

Reflective Report

I must admit that when I applied for the Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme, I was mostly interested in the research component and I was unsure (maybe even sceptical) of how beneficial the leadership component could be. Fortunately, I was wrong in doubting the usefulness of the latter and I can now say that the Leadership training has exceeded my expectations under every aspect. Before I go on to consider how I benefitted from it, though, I will reflect on what my experience has been with regard to my research project.

Overall, I probably experienced fewer logistical issues than I could have. Since my family lives abroad, I had planned not to remain in Ireland while working on my research. Luckily, the nature of my subject and of my project allowed for this. Before leaving to go home on my first summer of research, I made sure to bring with me all the materials I knew I would need and that were not accessible online. I was planning to prepare similarly for the second summer, but the sudden change in the international circumstances forced me to leave Ireland in March 2020 with only a few hours' notice, so I could not plan and prepare in advance for my summer research. Obtaining the necessary materials has been more difficult this way and it has slowed me down in the very beginning of the second research period. Overall, though, I feel fortunate that I did not have to radically change any aspect of my project to adapt to the work-from-home requirements.

More generally, my research did not always go according to my original plan. For instance, I soon realised that I had been excessively optimistic about the amount of time required to read and reflect on the sources I had selected as my starting point. When I managed to get through that, I was already running at least one week behind on the schedule. What I had not adequately considered was the difficulty of the material, a full grasp of which was probably beyond the reach of my senior freshman self. It is not that I could not read through it and understand arguments and concepts, but adequately critiquing my sources in order to develop my own answers to the problem I was investigating required background knowledge that, at the time, I did not possess. Filling my knowledge lacunae in the relevant areas of analytic metaphysics, though, took even more time and effort, and I was forced to alter my original schedule.

By the end of the first summer, I was feeling quite disheartened. Despite my supervisor reassuring me that I was, in fact, making some progress, I could not help feeling like the progress I was making – if any – was bringing me in the wrong direction. The more sources I consulted, the more I felt that the opposing arguments were too strong for me to be able to write anything in defence of my position.

In the time between the first and the second research period, I attended some seminars as part of my course which did help me get a better grasp some of the concepts I had encountered in the literature I had been

reading for my project. When I began the second research period, though, I felt that I was still not quite on the right track. It was only towards the end of the second summer that I started seeing how the knowledge I had gathered and my ideas could fit together into a proper argument to back my thesis. I must confess that, in moments in which I could not see where my work was going, I often considered changing the topic of my research. Now that my research period is over, though, I am glad I did not give up on the initial intuitions I had presented in my research proposal. Preparing the poster to summarise the outcomes of my project made me in fact realise that my time and effort had been anything but fruitless and that I do in fact have plenty of original ideas and arguments which it would be interesting to put in writing – so many that most of them could not even fit in the poster! I have not yet written any research paper based on the work I have been doing over the past two summers, but I am planning to do so as soon as I have the opportunity.

My supervisor was always very kind and supportive and she dedicated to me and my project way more of her time than it was expected of her. We had Skype meetings almost weekly and she was always available to answer my questions. She also kept encouraging me even when I was feeling that my research was going nowhere, and I am very grateful for this. Had I not had such a supportive supervisor, I think I would have been very tempted to give up on the project very early into my Laidlaw journey.

My supervisor also introduced me to opportunities that helped me get a better grasp of what being an academic researcher is like. Last July, she was invited to attend an online seminar featuring some of the most prominent researchers in the area my Laidlaw project was focusing on, and she requested permission to have the invitation extended to me (as her student), too. Not that I was really able to contribute to the discussion happening on Zoom, as the content of the papers that were being presented was often too advanced for me to critique, but witnessing what ‘a day in the life’ of a top academic philosopher is like was surely a very interesting experience.

She had also helped me find some interesting conferences and workshops I could have attended abroad over the second summer, but unfortunately these initiatives were all cancelled due to the coronavirus crisis. Some of these are annual conferences, so I really hope I will be able to attend one of the next years’ editions. I did not have a chance to participate to any conference or event in 2019. My research was at such an early stage then that, even if I had had a chance to create connections and discuss my interests, I would not have been able to do so strategically. I think attending the conferences that were cancelled during the summer of 2020, instead, would have been a really valuable opportunity both for academic and networking purposes.

One thing I found difficult during the time spent working on the project was keeping my motivation high. When my project did not seem to proceed well, I sometimes thought I had seriously overestimated my abilities and that I was not going to be able to produce any sensible piece of work out of what I was doing. Encouragement from friends, family, peers and my supervisor have been very important to help me find the confidence and the motivation to keep going even when, despite the effort, I could not see much progress.

Now I am happy of the results I got from my research and I am glad I did not give up on it.

My time management skills were put to the test, too. Initially underestimating the difficulty of some parts of my research surely forced me to revise my strategy and schedule quite a lot.

I also had to reconsider my approach to study and note-taking. The amount of reading I did for my Laidlaw project was significantly higher than what any of my course assignments had thus far required. I had to adjust my method and find ways to keep better track of the ideas prompted by the reading and of the key ideas of other philosophers that were relevant to my project. I asked my supervisor for advice and she discussed with me her favourite ways of taking notes and keeping track of her research. These preferences, though, are obviously very subjective so, while on a quest for advice and ideas, I also consulted some of the resources from Trinity's Student Learning Development and followed some of their tips, but I still do not think I have found a strategy that fully suits me. Anyway, it was good to have an opportunity to try out different things in a context in which, unlike with my regular coursework, there was no pressure from assessment and course requirements. Getting to test and work on the strengths and weaknesses of my study and research method has surely been a useful exercise of self-knowledge and self-improvement.

