

Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme
Experience Abroad Reflection

**Land and the concept of home: An analysis of perceptions of home in the face
of sea-level rise**

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During my first summer in the Laidlaw Scholars Programme, I pursued my experience abroad opportunity by traveling to Fiji and Tuvalu. More specifically, I spent the first three weeks of the summer program in Nadi, Fiji and the last three weeks on Tuvalu's Fongafale islet. It was not until I landed in the Nadi Airport, standing outside looking into the pitch black rain, that it fully registered with me that this was the first time I was travelling by myself to a country where I had no family or friends. Of course I was aware of this before leaving, but it just then set in with a cornucopia of feelings of fear, excitement, anxiety, exhaustion, and hunger. As I was standing outside of the airport and taxi drivers came up to me to ask if I needed a ride, I was overwhelmed and confronted with an anxiety of interacting with strangers that I would work to combat throughout this experience. During the six weeks that followed, I learned to navigate anxiety through confidence, awareness, humility, and adaptability.

"Bula," a greeting of hello, is what I heard everywhere I went in Fiji. I would be passing by strangers and instead of the slight head nod or microscopic smile of acknowledgement that I am used to, many people would say "bula" to me. This friendliness caught me off guard. If a stranger is being nice to me, I become cautious and wary of how they could be scamming me in some way. I know this is awfully pessimistic, but it is something that many friends of mine have also been trained into by growing up in the age of stranger danger and technology decreasing opportunities to interact with strangers, such as ordering for pick up instead of waiting in line to get coffee. It is not just being approached by a random person that makes me uncomfortable, but also being that random person, for I do not want to bother anyone. However, I knew I needed to push myself outside of my comfort zone and start talking with strangers because the development of meaningful research, which was the purpose of this summer, depended on me gaining an understanding of life in Fiji and Tuvalu from the people who live there.

Every day I left my homestay I would tell myself that I could not go back until I had a good conversation with a certain number of people. I held myself to this and with each interaction the next one was easier. One day I walked by a group of people sitting on the beach and right after I said "bula," they welcomed me to eat and chat with them before we had even exchanged names. Another time, I was welcomed to eat some lunch with a family I had just met. I did not want to be rude and take their food, leaving them with less, but I quickly learned that it is rude not to take

at least some of the food offered. While I had not offended them by saying no initially, it was a reminder that some things I do because I am trying to be kind and respectful are actually disrespectful in other cultures, and this was something of which to be cognizant.

After all the progress I made in Fiji in being able to strike up conversations with strangers and make connections, I thought that my confidence and comfort would carry over to Tuvalu. While I did continue to use these skills of cross-cultural communication and connecting with people, I was more nervous to explore because I worried about going somewhere I was not meant to be. I was instantly aware of how much I stood out when I walked down the street to the grocery store and a couple little kids pointed me out to their parents. Kids would come up to me to say hello and ask what my name was, where I was from, and where I was going. While my white skin and light brown hair did make me stand out a bit when I was in Fiji, people there were used to tourists from all over the world. In Tuvalu, however, there are not as many tourists, and in the three weeks I was there I only saw about a dozen white people. All of this is to say, I was increasingly nervous about accidentally saying or doing the wrong thing.

Something I was particularly worried about was being where I was not welcome. I carefully looked out for signs and asked people for advice on where I could go. Many people were open to me asking for guidance, and it often led to opportunities for me to learn. At one point when walking on the side of the main road, a person I had met briefly at the grocery store drove up next to me on a moped and said hello. She then proceeded to introduce me to her friends, who were so welcoming and excited to show me around. They offered to drive me to the other side of the islet and were open to my respectful curiosity about what life was like in Tuvalu. One friend welcomed me to join a church service, which I would not have done if I did not receive that invite, because of a fear of being where I was not welcomed.

I learned that cultural competence is not simply a matter of interacting with people from other cultures; it is actively questioning your assumptions, adapting your behavior to the cultural context you are in, remaining open to connection, and listening to the people around you. A certain level of caution in what you do and who you interact with is healthy and important in being respectful and staying safe, particularly when travelling solo. However, respect is not

always about being reserved or holding yourself back; it is about being inquisitive, listening, and remaining open to invitations. If I had not remained adaptive, respectfully curious, and self-aware, I would have gone without the cross-cultural interactions and experiences that enriched my understanding of the perspectives of people I met in Fiji and Tuvalu. I would not have made such dear friendships, been welcomed to people's houses for dinner, joined family functions, visited villages, participated in ceremonies, been shown how to make a broom with coconut leaves, learned new card games, and much more.

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