

Final report- A reflection on my time with the Laidlaw Scholarship and my hopes for the next few years

In this report, I take a reflective approach to think about the skills I have developed during the Laidlaw Scholarship programme and the way it has changed my perspective on myself. Here I discuss some of the student leader attributes I found to be at the centre of my development. Furthermore, I explain some of my visions for the future of the programme, and how I think my cohort and myself can help future scholars get the most out of their opportunity.

Starting the Journey

In all honesty, at the freshers fair in 2018, I gave little attention to the advertisement I had been given for the Laidlaw scholarship. Like many other programmes, jobs and sports presented to me that week I had briefly read the card and shot down the moment of consideration I had experienced towards signing up. I hadn't really thought "this isn't right for me", I had adopted more of a "I'm not right for this" attitude at that time.

By November I had already signed up to, and quickly dropped out of a volunteering trip for the summer holidays because of self-doubt. I was really unsure about what I was going to do that would make me stand out from the huge group of students taking my course. Everyone was rushing into internships or booking fundraisers and I felt like I couldn't keep up. Having looked one more time at my options, it became clear that I wouldn't have a chance to develop at anything if I didn't apply. I was motivated further by my interest in the research project discussed with my supervisor, I knew it had great potential to benefit the psychology department research and possibly the wider community. The more I progressed through the application process, the more I was driven to get a place.

The very first benefit of the Laidlaw scholarship became clear on day one. At the introduction talk, I was pleasantly surprised at how kind and welcoming the scholars from previous years were. They were genuinely interested in my project and encouraged conversation between the new scholars who were initially hesitant. I was so pleased to hear about everyone's projects and the variety of subject backgrounds in my cohort. The presentation was informative and secured my motivation to perform well on the programme. As someone who can sometimes find socialising difficult, the networking lunches and later leadership days were a positive challenge and a good introduction to the way this scholarship would push me beyond my comfort zone. Towards the end of these sessions, I felt much more confident about my ability to start conversations and ask questions about other's work or thoughts on a topic. This was largely encouraged by the networking exercises on the leadership residential.

The leadership training was an interesting process, part of the learning experience for me was accepting my own mistakes. There were times where I was aware of the competitive aspect of the group challenges, I didn't want to let the group down or make the wrong decision. When a mistake happened, I was happy to find that the group worked around it and didn't take it too seriously, I was able to accept my weaknesses on certain tasks. Identifying, and trying not to be afraid of my limitations or areas for improvement was a skill that Laidlaw training helped me to develop.

Furthermore, I enjoyed the reflective process of the leadership days, especially in the first year. While I was unsure about the personality tests, I did find the process of thinking about the way I act in leadership situations beneficial, as well as reflecting on my pitching and presentation skills. In particular, I believe I benefitted well from reflecting on my performance on group tasks with other members of the group. I used feedback from the group reflection to identify points for improvement. This is a skill I made sure I would apply to my research project and other networking events.

Research process

Transitioning to the first summer, I was excited to start my research project. I really wanted an experience of what it was like to conduct trials in the sound lab of the psychology department. The room was soundproofed with convoluted foam panels like a music studio and I had learned how to use the training tasks I was going to use. I intended to teach people how use echolocation to identify the size and orientation of several shapes in the room, and I thoroughly enjoyed practicing this myself, getting familiarity with my working environment. Before I started my project, I wish I had known what a big challenge it would be to get ethical approval. I struggled with the novelty of this task and the amount of documentation that needed to be perfect. At this time in the scholarship, I certainly saw a return in low self-confidence, I again began to think that I was not the person for this task or this project. I didn't *know* what I was doing. The amount of corrections that returned with my work to me, made me feel insecure. Imposter syndrome was a common experience amongst the Laidlaw cohort, and after talking to some of my fellow scholars, as well as the programme manager, I began to accept that my experience with it was valid. Again, reflective processes helped me do this. Looking at the student leadership attributes; resilience and determination clearly underpinned the future of my research project and I began working on these skills while completing my work.

My project supervisor was undoubtedly a fantastic mentor during the application process. They fully encouraged me to be creative in my approach to the advertisement of my project to participants. Furthermore, I was guided towards using my initiative in unfamiliar situations. Approaching new people and asking for the help I needed with my project was a skill that was amplified while doing this, and certainly helped to boost my social intelligence and awareness.

The resilience, self-acknowledgement and social awareness I had developed in the first summer of the Laidlaw were invaluable when it came to summer two. The pandemic was a huge obstacle for my project and I found confidence in the fact that I had the support of the programme and my supervisor. After deciding to continue my project as a literature review, the scholarship managers were incredibly supportive and again I found that the group meetings and exercises helped me to work through it. The summer sessions were really great in helping me set short term goals. I made plans to set up my project as a framework for someone to take on in the future and meeting my goals to do so helped me accept that I wouldn't get to carry it out myself.

Using my skills

In terms of collaboration and teamworking, this didn't develop the most until the presentation skills sessions and the leadership days after summer two. The presentation tasks were initially daunting to me. The information given in the pitching sessions were designed to give us perspective on the benefits of communicating our research and its implications. For example, giving your work a bigger chance of getting presented or published. Furthermore, that presentation skills are required in almost every field or possible career. The Laidlaw scholarship provided the perfect opportunity to develop

these skills. The most important task for me was the presentation itself, actually delivering my research pitch to other scholars went much better than I expected, and I felt happy with the feedback I had gained. Such an experience, I felt, came rather late in my degree. This made me think about how I could use my leadership skills in the future to help others practice presenting in a positive way.

