

Looking Back at Laidlaw- Emily Jane Chen

Written in part to fulfil the Laidlaw Leadership Scholarship, Cohort 3. Representative of Durham University, School of Law.

My journey with the Laidlaw leadership programme has been long, but I am grateful for all of the lessons that I have learned. The years one spends at university are widely regarded to be pivotal. The conventional student comes immediately from sitting A-levels in their home town and living with their parents, goes to university, and then is generally expected to be living independently in a job. For those steps to happen, university must be a big learning curve. However, I am absolutely certain that the Laidlaw programme acted as a catalyst for my personal growth, and I now feel more empowered and more ready to launch myself into the next step.

My leadership report shall be split into the following sections:

Reasons for undertaking the Laidlaw Programme

What did I gain from the overall programme

How I think the programme will help me in the future

Aspects of the programme that I think can be improved- and how

Am I prepared to 'give back' to the programme by being an active alumni?

Reasons for undertaking the Laidlaw Programme

My very first interaction with any component of the Laidlaw foundation was at my Freshers Fair in 2018. Being brutally honest, the first thing that I noticed was the financial sum that was attached to the award. That was what drew me in to speak to (who I later found out to be) the older cohort about what the programme was. Hearing that this was a paid opportunity to pursue my own area of research, I was ecstatic. My first thoughts were (1) I would never be chosen for this programme and (2) IF I was chosen, this would be a great way for me to pursue my intellectual curiosity. As a child I pursued (what my mother called) projects about random things- there is still a poster board somewhere in a house with all of the knowledge I could find about Quebec! That trend continued throughout school, and in my sixth form years I pursued the Extended Project Qualification Level 3 award. Through this, I decided to research and produce a paper on the use of the death penalty in Texas. In the process of completing this award, I found that I enjoyed really honing in on a particular area of law, and exploring how it interacted with philosophical, economic, societal, and democratic factors. The apex of this experience was when I had to verbally defend my stance in front of esteemed academics. Knowing how much I

enjoyed that academic process, I was very enthusiastic about the Laidlaw programme. In hindsight, I did not properly consider the leadership element of the scholarship, seeing it as necessary bureaucratic steps in order to be able to do what I wanted to do. This was a naive view, and the various leadership components of the scholarship have actually been integral to my wider journey.

What did I gain from the overall programme

Through the programme I have gained a sense of perspective that will help me foster both professional and personal relationships. I am immensely grateful to this programme for this opportunity, as I am sure that the recent increase in employment opportunities are because of my improved performance in interview, as a result of my better perspective.

During the Ushaw residential programme, I was very confident in myself. Too confident. I was certain that I was correct, that things would be faster if they were done my way, and that the lulls in between sessions were as a result of poor organisation. This was a massive misjudgment on my part. For one, the lulls between sessions were opportunities for us to network. Since then I have spoken with my fellow cohort, and I am aware that I came across very strongly, with some even having the impression that I was arrogant. This was not my intention, and not a reflection of my actual personal view. I then had a long conversation with Durham Laidlaw Scholarship Coordinator Suzanne Auty, and she gave me the opportunity to leave the programme. It was at that point that I had the realisation that by being the person who was most resistant to the teachings, it was obvious that I was the person who needed to listen to the programme the most.

Since that meeting, I made a considerable effort to really absorb, consider, and reflect on the teachings of Laidlaw. As a result of that new approach, I have now made it second nature to really look at the wider surroundings, consider how my approach may negatively impact others, or even impede everyone's progress as other people will often have much better ideas. I am so grateful that I have learned that lesson. Durham's Cohort 3 of Laidlaw Scholars are truly a fantastic group of individuals, all with particular passions and interests that have undeniably broadened my scope of knowledge. By moving away from the overly assertive persona that I used to have, I have not only learned a lot from the other members of my group, but gained a fantastic network of friends, that I am certain will become a brilliant group of highly esteemed individuals in their respective fields.

How I think the programme will help me in the future

As a result of the better sense of perspective, I know that I will be able to lead without authority. As I am intending to pursue a career in commercial law, it is very important that I am able to both pursue independent projects and solve problems independently, whilst also being able to work in a team with lawyers of varying seniority. The Laidlaw programme definitely helped me with both of these facets.

Doing the independent research, with a framework that I had to construct myself, was a definite challenge. During the first summer, I am embarrassed to say that I was not as communicative that I could have been with my supervisor. Due to a combination of varying personal complications, the overall timeline for my coursework was delayed. My supervisor was justifiably frustrated with me as I did not clearly explain the circumstances and he ultimately made allowances for me (that I am very appreciative of) without context. However, much negative emotion could have been avoided if I ensured that I spoke clearly, confidently, and simply about what was happening. The second summer of research was also made difficult as a result of COVID-19. However, by having a meeting with my supervisor, setting expectations, and really capitalising on my resilience and determination to achieve, I ended the summer with a successful project. Whilst I came into the programme only caring about the paper that I would ultimately produce, I am more proud of the skills that I have gained as a result of it. I am now sure that in a professional setting, I would have the confidence to reach out to my supervisor when I needed to manage expectations, communicate my questions, and produce a high-caliber of work as expected.

