

# **Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme**

## **Report for Reflections**

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## **Introduction**

Participating in the Durham Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme has enabled me to make the most of my university experience. Upon the completion of the research and the Leadership-In-Action programme, I would like to reflect on my personal development, the skills and knowledge that I acquired throughout the programme. The reflection is presented chronologically in this report.

## **Application**

The Laidlaw Programme caught my attention when I saw its poster at Hatfield College. Particularly, I was excited about the research component. As a first-year student, I knew that an opportunity to lead an independent research project is extremely rare, not to mention the opportunity to work alongside an established academic. My journey of application started when I signed up and attended one of the Q&A sessions held by Suzzane at the Teaching and Learning Centre. The session has given me a clear understanding of the application process, timeline and the required documents. I then read through the list of proposed research projects affiliated with the Laidlaw Foundation. The list helped me to find and discuss my research ideas with my potential supervisor.

An obstacle for me was to come up with an operationalised research question that is tangible enough to investigate within six weeks. As a social psychologist and an online study blogger for EC2KIDS.CO.UK, a key passion of mine was to tackle the issues of digital inequalities and bridge the gap of the generational digital divide. However, my initial questions were too broad for a research paper. As a solution, I drafted out multiple research proposals using the Laidlaw Application template and researched them individually. Eventually, I decided to tap into an area that I have not studied before – the social wellbeing of older adults. I was fascinated by this topic as I realised how little discussion there is between the old and the young in their experience of the digital world, despite older adults' efforts to become a part of the digital society.

The Leadership Competent also intrigued me a lot. I am curious to find out the type of leader I could become and the social project that I could develop from my research. However, at the time of my application, the greatest benefit of the leadership programme that spoke to me was the development of my employability, which I found out that it was so much more than this as the programme progressed.

## **Research Experience**

In my research proposal, I planned my study using a comparative approach to investigate how digital literacy skills may affect older adults in different economic backgrounds, such as Durham and Sutherland. However, due to Covid-19 and the vulnerability of older adults exposed to the virus, it was impossible to access the care homes which I initially contacted. To pick up the participants, I pivoted my research to investigate older adults' social wellbeing in the Covid-19. This allowed me to conduct a series of interviews with the older adults within my social network.

Using the snowball sampling methods, I was able to hold telephone interviews with ten older adults above the age of 60, both living in London and care homes in the Northeast. The data collection phase was a slow but steady process. I ended up spending many hours converting the audio into meaningful

texts. Over the six-week research period, I gathered over eight hours of interview recording, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, and categorised the data into over 100 thematic codes, 26 sub-themes and five global themes.

I found the data collection a rewarding process. During the research period, I kept regular contact with my supervisor to discuss the design structure of my thematic analysis based on the interview outcomes. At the end of the meetings, my supervisor would always send me some recommended readings to further develop my understandings and expand my horizon of academic writings. My choice of using the “open thematic analysis” approach enabled me to be more flexible when analysing the coded data. From there, I applied Ulrick Beck’s *Risk Society theory* to interpret the dataset. My results highlight the hidden risks for older adults to navigate themselves around the digital world, despite their ability to use computers and access the web.

Currently, I am still working with my supervisor to revise the draft of the paper that I completed during the holidays. This is because we want to ensure that the paper meets the requirements for the publisher we chose and to speed up the publication process when we submit the final paper for peer review.

### **The Leadership Training Programme**

Running in parallel with the research project, the Leadership training programme provided me with the opportunity to collaborate, network with other students and to inspire each other. The workshops, challenges and activities gave me an insight into what leadership roles entitle and the development of the various skill sets to prepare me for a leadership position in action. By learning about the assorted designs of leadership, I learnt to compare my attitudes with the theoretical models of the different leadership styles. I used this to reflect on my own behaviours to ask how I can improve myself as a leader in future.

An interesting observation I found was how my personality has changed as I joined the programme. Using the Myers & Brigg’s 16 personalities test, I was assessed to be a “commander” leader, who focus on team efficiency and productivity before joining the Laidlaw Programme. However, when I took the same test after the training, I was categorised to be the “campaigner”, who is more sensitive to other people’s feelings and feedbacks. The differences in my personality test amazed me as it suggested I have transformed from a transactional leader (who focuses on supervision, organisation and performance) to a more transformational one (who look beyond the immediate interests and focuses on the long-term change) at the end.

