

LIDLAW LEADERSHIP IN ACTION PROJECT 2020 ESSAY

Exploring alternative leadership in action project opportunities for Laidlaw Scholars in their local communities

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Executive Summary

This essay highlights the premise and results of the leadership in action project (LIA), exploring alternative leadership in action project opportunities for Laidlaw Scholars in their local communities.

Premise

- Why St. Andrews? There are extensive inequalities within the St. Andrews community that is present despite the outward perception of St. Andrews as a wholly wealthy town.
- Because of the perception of St. Andrews as wealthy, local community organisations have found it difficult to gain required support from outside sources.
- As we are Laidlaw Scholars from the University of St. Andrews, I decided to focus the project on inequalities in our own “backyard”.

Results

Key Takeaways

- Formation of volunteer programmes takes extensive time and effort to ensure ethical practices and local community engagement/buy-in.
- Importance of a partnership focused approach to not focus more on what is taken away from the experience by volunteers rather than what is left behind as impact to the community.
- Participating in a leadership in action project in one’s local community would present volunteers with an environment that challenges their worldview and therefore put the Scholar outside their comfort zone.

Template? Two Step Approach

- Template would be difficult to make because of different local contexts around the world so I made the choice to present two general steps.
- Step 1: Identify a need and how Laidlaw Scholars can contribute to meet this need. Step 2: Contact the community organisation that one would like to work with and work with them to create a LIA that would impact the initiatives that they are working on.
- Important: No vulnerable groups for ethical safeguarding practices.

Implementation and Next Steps?

- Impact of this LIA would be better measured down the line but progress has been made.
- Primary initiative worked with is Sustainable St. Andrews (SSA) and created a sample project outline that could a Scholar could potentially work on.
- Working with SSA because of prior contact and extensive scope of the initiative.
- Community organisations that need support, can benefit for the long-term, and are happy for a scholar as a volunteer to spearhead a specific project would be the best organisations to target to derive maximum benefit for both parties
- Upcoming year: establishment of a network of contacts for Laidlaw Scholars to approach – continuous engagement.

Introduction

As cliché as this may seem, a summer, with a significant amount of time working on this project, has gone by in a blink of an eye. During this time, I have learned extensively about leadership and volunteering – both local and abroad – and have applied the learning towards actions that I hope have or will have impacted the local community of St. Andrews and surrounding areas in a positive manner. The aim of this essay is to highlight the premise and results drawn from my leadership in action project – Exploring alternative leadership in action project opportunities for Laidlaw Scholars in their local communities. In particular, this essay will focus on the action component of the project – whereas the video that is also submitted as a part of the output focuses on my leadership development journey.

At this point, I think it would be salient to refer to the deliverable outcomes that I was aiming to achieve in the project proposal in the first instance.

- Evidenced-based understanding of current approaches in the creation of leadership volunteer programmes through a literature review, interviews, and contact with the local community.
- A draft template that future Laidlaw Scholars can follow in creating bespoke leadership projects that are impactful within their local communities.
- The implementation of the template by working with a local community organisation to explore the impact of a potential leadership in action project.

Throughout the project, I have used these deliverable outcomes as a guiding principle for the project with time allocated to achieve each of these aspects. At the end of the summer, the first two of the outcomes have been achieved, and the last outcome has been achieved to an extent. The manner in which these outcomes have been delivered will be elaborated on later in the essay.

Premise

The premise of the leadership in action project, to inspire positive impacts in the local community of St. Andrews and surrounding areas, was further developed throughout the course of the project. One of the first questions one may ask is Why St. Andrews? On the surface, St. Andrews, famous for sprawling world-class golf courses, and an elite university, may not be the most obvious place for impactful community volunteer projects. Surface-level statistics also corroborates this notion with St. Andrews being one of the least deprived areas generally in Scotland according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), and the lowest claimant (universal credit and jobseeker's allowance) rate in Fife according Fife Economy Partnership's most recent report (Fife Economy Partnership 2020; Scottish Government 2020).

