

Jack Doherty - 17324891

Laidlaw Scholarship 2019

15 October 2020

Reflective Report

When I first heard that I had been accepted into the Laidlaw Scholarship, I was very surprised. I signed up for the Scholarship when I realised that I was not going to be able to get Schols after I received a few assignment results towards the end of Michaelmas term. I wanted something that would push me academically and personally, while not being as soul crushing as spending hours studying old mathematics textbooks and books of essays on music for weeks. I have always been interested in research, and it was this aspect of the Laidlaw programme that first drew me towards it. I was initially somewhat sceptical of the whole “leadership” side of the scholarship, but over the course of my time in the program, I have grown to appreciate it. The chance to work with a professor I very much respected and liked learning from on a topic that I was interested in, and which was difficult to find information on was what really drew me to the Laidlaw Programme in particular.

Over the course of the programme, I think I learned a lot, both from the research side, and the leadership side. From the research side, first and foremost, I obviously learned a lot about my research area, Musical Set Theory and Transformation Theory. I discovered a lot of new things that my basic research when I was doing my proposal did not bring up, and which lead to my research goals changing a lot very quickly after I had properly begun the project. I will go more into how my research priorities changed in more detail later. As well as information about the research topic itself, I learned a lot about research and working with a supervisor. Both in the Mathematics and Music halves of my degree, I had never worked with a supervisor on such a freeform project, where neither I nor my supervisor knew a huge amount about a lot of the subject matter. I learned how difficult but also how rewarding research can be.

My project changed a lot over the course of the two summers that I worked on it. Very shortly after I began working on it, and had my first meetings with my supervisor, I realised that my original proposal had been far too ambitious, and had assumed that there was a lot less research done on this topic than there actually was. Due to this, I had to reduce the scope of my ambitions for the project and move to some more achievable goals. I was very upset by this at first, I felt like I had failed. I had never led any serious research project myself before, and I had envisaged myself theorising and discovering new things. In reality, most of the ideas I had had were already covered in several books by several people that were just obscure enough that my cursory research before putting together the proposal had not found them. The goals kept evolving over the course of the first summer, and I had a pretty firm idea of what I was going to do in the second summer by the end, and where the overall trajectory of the research would go. I am still a little bit sad at how I did not end up discovering anything new and ground-breaking like I naively thought I would when writing my proposal, but I understand the process of research better now, and I can still be happy with what progress I did make, and what things I did find.

Working with Sergey was a really great experience. I had had him as a lecturer in the first term of second year, and I felt like I really connected with how he liked to conduct his lectures, very straight to the point with no frills. He would walk straight into the lecture theatre, chalk in hand, and start the lecture before he even reached the board sometimes. This same attitude was carried over into the meetings, which were always very to the point and direct. This is not to say they were always short, sometimes we would spend a lot of time going over some things in great detail, but it was always straight down to business. This also meant that things were not sugar coated when I brought in something that did not work, or did not make sense, or was messy. I prefer to work like this, I like very clear direction as to what things need to be done, and how they should be done. He also gave me lots of technical help with things related to my presentation skills, giving me lots of advice and help with using LaTeX, which I had only used to submit homework assignments up until

this point. We met every week, and he would always answer my emails very quickly, he was very dedicated to my project, and it was usually wonderful to work with him.

However, at points the bluntness could be somewhat discouraging. I remember in particular one meeting we had where I had made a big mistake at the beginning of the week that I had based everything else I had done that week on, and I did not find out until I started trying to explain things in the meeting and nothing was working out or making sense. It was very embarrassing, and Sergey rather bluntly told me after a very short while that there was not much point in holding the meeting now, it would be better for me to go and fix it, and we could talk about it next week. This was a bit of a blow to me, not really because of how he had said it but because I felt like I had messed up very badly. It was very hard, and I felt very dejected afterwards. After that meeting I just went home and did not do any work for the rest of the day, I was just feeling very dumb and did not want to look at my mistake filled work again. The next day however, I did manage to get back in the saddle with it, and I think it was an important experience for me to learn how to deal with messing up. That was by no means the last mistake I made in the course of the project, but afterward I feel like they affected me a lot less, because I realised that wallowing in it was pointless and I just had to get on with working on the project.