As I became aware of the changes in my personality, I started to develop a deeper understanding of what leadership is – a process of building an inspiring and democratic environment, which motivates team workers to work beyond the common goals by being the best of themselves. I also understood that setting up a vision is much more important than focusing on the outcomes. Therefore, a true leader is someone to inspire others in the process of working rather than just monitoring the performance and achievements.

To put my understanding of leadership into practice, I applied to become the Vice President at the Durham Laidlaw Scholars’ Organisation, took part in Learn With Us Summer Camp and founded the E-Pocket Help Project. The reflection of these experiences will be presented below. I will continue using

the tools and theories I learnt in the Laidlaw leadership training sessions to monitor my actions and reflect on my thoughts and behaviours. I am looking forward to providing support to other people and making sure that whatever I do as a leader is sustainable in the long run.

### **Durham Laidlaw Scholars' Organization**

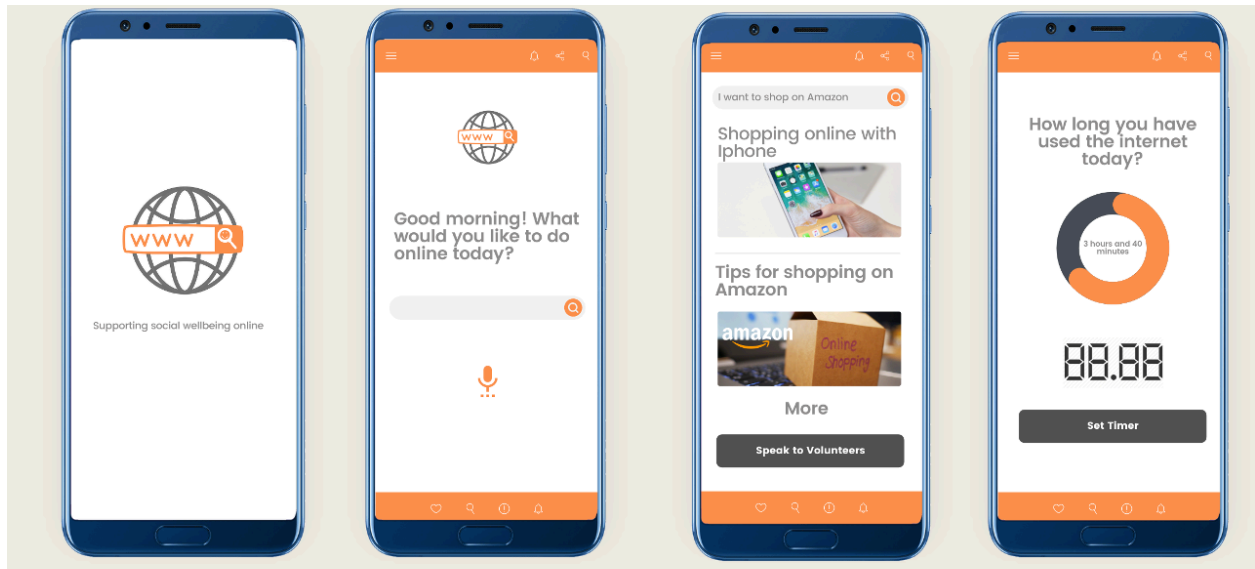
The Durham Laidlaw Scholars' Organisation (DLSO) provided me with a unique opportunity to practise the leadership skills I acquired in the leadership training programme. The DLSO is a student-led society in affiliation with the Laidlaw Programme at Durham University. The society has organised some enjoyable events and socials for scholars to meet each other in an informal setting. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our cohort rarely had an opportunity to get in touch with each other face to face. However, through the DLSO, we managed to get to know the scholars in our cohort online and through the social-distanced meetups at Durham University. More importantly, the social events provided an opportunity for me to learn about other scholars' experiences of their research and leadership projects, as well as support each other when anyone needed help.

In November 2021, I applied to become the Vice President at DLSO. My key responsibility was to help my fellow scholars to succeed in their scholarship, as the six-week research and leadership project could be very intense not just academically, but also mentally and physically. My aim was to ensure that all scholars can speak freely to the DLSO whenever they feel concerned about their projects and to fully enjoy their scholarship experiences. To achieve this goal, I posted opportunities and news about the Laidlaw Programme regularly in the scholar's Facebook group and on MS Teams with an aim to promote social interactions and encourage scholars to contact the DLSO as a stress-free approach if they want to voice their opinions about the Laidlaw Programme.

