

Reflective Report
Laidlaw 2019 Cohort

Deirdre Donohue
Psychology
Trinity College Dublin

It feels like much longer than two years ago that I was reading about the Laidlaw Programme and wondering if I would be able to apply. I had just started second year and had made the conscious decision to get as involved in extra-curricular activities as I could, as this was the last year that did not count towards my final degree. I signed up for the opportunity alerts from the Careers Service and applied for everything that I was interested in, even when I did not feel that I had a good chance of getting it. When I saw the notification about applications opening for the Laidlaw Scholarship I was very excited at the prospect of applying, and getting the opportunity to conduct my own research as well as develop my leadership skills.

However, when I attended the information talk, I was somewhat intimidated by the number of students who were interested in the programme, when so few places were available. As well as this, there were many STEM students in attendance when compared to the few arts students that I saw there, and no one from psychology. When looking up the previous year's projects I felt even more intimidated by the high standard that was evident and the calibre of the students involved. Despite this, I really wanted to give the application a good shot as I had nothing to lose if I was not successful, and a lot to gain if I was.

As I was set on doing a research PhD after my undergraduate degree, I felt that this would be an amazing opportunity to get a taste of what such independent research would be like, as well as giving me an edge when applying for such programmes. The leadership aspect was also enticing, as I never turn down an opportunity to gain new skills and further my knowledge in an area. Another factor which I considered was that this would be an opportunity to get to know the stages involved in planning and conducting a research project from start to finish, something I would have to do in fourth year of my degree for my thesis, and which I had heard was very difficult in psychology, especially the process of applying for ethical approval.

The first stage in applying was to ask someone to be my supervisor, once I had a vague idea of what I would like to research. Since I had enjoyed my lectures on developmental psychology the most up until that point, I decided to ask the main lecturer of this subject—Dr Lorraine Swords. I remember being very nervous approaching her at the podium after a lecture to ask if she would consider working with me and further discussing my idea, which was still vague at this point. All I had decided was that within the area of developmental psychology, I wanted to explore the impacts of immigration on later mental health and other psychological outcomes. It was not until I discussed this with Lorraine that we developed the methodology further and explored the different options for data collection. The proposal we settled on in the end consisted of two phases, one phase in each summer, with the first phase consisting of a quantitative analysis of data collected through the

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study, and the second phase consisting of a qualitative interview approach.

The first summer went exactly as planned, with me working from a desk in the Trinity Research in Childhood Centre (TRICC), and meeting Lorraine once a week to discuss progress made in the previous week and plan the week ahead. Lorraine introduced me to new statistical methods which would not be covered in my course until final year, and provided me with books to understand these new approaches and apply them to my research. I really appreciated the support provided and felt that this system of weekly check-ins allowed me to work independently while still staying in touch with Lorraine, and having some accountability in getting my work done.

My time in the TRICC also allowed me to connect with other researchers in a casual way, by having lunch together or chatting over a cup of tea. This gave me a great insight into the daily life of a researcher in this field and allowed me to ask questions about a range of topics. I also shared an office with a PhD student who was in her fourth year of researching issues related to homelessness. She answered many of my questions and encouraged me to continue networking with the other researchers, both within TRICC and within other areas in psychology. In this way, I was able to build a network of experts in this field, who were willing to guide me and potentially help me in the future when conducting further research, for example.

My overall experience in TRICC was overwhelmingly positive, and I learned a huge amount, much of which was relevant to my degree and has benefitted me since. The research itself also went very well, with interesting and meaningful results being found. However, the experience of doing the research made me realise that I did not want to pursue a PhD after all. While the independence and flexibility were great in some ways, I realised that I did not thrive in such an unstructured environment. Having completed a two-month internship shortly before the research period, which was highly structured and consisted of a strict nine to half five, Monday to Friday routine, I felt the contrast intensely. Before the summer I would have assumed that the internship would have been too restrictive and that the freedom of independent research would have suited me better, which turned out to be the opposite. Therefore, ironically, the biggest learning I took from this summer was that four years of research after graduating were no longer on the cards.

