged 14 to 18 build the digital and life skills they need for study and work. Illness cut my time in India short, so I finished the project remotely by building a complete course that local volunteers can run without me.

Overview of my LIA

My Leadership in Action project took me to Ahmedabad, a large and fast-growing city in Gujarat, western India. I worked with the Lions Club, a global volunteer network whose local members run service projects across the city, from health and food support to work with schools. My local contact, Rameshmasa Samved, has spent years giving back to his community through the Lions, and he became both my guide and my mentor during the project.

The problem I wanted to work on is easy to miss. In many low-income neighbourhoods of Ahmedabad, young people have access to a smartphone, often a family phone, but very few have been shown how to use it for anything beyond social media and videos. Owning a phone is not the same as being able to write an email, fill in a scholarship form, spot a payment scam or research a career. My project aimed to close part of that gap, in line with UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), and also Goals 8 (Decent Work) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

I had planned to spend six weeks in the city, however I was only able to spend three since I became ill and had to return to the UK to recover. This report covers what I did in Ahmedabad, how I adapted when my plans fell apart, and what I learned along the way.

My time in Ahmedabad

Learning before building

I arrived with a detailed week-by-week plan and a proposal full of targets. Within the first few days it was clear that the plan would have to bend. Meetings moved, schools were busy with their own timetables, and things were often arranged at the last minute. Long days travelling across the city in the August heat were tiring, and I had to learn to make the most of the time I had rather than the time I had planned for.

My meetings with Rameshmasa shaped the whole project. He was very practical about the whole project. Whenever I described an idea, his first question was whether a young person could use it the next day. He pushed me to drop anything that sounded good on paper but would not survive contact with a real classroom, and to make sure that whatever I built could be run by Lions volunteers long after I had gone home. Towards the end of my time there, he suggested that I become a full member of the Lions myself. That conversation changed how I thought about the project. To him, service was not a six-week placement; it was something you keep doing for the rest of your life.

A Lions service event

One of the most memorable days was a Lions service event, where members and volunteers spent the day helping local families directly. What struck me was how little fuss there was. Nobody was there for credit. People simply turned up, worked hard and knew the families they were helping by name. It showed me that the Lions' real strength in Ahmedabad comes from trust built up over many years, and from members who know their neighbourhoods far better than any outsider could. I realised that the best thing I could do was to fit into that network, not try to run something alongside it.

Conversations with young people

The most important part of my time in India was talking to young people about their futures. I asked them what they wanted to do, how much they expected to earn, and how they thought they would get there.

Two things stood out. First, most of them only knew a handful of careers: doctor, engineer, a government job, or going abroad. Very few had heard of the routes in between, such as Industrial Training Institutes, diplomas or paid apprenticeships, even though these lead to good jobs. Second, they were extremely confident on their phones, quick on social media, but almost none of them had made a CV, had LinkedIn accounts or used AI more than a chatbot. Their phones were a source of entertainment, not a tool.

Building with AI

The moment that stayed with me most came when I showed a group of young people how to use AI coding tools, such as Codex, to build things themselves. One teenager had an idea for a food delivery app for India. He had thought about it for a long time but assumed it was something only engineers at big companies could make. Sitting together, he described what he wanted in plain words and the AI helped him build a simple working version: a menu, a basket and an order screen.

I will not forget his face when it worked. It was not a finished product, but it was his, and he had made it in an afternoon. For him, it changed what a tech career looked like: something within reach, not something reserved for the bourgeoisie or people with engineering degrees from top universities. For me, it confirmed something I had started to suspect in all of those conversations. The gap was never talent. It was access, and having someone sit down and show you what is possible.

Coming home early, and continuing remotely

In late August I started to feel unwell. My first instinct was to keep going, because stopping felt like failing. Looking back, I pushed on for longer than I should have, and I eventually had to fly home to recover. I am very grateful to Jane for her support in organising my early return.

I asked myself which parts of the project still mattered and what I could still do from the UK. The young people I had met did not need me to be there in person. They needed something that local volunteers could use, again and again, after I had gone. This was exactly what Rameshmasa had been telling me from the start.

So I spent the rest of the summer building that. The result is *Aagal Vadho*, which means “move forward” in Gujarati: a free, eight-session course for young people aged 14 to 18. It covers using your phone as a tool, staying safe online, checking facts before you share them, writing emails, scanning and storing documents, money and safe UPI payments, careers and routes after Class 10 and 12, and writing a CV. Every part of it was shaped by what I had seen in Ahmedabad. Every session works with one phone shared between a small group, and every activity has a paper version for when there are no phones at all. The examples are local: rupee budgets, real UPI scam messages, Gujarat board and scholarship websites, and Indian helplines. The careers session exists because of those conversations about doctor, engineer or abroad.

Because the course has to work without me, I also wrote a facilitator guide, safeguarding rules for working with under-18s, a two-part training course so experienced volunteers can train new ones, before-and-after surveys to measure confidence, and a handover plan with a named local owner. Alongside it I made a 25-page print pack with every activity card, survey and certificate, draft Gujarati versions of the take-home cards, and a one-page summary to help the Lions decide how to take it forward. I’ve made it available publicly here: aagal-vadho.vercel.app

Assessing my SMART goals

My proposal set out four SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) goals. I want to be honest about how far I got.

My first goal was to deliver at least 12 workshops to at least 150 young people. I did not meet this. I worked with young people informally through conversations and hands-on sessions like the AI building, but I could not run the full workshop programme before I became ill. The finished course is designed so that Lions volunteers can deliver it instead, and likely to even more than 150 people!

My second goal was to co-design an eight-module curriculum covering digital literacy, online safety, financial literacy and careers, with key materials in Gujarati. I met most of this. The curriculum is complete and shaped directly by my conversations with Rameshmasa and young people. The Gujarati materials are drafts and still need checking by a first-language speaker.

My third goal was to train at least eight local volunteers to deliver the course. I did not meet this in person, but I have written the training course and sign-off checklist that will let Lions members do it.

My fourth goal was to agree a written handover plan with a named local owner. I have written the plan and am now agreeing it with Rameshmasa.

Final thoughts and acknowledgements

My Leadership in Action project taught me a lot more than if it had gone perfectly as anticipated. I learned to adapt when plans changed, to keep going, and, most of all, that the measure of a project like this is what carries on after you leave.

I am grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation for making this possible, to Jane Mumford for her constant support, especially around my early return, and above all to Rameshmasa Samved and the Lions Club members in Ahmedabad for welcoming me and showing me what real service looks like. Finally, thank you to the young people who shared their ambitions with me. I hope *Aagal Vadho* helps some of them move forward.