

Throughout my first summer of the Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme I learnt a lot about research, myself as a researcher, becoming a leader and my own leadership skills. I learnt where my strengths lie and where I have to improve. I gained so much from conducting my research on 'The Impact of the Inability to Access Period Products on the Irish Educational Experience.' I learnt important research skills, but more than that, about the importance of ethics, advocacy, communication and expanding my network to meet leaders in fields beyond my degree. I was taught so much by my research supervisor, study participants, Laidlaw leads at Trinity, guest speakers and coaches and other Laidlaw scholars on the Laidlaw network. In this report I will discuss what I took away from my research project and how I've grown as a leader throughout this section of the programme.

Research Report

Adapting from my original research plan.

My research project differed from my original research plan for a number of reasons. My original plan consisted of a survey, sent to secondary and tertiary level students across Ireland, asking them questions about how period poverty, or the inability to access period products, impacted their participation in education. This plan was changed for a number of reasons. Firstly, the 6-week timeframe, in the summer, did not allow for a comprehensive quantitative study to be carried out. We would only be able to contact a limited number of people and therefore any statistic generated would be non-representative. As a result, with guidance from my supervisor, I decided to do a qualitative study, with a smaller number of students, interviewing them on their educational experience without access to menstrual products and the barriers this created.

Another change was the smaller participant pool. To complete this study, I had to fill out numerous ethical approval forms, draft consent forms, take data protection courses and fill out data protection forms for approval. Throughout this process I learned so much about ethics in research, academia and the workplace, the importance of specific wording, data protection and it reinforced my belief in the importance of keeping empathy and compassion in any work you do, given the personal and taboo nature of my research project. It also unfortunately taught me the limits to ethical approval for undergraduate students. I could not interview students from secondary school, given the taboo nature of the subject.

The ethical approval process took two months, two weeks of which I counted towards my Laidlaw timeline. Whilst I learned a lot during those two weeks, the other six of waiting taught me more

leadership skills than I would have expected. These weeks were filled with doubt about my project, my ability to carry it out and my ability as an undergraduate researcher to get this task done within the summer. A call with Joel, our Laidlaw lead at Trinity, helped calm my nerves. He assured me that this often happens with ethics approval and that the Laidlaw team was understanding of the difficulties. This brought me a great deal of relief. As well as reaching out to Joel, I spoke to other students from Trinity and on the Laidlaw Scholars network about their struggles to get ethical approval. They all echoed my concerns, that the project wouldn't get done, that they were nervous to follow up with staff members as they felt it may be rude or annoying and that their timeline was changing often, which caused some level of distress. It felt as if by sharing these struggles, we all took a weight off of our shoulders. We couldn't speed up the process for each other, but we could offer each other the reassurance that we could get through it. It taught me the importance of building networks and support systems, to help each other through challenges and celebrate each other's eventual success.

This time also taught me the importance of patience and setting boundaries. In the beginning I was checking my emails five times a day, waiting anxiously by the computer so I could start the project as soon as possible. I learnt that it is important to step back and take advantage of my free time so as to re-energize for the second part of my project.

Engagement with my supervisor.

Securing a supervisor was a process more difficult than I expected. My project supervisor, Dr. Ann Nolan, was the third staff member I contacted. The first two I contacted were from my own school, the Trinity School of Law. Neither staff member was around to supervise the project for the necessary 18 months, but both were extremely encouraging about my research, which gave me a good confidence boost, as I wholeheartedly believed in the importance of my research but was unsure that others would. I was quite nervous to reach out to staff members outside of my school. I was worried about rejection; that they wouldn't see the value of my research, or that they would think I was not academic or intelligent enough (a thought that I very much had to shake, which the Laidlaw leadership training and community has helped me with). After a few weeks of searching, I found Dr. Nolan, Assistant Professor of Public Health. Dr. Nolan was incredibly supportive, engaged in my research, patient and willing to offer great advice and constructive criticism, as well being incredibly kind and open throughout the whole process.