Another challenge came about towards the end of my second research period, when some unforeseen difficulties arose within my personal life, which kept me so busy (and I was feeling so overwhelmed) that I did not manage to complete in time the work that was scheduled for my last two weeks of research. It took me a few more weeks before I managed to get back on track and catch up with the work I had left behind. Looking back on this and seeing that I have eventually managed to overcome the challenge allows me to feel greater self-confidence.

As I said in the beginning, the Leadership component of the programme was not the main reason I decided to apply to the Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme. I thought, in fact, that working on my project would have been the greatest source of personal development. While trying my hand at independent academic research was surely beneficial in many ways, the Leadership programme helped me learn and improve in ways I was not expecting to.

For instance, I used not to have a good sense of the importance of growing and nurturing one's network. Maybe I had never felt the need to rely much on my network before, or maybe I had simply been lucky to find myself within networks that were, in a sense, ready-made for me and did not require much effort on my part to be built and maintained. The networking workshops we had in May 2019 made me seriously reconsider the importance of networking. I have been actively employing some of the "networking tips and tricks" I learnt in the last year and a half and I am now convinced that good networking is not only important, but fundamental to one's success.

The Leadership training session we had in November 2019 has also been enlightening in several ways. Professor Doyle's workshop helped me have a better understanding of the "macro" world of academic

research and academic publishing, which working on my research project had only shown me in the “micro” version.

One of the workshops that have been most beneficial to me, though, is the one on self-leadership, resilience and working styles we had with Niamh Hannan. That workshop has been one of the best and at the same time one of the most challenging for me. Some of the activities proposed that afternoon made me realise that my approach to self-leadership had to change and that I had to put serious some effort into developing better resilience. Being able to identify and name the negative and counter-productive elements of my working style has been incredibly useful and has allowed me to address some of my main weaknesses in a more proactive and effective way. It helped me realise, for instance, that my tendency to perfectionism (of which I was mostly aware but had considered a strength in the past) was getting out of control and that it had become a problem. Of course, I could not change my long-established working style with the snap of a finger, but being presented with an analysis of its main characteristics and of those of alternative working styles truly helped me in making conscious efforts to find a better balance.

I also found the two workshops with Cathal Quinn (the one on voice training and the Zoom one on presentation skills) very useful and extremely enjoyable. In both cases, it was interesting and fun to take part in the exercises and activities proposed, but what I found most valuable was that we were explained some of the “theory” behind what we were learning. For example, the breakdown of the parts and characteristics of effective presentations offered during the Zoom workshop allowed me to understand why the presentation techniques I was already employing (in some form) were effective and how they could be improved or combined with other tricks and strategies to obtain better presentations that are clear and captivating.

The parts I found the least interesting and useful in the Leadership training were those that focused mostly on leadership in connection with entrepreneurship. During the conference in London (UCL) in 2019, I remember feeling slightly disappointed that so many of the talks focused on management and entrepreneurship and that instead there were so few concerned with (e.g.) leadership and academia. I understand, though, that in other universities the Laidlaw Programme could take a slightly different shape than it does in Trinity. I definitely did not have the same feeling about the leadership events and talks organised within TCD. In fact, even though events like the talk with some Trinity alumni who set up their own start-ups (November 2019) might not have been particularly interesting to me, I think that overall the workshops and the topics covered throughout the whole programme succeeded in catering for everybody’s tastes and interests, including mine.

Of the leadership development component of the programme, I particularly appreciated the focus on teamwork and group activities. Given that philosophy students like me rarely get to practice their research and leadership skills in a group environment, I found the focus on group work and team building throughout

the leadership programme to be very beneficial for me as it is something that is somehow foreign to my main academic context. Of course, I had had a chance to practice some teamwork and team-leadership skills before through sport and other activities, but I recognise it is something that I would not have had many chances to develop in university hadn't it been for the Laidlaw programme. The two days we spent in Wicklow last spring have been particularly valuable and enjoyable from this point of view. We in fact had the chance to build stronger interpersonal bonds within the 2019 cohort and to put our teamwork skills to the test with some fun activities. The social and team-based aspects of the leadership programme allowed me to put myself to the test through non-individual challenges and even though there is still much I need to learn about teamwork, team leadership and my approach to such things, I think it has been extremely useful in helping me identify this area of leadership as one of my possible weaknesses. I hope that I will have more chances to keep learning and growing in this respect in the near future.

I was sorry that the covid-related restrictions forced my cohort to complete the leadership training through online means, for there is – unfortunately – no satisfying online alternative to in-person opportunities for socialising and networking. I am glad, though, that we managed to create a nice bond as a cohort and I hope that there will be opportunities to keep nurturing these relationships in the future. I also hope that myself and many of my peers will stay involved with the Laidlaw Programme as alumni. I particularly appreciated that students from the 2018 cohort often participated in inter-generational activities with us (like the London conference or the latest leadership workshop that took place on Zoom). I think this gave me and other students from my cohort a great opportunity to get to know the 2018 Laidlaw Scholars and to create a 'bridge' between the two generations. I hope there will soon be a chance for the 2019 Scholars to meet with the 2020 ones (covid restrictions permitting), so to be able to continue forming these inter-generational links. I would be very happy to help with future initiatives with at the newer Scholars and to participate in events that involve the Programme's alumni.

Overall, I can confidently say that the last eighteen months with the Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme have been a journey of self-development and self-discovery as a researcher, as a leader, and as a person. I am sure I will benefit from what I have learnt through the Programme for the years to come and I hope I will be able to ensure that this, rather than the end of my leadership development journey, be just the beginning of it.

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