

Laidlaw Leadership Essay: Reflections from a Two-Year Long Whirlwind

Rebecca Bisset

The two years of my Laidlaw scholarship have been truly transformative for me. I started the programme as a shy third year with no research experience and minimal leadership experience. I finish these two years as a much more confident fifth year who carried out two fascinating projects in research and leadership and who feels much more equipped to go on to whatever life has in store for me next. Before I go on, I would like to give my thanks to the Laidlaw team at St. Andrews for their help and support in my scholarship and for organising all our leadership training events. Also, to my research supervisor, Professor Sharon Ashbrook, and her group for guiding me through my first research project and inspiring me throughout my degree. I am grateful and appreciative to the make_sense team and to Extinction Rebellion México for shaping my leadership project into the rewarding experience it was. Finally, a huge thank you to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for providing such an impactful scholarship and making so much possible for myself and my cohort of Scholars.

I remember writing my initial leadership statement as part of the application process and describing how quiet I am and how I like to step outside my comfort zone to counteract the disadvantages of being shy. I hoped that a Laidlaw scholarship would build my confidence in communicating with others as well as in my own abilities, and that it would lead to experiencing things that might not otherwise be possible. Looking back now, I think my assessment of what I would get from the scholarship was pretty accurate – I am going into my fifth and final year of my degree a much more confident and (I hope) more well-rounded person. This has been a slow process over the course of my two years with the programme and has been fed by each aspect of the scholarship.

Thinking back to our first in-person leadership day in October 2021, the cohort was sorted into small groups, and we had to complete a series of teamwork-based tasks. We bonded quickly and worked really well together, doing ourselves proud in (most) of the tasks – our world geography definitely left something to be desired. I noticed two things about myself that day. Firstly, as soon as I am not completely confident in what the group is talking about, I am much less likely to share and contribute – this might go unnoticed in my university classes where everyone is on the same page but was clear in this sort of scenario. Secondly, one of the final tasks was to give a one-minute talk about our strengths and weaknesses – I happily chatted to my group all day but as soon as this somewhat formal restriction was imposed on the task I really struggled with it. The day left me with clear goals to work towards on other leadership days and the leadership project.

We had two more leadership days in March 2022 where I gained more valuable insights. Both days involved more small-group tasks, and I found that I did not get on with these groups as nearly as smoothly as the first leadership day in October – everyone contributed well to the teams but there were more personality clashes than ideal. These experiences really showed me that in both the leader and follower positions you don't have

to get along with everyone perfectly and that should not be something that holds a team member back. The important thing is to respect everyone's roles and contributions in the group while understanding that you don't all need to be best friends at the end of it. I recognised that this fear of clashing with people has probably held me back in group situations in the past, but I realised that this should not be a reason for me to avoid leadership positions – especially when I know I am well suited for them. An example of this was one task we did that involved a mountain rescue simulation – it turned out fairly quickly that I had retained a slightly weird amount of medical information and so out of my group seemed to know the most information to efficiently lead the team. However, for the first few minutes I did not want to step into that position of leading the group because I didn't want to be in any sort of confrontation – if that had been a real mountain rescue I would have needed to act much more quickly and not been concerned with stepping on a few toes. Obviously, this all needs to be taken with a pinch of salt – no one wants a leader who is antagonistic or confrontational, but a leader who is a pushover to avoid all issues is also not going to be productive.

In the summer of 2021, I undertook my research project in computational chemistry – I was simulating experimental results on a type of material called perovskite to provide a base for later synthesis and experimentation of these materials to refer to. There were several aspects of the project that I feel helped my leadership abilities. The first thing that comes to mind is confidence in my own abilities – being led in experiments, computation and other coursework in university classes made it hard for me to realise the extent my own abilities to research and run such a project. Discussing my findings with my supervisor and her research group allowed me to build my skills in presenting my research, and their feedback reassured me that I was on the right lines. Another big thing I noticed over the course of my project and afterwards was my communication – specifically emails. At the start of Laidlaw, like when I was trying to define my project with my supervisor in order to apply, I was so bad at writing and replying to emails – it would stress me out for days while I tried to word everything in 'just the right way'. Clearly, this is not very efficient and so getting a lot of practice in writing and sending emails has luckily made this process quicker and less stress-inducing for me. The research project also really helped me to work on my planning abilities. I have always been an organised person who gets my work done on time, but before my project I was really struggling to define a timeline of what I wanted to achieve in my project. Upon carrying out my research I discovered that the key things are to know exactly what you want or need to do and to plan your time as much as you can. For me, planning my time was much easier to do once I had started my project – once I knew the timescales of my different calculations and how many calculations I would need to submit. I also realised that as long as I knew where my day and week was headed, a strict timetable wasn't of as much importance as I might have thought – I am the sort of person who likes to plan every minute of the week, especially when I have a lot to do, so this was a bit of an adjustment. This mindset was definitely helpful during my leadership project too – I knew what needed done generally in a week, but I also knew that it was alright to plan a few days out at a time.