Dr. Nolan guided me in the right direction in regard to changing my research idea to make it more viable within 6 weeks. She pointed me towards important literature and taught me important research skills such as literature scoping, completing the ethical approval process, qualitative interview skills and thematic analysis. She gave me great advice, whilst also allowing me to immerse myself fully in the research experience, allowing me to make mistakes, learn from any mistakes and was incredibly patient with me. I have learnt so much from Dr. Nolan, not just academically, although she taught me a great deal, but also about the kind of leader I want to become. I connected with Dr. Nolan a year after leaving campus due to Covid-19 and had not had a single one on one conversation with a staff member since. Dr. Nolan was incredibly kind, open and interested in both my research and my own personal development. I left every meeting feeling bigger, instead of smaller, even if we were discussing errors in my forms, project alterations or timeline pressures. I aim to be this kind of leader, one that makes people feel more intelligent and valuable, whilst also delivering important constructive criticism.

What did you learn about your style of leadership while working on this project?

Throughout my research, I learnt that I am very driven by morals and ethics. This was tested throughout the project, as I had to advocate to make the research gender inclusive. Most reports on period poverty, including Irish quantitative research, speak only on the experiences of 'women and girls.' I wanted to ensure that all menstruators, including female, transgender-male, non-binary and genderfluid menstruators, felt validated when reading the study. This was an important discussion to have with my supervisor, who was very supportive in ensuring that the research was inclusive.

My favourite part of the research project was the interview portion. I prepared for months, sorting the ethics approval, the interview schedule and practicing interviews with my supervisor. The week and a half of interviews was emotionally heavy, due to the nature of the research, but incredibly rewarding. Due to the taboo nature of the inability to access period products (and periods in general), I was not expecting a large number of participants to elect to interview. My supervisor told me to do about eight interviews, and I was expecting around four people to elect to interview. I was shocked to have gotten 10 people in the first 24 hours. This taught me a lesson about being more confident in myself and my research. I can be quite pessimistic in order to ensure that I am not disappointed, when I really should back myself, my ideas and what I offer academically.

I ended up capping the interviews at 12 (although more applications came throughout the month of August), so I could give each participant enough time, attention and empathy, as well as myself

enough time to analyse the data before the semester commenced. In the interviews I learnt about period poverty, the impact it had on the participants, the deep levels of embarrassment and shame they felt and the fact that they felt unseen by their systems of education and the state.

One participant who grew up experiencing period poverty told me that they read the call to interview and thought “this is like the story of my life... how did someone get the courage to set up a whole study [with] a load of like paperwork and red tape to kind of cross?... The fact that you thought that this was something that needed to be addressed just made me think wow, you're an incredible person. Honestly, changing lives.” This made me quite emotional, although I held it in throughout the interview as it was time for me to listen to her story, to gather all of what she had to say, in order to give justice to her experience through generating data that can be used to solve this issue. It felt silly in ways, as she and the other participants were the ones providing the data and sharing their stories on this deeply vulnerable and personal issue. But it gave me confidence in the study (and in myself), in the importance of generating the data and a renewed motivation to do something with the data, to contact politicians, to create a report. Each participant being open and willing to share their story with me, to be vulnerable with me and to share what they wished their schools or the state had done to prevent this struggle for them was such a blessing, one that I will never forget and that will motivate me to do the best I can to make change in this area, through my research and throughout the rest of my career.

Leadership Attributes and Personal Development

The Laidlaw Scholarship programme gave me a great opportunity to network outside of my own circles. It really opened up my network beyond law, my subject of study, to other practices such as public health, social science, medicine and public policy. I got to meet public health researchers at various stages in their careers, policy researchers and advocates in many different career paths, all using their skills to make our world a more equal place. This was extremely helpful for me as I discovered, through my research and networking, that a legal career is likely not the place for me. Whilst I love my degree, the knowledge I've acquired and the skills I have learnt, I find more joy in social science and social policy research.

I look forward to developing my communication skills, especially in regard to public speaking. Our leadership training session with Cathal from the Lir really positively contributed to improving these skills. He taught us important breathing and grounding techniques to ensure that our nerves don't

get the better of us whilst public speaking. He also taught us how to hold our bodies to appear confident. He offered great constructive criticism on our presentation skills and storytelling, criticism that I definitely learned from and has changed my perspective on public speaking. When applying for the Laidlaw research and leadership scholarship, I noted public speaking as one of the areas I hoped to improve upon. This leadership training did not only offer valuable skills for communication, but instilled a sense of confidence in me, that I am capable of public speaking and communicating my message effectively. I look forward to implementing and improving on these skills throughout the second half of the programme, both through presenting my research and findings to academics, policy makers and students and through the Leadership-in-Action element of the programme.