

Laidlaw Final Scholar Report

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Reasons for undertaking the Laidlaw programme

After returning from an inter-faith educational trip to Israel and Palestine in December 2018, I was sparked by Israeli ethnonationalism, the Jewish Nation-State Law, and complete lack of separation between state and religion in Israel. I applied very last minute and had little faith I would make it to interview, yet alone be awarded the scholarship; linking the ethnonationalist law to geopolitics and the implications of such illiberal laws on minority citizens in supposedly democratic nation-states formed the basis of my Laidlaw research. I was also highly eager to build my leadership experience - applying to the Fast Stream and working on sustainability policy was a long-term aim in first year.

I didn't intend to enter academia or long-term research whilst applying to the scholarship, but rather I was keen to build a basis for future work in policy and human-rights law. Immediately after being informed that I had been awarded the scholarship and following talks with my professor, I knew it was research which needed to include fieldwork in Israel. The funding from the scholarship enabled me to undertake one of the most valuable, exciting, and intense periods of learning in my life as of yet – 3 weeks of unstructured interviews in Israel – which has since given me a platform of confidence I wouldn't have otherwise gotten. Though I am now putting my all into the sustainability field, the research experience has been inordinately helpful in a plethora of contexts in both my personal and professional life (i.e., graduate applications, starting a student society at Durham).

What did you gain from the overall programme?

Research experience

Intensive primary data collection and reading into geopolitics, a central part of my degree in Human Geography, was invaluable in thinking deeply about my career and academic specialisms early on in my time at university. Initially, before fieldwork in Israel, my research was specifically on the implications of the 2018 Nation-State Law on Palestinian citizens of Israel: the effects on Israeli political discourse, how it breached international human-rights law, accelerated ground for the annexation of the West Bank, and changed the legal balance in Israel. Yet, whilst in the field, I realised that the Nation-State Law was one part of a larger ethnonationalist structure. I had many conversations with my supervisor (Phil Steinberg) about interviews in the field which sparked my interest in politics, and slightly expanded the scope of my research to focus on - *illiberal democracy* – occurring when democratic process no longer protects our rights and freedoms in an electoral democracy. I was fascinated by Fareed Zakaria's conception of illiberal democracy in his 'Foreign Affairs' article and wanted to take this further, using Israel/Palestine as a case study, and demonstrating how my analysis can be applied to innumerable ethnically divided nation states. I devised the 'political threshold' concept to qualitatively assess the point at which minorities' social powers are undermined in seemingly democratic nation states. I am highly grateful that my paper will be published on the Columbia Undergraduate Research Journal on the 26th April 2021 under the title 'Illiberal Democracy: the case of Democratic Erosion'. I started with a specific aim, and my research journey expanded into illiberal democracy, a contemporary political

phenomenon which is highly interdisciplinary (crossing into political theory, international relations, foreign affairs and human geography).

Resulting from my research in Israel, I presented my research at both the 2019 International Undergraduate Research Conference (ICUR) and at the 2019 UCL Conference. ICUR 2019 was a steep learning process as it was the first time I presented to a non-specialist audience, with a quick turnaround upon return from fieldwork. I learnt the importance of making my research relatable, avoiding unnecessary academic jargon, and including points that any audience member can act upon in their everyday lives (i.e., how to spot illiberal democracy in the UK context). In a different format, the UCL Laidlaw conference meant summarising the most impactful parts of my research in a '3-minute thesis' competition. I am highly grateful to the staff at the careers centre at Durham for helping me refine my public speaking skills before the conference, and this was transformative as the most challenging public speaking context I had presented at to date. Building upon ICUR 2019, I focused solely on the *impact* of my research on recognising and acting upon illiberalism in the most relatable contexts. The Occupation of Palestine contains an immeasurably complex history, and I was only able to grasp this history because of my degree, I have learnt to reinforce illiberal democracy when presenting my research rather than the specific geopolitical example of Israel/ Palestine.

Finally, I gained the ability to summarise and curate my research into a publishable academic article for the Columbia Undergraduate Research Journal with the help of my supervisor. Throughout the process of peer review, I learnt that it is most effective to highlight primary data (in my case, interviews) to emphasise an academic point, and that theory loses impact in large chunks. The crux of my argument in this paper, is to recognise that seemingly irreparable political actions (I argue illiberal legislation being passed) have a much longer history – within political discourse and sentiment, early definitions of the nation-state, and covert discrimination towards minorities. I hope to apply this medium of analysis, shedding light on threshold points and tipping points leading to illiberalism, to the field of environmental sustainability. All too often, government actions seem drastic and unprecedented, following my Laidlaw research I aim to deploy the political threshold concept to improve constitutional liberalism in the context of sustainability policy.