However, after some discussions with community members, they have pointed out that these impressions and figures are somewhat deceptive. In conversation with a community member about the demographics of the St. Andrews community at large; they noted that St. Andrews population can be split generally into three distinct categories: the very wealthy, students + staff, and the people struggling to get by. They note that the prominence of the first two categories of community members mean that that the last category of members is often not considered when thinking about the St. Andrews community at large. The community member also noted that an example of this is extensive food bank usage within St. Andrews. While this observation is

anecdotal and from the experience of said community member, there is some basis to this observation that can be corroborated by looking at the statistics. According to SIMD, there are areas in St. Andrews (such as the Kinnesburn East and Kilrymont East for example), that are below the median regarding SIMD rank in 2020 (Scottish Government 2020). According to Small Area Income Estimates, around 15 percent of households in the St. Andrews Area have income that is under the poverty line (which is 60 per cent of the median UK household income) – this is not an insignificant number of households when compared to the larger St. Andrews community (Scottish Government 2020).

Because of these disparities within the St. Andrews community at large, there are an extensive variety of local non-profit organisations/charities that are operating within the town and surrounding areas. These organisations generally operate on a low budget and require grants to stay afloat. In the last couple of months, local community organisations have found it difficult to get enough support, both from a manpower and financial standpoint, to continue operating due to pandemic related complications. These organisations provide many helpful programmes and services such local youth engagement that would be detrimental to community welfare if they are discontinued or downsized. General perceptions of St. Andrews as a well-off area, has compounded the difficulty of gaining enough support for operations as outside sources prioritise other areas in Fife or around Scotland.

As such, because we are Laidlaw Scholars from the University of St. Andrews, I decided to focus the project on inequalities in our own “backyard”. Community members have noted that students from the university, and in extension Laidlaw Scholars, have many skills that they could contribute to local community organisations that are short staffed and underfunded. One of the things that I learned in my four weeks participating in a virtual internship programme with British-Fijian volunteer organisation, Think Pacific, and through discussion with relevant academics, is that a lot of volunteering is what is being left behind rather than what is taken away by participants. In this manner, by working with the St. Andrews local communities, my hope is that it increases the chance for long term engagement between local community organisations and Laidlaw scholars if both sides see fit. This would increase the likelihood of meaningful impact to the local projects during and post-action project.

Results

Evidenced-based understanding of current approaches in the creation of leadership volunteer programmes through a literature review, interviews, and contact with the local community.

This section of the outcome was built up over the course of the project period – from the initial phase of reading literature to participating in the Think Pacific virtual internship programme to interviews and implementation. One of the key takeaways from the summer is that the formation of volunteer programmes is a complicated process that takes an extensive amount of time and effort. Think Pacific took years of extensive consultation and research before executing their first volunteer programme on the ground. This time and effort are made to ensure that relevant ethical considerations are considered and that there are buy in from the local community that a programme is operating in. A community member told me that for any local community project to be successful, there needs to be communication six month in advance, at the minimum, with many projects having longer implementation periods.

The reality of the volunteer sector at the moment is that, for many, participation stems from a desire to gain work experience and to bolster one’s resume. This can be displayed through the

Think Pacific programme where most interns participated because they want to work in the international development sector in the future. As such, an academic interviewed pointed out that many volunteer organisations tend to advertise their programmes by putting an emphasis on the employment benefits to potential participants. However, this approach, that focuses on what is taken away from the programmes by the participants rather than what is being left behind, is often unhelpful to the local communities that the programmes are working in. As such, both Think Pacific and academics recommend an approach that puts more emphasis on the partnership and exchange between stakeholders.

