

Laidlaw: Final Report

Introduction

Welcome to my final report summarising my experiences and takeaways my involvement with the Laidlaw Scholarship 2020-22. My name is Kathleen Payne and I am about to start my final year at Durham University in Josephine Butler College. I began working on my application for the Laidlaw Scholarship towards the end of my first term of my degree. It has been very rewarding to reflect on how this journey has developed my skills and experience throughout my academic and extracurricular career at Durham. When I applied to the scholarship, I was in my first term at Durham and did not yet have a clear picture of my career plans and was adjusting to university life in the midst of a global pandemic. As a mature student, I had arrived at Durham University following an Access Course. During my first year, I was involved with a number of groups designed to help non-traditional students find their place at university. For example, Enabling Opportunities and the First-Generation Students' Network, which were both instrumental in helping me with the Laidlaw application and other opportunities. Despite seeking out these sources of support, settling in to university as a non-traditional student naturally involved different challenges.

Despite these challenges, I threw myself into my course, Sociology, and explored and developed my dual interests in gender/women's rights and educational inequality in the UK. Initially, I saw the Laidlaw Scholarship as an opportunity to further develop my academic interests. I was drawn to the potential I could develop these fields, and to learn how to plan and conduct an independent research project based around my academic interests. Secondly, I had a strong interest in utilising my research skills to benefit others in a practical sense, and I saw the second summer of the Scholarship as an opportunity to put the research into practice and make a real difference within the community.

From this point at the beginning, to where I am now, I have grown so much as a scholar, individual and leader. My future career ambitions involve continuing in Higher Education after I graduate, working in research in either an applied research capacity or within scholarship. I will reflect throughout this report on how my Laidlaw journey has enabled me to clarify my ambitions, offered me untold numbers of opportunities and finally, helped me explore different options to learn about myself and the world of leadership.

Year 1: Research Project

As highlighted in the introduction, the research project was integral to my interest in applying for the Scholarship. I decided to undertake a project I had a personal connection with: the experiences of first-generation students at university. I wanted to see how feelings of belonging during the first year of university differed between those from a non-graduate background, and those whose parents had attended university themselves. Before attending Durham, I had begun a degree course at another institution but struggled as a working-class student whose parents could not help with questions about university and did not really understand why a university degree was important. Further inspiration came from my degree and my interest in the sociology of educational inequality. In particular, I drew upon the theorist Pierre Bourdieu's work into *capitals*, in particular his theories of social and cultural capital, and the role these play in inclusion, exclusion and belonging in a university

setting, a traditionally a middle-class institution. During the application process, I refined this theoretical framework, constructed my research questions I wanted to explore through this project and established how I would answer these questions through my methodology. Finally, I made contact with a potential supervisor and met with them to outline my ideas and receive feedback on my proposal.

After taking part in a successful interview with the Laidlaw team, which I prepared for through a mock interview and research into the foundation and leadership, the research period came around very quickly. Under the supervision of Vikki Boliver from the Sociology department, in preparation for the research project, I planned my time through a Gantt Chart, revised my instruments such as my survey and social media posts to advertise the project, and finally submitted an ethics form.

Once the six weeks began, a priority was sending the form around key groups within the university, via email and social media, in order to advertise my survey and receive as many responses as possible. This was key, as I was undertaking a quantitative survey and thus had the ability to process large amounts of data with ease. Despite the challenges I experienced, such as navigating the permissions required to advertise research in a college setting, and the inactivity of a lot of social media accounts over the summer period, I successfully raised awareness of the project through this advertising campaign. Another key task was selecting and reading the integral literature on the topic, which required organisation and selectivity. This in particular really honed my research skills. Once the survey was closed, I analysed the data using data processing software. I utilised online courses and support from my supervisor to navigate this unfamiliar software. From this point, I began to construct my report summarising my research.

Although my sample was small and selected via convenience sampling, I discovered that first-generation students experienced a less strong sense of belonging during the first year of university compared to those from a graduate background. Another interesting finding from my research was that colleges played a key role in supporting a feeling of belonging. These two findings, despite the sampling issues, revealed the importance of fostering a sense of belonging in first-generation students and perhaps revealed an important way in which this may be achieved: through utilising already-existing college support systems.

As well as developing my research skills exponentially, this project also developed my communication skills through the required communication with staff members and networking to advertise the project. Additionally, through having six weeks to plan and conduct research on my own initiative, I learned how to effectively plan my own time around deadlines and others' schedules to meet the outputs and deadlines required.