Reflecting on my leadership journey with Laidlaw, it makes sense that the focus of this journey turned out to be my leadership project this summer. I undertook a 're_action for climate' project with an organisation called make_sense who paired me and my project partner (Kathleen, a Laidlaw Scholar from Durham University) with Extinction Rebellion México (XR México). XR México came to us with a challenge to raise awareness of the climate emergency through disruptive action, and they asked us to focus on the use of activism. Before going I had a lot of concerns – maybe I would only talk to my roommate and my project partner for 4 weeks, or I would have no idea how to recruit or lead the volunteers once I got there. Looking back on this now it feels silly – I ended up making so many amazing friends, I thoroughly enjoyed leading our group of volunteers, and I truly felt like I was making a difference. There are so many leadership skills and qualities that I noticed myself displaying and developing while carrying out my project. Two of the key ones for our project with XR México in particular, however, were resilience and adaptivity. The need to be adaptive became key when leading our volunteers – the first week or so of communicating with them we followed a plan of sending emails and group WhatsApp messages but found the engagement to these wasn't great. We had plenty of amazing volunteers joining our meetings but when we asked them as a group to carry out tasks they seemed to get a bit lost. We changed our approach to making sure we kept up with every volunteer individually and splitting up tasks to be simple and aimed to different volunteers. In the last two weeks of the project, both Kathleen and I had to show our resilience when make_sense told us that our project was 'too political' and they didn't want to be officially involved. This meant changing our branding across social media and doing some reformatting of how we wanted to run our events very last minute. Obviously, this was a frustrating development since Kathleen and I were paired with XR México and suggested to run an activism event by make_sense – so being told that carrying out the solution they proposed was too political was unexpected. The whole situation definitely allowed me to develop my skills at responding to unforeseen problems and demonstrated my resilience and adaptivity.

I enjoyed the amount of teamwork and collaboration the whole experience afforded the group of Scholars. It was a new experience to work so closely with one partner for so long, but it was very fun getting to know each other and developing our leadership skills together over the course of six weeks. We were also leading a team of inspiring volunteers to help us plan, promote and host the three events we held – which definitely taught me a lot and was hugely valuable. An aspect of the project I hadn't anticipated however was working more widely with the other re_action teams (who were each working with a different organisation). At first, each team worked independently towards their goals but about 3 weeks in we realised how several of our 'solutions' were close enough that we could work together. This led to Kathleen and I planning a Sustainability Festival with four other teams, which would be promoted using the app of a sixth team.

My project with make_sense also allowed me to develop and demonstrate the Laidlaw leadership attributes. For example, Kathleen and I were ambitious in what we wanted to achieve – we planned and hosted three events during the final two weeks of the project (the

're_action' stage where we worked with our volunteers). We were determined to make our events a success despite the setbacks we faced – and going to Mexico for four weeks and experiencing such a vastly different culture with a group of strangers was definitely brave!

The change in my confidence and general communication has already come in helpful – I had to give two talks towards the end of last year at university which I found much less intimidating due to my experience with Laidlaw. St Andrews Scholars were recently asked to express interest in attending the Laidlaw conference in London in October – the concept of merely attending would have been terrifying to me two years ago, but I eagerly applied to go and said I was happy to present my research as well. The scholarship has also widened my horizons in terms of careers – I feel like I would be much more suited to roles that had leadership responsibilities now than before. I hope I get to share my hugely positive experience with the Laidlaw programme with prospective Scholars in the future and continue to interact with the inspiring Scholars I have met in my journey.