

Laoise Murray, Laidlaw Programme Reflective Report – Summer 1 2021

Introduction

Upon reflection, the first summer of the Laidlaw Leadership Programme has been a profound learning experience for me both professionally and personally speaking. Originally, I intended to use the summer to explore outside of the typical legal field of study and to discover other interesting areas of academia. I wanted to take the opportunity to develop my academic writing skills as the lack of typical limitations such as a word count was an interesting adventure. I certainly did these things, but the six-weeks of research and the surrounding workshops, events and encounters have resulted in a much deeper experience and one which will leave an impact on me for the entirety of my future career. My horizons have broadened in every way, and the people I have had the pleasure of talking to within the Laidlaw scholars group have challenged and even changed how I think about the world. With regards to the leadership components, I feel I have developed a basis of understanding about leadership in theory which I hope to put into action during Summer 2.

The Research Process

My research period began with a preliminary meeting with my supervisor, Professor Rachael Walsh, on the 15th of June 2021 through Zoom. We discussed how I was going to start my project, that I should define its scope more carefully and clarify the structure for the research. This was the first of four meetings we had over the course of the 6-week research period. Dr Walsh was extremely helpful and engaged through the entire process and responded to any questions or concerns I had with positive and useful advice. The feedback she gave me on the work I sent her or the ideas that I came up with guided my research; she helped to put guardrails on a project which would have otherwise spiralled out of control. My original schedule for the research period was possibly quite naively made. I did not expect to find as much material as I did, and therefore, I did not correctly gauge the amount

of time I would need to read and digest new information. Understandably, my interest in the subject took me down rabbit holes which did not need to be explored. I am now aware that I must be strict with following only research leads that are connected to the essential argument of the project in the future.

The most significant experience that I gained from researching this intensely was discovering the degree of personal resilience within me to continue working. I also realised that my levels of determination will waiver over time. Towards the end of the research period I really understood the value of a break when its needed. The quality of my work definitely decreased when I was mentally exhausted but after a short detox, I was able to concentrate better, I had better inspiration and produced work of a much higher standard.

Meeting and talking to my ALS group and the two people in my college course who are also Laidlaw scholars was central to my experience of the research period. I have realised the value of having people to bounce ideas off of and to relate to through the research process. Studying all day at a desk at home can be quite lonely; talking to other people doing the same or similar things to you really helped with motivation, accountability, and my ability to communicate my ideas. The ALS group meetings were also an opportunity to hear about a really wide range of research. It is very easy to get caught up in your own project area but meeting the group gave me a much greater sense of perspective.

I was lucky not to encounter many logistical issues. I did have less time than I expected originally as I committed to another project which was stricter about the times when I worked. I found myself prioritising this other project at the beginning and then having to catch up a bit during the middle of the research period. It was difficult feeling like I had wrongly prioritised and had wasted time, but I quickly sorted out my new schedule and dug deep for the motivation to push through. Occasionally it was difficult to find sources of information as very little academic material has been published in the precise area I wanted to investigate. Even so, I was surprised with how much I enjoyed the researching

role. However, I missed the personal interaction aspect of a team project. Many of the larger projects in my college course were a collaborative effort, and this was lacking in my project this summer. I like the idea of one day researching in a group who would offer a variety of opinions and perspectives on an issue and which could perhaps augment the quality of the work produced.

During the research project process, I definitely learned a great deal about my preferred style of leadership. I am typically a very self-motivated person who responds well to routine and goals. The lack of a grade-based goal definitely confused me at the beginning, although I began to value the lack of pressure as a positive influence on the work I produced. I have learned is that fear of any kind does not help in any way when it comes to managing projects. Even when things don't work out the way you wanted them to originally, things usually turn out okay if you approach the challenge calmly. Maintaining a greater perspective on the issue is also very important as usually such a problem will not mean the end of the world (unless you're a nuclear scientist!).

Leadership

I applied for this programme because I believed it was an amazing chance to learn leadership skills outside of the normal college experience. I knew the practice of researching and development of leadership skills would be extremely beneficial to me both personally and professionally. I have seen how most university degrees do not prepare women in particular to take up leadership positions after college and that this results in an imbalance in the number of women in leadership positions in law firms. I intended to use the skills from the Laidlaw programme to rebalance those figures, and this motivation has not changed.