While working on the project, I also came into contact with a lot of other people working in the area, mainly other students or PhD researchers who I met due to asking around online in various groups I am a part of for sources or material to read. I also got in contact with one of the leading researchers on the topic today, Dr Julian Hook, who was very kind and sent me a copy of his PhD thesis from 2002, which is not easily available online. This was a consistent theme throughout the project; finding material could be difficult. Many of the books that I required were not in TCD library, or if they were, they could not be removed from the library. I managed to find a few of these that I could purchase as PDFs, but not everything, so I spent a long-time scanning books page by page. For one book, I had to get a friend in a university in America to email me scans of the first two chapters

of a book, because there were no copies in Ireland that I could get access to, and it has been out of print for several years.

On the leadership side of things, as I said at the beginning, I was sceptical of it in the beginning. I can be a very cynical person, and all the talk of 'leadership' and 'networking' all seemed very corporate to me. It was not something that I was very interested in taking part in, and I just thought it would be something I would suffer through in order to do the research project and to get the stipend. However, as we did more of the leadership weekends, I was often pleasantly surprised. A lot of what we did was more practical than I had expected, particularly things like the day with the speaker from the Lír academy, or our talk with the Dean of Research, Linda Doyle. While some of it was mildly off-putting to me due to the corporate feeling of it, I do think on the whole that I had positive experiences from the leadership events overall, and especially everything that involved interacting with Joel and Orla, or my fellow Scholars.

I did my best to take as active a role as I could in the leadership events we had, and to keep an open mind while in them, because as I said, I can be very cynical. The events that I thought were the most effective were the more practical ones. The talks we had that discussed specific things that we can take action on, like Joel's talk about elevator pitches, or the talk about public speaking and presentation skills. I found the more conversational ones less engaging, not because the speakers were bad by any means, but because often they were from, and spent most of the time talking about things that I am not interested in. There were a lot of businesspeople and entrepreneurs who came to speak to us, which I felt rather disconnected from, as it is not an area I really have any interest in. That is not to say that there should not be speakers like this, as there are certainly Laidlaw Scholars who are interested in these areas, but I would have liked to see more artists, or more researchers, so see leadership in action in different areas, rather than so many businesspeople and a comparative paucity of representation of other fields.

I think that most of my favourite parts of the leadership events were the ones where we the scholars had to work together. The teambuilding exercises at Kippure estate were a highlight. Working with fellow scholars and trying to apply the principles that we had covered in the leadership talks was very interesting and a lot of fun. It was also a bit of a push outside of my normal comfort zone, as I have always been a rather solitary person, and have tended to avoid working in teams where possible if roles and jobs are not strictly defined. I think over the course of the leadership events, I think I got a lot better at working in groups and working with people, both in a leading role at the head of a team, and in working with another leader. In addition, it got me used to working with lots of different kinds of people. The 2019 Laidlaw cohort is filled with a diverse array of personalities which all have different ideas of how things should be done, which once again got me out of my bubble and forced me to learn a lot to get into it.

All these experiences have so far been a great benefit to me, and I think they will continue to be benefits as I leave university. The practical leadership training and skills that we covered in those sessions will stand to me in any interview or position I take in any kind of team endeavour. The research skills will also stand to me in any future academic projects I undertake, as well as the experience of working under a supervisor on a new area where not much has been written. As well as this, the connections I have made both with the careers service, and with other Laidlaw Scholars from both the 2018 and 2019 cohorts, and from the wider Laidlaw Scholars network will serve me well in the future regardless of where I go or what I do by giving me a strong network I can always fall back on.

In the future, I would be interested in continuing to work with the Laidlaw Programme. I think a lot of my best experiences in the program have been working with other scholars in my cohort or getting to know the previous cohort to ours. I hope that before I leave college, I will be able to meet and get to know the 2020 cohort like the 2018 cohort got to know our group, and I would love to continue to work with the foundation in whatever ways I can in the future. I think that there would

be a lot to gain both for myself and other scholars in my cohort, and for possible future scholars we may be working with, both for networking reasons, and to mentor and learn from each other.