Leadership training

The Laidlaw programme was fundamental in understanding my own leadership style, and how to elevate and lift others in any team context. The leadership training in 2019 highlighted to me how many different leadership styles there are, and how essential it is to leverage all styles. I am also excited to be working with Alice Lassman and Emma Frank-Gwinell on a future Laidlaw leadership matrix which will put in action this leadership training into the context of ethical leadership (as well as a podcast!).

Networking

Meeting incredibly hardworking scholars who all share the aim of solving problems to make society more equitable for all, some of which are now some of my closest friends, has undoubtedly been the highlight of my time on the Laidlaw programme. I have since made the podcast 'Here's a Thought' with economics scholar Alice Lassman, as well as entering the Hult Prize with 'Treequent Flyers' (universalised free carbon offsetting) and fostering a

community and space for sexual assault survivors. Suhasini Vira has been hugely inspiring (she created the non-profit organisation Clean Hands Initiative during the first lockdown) and I'm highly grateful to have gone through the process of graduate applications alongside her. Aside from this, the Laidlaw programme catalysed the notion of presenting my story and research to generate interest- from political actors in Israel to meeting other scholars at conferences- this was instrumental to my professional life to begin this kind of thinking in my first year of university. In my second year, I focused on breaking into the sustainability space, and I felt equipped to reach out to professionals for advice as a result of my Laidlaw experiences.

Chairing the Law society human-rights panel (run by Nicole Lim) in second year was also a highlight, I had the chance to meet the environmental lawyer Tessa Khan alongside my Laidlaw supervisor – who took the Dutch government to court for violating emissions targets- setting the precedent for holding national governments accountable for the climate crisis.

Any international experience

Conducting unstructured interviews in Israel was certainly challenging at times, but my main takeaway was the ability to entirely put my political views aside and speak cogently with political actors whom outside of a research context I would intensely disagree with. As a non- Israeli female undergraduate interviewing Zionist politicians, I was able to use my knowledge to reassert myself in interviews, something that I am certain I will have to deploy in my career as a woman entering government. Navigating the political uncertainty of the field was manageable, yet at times, I accepted the truth that unless I learnt Arabic and invested myself heavily in Middle Eastern studies, I could not make a difference to the Occupation of Palestine long term with my positionality. Going to Israel on my own was undoubtedly one of the best decisions I have made, and I hope I can assist future scholars with any international research they wish to undertake.

Other aspects

The Laidlaw programme has defined my time at Durham university, and has influenced my involvement in university leadership, societies, and building my own core values over the last three years. At the beginning of my final year, myself and two close friends launched 'DESA' (Durham Environmental and Sustainability Association) to inspire Durham university students to pursue careers in the environment and sustainability field, by posting relevant job opportunities, connecting them to relevant alumni, and running speaker events (online). I directly used my own experiences of networking, work experience, and passion for sustainability – to encourage other students to consider incorporating sustainability into their career path. This society has grown substantially and all our events to date have been well attended (40+ students and/or staff). It was a pleasure having interviews with the students who are taking it from our hands in the next academic year, and I hope DESA continues long after we leave Durham now that the climate crisis begins to dictate the job market in the coming years.

The role of Curriculum officer at the student society 'ECO-DU' has also stemmed from my Laidlaw experiences. I aimed to impact sustainability through embedding it mandatorily into the university curriculum, working with professors from various departments across the university. This would have resulted in a climate crisis module, to be incorporate into every academic timetable; unfortunately, I could not get this module through enough members of staff, so I came to the compromise of building a liberal arts style climate change degree which will enable students from any discipline to incorporate sustainability into their degrees which is still a work in progress.

Are you prepared to 'give back' to the programme in the future by being an active alumnus?

Laidlaw has certainly made me more passionate about social mobility as a cause. Alongside the Laidlaw programme, I was an associate with 'UpReach' (the social mobility charity) and in recognising the immense importance of the Laidlaw scholarship to employability – I would be highly interested in enabling disadvantaged undergraduates from diverse and socio-economic backgrounds to gain a place on the Laidlaw Scholarship. I am excited to get involved in the upcoming mentorship programme and engaging with the next cohort of scholars. Durham University has a systemic problem with its private school intake, and I know that awarding the Laidlaw scholarship to more students from disadvantaged backgrounds will change lives.