In November after the initial summer of research, I applied to present my findings at the annual Growing Up in Ireland national conference, after Lorraine advised me to do so. The application involved writing an abstract for my work and a bio about myself and my research experience. Having read the book of abstracts from the previous year's conference, I felt very intimidated, as I was so new to research compared to many of the impressive researchers who had been presenting the previous year and would be presenting again. I realised that I often doubt

myself when first confronted with participating in something with others who I consider to be very impressive and intelligent. However, this does not take away from my abilities, and I came to see that, by being surrounded with brilliant people, I could be inspired and get closer to their level.

This realisation, however, did not take away from the fact that I was extremely nervous on the day of the presentation. While I had spent the previous week preparing the slides on my findings and rehearsing my presentation, the crowds at the conference made me nervous nonetheless. My supervisor came to support me and guided me through the sign-in process and getting my presenters badge and seeing the stage on which I would be presenting. Once I got up on the stage and started talking, my nervousness dissipated somewhat, as I knew my research well and wanted to tell people about what I had found. The questions from the audience were another challenge but I did my best to answer every question which was posed. I spent the rest of the event attending other presentations and networking with other researchers, despite being very new to the concept at this stage.

In February of this year I began my application for ethical approval for the second phase of the research, which would involve interviewing young adults who immigrated in childhood and asking them to reflect on their experience. It was hoped that this qualitative perspective could add depth to the data analysis that I had completed in the summer before. However, before approval could be granted, COVID-19 resulted in a lockdown and a stop to all in-person data collection. As I tried to reapply to conduct the interviews over Zoom, more and more issues were raised about the recording and storage of such interviews and the issue of anonymity. I was on my third round of amendments when I received an email from the Careers Service about being able to volunteer for six weeks instead of conducting the second summer of research, if we were encountering difficulties with moving forward with it due to COVID-19.

I was delighted to participate in the volunteering alternative, in which I would be working with Make.Sense on the RE_Action for Education initiative, as this meant I would no longer have to struggle with the ethical approval which may have taken until August to obtain, as well as giving me another experience to broaden my skillset and perspective. Two other Laidlaw Scholars had chosen to participate in the programme, allowing a high degree of teamwork and cooperation. The programme allowed incremental learning about the issues in education which had resulted from COVID-19 and gave us the opportunity to share resources with people who were affected, and volunteer to help where possible. We also conducted a wide-scale questionnaire to identify people's opinions on the impacts to date and what they believed would help the most.

After the initial two weeks, we mobilised our own group of volunteers for a week, supporting them with daily Zoom calls and information packs. As a group, our volunteers created a

small website of easy user guides to the different modes of online learning, to help parents understand these platforms, as this was an issue we had identified. Everyone shared this link with parents that they knew and any teachers who could share the link as well. By the end of the week I was very happy with the progress which we made as a group, despite initially being nervous about being placed in such a leadership position when the group I was mobilising consisted of my peers, some of which I knew vaguely already from college. However, everyone was very cooperative and friendly and I felt more at ease with each day.

In the last three weeks of the programme, the three of us who were working together to come up with some type of resource to benefit someone affected by the pandemic in terms of their education. Others on the programme contributed a poster or other small resources, which we (the three Irish scholars) found to be very low effort and not too impactful. We aimed, instead, to create a website of free resources for Leaving Certificate students who were under enormous pressure to catch up on the syllabus following the months of school which they had missed. We spoke to many experts on website design, social entrepreneurship and tutoring and gained as much knowledge as possible. We also made connections with some Trinity societies who agreed to help spread the word that we needed volunteers as well as donated notes to put on our website.

While this process started strong, we underestimated how time-consuming the whole process would be. After the six weeks were complete, we had many more hours of work to do and continue to look for notes to add to the website. We also rely on someone to upload the resources for free, which means that it takes longer to make any progress. Currently we are still uploading and trying to gather as many resources as possible, a task which is much more difficult than any of us could have guessed. I feel that it has been a valuable lesson in carefully evaluating the time and resources available before jumping into an idea, because it is often much more complicated than first anticipated.