A question that has come up in conversation is by participating in a leadership in action project in one's local community would fit the Laidlaw criteria of "living in a new and challenging environment, outside of a Scholar's comfort zone". Two of the academics pointed out that for many students, volunteering in their local communities may put them further outside their comfort zone than volunteering in another locale could. This is because when one volunteers in a different locale, they could put a split between their "regular life" and "volunteer life" which would limit how much a volunteer's worldview is challenged. On the flip side, volunteering in one's local community would make it more difficult for a volunteer to create this split which force one to confront the inequalities in one's everyday life. This would in turn challenge one's worldview in a more extensive manner and present a new environment that is outside of a Scholar's comfort zone at least initially. As such leadership in action projects in local communities would fit the Laidlaw criteria in this context.

A draft template that future Laidlaw Scholars can follow in creating bespoke leadership projects that are impactful within their local communities.

As the project has progressed, it became increasingly apparent that a general template cannot be created that would apply to Laidlaw Scholars and their local communities globally because it is highly dependent on local practices and contexts. Instead of template, I propose two general steps that could be followed that could be relevant in other locales for Laidlaw Scholars to establish leadership in action projects in their local communities.

The first step is to identify a need and how Laidlaw Scholars can contribute to meet this need. This need would be identified in collaboration and discussion with local community stakeholders.

The second step is to contact the community organisation that one would like to work with and to work with them to create a project that would impact the projects that they are working on.

In terms of the projects, it is essential that scholars are not working with vulnerable people and groups that they are not qualified to work with to ensure ethical safeguarding practices.

The implementation of the template by working with a local community organisation to explore the impact of a potential leadership in action project.

As pointed out above, the formation of community projects takes extensive time and effort and therefore the larger impact of this leadership in action project would be best measured down the line. In this summer, progress has been made in terms of communication with local community stakeholders to highlight interest and areas where Laidlaw Scholars may add value. After contacting various organisations, I decided to work with "Sustainable St. Andrews" (SSA) initiative in the first instance (See Appendix A for description of SSA as provided by the organisation coordinator). In collaboration and discussion with SSA, we have also created a sample project outline that a Laidlaw Scholar could potentially work on (See Appendix B for sample SSA project outline).

I chose to work with the SSA initiative for a variety of reasons. One the reasons is that I already have a relationship built with the coordinator of the initiative, Dr. Daphne Biliouri-Grant, from previous projects. As such, we were able to communicate in a franker manner without introductions. The extensive strategic direction of the initiative also means that they have contacts with many community organisations within St. Andrews. This has been helpful in directing me to potential contacts within those organisations that may be interested in having a Scholar work with them on the project next summer.

When talking with fellow Laidlaw Scholars, one of the concerns they have about designing bespoke leadership in action projects in the local community is the process of networking and making contacts. As such, the establishment of a network of contacts in local organisations is a priority. Community organisations that need support, can benefit for the long-term, and are happy for a scholar as a volunteer to spearhead a specific project would be the best organisations to target to derive maximum benefit for both parties. I hope that in the upcoming year, I would be able to continue building relationships with community stakeholders to ensure that potential leadership in action projects would be impactful to the St. Andrews community.

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Word Count: 1964



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Appendix A: Sustainable St. Andrews Initiative Description

Sustainable St. Andrews (SSA) is the current initiative led by St. Andrews Environmental Network (StAndEN), the local environmental organisation, in an effort to develop a clear and unified sustainability strategy supported by all the stakeholders and the wider community in St. Andrews. Following the success of the 'Towards a Plastic Free St. Andrews' initiative that was established in 2019 and led to the collaboration amongst all the major stakeholders in St. Andrews towards the eradication of single-use plastics, SSA will be looking beyond plastic pollution. SSA aims to promote sustainable practices within the community and the local businesses in accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and develop further collaboration amongst all stakeholders in St. Andrews.

