

## Research Project Experience

When I first began my project in May, which at this point feels like a lifetime ago, my previous naivety led me to believe that it would be a straightforward process. As someone who has never carried out an independent research project, the process seemed daunting, and I could have never imagined it would lead me to where I am today. With that said, I am incredibly grateful to have had this opportunity, and I couldn't imagine any better way to have gained the skills and knowledge I now possess and continue to expand upon.

Before being selected, I had to choose a supervisor that I believed would augment the experience and the research while also adding to my research by providing me with invaluable knowledge on my topic of choice. Although I was in the second year of my studies, the pandemic meant that I had only been in college in person for four months in my first year, so I had not had the opportunity to become acquainted with many psychology department staff. If selected, I wanted to do a research project surrounding child development, so I decided to ask Dr Lorraine Swords to be my supervisor. Having previously never met each other, we were both taking a risk by agreeing to collaborate on the programme. From our first zoom meeting, Dr Swords showed immense interest and desire in my research. Having support from such an established and experienced professor and researcher was an honour, and stood to me significantly throughout the programme. Not only was Dr Swords extremely vigilant and helpful throughout the process, but the attention she gave me when a question or issue arose was highly encouraging. Dr Sword's belief in me, coupled with her extensive knowledge of child development, was one of the greatest attributes I could have asked for throughout the programme.

Regarding my original plan, issues such as collecting data, keeping focus, patience with learning and technological issues were difficulties I didn't imagine nor prepare to encounter. The delay in ethical approval forced me to think of other ways to contact participants as well as individuals and organisations to partake in my study. As I had planned to reach these individuals during the school year, and with the application not approved until the summer months, it was much more difficult than I imagined to get participants. As I struggled to gain participants, I recall thinking that I would not finish the project. The doubt that I was facing grew over time, and for about five days, I struggled to remain focused and get anything done. Then, I got my first response. The first participant had taken the time to answer my survey thoroughly, and the response was heartbreaking, eye-opening and motivating. This first response made me determined to continue with the project and further ensure I gave this project every ounce of effort I had in my body. Not only was I not expecting the

answers I received, but I was left a comment at the end of the survey detailing how writing down the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had had on this participant and their family, in particular, was therapeutic. Not only did this provide me with a level of motivation I had never experienced before, but it enabled me to realise my resilience potential and understand that anything worth doing is worth doing well.

As I began my research, I had to start contacting organisations and individuals who could aid in my understanding of what implications have impacted children and their families the greatest through the pandemic. This engagement with other individuals for my research had its highs and its lows - for every ten emails or phone calls I made, I got one, maybe two, responses. I didn't think everyone I contacted would be interested in participating. There were special cases such as the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) who do not participate in research they are not directly conducting. Still, as this was the first time I contacted others for their input and help, I imagined it would have drawn more interest and attention than it did - but I was wrong! Moreover, before beginning this research, I found myself reluctant to send emails and make phone calls, as I feared rejection. Yet, three months on, I have gained a newfound level of confidence with not only approaching others but how I approach them. I have found myself changing the language and tone of my communications based on who I am communicating with - a skill I am very grateful to have developed through my research and the programme. As I hope to work with children and adults from various backgrounds, learning how to communicate in different scenarios has been of great benefit to me.

Regarding my resilience and degree of determination, while working on my research project, I genuinely believe I have come out of this summer a new and better person. The lockdowns brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic took a physical and mental toll on me - my parents live abroad, and I moved in with my brother and sister, who I had not lived with for five years. On top of my new living situation, I was trying to work online and study online. For a long time, I felt that my life was stuck in this never-ending loop and that the loop would never be broken. In short, my confidence in myself and my abilities was at an all-time low. I had previously written in a blog post about the confidence boost being accepted to the programme gave me, and I want to reiterate it as it really has helped shape me into the person I am today. Being able to research such an important topic and attend the exceptional seminars and workshops made me feel as if I had a meaningful purpose and genuinely motivated me to work as best I could given the existing climate.

## Leadership Attributes and Development

My current perspective of a good leader differs hugely from my previous perspective before the programme. I recall attending the first LEAD sessions, and when asked about what I believed a leader was, words such as “in-charge”, “authoritarian”, “strong”, “intelligent”, and “important” came to mind. I can still think of the image shown of a row of pencils, with one pencil in particular raised above the others. I automatically thought - leader - the one above everyone else. As other scholars began talking about what they saw, such as an individual rising to take charge of a challenge for the greater benefit of the group, I knew my perspective on leadership was about to be revamped. Within the first 15 minutes of the LEAD1 session, the original words I had attributed to leadership were wholly wiped from my mind. Gaining insight into what others thought of as a good leader enabled me to shift my focus from my ideologies and appreciate the other definitions surrounding the word.

