When signing up to this paper, I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into. Thrown in the deep end would be an understatement, but I learnt to swim quickly! I remember the first lecture when Deb used her scare tactics to weed out the uncommitted students. Fortunately, this only fueled me to rise to the challenge and lead a global team! Three weeks later and that is exactly what I did!

I would consider myself a capable leader with leadership experience (sports teams, student leadership and leadership in the workplace). However, GEE was a whole different ball game. The team included Colombians, Dutch, Kiwis a Burundian and a Rwandan. My team was relatively slow off the mark which presented a few issues early on. Getting people on board was the biggest challenge we faced as only three of the team replied to my launch letter. I think I did well in regards to keeping calm and not letting this throw me off. Instead, I tried a new avenue to reach my team – WhatsApp. WhatsApp (an absolute lifesaver), was where most of our communication occurred, alongside a Facebook page – both had their benefits. Obviously, time zones were a big obstacle when communicating. The method I used to overcome this, which I would highly recommend, is establishing one member in the team, in a different time zone, to co-lead the team. Luckily I had a very competent Dutch student (Sander De Graaf). This meant the team could always be working and contributing no matter the time as either Sander or I could oversee and direct the conversation. I made sure to have a talk with Sander about making sure that we had lots of ideas from everyone, before we finalized anything. This raised another issue – creativity.

It seemed that a general theme of the team was that we needed an idea immediately in order to begin working. This meant that when any ideas were introduced, there was a tendency for the team to want to just select that. I struggled to get them to maintain their creative thinking in order to generate plenty of ideas. I did manage however, by facilitating discussion, rather than asking for free contribution. This is another technique which was instrumental to coming up with a good idea. I asked open ended questions like what problems their countries faced, and what solutions the group had for helping that problem. This both showed that I was invested in the group, and what they had to say, but also made them feel a sense of responsibility and accountability to the team. This really helped the team gel and made everyone feel comfortable to contribute which was extremely important for when it came to writing the report. Eventually we selected the idea of producing Sauerkraut in Burundi to create jobs AND help increase nutrition in diets there. The group loved this idea as it was specific and we had a local in our team who was very knowledgeable and I used him to help educate the group on this location.

Another leadership technique I used, which has been a weakness of my past leadership and something I know I need to develop, was delegating. I tend to take on a lot of work for myself due to my high standards. However, I really focused on utilizing the amazing team we had and delegated everyone specific areas of the report to work on. In order to not overwhelm or pressure anyone, I asked for a draft first and within 24 hours most of the team had uploaded something. Delegation worked wonders! WHO KNEW? I am proud that I was able to learn from my past and develop my leadership skills on this project. Another awesome lesson that I learnt came from finding myself in a relatively unfamiliar situation – dependence. Often at Uni or School, we work alongside peers who have similar experiences and lives to us and we are more or less on the same page. However, this team was anything but similar. Everyone came from different cultures and backgrounds and more importantly everyone had different skills. There were countless times during the project that I had to depend on others and draw from other’s knowledge. It has always frustrated me the way society looks at lower socioeconomic groups as less able and this project proved just how wrong that was. Our Burundian team member (Burundi being one of the poorest countries in the world), along with every other team member, had the most incredibly diverse and useful skills. Almost every single day everyone would be asking each other question that they didn’t know the answers to, and it was amazing to witness our team working together so well. It really was proof that you have to use ALL the resources you have. This is what I am most proud of with my team – we all fully utilized each others skills and abilities. I can confidently say that without each of our seven team members, we would have produced a report of far lower quality and detail than we did.