

Overall Reflective Report and the Laidlaw Experience

When I first went to the info session about the Laidlaw Programme, which was before I had even decided to apply, two Laidlaw students talked about how the best part of their experience had been the leadership training and the progress they had made in that area. At this point, I was one of the many students who intended to apply specifically for the opportunity to do independent research on an undergraduate level and I could not believe that the leadership part of the programme had been what people felt to have benefitted from the most. Now, almost two years later, I would have to say that I agree with them and that I felt like I did not only learn more about leadership but that the parts of the programme related to leadership were those which contributed the most to my personal development. In explaining what the Laidlaw experience meant to me, it might be best to consider the different parts of it: Firstly, the six weeks of summer research in the first summer, then the different remote Leadership workshops and the seminar weekend at the beginning of this term, and finally, more recently the Leadership in Action experience in the second summer.

In the summer of 2020, my research aimed to investigate the use of doomsday scenarios by environmental movements as instruments of mobilization and to examine the relation between the use of doomsday imagery and political radicalism within different environmental movements. This research was largely detached from any methodologies that I was familiar with through my degree. Therefore, the whole experience challenged me to look into, learn and understand new methodologies and techniques and implement them in my work. I conducted the research entirely on my own except for regular talks and input from my supervisor. Since plenty of research and working by oneself are part of most academic research in my discipline I felt it would be a good indicator to determine whether long-term research projects would be something that I could have an interest in. After overcoming the first challenges of how to approach such an independent research project, I felt that despite occasional struggles, I was able to handle my time management and improve effective planning. A key moment in approaching my project was to show that, argued based on several motivational theories, end-time scenarios had a high potential for mobilizing people for environmental movements, and in this sense could be an effective instrument of political agitation. As the project came to an end, my analysis had shown that clusters emerged when looking at different movements and their radical tendencies in relation to their use of doomsday predictions. And although, to speak of a possible link existing between radicalism and the use of doomsday scenarios would require the analysis of further movements, having this moment of drawing conclusions from weeks of research

was something that showed me the rewarding aspects of research and will certainly remain one of the biggest things I will be taking away from my time with Laidlaw.

Another part of the Laidlaw programme were the workshops and seminars, which were very heavily affected by the COVID-19 restrictions. Although all of them were planned out well, it was difficult for me to focus on them through a screen and I was struggling to take anything away from the first two. The seminars which were held shortly before Summer 2 were shorter in duration and not scheduled during the most stressful times of college which made me feel as though they were a lot more helpful and they left me considering new and different perspectives. Particularly helpful, although very intense and challenging, I considered to be the individual personal development sessions. Since they forced me to reflect and analyse myself, my feelings, my progress, my goals, my strengths, and also areas of improvement, I always felt like I truly benefitted not only from the session itself but also from how I prepared for them and reflected on them afterward. Being able to reflect intimately about those things with someone who has the experience to guide my thoughts, might have been a little out of my comfort zone at first, but I quickly grew accustomed to. Therefore, these individual sessions were one of the things I enjoyed most about the programme and believe to have benefitted from the most.

Finally, the in-person weekend was a great opportunity to make use of existing leadership skills while also working on other aspects of it. Having to work in teams and apply the leadership skills I believed to have acquired over the summer during my LIA was certainly very helpful. Bringing together ideas and finding a dynamic as a team was a great way to implement many things that had thus far been part of Laidlaw in a largely theoretical framework. A great way to combine theoretical framework and team-building was the conflict resolution workshop. It encouraged me to consider different perspectives, think outside the box and emphasize what I had learned over the summer about the value of different cultural perspectives.

The leadership in action experience of Summer 2 surprised me positively and possibly the most throughout the entire programme. My decision to join Think Pacific was one that I ultimately made in light of possible COVID-19 restrictions and because I suspected that it would offer me great opportunities to work on my leadership abilities. Again, the circumstances showed that flexibility and spontaneity were crucial in terms of self-leadership. I approached the LIA much more open-minded and more relaxed, not only because at this point, I had gotten slightly more used to the uncertainties which accompanied the pandemic, but also because the team-based and more hands-on tasks meant that we would all have to be open-minded and flexible for the project to work. Our team was tasked with developing a zero-waste delivery system for Fiji's capital Suva, that would help people specifically in the context of COVID lockdowns while simultaneously tackling the plastic pollution of the islands.

