What were my first thoughts about this project? Stress, pressure, and frustration. Of course, I was also excited to participate in this experience since the SDGs have an extremely important role in our lives. However, truth to be told I was sceptical. All that came to my mind was the amount of struggle and hardship this competition could bring. I believed that this project was not meant for us first-year students, despite its philanthropic and valuable purpose. I also thought that I already had enough responsibility on my shoulders, so why would I want more? Not to mention the fact that I would have to be working together with seven total strangers from all around the world. Well, let’s just say I was stressed even before the start of this contest. Partly I was right, but on the other hand, when did I ever learn from easy and unchallenging situations? The answer is probably obvious. “We do things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.” – John F. Kennedy

I did not imagine this quote would mean so much to me one day. Now I realise, that I did not do my best in this competition because it was easy. I did it because it has been one of the most difficult experiences in my life so far. I stepped up as a leader, encouraged and supported my team members because I thought if I do not do it, then who will? To be entirely honest, I did not feel like I belonged to the team leaders nor did I think I was a great one. I just knew I had this role, and that I have to try and bring out the best of my team members. It was not always successful of course. Still, I felt like I had to go that extra mile not just for them, but for myself too. The term ‘servant leader’ always fascinated me, but I could not imagine myself as one until now. During this contest other than improving my skills, all I was focusing on is to help the members and “serve” them, but at the same time provide guidance when necessary. I was probably not the greatest servant leader to ever exist, but I was a servant leader for the first time in my life and that gave me a sense of accomplishment.

What challenges did we experience? Where should I even start, there were so many. Perhaps, I should begin with the very first few days of frustration and panic of not being able to reach any of the team members. I was told that late responses are not unusual, however, not hearing from any of the seven people was worrisome. Without even realising, I decided to listen to my instincts and do everything I can to reach the members. I read everyone’s bio, started sending e-mails, trying to find other contacts such as social media to send them messages there as well. After contacting Deb Gilbertson, I also learned that our team leader was struggling with sickness which made me want to contribute and offer my help even more.

The members eventually started responding and I managed to gather everyone on the same platform. However, as time passed by, the level and impact of difficulties also grew. Challenges such as language barrier, time difference, work ethic contrast, creativity block, and lack of productivity started growing upon us. I already felt as if a lot of time had been wasted with the late arrivals and the fact that we still did not have an idea settled was even more concerning. I was suddenly in the position of fostering creativity, sharing even the smallest ideas, and encouraging the members to get involved. Fortunately, a promising idea came up and we finally started to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Even then, despite all my efforts in enhancing communication and productivity, some members still did not participate entirely, and that even ended up resulting in a serious conflict between two people during the last few days of the contest. I knew I could not allow that argument to escalate. Thankfully, I managed to convince and help the members sort things out and cooperate until the end of the competition. This conflict opened my eyes even more and made me understand that in these situations you have to put the team first, instead of letting your own emotions and the pressure get the best of you. Stepping up as a global team leader is not easy, and I felt the burden of it. But without that burden and responsibility, I would not have been able to challenge myself either.

My overall insights
After realising during our first team meeting that I was the youngest in the group and probably the least skilled as well I was worried that I would just be a nuisance to my team. The idea that I – the one with the least experience – should lead the team freaked me out, even though, it was not my first time being a leader. I just knew that this was more than a regular school project. There are many things I would probably do differently, such as being more confident when making decisions and urging the team even more in order not to finish the work so last minute. Nevertheless, I have learned a great deal from this experience. In the beginning, I thought these 3 weeks would be difficult because I
would have to use all my business knowledge to contribute to the work. Although that became true, I also had to do so much more. This project made me use my creativity, critical thinking, patience, persistence, and required a lot of effort. I have never paid this much attention to team unity, problem-solving, and to motivating others either. Still, GEE allowed me to see a new side of myself, to discover new strengths and abilities of mine, and to overall develop my leadership skills and style to the next level. Working together towards the same goal with team members from all over the world also widened my perspective. I have got to know amazing people, formed great friendships, and became part of the inspiring UK team leader group of this organisation. All in all, I am writing this reflection with gratitude, joy, and will forever consider this experience a great achievement.