The leadership role was not without a challenge. During my administration, a key change to the DLSO was that it has transferred from the Durham Student Union to the Career and Enterprise Department. This change allowed the society to obtain greater flexibility in budgeting and management. Conversely, the transfer also added the workload for the exec team to process and get familiar with the new organizational framework. In this period of transformation, it is extremely important to maintain effective communications between the programme directors, the exec team members, and the scholars. To facilitate the communication, we as the execs have been meeting regularly to discuss our monthly plans and broadcasting to the scholars on Microsoft Teams.

Taking part in the DLSO as an exec member allowed me to gain much hands-on leadership experience in a safe place. By taking the responsibility of providing welfare to the scholars, I learnt about representing a group of people and speaking on behalf of their wishes and needs. Furthermore, I became more confident speaking in meetings, making decisions and proposing original ideas while working collaboratively with other students. These transferrable skills prepared me to become a better leader than when I first joined the Laidlaw Programme and paved the way for my ambition of setting up a social enterprise project myself.

## Leadership-in-Action: The E-Pocket Help Project



In my second summer holiday, I decided to set up the E-Pocket Help for my Leadership-in-Action project. The E-Pocket Help is a social enterprise project which aims to support older adults in improving their digital literacy skills in the time of the pandemic. The App is designed to contain a Chatbot system that identifies the older adult's concerns, offer solutions, and connect them with volunteers who are specialized in this field. The project aims to bridge the generational digital divide by allowing the young to help the old and creating a more pleasant experience for the elderly when they are online.

The E-Pocket Project is developed based on my research in the previous summer holiday, which investigated the impact of digital literacy on older adults' social wellbeing during Covid-19. Seeing my research findings turned into a tangible project was exciting for me. As a social sciences student who had little experience in coding, working on an App was definitely a step out of my comfort zone.

My experience of setting up a social enterprise project like this was both exciting and initiating. During the summer holiday, I explored a range of MOOC courses and consulted the experts in the field of App design. To make sure I commit to the MOOC courses I set myself a timetable and used it to track my learning progress on the different aspects of social enterprise, leadership, and App development. However, the learning journey was pretty much self-exploratory as I wanted to make sure that I am always open to new opportunities and features when building the App.

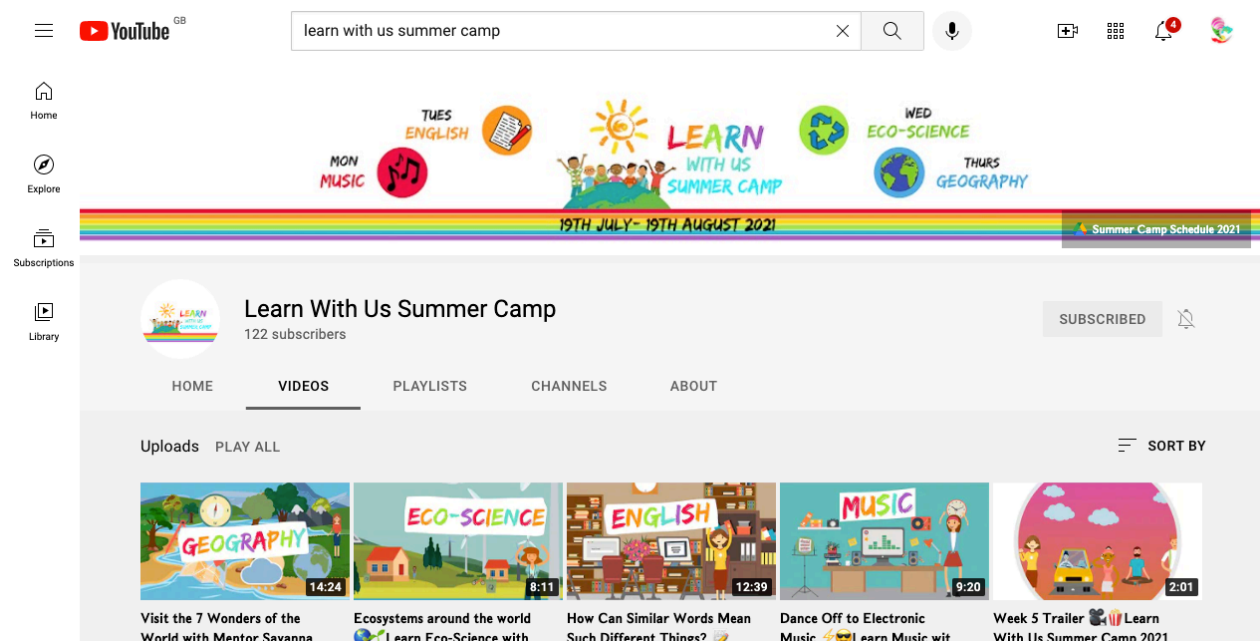
The project was indeed more challenging than I thought. Firstly, I had an issue with time management. I realised that if I want to create a minimum viable project by the end of the summer holiday, I must work on courses from multiple disciplines at once. Secondly, I undermined the complexity of building this App. While I managed to grasp a good overview of Python and Swift to me. I also realised that developing an App that embeds an Artificial Intelligent chatbot required far more advanced coding skills than what I was capable of.

