

Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme

Reflective Report

I first learned about the Laidlaw programme around this time two years ago, at the beginning of my second year of PPES (Philosophy, Politics, Economics and Sociology). At that point, I had only spent eight months in Ireland since moving from my home in California. After a difficult first year of university, my confidence was low. I was questioning my course choice as well as my place in Trinity. While I did not realise it at the time, applying to Laidlaw was an attempt to create a sense of belonging for myself, both academically and personally. Through encountering new challenges and learning how to overcome them, Laidlaw gave me a unique opportunity for growth both as a student and as a leader.

Looking back, I am so glad that I applied to the Laidlaw programme. Even though I had known about the call for applications for a while, I applied last-minute because I told myself there was no way I would be chosen. Eventually, I told myself there was nothing to lose. Even if I wasn't selected, I knew that I would learn from the experience of writing a short research proposal. When I was called back for an interview, I was elated. This was the first time I had been in a serious interview, and I am so grateful to have been put in that position so early in my university career. From the very beginning of the process, I was learning so much. The interview was challenging but gratifying. I enjoyed the experience of taking ownership of a personal academic interest in a way that my undergraduate course, by nature, did not allow.

I decided to lean into my passions and hoped that I would learn along the way. I frequently brood over the problems in the Irish recycling system, so I figured it would be a suitable project for me. After Professor Anna Davies of the Geography Department agreed to be my supervisor, I decided to present a research proposal that sought to fix Irish recycling in ten weeks – of course, this was impossible. From the very beginning, I was learning what it meant to conduct a research project, and everything I learned seemed to be applicable to other aspects of my life (In this case – I clearly needed to learn how to set realistic goals for myself. This was a valuable skill I honed during my time in Laidlaw, which I will discuss in more detail in later paragraphs.). Anna coached me to find a more achievable project. We ended up deciding on a comparative analysis between the Irish and Welsh recycling systems. This then evolved into further precision as a qualitative analysis of household plastic use in Dublin households. The learning curve was steep: I had no experience in independent

research. While this was the case for most of my colleagues in the programme, I was focused primarily on the irrational thought that I was granted the scholarship by mistake. I began to doubt my capabilities in the same way I doubted my place in Trinity. The first summer of research was difficult for a few reasons. First, I felt entirely overwhelmed; looking back, I do wish I made more of an attempt to seek support from my supervisor. At the time, I was nervous that she also thought, as my irrational and negative self-talk was telling me, that I was underqualified. Thus, I kept any worries that I had about my work to myself. Second, I was doing much of the work alone in the college library. The isolation simply heightened my sense that everyone else in the programme was miles ahead of me and that I was destined to fail.

Reflecting on this period of my life, just over a year ago, is strange. The idea that I don't belong in Trinity or in the Laidlaw programme has vanished entirely. My confidence as a student and as a person has surged. While simply getting older is of course a factor, I think Laidlaw also had a lot to do with it. Laidlaw was a much-needed catalyst in realising and overcoming the detrimental perception I held of myself, helping me strive to reach my full potential. This is not to say that everything went smoothly once I realised this. I encountered significant personal hardships completely unrelated to Laidlaw, especially in the first summer of research. I am proud to say that, while it was a difficult period, I persevered. At the time, I thought that the timing of my situation was unlucky. Now, I can see that through this difficult period, I learned that I am much more resilient than I once thought. The fact that I fulfilled the first summer of research amidst adversity, went on to move to a new city for Erasmus and achieved excellent academic results, and successfully transformed my project to work around COVID-19 goes to show how adaptable I am to difficult situations. I will discuss how I adapted to COVID-19 specifically in later paragraphs.

As I mentioned above, after my first summer of research, I moved to Reims, France for my Erasmus. This time last year, my cohort travelled to London for the 2019 Laidlaw Conference. I travelled from Reims to attend the conference. I remember getting onto the bus from the airport and seeing all the familiar faces -- it was comforting after my first month of being away from a city I knew so well. A highlight of the weekend was hearing presentations from other Laidlaw Scholars about their research. I was impressed and inspired -- I still remember some of the presentations quite well. I also really enjoyed getting to spend time with the other Trinity Scholars. I think this trip was when everyone began to really get to know each other. I have highly valued this opportunity to befriend people outside of my usual academic and social circles and hear such varying perspectives.

I also thoroughly enjoyed the other various leadership development opportunities we were given through Laidlaw. I really appreciated the one-on-one session with Orla Bannon at the end of the first summer of research. It was useful to have a conversation with someone who has so much experience in career development, and I felt motivated and reassured about my future after our session. The second leadership development day, for which I flew to Dublin from France, provided me with a lot of interesting insights. The panel discussion with successful Trinity alumni was eye-opening – seeing these people who had followed a similar path to mine who were enjoying fulfilling careers made the concept of my future more real and exciting. Niamh Hannan's workshop on developing resilience as a leader was a moment that I felt grateful for Laidlaw's sustainability focus in terms of work. When I applied, I did not expect there to be such an emphasis on mental health. I think this is a key strength of the Laidlaw programme.

The trip to Kippure Estate at the end of February this year was my favourite Laidlaw event. Gerry Hussey's workshop was thought-provoking, and I really enjoyed the heated discussion. It was deeply interesting to see how each person responded differently when confronted by an oppositional viewpoint. Some preferred to strongly and frequently voice their disagreement, while others took time to develop a few thoughtful insights. Through Laidlaw events such as these, I began to discover the strengths and the weaknesses of my personal leadership style. I have learned that I enjoy public speaking and intense discussion while attempting to include everyone in the conversation, especially people who are quieter than me in group situations. I believe I have a lot to learn from people like this since I tend to react quickly. I have also realised that I am able to assert myself without coming across too forcefully, which I believe will be useful to me in the future. While I am still deciding on the steps to take after graduation, law is definitely a potential path. Whether or not I do go this route, I hope to apply the many skills I have learned during my time in Laidlaw to my career.