However, we have worked and continue to work very well as a team, a skill which I have hugely improved through the course of this Scholarship. Before starting the programme, I would have considered myself very independent in the way I work and someone who would prefer to lead alone versus with others. By sharing the leadership responsibility with other Scholars, I came to realise that having two or more perspectives can be invaluable and aid in the effective leadership of a group. It can also be beneficial for team members to have more than one leader to turn to, as some personalities just get on better than others, something which is not personal at all. I also developed my ability to be a compassionate leader, asking for opinions and really listening and taking feedback on board, rather than thinking that I have the best solution.

The leadership workshops were great in introducing me to new concepts and skills and allowing me to develop them in the workshop and throughout the research and leadership experiences which occurred in parallel. The workshop on networking, for example, changed my whole perspective on the issue, as I had previously seen it as cringe-worthy and artificial, rather than just a means of getting to know more people through genuine interest. By using this skill more, I was able to connect with many more people than before and actually secured an internship for this summer, simply by talking to people who are doing things that I am interested in and asking for suggestions on what path I should take.

Another area of the leadership development which I really benefitted from, was the sessions on public speaking. I realised that I had previously had a false sense of confidence in my abilities and had much more to learn. Once I realised how much I still did not know, it gave me the space to actually significantly improve and practice where I could. I am still nowhere near perfect, but I feel that I have learned some tools which I can continue to practice using in the future. The process of learning within our cohort of scholars was an added benefit, as everyone has a different perspective and has their strengths in different areas. I came to see that just by being surrounded with highly intelligent people from various different backgrounds, I was encouraged to strive for excellence like they had, and continue to do. Rather than seeing brilliant people as competition, they should be seen as inspiration, and as motivation to also work hard and be as brilliant as them.

This realisation was one of the biggest things I gained from my involvement in the programme, as I went from being intimidated by other's greatness to being inspired by it. Apart from gaining a new perspective, I also gained direction in where I wanted to go with my life after college. The research element of the programme made me realise that the PhD route was not for me, and the networking element of the programme allowed me to make connections and set up an internship in KPMG and then a position on their graduate programme in 2021. This process of discovering what type of environment works for me in terms of structure and the type of work being done, was accelerated as a result of my involvement with the Programme. Had I simply continued with my studies without exploring these options in parallel, I might have made decisions upon graduating which would not have suited me in the long run, leading to setbacks and frustration.

I am extremely grateful for these insights and experiences which have most likely saved me a lot of time trying to figure out what I actually enjoy. While the skills which I gained through the programme allowed me to figure out what I wanted to do after graduation and secure that job, being a Laidlaw Scholar also carried weight in itself and boosted my CV and chances of success at the interview stage. The network of scholars, both in Trinity and other universities, will no doubt continue to be an invaluable resource, as I can connect with experts of many different fields easily

through the Laidlaw Network and LinkedIn. On a personal level, I have gained many amazing friendships through the programme and met people from many different backgrounds, which I may not have otherwise met. Our cohort felt similar to having a “base class” in secondary school, where you get to know a group of people very well, and interact with them on a regular basis. I hope to stay in touch with as many in the group as possible and hopefully meet up in person when it is safe to do so once again.

It would be great to have alumni events where we can all meet once a year or so to catch up and perhaps discuss different issues, as everyone has such a unique and interesting perspective. I would also like to help out with incoming cohorts of scholars to give them a sense of what they are involved in and where their future might take them. It may be useful to get updated blurbs of all Trinity alumni of the programme each year, including how the Laidlaw Programme contributed to where they are, so that the new cohorts can see the many paths which Laidlaw can bring them down and connect with people who are doing something which they are interested in. This greater involvement from alumni could greatly benefit new Scholars, something which will be bigger each year, as more cohorts graduate. I also believe that the volunteering element of the Programme which is being introduced has a lot of potential and could really open new areas of interest and potential career pathways for Scholars. I believe that this Scholarship carries huge benefits and has changed the course of my life, and will continue to do so for each new cohort of Scholars.