

## ONLINE INSIGHTS

### Oxford Women's Leadership Development Programme

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# This programme helped me find my place

## Liliana Bermudes and the Oxford Women's Leadership Development Programme

Liliana Bermudes had not long started her position as Community and Partnerships Lead for the UK nonprofit Code Your Future when she spotted the opportunity to apply for a place on the Oxford Women's Leadership Development Programme in the Sister Sister Network newsletter.

She is, as she said, 'addicted to personal development,' but the reason she applied was more to do with the clients – mainly people coming from social excluded groups – she was working with. 'I think for all of us, but especially if we are working with vulnerable people, we have the responsibility to be the best versions of ourselves. We have the responsibility to be the best leaders we can be, and help guide the organisation to have a better impact,' she said. In addition, she wanted to enhance her leadership skills to become a better role model, not only for the women served by Code Your Future, but also for those in her native Brazil.

When she actually started the programme, though, as she now admits, Liliana was feeling far from a prospective role-model: 'Throughout my professional life, in different roles, I was never sure that I could do the job, if I was the right person. In fact, I found out later – during the programme – that this questioning is very common among women.'

Indeed, she says that the biggest benefit she got from the programme was confidence – not just the belief that she could do whatever she set out to do, but the self-assurance to accept that she is not good at everything. 'Before, I used to spend a lot of time thinking about the things that I don't know or am not really capable of, that I'm not really good at,' she said. 'I thought that I had to concentrate on improving in those areas and become an all-round good professional.'

'What I got from the programme was not only the recognition that there are things that I am good at, but the realisation that my qualities and strengths are precisely where I should be focusing my energy. I should not spend time with my weaknesses and things I am not good at. That to me was a revelation.'

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The Sister Sister Network is a social enterprise aimed at contributing to women's empowerment and gender balance. It joined with Saïd Business School to offer a place to one of its members on the online Oxford Women's Leadership Development Programme. 'We saw it as a real intervention that could actually make a difference, especially during the Covid pandemic when we saw that women were disproportionately affected,' said Sister Sister Network founder Aduke Onafowakan. 'It was an opportunity for someone to benefit from some great research and teaching, add to their network and enhance their CV all at the same time. What's not to love? We welcome collaboration opportunities such as this to help women reach higher.'

[www.sistersisternetwork.org](http://www.sistersisternetwork.org)

### Surprising benefits of online learning

The Oxford Women's Leadership Development Programme was Liliana's first experience of a business school, and first experience of online learning. She was surprised to discover how engaging the programme was and how much she appreciated its flexibility.

'I actually moved house half way through the programme, and was without internet access for nearly two weeks,' she explained. 'I had to download the materials during the day in order to study in the evening, offline. It sounds challenging but it worked very well. If it had been a live programme I probably would not have completed it, but the programme itself gave me the energy to finish it; and all the other women who were sharing their experiences gave me the courage and the will to keep going.'

It was still hard work, though she puts some of that down to not being a native English speaker: 'There were a lot of discussions and it was difficult to be spontaneous because you had to reflect a lot and structure your thoughts. But having to think about your experiences and relate to other people's stories is a very good way to learn.'

### Putting new ideas into practice

Throughout the programme, Liliana experimented with applying what she had learnt to her day-to-day activities. 'Everything started from the moment when I realised that I shouldn't try to be a different kind of leader: I should be the leader that I am. From that moment on, a series of changes in behaviour started happening. I would encounter something and think, "let me just try something new here".'

In particular, she started taking different approaches to dealing with difficult situations. 'I have consciously started using more influence and negotiation – both skills that I practised as part of the programme,' she said. 'The outcome has been positive. It was a transformative moment for me: the realisation that my personality traits were unique and that I should use them to help me deal with challenging situations. I could combine being assertive with being compassionate and not allow myself to be derailed.'

### A blueprint for the future

The career-planning and self-development activities on the programme were 'magical', Liliana said. 'Articulating our short-term and long-term goals, thinking about the future version of myself, putting it all down on paper: that plan will help me for at least the next ten years. The programme was not just about how to be a leader but how to have a successful career as a leader, complete with skills such as negotiation, how to have difficult conversations, and how to influence people.'

'When you are an immigrant, as I am, you are working in a country that is not yours, and you are working in a language that is not your native language. That's hard. As an immigrant woman it is hard in terms of confidence, in believing in yourself. You feel uncomfortable and you feel out of place in a professional context many times. This programme helped me find my place, and gave me the tools to succeed. Anyone can use the same tools; it doesn't matter where you come from.'

'I have to thank Oxford Saïd and the Sister Sister Network for the opportunity to join the Oxford Women's Leadership Development Programme: it has changed me, and will probably change my career in years to come.'

### Online programmes at Oxford Saïd

[www.sbs.oxford.edu/owldp](http://www.sbs.oxford.edu/owldp)

To find out more please visit the website or get in touch with our team to start your learning journey on:

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