It goes without saying that my second summer of research was undertaken in very different conditions. I spent the first summer conducting a literature review and preparing for in-person sociological interviews and expert surveys that would be administered the following summer. This, of course, was impossible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There was no way for me to continue my original project plan. Luckily, my supervisor invited me to help with research being conducted by SHARECITY, a food sharing organisation of which she is the project lead. I was tasked with looking into the effects of COVID-19 on food sharing networks, but I was given immense freedom. Contrary to the previous summer, I felt excited, rather than panicked, at the thought of self-led research into an interesting topic. As the first day of my research neared, I reflected on how much I had grown over the last year. The fact that my supervisor trusted me to work for the organisation she

established felt like the final confirmation that I was in the right place. Everything had come full circle. Even though it was remote, I felt more engaged and motivated about the new project than I had been about the original one. The second summer of research felt like it was more Laidlaw-oriented than the first, which was interesting considering the extraordinary circumstances. I was a member of a team researching an important social issue. The “team” element helped me to stay inspired and on track, since I knew other people around the world were working alongside me. I had weekly check-ins with another team member, which I found very useful. I began to understand that I work best in a team, rather than in isolation as I had been in the summer of 2019.

It was no doubt a privilege to be part of the Laidlaw programme. If I could offer any feedback, it would be that it would have been useful to receive arts-specific support in the research portion of the programme. Since arts and science research are so different and come with their own challenges, I would have found it very useful to either meet with the other arts Scholars and discuss our research (which I realise we could have done, but perhaps it could be encouraged) or hear from a researcher in an arts field. Additionally, I think the treatment towards people who have medical justification and miss a leadership training day could be improved. I fully understand the importance of the training days. However, when I missed the first one due to a serious medical problem, I felt quite intimidated, almost as if I had done something wrong even though I had no way of preventing what happened. Honestly, it greatly contributed to my lack of a sense of belonging in the programme for the first while. I understand that the first leadership development session is arguably the most important and missing it could raise a red flag regarding the commitment level of the student. I think this is the wrong way to treat the situation. The Laidlaw team should assume that any student who makes it through the rigorous application process is completely dedicated and anyone who misses the first training day due to a situation outside of their control is surely anxious enough without also being questioned about their engagement level. I would recommend preparing for such circumstances in a way that helps the student to feel more supported. Finally, it would be great to see more ethnic and LGBTQ+ diversity in the Scholars. The programme is already a force to be reckoned with. I can only imagine what it could be if we represented traditionally underrepresented minorities and gave them a platform to showcase independent research and develop leadership skills. The goals of Laidlaw seem to align with the idea that we need more diversity in the leaders of our world. While this may be ambitious, it would be interesting to see if the programme may evolve to encompass a more minority-centric approach; for example, there could be more of an emphasis on recruiting students from the Universities of Sanctuary initiative.

I think my two years in the Laidlaw programme will stand to me in the future. When I applied, I was wondering why the programme was five weeks over two summers rather than all in

one summer. It makes a lot of sense to me now, and I am so glad that it is designed the way it is. While the research was obviously important, the leadership development was equally so, which I did not expect when I applied. Through being involved for two years, I was not only given many opportunities to enhance various skills, but I was also able to monitor my personal growth against the backdrop of Laidlaw. To have a constant force during the unpredictability of university was valuable because I could easily assess my own development by comparing my experiences and mindset to, say, a year earlier. As I mentioned in a previous paragraph, learning how to set realistic goals for myself was a key part of the progress that Laidlaw facilitated. The programme's encouragement of self-reflection was unexpected and appreciated. Through this self-reflection, I began to understand how to correct the thought patterns I had been trapped in for a long time. This helped me to gain a more realistic approach to my college-related and personal goals. I was able to simultaneously improve my academic and leadership abilities while cultivating a better understanding of myself. This, I believe, will become increasingly useful in my career path. Thanks to Laidlaw, I have learned that I should work in a field where I interact with people all the time. My communication skills have improved through establishing scholarly relationships with superiors for the first time. Most significantly, I have gained confidence in my academic abilities as well as in myself as a person. I ended up with a piece of work of which I can be proud, the sense that I can succeed in whatever I decide to do, and, not to mention, many more friends.

In the final leadership development day, which was held online, I got the chance to hear my fellow Scholars' hopes for their futures. As each person shared their thoughts about how they were going to try to create change in their fields, I felt a wave of hope wash over me. My personal career goal is simply to retire with the sense that I have made a change, regardless of income or status. At a time when simply reading the news takes a toll, it can become easy to slip further and further into a pessimistic worldview, that someone like me is naïve or deluded. Especially being involved in activist circles in Dublin, change can seem distant, nearly impossible. This is why I think Laidlaw is such a powerful concept. Through uniting students from assorted backgrounds who all share a common interest in bettering the world, change can seem much more possible. Especially because much of the work required in the present and the future is interdisciplinary – COVID-19 being a fitting example, when many different fields must come together – working alongside the other Laidlaw Scholars has been such a rewarding and uplifting experience. I look forward to seeing what we all accomplish.

As an alumnus of the Laidlaw programme, I plan to stay connected with the organisation to learn about new developments and changes. I intend to help whenever I can with the 2020 cohort and to stay in touch with my fellow 2019 Scholars. I feel so lucky to have gained such an extensive

network that spans continents that I can use in the future. Thank you to Joel McKeever, Orla Bannon, Ann McCarry, Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for providing me with such a unique environment that is intellectually rigorous, stimulating and enjoyable. I hope the programme continues to expand and attract people who are hoping to use their skills for the greater good.