Even if I do not ultimately become a lawyer, teamwork is a necessary skill for any workplace. Therefore I am glad that its value and varying ways to improve my personal cooperative abilities were honed through the Laidlaw programme. During a training session, the entire cohort was split into 2. Each team was given a large bag of materials to build something. One team had all of the hinges and the other team had all of the building blocks (or something equivalent). It was a different member of the team I was on that noticed this, and encouraged us to work together across the entire cohort. At this time I had not gained an appreciation for the leadership attributes of the programme, and questioned his judgment and delayed the overall outcome being achieved. Surprisingly enough, I was in a similar situation in the context of a law firm vacation scheme interview. Using the tools that I learned from Laidlaw, I made sure that every person was involved, that their voices were heard, and that our approach to a task was collectively decided. In addition to being successful for that application, I was particularly praised for my team work ethic. As a result of moments like that wherein I am reminded how much that I have gained from the Laidlaw programme. For those factors mentioned above (in addition to many others) I am grateful.

Aspects of the programme that I think can be improved- and how

The community of Laidlaw scholars is something that I am stupendously appreciative for. There is a Laidlaw group chat of fellow Durham cohort 3 scholars that helps to create a sense of camaraderie, motivation, and support. By fostering relations with those individuals, I became more committed to the programme as I was so inspired by their respective talents, and I wanted to work to be on their level. The big bonding moments that we had were during the residential course, and at the UCL convention. Whilst I am aware that COVID-19 has prevented this for the newer cohorts, I believe that the programme will see much stronger results if there are more individuals for in-person socialisation. I remember attending a networking dinner with the Durham Cohort 2, wherein seating was mixed. We heard about how one member had been awarded Undergraduate of the Year by TargetJobs, another was given a place to do their Masters at Oxford, and another had earned a Training Contract at a prestigious Magic Circle

Firm. Being able to glean this information from natural interactions, and how they felt empowered to do this as a result of Laidlaw, meant that the lessons of the programme felt more meaningful. As a result, I believe that the programme should add in more networking between cohorts. On a very similar vein, another element that I believe could be improved is communication between universities. The UCL conference was a great opportunity to speak with other people, and test out all of the networking skills that we had developed from the previous courses. Hence, if the teamwork and leadership skills courses were integrated into the conference, that would ensure that individuals were building on skills that they previously learned, but be using them with new people (which I perceive to be an increased difficulty). This is also much closer to how the skills would be used in a professional workplace. From my understanding of how law firms work, if you are working on a merger in the corporate team you would be expected to consult with the real estate team (about the property that the target company owns and what can be done about contracts in that area), the tax team (how spending this money would impact the amount of tax they would need to pay, if the target company is based in another country and therefore question if the predatory company would need to be considerate of their tax laws), the target team's counsel, et cetera. This process is not exclusive to law, but it is the professional setting that I have learned the most about. As a result, it is key for individuals to be able to express all of the Laidlaw attributes in both the setting where they are more likely to be comfortable (surrounded by members of their cohort that they are more familiar with) and with new groups of individuals (members of their cohort from different universities).

Consequently, an increased number of opportunities to undertake the training programme with students from other universities, and also networking sessions to allow relationships to naturally foster within each universities cohort, will be a great way to further steepen the personal growth trajectory of laidlaw scholars.

Am I prepared to 'give back' to the programme by being an active alumni?

I would be delighted to give back to the programme in whichever way that I could. I can evidence my keen interest in further supporting the programme with the fact that after my first summer of research, I was part of the executive committee of the Durham University Laidlaw Society. Moreover, I have volunteered on several occasions to speak with the newer cohorts about my journey within the Laidlaw programme, and how that has impacted my life. I regularly see the posts about the Durham Alumni Laidlaw Network on LinkedIn, and I would love to be able to contribute. I understand that the implementation of the Laidlaw programme has become much more difficult as a result of COVID-19, but I look forward to seeing how it could morph into something much larger. As a Laidlaw alumna said that the achievements of fellow Laidlaw scholars help to credit the programme, which is a symbiotic relationship as then being able to claim that I am a participant will be a credit to me. If there are opportunities for me to 'give back', I look forward to hearing about them.

Conclusion

I will admit that I am embarrassed by the person that I was prior to the Laidlaw programme. The past 2 years have been a big learning curve, and I am glad that I followed the meander. Overall, I must underline that the Laidlaw programme is much more than just a paid opportunity to explore academic pursuits, and that one's research pursuits would actually be improved if there was greater consideration given to the leadership component of the programme. So thank you to Suzanne Auty and Lucy Morris for choosing me for this programme, I am very grateful.