

*Leadership reflections Summer 2020*

How does one develop leadership in research? This is fundamentally the question which the Laidlaw scholarship poses us as scholars. It provides us the time, resources, and support to develop our skills into fields which often seem to have as much relation to each other as geomorphology and theology.

However, just as many faiths find evidence for their God's power in the landscapes produced by geomorphology, academic research can be viewed as being intertwined with leadership. Similar skills of perseverance, co-operation, and innovative thinking must be employed in both research and leadership.

This essay will reflect on how I have developed, through the process of research, my skills of leadership.

One of the initial stages that any research project has to achieve is assessing the current state of scholarship. In many ways we can read this as being analogous to the process of understanding our underlying leadership styles. We identify common themes and methodologies, strengths and weaknesses. We find areas where we might ourselves build upon what has come before us. We make assessments. We become more informed. Without understanding the current state of the discipline, we do not know where the shoulders of giants are upon which we might find a foothold. Similarly, without addressing our own strengths and weaknesses as leaders, we are more prone to make decisions which will detriment the interests of the teams that we work with, and might undermine the success of projects that we work on. For example, according to DiSC profiling I tend towards dominant and conscientious characteristics has proved to be an interesting and useful insight. Knowing this has enabled me to focus my efforts in leadership positions towards working collaboratively and working against my instincts to hoard tasks. This process of delegation has enabled me to achieve more, as well as helping others to develop their own skills. In the process of academic inquiry, I was able to identify an assumption in the scholarship which had largely gone unchallenged on one specific issue. Only by assessing the state of the scholarship, was I able to find this assumption and the space it created for innovative thinking.

Having found spaces in the literature which enabled the application of innovative thinking, manuscript source material which had been reviewed previously had to be reinspected to analyse it in detail to find which elements supported the hypothesis, and which elements contradicted it. The sources which we use for medieval history are rarely virgin territory: generations upon generations of scholars have poured over them, each bringing their own baggage and perspective. This makes the process of historical analysis not

dissimilar to what leaders do on a regular basis. Often leaders find themselves addressing the same broad problem as generations of their forebears have faced before them. However, one of the acts which differentiates leaders from managers is their critical re-examination of problems which face groups and organisations and asking whether the status quo is the most effective way of doing things. Sometimes this will be in response to an external stimulus, for example the current coronavirus pandemic, which forces one's hand into taking action. Equally, leaders often find that the systems which they work within do not solve the problems which they seek to address as efficiently as possible. Whilst in both academia and leadership romanticise the act of laying the first foundation stone to erect either an understanding of a phenomenon, or setting up a system, gleaning for the important nuggets of refinement upon these understandings and systems is still important. Ultimately, the act of leading through slowly changing the structure of systems and understandings does lead to larger scale change. The system or concept that you leave behind becomes the foundation stone of the person following in your wake.

Collaborative working is similarly essential in both academic study and in leadership. Rarely in either pursuit does one possess a complete set of all the materials or skills that one needs to study a topic or complete a task. Being able to collaborate with others, to share resources and insights is essential to achieving tasks which might otherwise be insurmountable. Collaboration often seems antithetical to the romantic vision of both leadership and scholarship. We often imagine leaders as solitary commanders, issuing dictates and taking solitary initiative. Similarly, particularly in the humanities, we often picture academic research in a similar way: the solitary researcher, retreating into the archive, surrounded by dusty tomes, to emerge months later and publish their findings in a tome that in time will gather dust too. Of course, neither of these statements are true: leaders need to regularly work collaboratively and create spaces for others to take on roles of leadership. Similarly, almost all scholarship is collaborative, whether the papers produced are single-authored or have multiple authors. We regularly inquire with colleagues about our interpretations, whether in the form of personal communication or referencing their scholarship, and share resources. During my summer research period I was at the receiving end of this generosity and was able to receive the assistance of several academics across the country in accessing undigitized material during the Coronavirus pandemic. This was in itself an act of leadership on their part. In more normal times, academic conferences provide another arena for collaboration. Similarly in

leadership, collaboration is important for achieving success. This is not simply working with the other members of your team effectively: it is working with other teams to mutually support each other and find ways to improve how you set about your activities. Collaboration in leadership can be done in a short term way also. For example the 'action learning sets' that the Laidlaw scholars participated in during the summer provide an example of collaborative problem solving. Both in presenting and supporting roles, one is given an opportunity develop skills and understandings. Perspectives are expanded and new potential solutions to problems are found.