I had the privilege of presenting this research at a Josephine Butler student research conference, and winning the Poster Prize. I learned how to effectively summarise research into a poster format, and also how to network and present my research. Finally, through contacts I have made during this project, I learned about a first generation students' writing course which Durham University ran this Spring in collaboration with Cal State LA, which I applied to and was accepted onto. The resulting narratives from this course will be published in a special issue of *Text & Type* journal. Finally, I was headhunted for the position

of a Research Assistant this academic year at Durham University working on a project exploring Imposter Syndrome in education. Thus, undertaking this project has already exponentially benefitted me in my academic career, and will continue to do so.

Year 2: Leadership in Action

Despite initial plans to try to spend my second summer conducting another period of research, I pivoted to apply for an international central LIA project with Make Sense in Mexico City in order to make a difference in the community. As a mature student with commitments at home and financial concerns, I was initially hesitant about this experience. Additionally, this would be my first time travelling outside Europe. As I knew from my research in my first year, non-traditional students are very rarely able to take part in international placements which could develop their skills and experiences, due to concerns such as these. However, despite these reservations, I ended up going for this project and it was the perfect way to spend my second summer growing my skills and developing as a leader and an individual.

It was a hybrid LIA, with two weeks online designing the project online in the UK and four weeks carrying out the project on-site in Mexico City. In the first session, we were introduced to our project partners we would be working closely alongside and assigned our projects. We were assigned to work alongside Extinction Rebellion Mexico, through a local community garden, Huerto Roma Verde, which provided recycling services, community classes, grew food and cotton to make clothes. Huerto Roma Verde focuses on creating a holistic zero-waste community, enabling the empowerment of women and Indigenous communities. We would help this groups run an 'artist' event, which would use art as a form of activism, in order to raise awareness about the climate emergency, in particular, the damage to wildlife, communities, and the environment which would result from the construction of the Mayan Train in South-West Mexico.

We began our project by researching the climate emergency and activism, with a specific focus on the context of Mexico, utilising skills I had developed in the first summer. Additionally, we received trainings from the Make Sense facilitators in Design Thinking and Project Management, which helped us prepare for the next stage of the project: recruiting and guiding volunteers through the project, working with them to successfully run these events with the help of our organisation. Throughout the course of this project, I learned how to use tools to help us in this goal, such as video editing software Loom, Notion, Canva to create social media posts, and finally, how to advertise social causes on platforms such as Instagram. Additionally, I also developed my public speaking skills through providing presentations to the rest of the group on our initial ideas, our progress, and finally, to summarise our entire experience. I gained experience in leading meetings and setting the agenda, as well as organising a calendar of events leading up to a final event.

As well as these concrete skills acquired over the course of the project, I also learned so much about the culture and rich history of Mexico City, a little of the Spanish and Mayan languages, and a lot about the delicious food! From a sociological perspective, I loved learning about indigenous history and cultural experiences – such as Temezcal and listening to traditional singing. Finally, I think I learned even more than I would have otherwise because I spent so much time alongside an interesting and interested group: my fellow

scholars and the Make Sense facilitators. They always inspired me, motivated me, and helped me deal with any homesickness.

Another key thing I learned during my second summer was adaptability, how to change schedules and plans last minute because of unexpected changes – how to keep up momentum and continue thinking on my feet even though everything seems unclear and uncertain. *Everything will work out okay in the end – as long as you just don't give up!* Overall, my second summer was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, although I hope it will not be the last time I take on a leadership role in an unfamiliar landscape. Because I learned I *can* do something I never imagined I could, in future I will be developing myself through jumping into unfamiliar experiences.

Conclusion

Overall, taking part in the Laidlaw Scholarship has led to my personal and professional development. I have had practical research and leadership experience and shared my research findings with others through attending a conference and writing promotional material to support this. I also developed my leadership skills during my Leadership in Action through project management and utilising Design Thinking in order to ideate a solution to a given challenge. I have learned how to work together with peers, staff members and a team of volunteers in order to complete an assigned task.

As well as gaining these skills, I have clarified and developed my future plans. These experiences have inspired me and taught me more about things I had no practical experience of previously, such as project managing and undertaking a research project.

I have traced my journey leading to this point throughout the course of this final report and have explicated how these experiences have led to my personal and professional development over the past two years. I hope this has fully expressed my gratitude for the experiences I have had, the people I have worked with, and the Scholarship as a whole.