Before beginning the programme, I would say I was a very reserved leader. I never wanted to be the person held accountable, and I didn't enjoy speaking up about my ideas in case someone shot them down. My confidence in myself and thus my leadership began the second I got accepted to the programme. I thought to myself, here are people who want to hear my ideas and trust me to carry out such important research - the feeling was euphoric. Being accepted to the programme was a different level of achievement and success. I was being entrusted to research a topic of immense importance to me whilst also being given invaluable workshops and seminars that would stand to me for life. Initially, I decided to apply for the programme to improve my leadership abilities and further my research skills. I recall reading the email sent out to the college about the programme, and the minute I saw the words scholarship, closing the tab. But for some reason, the email stuck in my head, and before I knew it, I was applying.

The most challenging aspect of the leadership development sessions I have found so far was the seminar on public speaking. My history of public speaking is horrendous - from throwing up (yes, throwing up!) in front of my class to saying my name wrong at my graduation ceremony, public speaking is more like a public enemy to me. Before attending the session, we were asked to prepare a 2-minute oral presentation. I remember reading that requirement and feeling sick to my stomach as I knew I'd have to speak in front of a group of people. I spent about five days preparing - practising in my room, presenting in front of my siblings and ensuring I knew everything off by heart. While we introduced ourselves, our introduction was picked apart by Cathal, and we were told what we did well and what we needed to improve on. I had never realised that my breathing was one of the

principal reasons as to why I would be flustered and uncomfortable when speaking in public, and learning how to stand and position myself properly has greatly benefitted me. When I was asked to speak in front of Lord Laidlaw and Susanna V. Kempe on their visit to Trinity, I put these new skills to use, and further acknowledgement from scholars who had attended the public speaking seminar on my improvement was very uplifting to hear.

I feel I have learned that my way of communicating my ideas and engaging with a group, although passive, is a style that works for me. Rather than take complete control of a situation, I prefer to listen to what is being said by others and then add my own opinions and ideas once everyone has had a chance to give theirs. As with most things and as everyone does, I have my preconceived ideas, but I have found taking the views and opinions of others to be incredibly beneficial as it has allowed me to build upon my own thoughts. Regarding engaging with a group, I am more than happy to offer my ideas towards the end, and I am getting better at being more assertive with what I think. In the past, I have found that I sometimes get overlooked, but the programme has taught me ways to get my point across and ensure I am also being listened to and acknowledged in an appropriate manner.

Over the last few months, I feel using my leadership strength of empathy has helped contribute in a group setting, especially when I am working with vulnerable individuals and children. Throughout the programme, I have realised the importance of ethical leadership, and I believe that my level of empathy enables me to lead ethically. As I try to consider the feelings of others in my decision-making process, I feel my leadership style benefits those I work with as they know they are truly being listened to and considered. With that in mind, I am still learning how to acknowledge my own feelings while ensuring the needs of those around me are met. I have found myself, from time to time, feeling overwhelmed, but instead of speaking about it or asking for time to myself, I continue doing what needs to be done, which can sometimes result in negative outcomes.

Thus, an area of leadership I want to develop further in the second half of the programme is relatively linked to confidence, but more along the lines of self-validation and improving my self-awareness. I find myself often seeking my validation through others, a quality that has been of significant disadvantage to me in the past and I know will hold me back in the future. I believe that validation and praise from those around you should add to one's motivation, but it should not define the person or the type of leader they become. I have realised that you can only become a successful leader if you truly believe in yourself. As I write this, I know I know this, but I would like to develop this area of my own leadership.

Before beginning the programme, I had minimal experience or knowledge of networking and what it entailed - I only created my LinkedIn when I got accepted to the programme! I have found Laidlaw's networking site to be beneficial in meeting like-minded students from around the world. I have been fortunate enough to meet some great people who have turned into great friends and having a community to discuss the highs and inevitable lows of the programme has been a great support. Moreover, meeting psychology students from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Hong Kong has allowed me to widen my ideas and beliefs of the course and the job opportunities available. I am looking forward to meeting more scholars and discussing our future plans both in and outside the programme!

Finally, I would like to conclude by thanking Joel, Ann, the Trinity Careers Service and Dr Lorraine Swords for giving me their time and invaluable expertise and advice. This has truly been a life-changing experience, and I am ecstatic to continue on this journey.