Qualities of perseverance are also a shared characteristic between leadership and academia. In both positions improving understandings and systems is rarely as simple as it first seems. Problems arise that we don't necessarily expect, and nuances must be added to contend with the addition of evidence which different to that initially considered. Furthermore, perseverance is needed in dealing with implementing changes in both remits. In leadership, pushback is very common against new ideas and new ways of doing things. Sometimes this is fair criticism, which needs incorporating into how we operate as leaders. Other times it is the manifestation the general human tendency to be slightly conservative when presented which change. Additionally, we find that the best laid plans often go awry – plans made in fair weather flounder in fowl, or a unconsidered factor crops up and disturbs otherwise smooth progress. As well as attempting to foresee where these issues might arise, leaders need to be able to continue on the path which they have set out on, whether that requires hoping over a stile or diverting around a river in spite, to ultimately find oneself at the destination originally intended. The course of academic research often follows a similar path. Sources prove to not contain the information that you thought they might, and rabbit holes can lead to distractions. Then in the process of process of submitting literature for publication peer review one is often disheartened. Articles are rarely published in the first journal to which they are submitted and come back marked up with critical comments. Having your work criticised, often by the eminent academics in the sub-field, naturally stings. However, by building upon the comments they made (whether it indicated a lack of clarity on your part, or an error) and persevering with the concept, the article which is produced is ultimately improved.

So, what have I gained from doing the Laidlaw scholarship over the last two years? It has given me the opportunity to explore elements of leadership that I would not have otherwise, through the training

weekends and the lunchtime sessions during the summer. One of the most interesting was given by Ejaj Ahmad on how to spread leadership education and support among youth in his home country of Bangladesh. It was interesting to hear about how leadership education could be used to help promote unity and understanding in a region with a culturally fragmented education system and help encourage innovation. The session provided an opportunity to reflect on the importance of quality leadership in promoting the long-term development of economies. By giving the future leaders of Bangladesh the skills and support to innovate and create sustainable change, it is hoped that long term benefits can be achieved which affect more than the participants in the program. It was interesting to learn and reflect on the applicability of leadership training in a different cultural setting, and how it could overcome long standing problems in diverse societies.

However, what has been the most rewarding element of the scholarship over the last two summers have been the weeks of research. Despite the second summer being disrupted by the effects of Coronavirus, these weeks provided a unique opportunity to research topics beyond the normal academic curriculum and explore the potential of following a career in academia. They have encouraged me to follow rabbit holes, think about problems with sources deeply in a non-pressured environment, whilst having the support of a supervisor. It was in this environment that I was fully able to explore the elements of leadership promoted by the program. I have been able to take a lead in the research pathway I followed. This was the environment that enabled me to think about how I could support others into following the pathway that I had trodden. And most importantly it provided me with an opportunity to innovate in my thinking and break with old ways of doing things. Whilst the leadership sessions provided me with context of what leadership was, it was the research weeks which enabled me to implement this understanding to self-lead and innovate. Without the full ten weeks of paid research time, I would not have had the opportunity to properly explore the elements of leadership through research outlined above. I would not have had the same opportunities to be self-led, since the scope of my research would have had to have been much more focused, and my ability to bound into the bushes of the sources would have been more limited. This ultimately would have meant that not only that I wouldn't have had such a rewarding experience taking part in as much research, but I wouldn't have been able to access parts of my

topic where invitation at leadership are possible. And its as a result of that that I've been able to have the experience of producing a piece of publishable work and sending it off for review at several journals.

Looking forward to the next few years, my experiences as a Laidlaw scholar have been invaluable. In the short term, the experience of researching a topic in depth has provided me with a solid basis for applying for post-graduate programs, the next stage in pursuing an academic career. It has given me the skills and knowledge to do that. The leadership components have also equipped me well to take on being school of history president for the coming academic year. This feels particularly challenging because of the whole Coronavirus situation making the usual pattern of events and meetings impossible. However, I am glad that I have this opportunity, and that the Laidlaw leadership component has equipped me well with the challenges that lie ahead.

In conclusion, the Laidlaw programme has prepared me well for the coming years. It has given me the opportunity to explore a career pathway which I had previously thought impossible and equipped me with skills which I will find useful for many years ahead.