Melinda Sayers in the second leadership workshop described leadership character as a habit of being, and a 'disciplined pursuit of excellence'. My current perspective as to what constitutes a good leader is definitely influenced by this statement. I now see that the leaders I most respect and look up to are leaders out of practice, and who make decisions based on the long-term positive impacts rather than

being simply reactionary. It is difficult to see into the future and around every corner, although I think the strongest leaders have the characteristic of a good sense of perspective while also understanding the needs of the people that are asking them to make decisions. Having the foresight and strength to make decisions which doesn't satisfy everyone but will definitely be more beneficial in the long run I think shows great leadership character.

Participating in the leadership programme during the pandemic has been a unique opportunity to reflect on different leadership styles during a worldwide crisis which has had the power of uniting large amounts of people and deepening lines of division in society. It has also been made clear that our trust in traditional organisations has diminished, and that this trust will be something our generation must seek to re-establish. I really enjoyed hearing in the workshops about companies and organisations who use a business model which is built upon providing solutions to problems rather than wealth maximisation. My experience outside of the programme of working in a tech company was an interesting parallel to this, as they combined both a strong social vision with the purpose of wealth maximisation as a means of furthering that vision. The director of the company also provided me with an idea of what leadership can mean in practice; in this instance, the company director was a helicopter visionary who made big-picture decisions while the rest of the company worked hard to put those ideas into practice. From this I have learned that this style of disengaged leadership would not be my preferred style of leadership. However, I do now understand that delegation and trust in employees is an incredibly important part of being a leader.

Furthermore, because of learning experiences such as this during the summer, I can now analyse my own strengths and weaknesses with a critical eye and understand better how I can develop the skills which I lack or just need to work on. I definitely feel more confident in my ability to play to my strengths and understand how to apply those strengths to different leadership situations. I learned that am energised the most by writing and discussing interesting topics with people in an open-ended way. I also really enjoy tackling a problem and making a plan as to how the problem can be solved. I

think the most energising experience is connecting with people, either through words or actions and building a relationship of trust and understanding. In contrast, I do not get that much enjoyment out of menial tasks which are extremely detail oriented as they drain my energy store and I find it difficult not to get distracted. I do think it's important to develop the focus needed for those activities also however, because they are numerous in life and avoiding them will not make me a better leader.

The leadership development process during Summer 1 has certainly impacted my personal development as well as my professional development. I now understand that I must reflect on my values and implement them in everyday life to ensure that these values shine through in my professional life also. One point from a workshop that stood out to me was that often it's important to take the leap and 'do first and know second' and I believe this applies to personal life choices also. In a year where we have all become very comfortable in a certain "safe" zone, we must remember to push ourselves out of this comfort zone again, even if that involves intimidating changes. There were many lessons such as this in the leadership sessions which I didn't get a chance to fully process at the time which was challenging, but after a period of reflection I gained a great deal more from them.

This project gave me the opportunity to reach out to a couple of people in my field whom I greatly admire and to ask them for advice on both my project and also career-wise. I asked the two professors and lawyers in other non-research fields that I was in contact with about their career development path as a way of exploring different career avenues. I also talked with the other Laidlaw scholars in my field about their interests and potential career paths which was very interesting. All the people I talked to over the summer were very helpful and generous with career advice and it gave me a good idea of what sort of avenues I could go down myself. Rather than slimming down and simplifying the options, this information actually broadened my horizons!

Networking like this has added value to my life in terms of my career progression as developing personal and professional relationships with people in my area of interest leads to more job opportunities and interesting career developments. As Sinead English, a career management expert,

said, 70% of job positions are filled through professional networks rather than a traditional CV application.

Conclusion

The opportunity to delve into a research project on a scale such as this has been an amazing, if not also a terrifying, experience. I have had plenty of time to reflect on my journey as a student to semi-researcher and am now able to see the many lessons learned from going through the process of research. If I was to start the project again, I believe that I would change my approach quite significantly and begin with educating myself about how to conduct the precise type of research methodology that I wanted to do. I felt as if I was very much learning as I went on and as a result, there are some holes in my methodology that could have been prevented. This will potentially be a skill that I continue to develop during Summer 2 alongside putting the theoretical approaches to leadership into action while also engaging in a group dynamic.