However, the challenges did not stop my desire for helping older adults improve their digital wellbeing. I reassessed the workload required for this project and started working on the fundamentals for setting

up a social enterprise based on the App that will allow me to seek external guidance from charities and organisations, such as the AgeUK and Digital Social Care, who were the experts in this field. Eventually, I decided to create a web-based App using Wix as an MVP to test out the functions I designed. I am also working on the IOS version and learning about coding on Python and Swift as the App develops.

By the end of the second summer holiday, I managed to set up and launch the web-based version of E-Pocket Help. Furthermore, I completed ten articles on the guidance for older adults to navigate themselves around the web and established connections with care homes and charities who are helping me to promote the App to the older adults' community.

## Learn With Us Summer Camp



Apart from my research and Leadership-In-Action project, I applied to become a Publicity Officer at the Learn With Us Summer Camp. The Summer Camp is a YouTube Channel set up by another Laidlaw scholar. The aim of this YouTube channel is to facilitate children's learning progress during the national lockdown in the Northeast. My role involved writing the video descriptions, designing pictorial posts for social media, and publishing the posts on Facebook and Instagram on a regular basis. Being the publicity officer allows me to monitor the growth of the channel and to design solutions for maximising the exposures of the videos. It has been an enjoyable experience working with a team of 15 undergraduate students, who were either from Durham University or the Laidlaw Programme network.

The volunteering experience shed light on the development of my leadership skills for many reasons. As a team member in this organisation, I developed my team-working skills by collaborating with volunteers to work towards a common goal of promoting the videos to the children in need of education. By working with people from a variety of backgrounds, I learnt how to handle conversations with different people in different situations. Most importantly, I found it inspiring to see the practices of

other students in leadership positions and their approach to building an agile, efficient and compassionate team in a friendly and relaxed working environment. Observing the leadership practices of other students led me to reflect upon my own leadership skills. For example, I started to pay close attention to my actions and attitudes towards the other team members when I designate tasks to them.

## **Conclusion**

The Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme is certainly one of the most valuable experiences I had at Durham University. Reflecting on my scholarship journey, I am surprised to see how much I have developed since I first joined the programme.

The research component allowed me to explore my passion for digital social justice in depth. The experience of working with an established academic as my supervisor gave me a compelling experience of academic research, which I now intend to progress for my future career. Additionally, the research sparked my curiosity about the ecology of digital education, and I intend to continue exploring this field in my postgraduate study.

Not only the programme taught me the various skillsets for research and project management, but did it also provide me with a safe and flexible space to apply the skills I learnt in different working scenarios. Through the leadership programme, I learnt how to communicate and work with people from a variety of backgrounds to achieve a common goal. After the Laidlaw Programme, I will continue to utilise every skill I learn and apply them to my learning and work environments. I am also excited about the newly announced Laidlaw Venture Capital Funds. In the next two years of my postgraduate study, I will continue developing the social enterprise programme that I started as a part of my Leadership-in-Action project and evaluate my personal and career growth before reporting my progress back to the Laidlaw Foundation again.