This initiative aims to benefit the community and strengthen its presence as one of the notable towns in Scotland. As the country is now entering the next phase in response to the pandemic crisis and looking into adopting new ways of functioning in order to promote an economic recovery and strengthen the community, sustainability is now more than ever essential for a successful recovery. From the perspective of an economic recovery, local businesses will benefit by adopting sustainable practices within their operations and also set up close partnerships with each other, where possible to strengthen their offering. In terms of the community groups, the Scottish government has highlighted the need for stronger partnerships between organisations in the third sector, while both public and private funders have also indicated they would rather support collaborative projects to ensure a more effective social and economic impact.

Therefore the 'Sustainable St. Andrews' initiative would like to develop a common sustainability strategy for St. Andrews and establish a unified action plan amongst all the stakeholders. The current pandemic has enforced the fact that it is now even more urgent to be able to implement such a strategy within our community. A single, united strategy will be extremely useful for everyone involved:

- a) It will help with the economic recovery of the businesses,
- b) It will increase the effectiveness of the charities and community groups operating in the town, and
- c) It will strengthen relationships between all the main stakeholders and provide a united front of the community to external actors such as the local authorities (Fife Council), the government and potential funding bodies and corporate entities.

We envision that as all community groups and local businesses come together to develop, support and implement this strategy, St. Andrews will be able to implement a long-term sustainable future for the town in accordance with the UN SDGs. From the 17 SDGs that are currently in place, we have identified the ones that will become the focus of the common sustainability strategy and will act as the leading force within our community.

Under the overarching SDG of ***Partnerships to achieve a sustainable future***, and based on the principles defined by the goals of ***Quality Education*** and ***Responsible Consumption and Production***, this initiative will incorporate the following SDGs within its strategy by giving the lead to certain community groups for each SDG as noted below:

Affordable and Clean Energy (Cosy Kingdom)

Decent Work and Economic Growth (Tourism St. Andrews)

Reduce Inequality (NEF Community Hub)
Sustainable Cities and Communities (StAndEN)
Climate Action (FCCAN, Transition UofStA)
Life on Land (St. Andrews Botanical Gardens)

I would like to discuss with you the opportunity for your organisation to join the initiative and play a central role in the realisation of a common strategy for the benefit of our community as a whole.

Appendix B: Sustainable St. Andrews Sample Project Outline

Brief description of the organisation

Sustainable St. Andrews (SSA) is the current initiative led by St. Andrews Environmental Network (StAndEN), the local environmental organisation, in an effort to develop a clear and unified sustainability strategy supported by all the stakeholders and the wider community in St. Andrews. Following the success of the ‘Towards a Plastic Free St. Andrews’ initiative that was established in 2019 and led to the collaboration amongst all the major stakeholders in St. Andrews towards the eradication of single-use plastics, SSA will be looking beyond plastic pollution. SSA aims to promote sustainable practices within the community and the local businesses in accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and develop further collaboration amongst all stakeholders in St. Andrews.

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Volunteer involvement

SSA will like to identify a volunteer that will like to take a leadership role in establishing a marketing strategy on how to raise awareness of SSA within the wider community and increase its visibility. One of the aims of this plan will be to utilise social media and other methods of communication to publicise the SSA initiative in order to achieve the following:

- a) engage the community organisations that have already committed their support in working together towards a single, united strategy that would help them with their recovery under the current pandemic crisis, continue to promote them and be able to
- b) attract other community groups and other stakeholders within St. Andrews to join the SSA initiative in order to help them increase their exposure, help them identify new ways to operate and help them develop partnerships.

Timeline

The volunteer will liaise with Daphne Biliouri-Grant in creating an action plan in terms of marketing and communications over a period of 5 weeks during the summer break that could be implemented. Daphne will provide all the necessary information to the volunteer and establish regular meetings to update on the progress of the project.

The volunteer will take the lead in drafting the action plan, set timelines and identify specific tasks that a team of other volunteers can realise. The volunteer will also have the opportunity to lead a team of volunteers during the last 2 weeks to ensure that the infrastructure is in place upon completion of the project.