

Laidlaw Scholarship: My Leadership Development

Since summer 2021, I have been a student of the Laidlaw Scholarship. Over the course of two years, this program aims to develop leadership abilities through various means.

When I first applied to the Laidlaw scholarship, my leadership experience was limited. Though proactive and inspired, the largest team I had managed was single digits. Further, my public speaking and time management skills seemed to be embryonic at best, and research ability in short supply.

The scholarship has provided various opportunities for personal growth in these areas and others, ranging from the wonderful (Rstudio giving me the *first hint* that my project might have some merit, after four weeks of technical difficulties) to the weird (navigating the complexities of a Tooro wedding with a staggeringly *comical* language barrier) and everything in-between.

One of the first activities of the scholarship involved a thorough analysis of our leadership and teamwork preferences: the DiSC Workplace Profile provides insight into how you work in a team, and – more importantly – how you interact with others of various profiles. The report analytically confirmed much of what I already knew about myself: that I enjoy collaboration, enjoy person-oriented tasks, and appreciate supporting others through their work. Unexpectedly, however, it introduced several challenges that I was unaware of facing: difficulty in saying *no*; an aversion to conflict; and slow, careful decision making.

Soon after the DiSC profile's cutting analysis came the first summer of research. This began with several days of seminars on research techniques and leadership. Through these days, we were given the chance to speak to other scholars separated by an ocean: the Tufts scholars. The opportunity to meet those of a different background entirely and hear their experiences was to become a highlight of the scholarship, and possibly the means by which I learned most.

Six weeks of research proceeded which can only be described as *character-building*. This period developed my leadership abilities through various channels, but the highlight must go to the demands of time management. In addition to full days of research, I faced balancing a high-performance sport – both as an athlete and an organiser – whilst trying to squeeze what social life I could into the remaining hours. Using time-management models and techniques provided to us in the first few days of the programme, I learned to make every hour of the day count. These are skills key to surviving any demanding period – an exam season, a tight deadline, or anything similar – which have been used many times since.

During the research, we were also given the opportunity to meet with a smaller group of scholars in weekly review sessions. In these hours, we were able to hear of projects wildly different to our own and receive advice from others facing the same issues. Most importantly, they provided a means by which to learn from others on the scholarship. Ranging from the smallest issues (slow replies to emails) to the largest (data-collection disasters), this forum allowed me to see how others approached the same issues that I faced and learn from the toolkit they all brought to the table.

My summer of research, however, saw one leadership skill receive more attention than any other: the ability to make mistakes productive.

From day one, my project faced more avoidable mistakes than I knew possible. Faulty code, data stored in daft locations and translation errors are just a taster. Learning to confront these shortcomings, discuss them openly, and then work to find a solution was a process that dominated

my summer. However, the importance of this process to effective leadership cannot be understated. The ability to take mistakes as opportunities to improvement, rather than marks of failure, was a trait I had to develop.

In the months following the first summer of research, we were invited to a new opportunity through the scholarship: our first opportunity to meet the other scholars in-person. Over the course of a day, we were able to meet those that had existed solely as pixels for the preceding months.

By participating in a variety of seminars, we were able to better understand (and develop) our own leadership skills. Memorable tasks involved jumping between various numbered pads on the floor as a team, a task intended to highlight the importance of communication within a group; drawing a map of the world with no input, to amusing results; and a public-speaking development seminar. Though challenging at times, through these tasks I was able to better understand the way in which I interact with others and become aware of mannerisms and tendencies – both good *and* bad – that had previously gone unnoticed. In addition, we were able to pinpoint personal weaknesses (in my case, a *shocking* inability to speak under pressure) and design a plan for improvement over the next year.

The next opportunities for development came through the Hospitalfield retreat. This full-day workshop, much like the above, provided multidisciplinary tasks encouraging self-reflection and analysis. Alongside this came a chance to meet the next generation of scholars. Seeing them at the outset of their scholarship gave our cohort a moment to reflect on just how much we had been able to do over the prior year. Finally, a discussion of the Belbin profile – much alike to the DiSC profile – supplied a means of analysing our own leadership style and identifying areas for improvement.