The dynamics of having a team of students from different countries and continents all working with a Fijian organization that would implement our plans and ideas, and doing all of it remotely was a complete opposite to my theory-based, research-heavy project in Summer 1. It should come as no surprise that one of the areas I felt that my leadership skills had improved the most was “collaboration and team-working”. I also learned how leadership is not something that is split between members of a team with someone ultimately being the leader. While during the first week the output we produced was already great, it was noticeable how each week, we worked together a little better as a team and found compromises much easier than when we first started. This is not to say the summer was free of struggle. A lot of new input we would often get on very short notice from the organisation in Fiji, which forced us to work within very tight time frames but in the end taught us to work more efficiently. More unexpected to me was the improvement regarding effective communication. Being in touch with the team, the programme coordinators, the cultural mentors, the organization in Fiji, and finally, the Laidlaw team and scholars showed me how to communicate more effectively, more quickly, and more precisely. Especially the tone around Think Pacific was always friendly and supportive but clear at the same time.

Everything considered I would argue that Laidlaw has changed my understanding of leadership. Before I used to think of a good leader as someone who can take charge, who can command a room, someone who is both respected by the people they work with, but also respects them and listens to their input. Through Laidlaw, I have come to understand that what constitutes a good leader is significantly more versatile and requires one to consider many more aspects. I would now consider being a leader, to be a skill, rather than a title, the ability to bring together ideas, to assess what and who might work best together, to always consider that different backgrounds, skills, education etc. are crucial to finding the best possible solutions. I believe that leadership has to be adaptable and flexible, that leading does not necessarily mean making all the decisions or commanding others, it means guiding people to finding results. What has remained the same is that I still believe listening is crucial to executing leadership in any situation. I still believe that acting as if there is a right and a wrong way and putting team members down or belittling their ideas is detrimental to any good attempt at leadership or group dynamic.

The Laidlaw programme has shown me that there is no one way right way of leadership, but that leadership is the ability to take core skills and adapt them to fit different tasks, people, and environments to find the best possible way to make use of one’s leadership style. I learned that even tasks that are unfamiliar or projects which take on different dimensions than anything previously done, it is best to get as much advice as possible from people who have more experience but also to trust yourself to approach a new challenge based on existing skillsets and careful research. Future projects I want to approach more relaxed, despite the possible pressure of deadlines or expectations because

in solo projects it is important to properly familiarize yourself with the task first, and in team projects, a team needs to find a connection to each other and their place in the group first before getting started. Leading means creating the framework in which collaborative team effort can thrive. By the end of everything, I finally understood what was meant by “leading without authority” and that might be one of the most important things Laidlaw has taught me.

Despite all the progress during the Laidlaw programme and big efforts made on my part to improve, I still find networking to be difficult. As much as I have tried, the context of the pandemic has not only changed the way that people are expected to network but also has brought on a number of new anxieties for me which made it difficult to deal with the new circumstances. Since it is a skill relevant to both “Collaboration and Teamworking” and “Social and Cultural Intelligence and Awareness” I plan to improve further in building relationships and networks. On a related note, the LIA has made me much more comfortable with using digital connectivity. Overall, I believe that through Laidlaw I have become more open to new challenges and more confident in approaching them. Furthermore, I have come to accept setbacks, doubts, and insecurities as natural and something that I should be more forgiving about. It is, however, important to be aware of the eventual goal, which makes it easier to deal with challenges along the way. Laidlaw made me reflect more on my behaviour, and the way I approach challenges. I realized that determination, flexibility, creative thinking, and adaptability are some of the key skills to develop and work on. I plan to make an effort to learn more about leadership and different techniques since I have fundamentally underestimated its relevance even in everyday life so far. I have certainly become more comfortable with teamwork, with leadership and I have done independent research for the first time! Laidlaw also made me develop or improve upon other skills, such as learning to work with new software, creating portfolios, and designing. Laidlaw with all its different experiences was a challenging but certainly rewarding experience.