

Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme

Summer 1 reflective report by Aminata S. Roth

I undertook my Laidlaw scholarship research project in summer 2020, over a period of 11 weeks (from May to August). The project was entitled 'Learning from other jurisdictions to improve EU lobbying regulation' and was carried out under the supervision of Prof Raj Chari. The aim of my project was to identify the shortcomings of the current EU lobbying regulation and highlight possible solutions based on regulations in place in the US, Canada, France and Ireland. I was successfully able to pinpoint several weaknesses of the European regulation and provide details regarding the applicability of provisions other countries are using in their regulations.

Having travelled back to my home country, Austria, in March following the campus closure, I initially welcomed the flexibility that carrying out my research from home would give me. Given that everyone was adapting to the pandemic, moving my project online was largely problem-free. For example, arranging expert interviews for my research over Zoom instead of in person was not an issue. While lack of access to the library was bothersome initially, this was overcome by working with my subject librarian who pointed me towards useful online resources. Although I continued to enjoy the freedom of working from home, it was difficult to keep on track at times. I tend to be self-motivated and driven, but the blur between home life and study was often draining. In this regard, my Action Learning Set (the *Umbrellabirds* as we have called ourselves) helped a lot. We met up once a week and discussed our progress and difficulties. I think I can speak for all of us, when I say that these meetings were helpful because they provided an accountability mechanism, as well as an oftentimes necessary distraction. Furthermore, I found that detailed planning in the form of schedules and to-do lists as well as clear time management proved beneficial.

Throughout my research, I conducted a total of seven expert interviews with public officials and representatives from transparency advocacy groups. Initially, having to interview high-profile experts in the field was very daunting. However, the interviews ended up being very useful and even enjoyable. In contrast, I found the process of doing my literature review very tedious. One thing I remember distinctly about this part of the research is the constant sense that I am missing something, and that every new article I read pointed me towards a sea of issues which I hadn't considered. Eventually I learned to balance perfectionism and efficiency, and to be clear (and, to a certain extent, rigid) about the focus of my research and what was important. One thing that pleasantly surprised me about the interview process, was that they rarely consisted of these experts telling me about their experience and instead often involved us exchanging ideas about the subject, which was incredibly

valuable. The same goes for my supervisor and other researchers I contacted throughout the project, who all treated me more as a fellow researcher than a student. These exchanges were incredibly enriching and helped me to develop my critical thinking skills, which has undoubtedly been one of the parts of this experience I am most grateful for. I previously doubted my critical thinking skills in an academic setting but now feel much more confident.

It should be added that the relationship with my supervisor was a very good one. As a key expert in the field, he was able to give me crucial advice on the subject as well as research and academic writing more generally. I also believe that our approaches were very compatible – I often worked at my own pace for large periods of time, structuring my own work and we would then meet back up (virtually) to work on any issues I had encountered. In terms of the content of my research, no changes were made to my initial research proposal. However, you could say that it was refined as I gained more insights about the topic as well as research methods. The research period was longer than I had initially envisaged, partly due to an extended focus and partly due to the unusual circumstances.

The leadership sessions I took part in over the last few months benefitted me in two ways. On the one hand, I gained interesting insights from the people that spoke to us but on the other, they helped me build confidence simply by attending them. I was very hesitant at first, as I did not know what to expect, especially given the circumstances and the unfamiliar setting. This was especially true for the workshop with the Lir. However, the sessions turned out to be very helpful. In addition, overcoming something that was a personal challenge for me helped me build confidence. Going on a Zoom call with people that I did not know previously to talk about myself and what I do, did push me out of my comfort zone. I was surprised how much of what we learned turned out to be useful for my everyday life. Again, this is especially true for the voice coaching. Our workshops, as well as explaining and talking about my project to a wide range of people, has improved my communication skills in ways I did not expect it to. I have learned that most of the time there is no need to communicate in the most sophisticated and specialized way possible, but rather, simplicity is key and is in fact a lot more appealing. I felt that the leadership qualities workshop suited my personal approach to this topic in particular. I am quite observant and self-reflective, so I appreciated this analytical approach. I found it easy to 'implement' and it helped me in dealing with other people and thinking about how I can improve personally.

While I have learned a great deal about my leadership qualities, I am still trying to determine what my personal leadership style is. So far, my experience of leading others has come from other college activities (e.g. group projects, society committees), rather than the Laidlaw programme. I hope to

further explore this aspect in the next stage of the programme. When leading others, I tend to have a very strategic approach and often set high goals for myself and those I'm working with. Problems can arise if I do not communicate my expectations properly or set expectations that are unrealistic. Besides working on this, I hope to develop my teambuilding and motivational skills, going forward. Another aspect I need to improve on personally, is that it can take me a very long time to build up the kind of relationship with someone where I feel I can trust them enough to delegate work. I find that this is especially relevant in the context of the pandemic, where I am often faced with having to work and cooperate with people I have never met in person. Although this is not something I struggled with on the Laidlaw programme per se, it is something that I would like to improve on, based on my previous experiences, especially going into the second summer of the programme, where I will have to put my leadership skills to work.

Laidlaw has opened doors for me not only to the world outside of Trinity but also within my own cohort. The exchange with my ALS group, has taught me how to view my own discipline from completely new and distinct angles. All in all, I am very proud of the research I have produced during the first part of this programme and hope to extend the project in the future. I am also very grateful for the progress I have made personally over this summer. The Laidlaw leadership development has made me more confident and refined a variety of skills, which has been a real asset in my college and personal life. Over this short period of time, Laidlaw has broadened my horizons academically as well as personally, not least through the contacts I have made within and outside of Trinity, both professionally and personally.

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