The more memorable and dynamic tasks of the Falkland Estate allowed time to put these into practice. Hot weather orienteering tested communication and planning skills within a smaller team setting, and discussions of ethical leadership sparked philosophical debate. Most significant to my development, however, was a task involving a mock-up search-and-rescue operation under time pressure. This task involved team-based communication whilst searching for the victims; situational and medical awareness whilst confronting the emergency; and a discussion of how to prioritise lives to save. This challenge once again highlighted the slow decision making identified by the DiSC and Belbin profiles – an area still demanding improvement.



i. The team planning an orienteering route at the Falkland Estate

Despite the significance of all of the above, the period seeing the quickest (and, in my opinion, most significant) leadership development was the most intense period of the scholarship: the Leadership-in-Action Project.

During the second summer, I was a member of a group of eleven which travelled to the village of Kasiisi, in the Kamwenge District of Uganda. Three projects would run simultaneously: one focussed on conservation education and curriculum development (on which I participated); one focussed on analysing and improving district health; and one focussed on the development of ecotourism in the local area.

From the outset, we were faced by challenges to overcome: on the first day of the project, I was one of two scholars to test positive for COVID-19. Our ability to work in spite of such hurdles was tested, with the teams having to quickly adapt to working with scholars in isolation. Similarly, throughout the six-week project we were faced by miscellaneous further periods of medical dilemma: colds, food poisoning, and even a rusty nail through the foot. In terms of my own development, I was able to learn from the resilience of the scholars around me; even at the worst of times, leadership was demonstrated by someone willing to keep working.

A more shining example of leadership, however, came from the Ugandan staff with which we worked. The barriers to work that we faced proved insignificant to many of our colleagues. Four-day blackout? Just use the generator. Language barriers? Find someone that can translate. No water? No problem. The drive and work ethic of our mentors and peers is something I tried to emulate and hope I have managed to bring home.

A series of interviews we conducted through the projects compounded this. We met individuals of various backgrounds – both privileged and unprivileged – willing to share their background, and how they reached the position they now hold. Ranging from a park researcher that had faced sexism at every level of her career to the highest-ranking politician in the district, we were able to learn from an array of different people. This provided an opportunity to understand our own privilege and take advice from the most inspirational of stories.

Our challenge sounded simple: to develop a curriculum focussed on elephants within Kibale National Park, with the aim of building sympathy in a less-than-sympathetic farming community with elephant raids occurring regularly. A secondary goal was to educate the pupils on safety around local (and deceptively harmful) elephant populations.

As it transpired, the project was far from simple. We were forced to learn the ever-lacking leadership skill of *patience*, as we waited three weeks for school strikes to end. We were additionally faced by language barriers, varying levels of ability, lacking resources, small budgets, and excitable classrooms. These recurring issues taught us the importance of self-reflection, especially within teaching: an iterative approach to improving our delivery and lessons was taken, which – eventually – amounted to a rewarding curriculum.

Over the course of the project, I was able to face the various leadership qualities that I sought to improve. My public speaking was sharpened by presenting to large groups of teachers and managing the largest classrooms I had ever seen. The need for quick decision making in a rowdy classroom, in addition, is something that will stay with me forever. Conflict, too, was unavoidable given the scarcity of resources surrounding us.



ii. Our group delivers a curriculum seminar to Ugandan primary school teachers

Returning from Kasiisi, I found myself armed with a whole host of new skills, *most* of which are relevant to leadership: classroom management, communication through a language barrier, and the ability to build an elephant-defence beehive, to name but a few.

Coming to the end of my time as a Laidlaw scholar, I am able to review my personal development positively. Through the last two years, I have been able to change from a leader hesitant to speak publicly to a comfortable presenter in any size room. My previous hesitance to take leadership positions has changed into an excitement surrounding new opportunities and unknown waters. Most significantly, I have further gained a large network of mentors and peers able to support my development

There always, however, exists one further question with regard to leadership development: *what next?* Nobody's leadership skills are perfectly refined, so what is the next step to improvement?

As an individual aspiring to work in educational leadership, I aim to acquire more experience within the classroom and (more generally) the school setting. Through our time in Kasiisi, we learned that every classroom is different and demands different teaching styles, methods of content delivery, varying levels of support, and different relationships. This is something integral to the success of any pupil.

Finally, I hope to provide support to any Laidlaw Scholar hoping to follow a similar route to myself. Education in any setting requires effective and self-aware leaders, and that is something that I hope this scholarship can generate.