After speaking to a friend about my thoughts on the lack of presentation opportunities on our courses at the university, we decided that we could do something to help. Using a combination of her connections with the college JCR and my enthusiasm for improving public speaking skills, we gathered a group of students and created a public speaking society at our college. The society would give members an opportunity to practice speaking to an audience, whether this be a presentation for classes, interviews or simply a topic of interest. In addition, other group members would have the chance to develop their critical thinking skills by commenting on the presentation and asking questions. While difficult to implement this process over zoom/teams, I am pleased that the society has been set up, and I hope it will continue to benefit other students in the future. This is one way the Laidlaw scholarship has helped me give back to the wider community and hopefully I can continue to use my leadership skills to help others in this way.

Hopes for the future

The most important skill I still hope to develop in the future, supported by my experience at the Laidlaw scholarship, is turning ideas into action. I am hoping to enter a career in a more industry based psychology field and when deciding which offers to take, I am aware that I need an opportunity to produce my own ideas and make the space to turn these into real actions. The Game changer weekend task that my cohort participated in was a good taster of this. A particularly valuable task was using the design thinking process, this method including the use of problem spaces has already proved valuable when completing tasks in assessment centres for graduate jobs and I know this will continue to assist my problem-solving abilities in the workplace or further education. This relates to the leadership attribute of critical and creative thinking.

The programme has also given me an appreciation of the challenges academic research can deliver. It has definitely changed my perspective on staying in academia, which is what I originally considered to be my path. Despite enjoying the research process, taking a step back and re-considering my options was something the scholarship allowed me to do. My goals have somewhat changed to working in a more industry-based setting, and they are much more flexible, I recognise that getting a variety of experiences after graduation will be advantageous. This development can be linked back to my attitude at the start of my time with the Laidlaw programme. Most opportunities I had, I was inclined to turn down because I didn't believe I was the right person. Contrastingly, coming towards the end of my scholarship, I feel this fear a lot less. I have more confidence in applying for a wider range of opportunities.

Another one of the student leadership attributes involves learning continually. Hopefully, this reflective report shows that the Laidlaw programme has encouraged this in me. As someone who hates boredom, I believe I will have little difficulty in finding new interests and ways of learning. I have thoroughly enjoyed learning through podcasts, including those run by fellow scholars. Something I am very grateful for is the diverse network of very talented, hardworking and incredibly promising students and alumni I have gotten to know. Their projects continue to amaze me and I sincerely hope in the future I can stay in touch with my cohort and their work, so much can be learned from this group, and I hope I can share my projects with them too.

What could be improved?

The Laidlaw programme was very welcoming and flexible, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. I particularly enjoyed the summer sessions and the external talks that were advertised through the newsletters. Thus, I hope that in the future these sessions continue and increase in number. Even in the absence of a pandemic, doing research in a different city or country for six or more weeks can be tiring and isolating. It is nice to have content or group sessions to engage with and keep you grounded.

Moreover, I would like to have heard more about other scholars from other universities. I have found the network and LinkedIn useful for this, and I hope that it'll improve as more people begin to use and update the network.

Giving back to the programme

Next year, it's possible that I will be on a masters course, in full time employment or on a gap year depending how my interviews go. Nonetheless, I hope that I will be able to keep up with the network of Laidlaw scholars and contribute exciting new information for future scholars who might go into the same field as me. I would be very happy to talk to future scholars about the way the programme has helped me in the further steps of my career. I think it's important to remember the variety of skills the Laidlaw scholarship can provide in comparison, or in addition to an internship/work experience scheme and I think it is important for future scholars to really understand the skills they can get out of this programme depending on what they put in. I would also be very happy to recommend Laidlaw scholars to employers should I ever get the opportunity.

Another thing I would be happy to help run, are competitions or challenges that can help scholars navigate their possible leadership type and build on the skills they hope to target. At the start of my first research period, I identified having confidence in my own ideas as an area for improvement. The workshop style leadership exercises really pushed me to do this and I would like to see more of these problem-solving sessions run by Laidlaw alumni. Those who have been through the programme will understand the challenges and perspectives of those currently on the programme, I think it would be good to engage with the future talent in the programme in this way.

Mentoring is another fantastic way to make next generation scholars feel welcome to the network. Looking back at my progression through education, having someone to ask questions to and receive advice based on their experience has been a great resource. There are certainly things I wish I had known to do (or not to do) when working through the programme and sharing these thoughts with other students where appropriate, is something I hope will help them get the most out of their scholarship. Mentoring is also a fantastic method of putting leadership skills into practice. As a mentor to younger psychology students throughout my time at college and university, I have found the responsibility of such position compelled me to develop my communication skills. Leading the conversation when the mentee might be unsure or unfamiliar with new information is a skill I have built over the last few years and I would like to help guide new Laidlaw scholars through any questions they have, so they do not feel 'in the dark'.

Conclusion

Coming to the end of my time with the Laidlaw programme and my degree, I am surprised at how much I am looking forward moving out into the world despite the uncertainty in the world. The self-confidence, resilience and ability to keep working after a failure are key attributes I have developed at my time on the scholarship will be invaluable as I navigate the next few years. Over this period, I hope I will be able to retain my connection to the programme and become part of the support system it provides for its promising scholars.

Overall, I am incredibly pleased with the way the experiences within this programme have helped me change my self-perspective. I have the desire to engage with more opportunities and take on challenges that three years ago, I would've been too self-critical and cautious to try. The three main things I think I will take forward with me from this programme are: understanding things do not always go as planned and you need to be prepared for this; people are more willing to help you than you think, just ask questions; and you need to remember your potential is just as wide as it is high, you are just as capable of trying new things as you are at getting better at one thing.