



LAILAW UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP AND RESEARCH PROGRAMME  
SUBMISSION – 2021 COHORT

Name	<i>Mairead Maguire</i>
Programme	<i>History and Political Science</i>
Year of Study	<i>2<sup>nd</sup> year</i>
Research Project Title	<i>Class Conflict in Literature: The Role of University Settings in Understanding Social Dynamics</i>

**Before completing this submission, you should review the [Laidlaw Programme Application Guide](#) and ensure you have included every key component requested**

<b>Leadership Statement (800 words max.)</b> Including 'Leadership in action' experience proposal and leadership development goals
<p>My past experiences show my eagerness to become the kind of leader that is versatile, well-informed and capable of dealing with a diverse range of people. Upon entering college as a HEAR student, I got to experience first hand the impact an informative and empowering pre-orientation makes. It inspired me to become a TAP Ambassador and last year I worked as a Community Mentor in DEIS schools. I researched the schools I was visiting to ensure I was knowledgeable about the statistics and attitudes that existed in order to know what I needed to help with. I shared my story and emphasised how there are numerous routes to third level.</p> <p>I am also the TAP Representative on the Welfare and Equality Committee of TCD Students' Union in which I am actively finding ways to make HEAR students feel confident in their abilities and supported by their peers. I have been trained as a Student2Student mentor which involves introducing First Year students to college life, giving them practical advice on how to excel at their studies, and empowering them to use the services available when they are struggling.</p> <p>My most significant leadership role to date has been as Societies Editor of <i>The University Times</i>. This role has required me to head a team of three people, ensuring that there is a constant stream of content for the Societies section of the newspaper. I have had the opportunity to interview students, College staff and politicians. The majority of my work involves research - researching people, analysing society constitutions, and unearthing society history. I am now also part of the</p>



small team that covers the Provost election. Producing engaging yet accurate articles under time constraints is something that I have mastered during my time with the campus publication. I have also learned that leadership is not just telling others what to do, but leading by example and guiding my juniors in the right direction. While I thoroughly enjoy collaboration, Laidlaw would be a great opportunity for me to work largely independently on a topic that is very specific to my interests.

At the beginning of this year I began a new role as Head of Research for Davis Street Outreach, a social justice engagement organisation focusing on homelessness outreach. Our team researches statistics, constitutions, policy documents and personal stories of those affected by homelessness. I have also conducted research on other social issues as I have been developing a startup social venture which aims to address inequality in housing and education. Laidlaw would afford me the time and purpose to do much deeper research than I usually have the opportunity to do.

I have chosen Dr Rosie Lavan as my research supervisor because of her excellence in her field. She has been indispensable throughout the application process, recommending resources and suggesting alternative perspectives. I hope she will guide me throughout the six weeks and answer any general questions about literature and research that will inevitably arise. Laidlaw will afford me the rare opportunity to directly learn from a leader in an academic field, and my hope is that one day I can be a leader in my own chosen field.

While my project will study the behemoth topic of class and education, relating this subject to the current climate can be achieved by working directly with students affected by the pandemic. A leadership placement in a space that addresses these issues would be of great value to me, and I think my research would benefit such a space. I have been in contact with Trinity Access Programme (TAP) with regards to a placement that would enable me to act on my research as well as expand my knowledge of the issue through practical work. Dr Rónán Smith, who is in charge of the schools programmes at TAP, has offered me a placement with their organisation. I aim to devise a summer workshop programme for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Year students using my research. The first series of workshops will discuss how literature can inform our understanding of class dynamics. The second series of workshops will focus on real-life barriers disadvantaged students face in the pursuit of education and how we might remove them. I will also aid TAP through creating accessible and informative social media content and sharing with them my perspectives, as a student from a disadvantaged background, in order to improve their service.



Finally, the diverse community that the Laidlaw Programme provides would be instrumental in accelerating my world knowledge and personal growth. My research project talks a lot about dealing with difference, and I want to actively practice that in my personal life. It would be a privilege to not only be part of the Trinity cohort, but the wider community of intelligent young leaders.

#### Research Project Proposal (1000 words max.)

##### Research Question

Contemporary society has never been more acutely aware of the prevalent inequalities within our social structures. This has been reflected in the writing of characters' experiences in texts dealing with university education. The stories of fictional working-class students are complex as class affects their understanding of academia, wealth, relationships, self-image and their identities. This project will analyse the significance of the university setting in depicting class dynamics in literature and in real life, as well as the greater social implications of such works.

Three texts fundamental to the study of class divisions in university settings are *Educating Rita* (1981) by Willy Russell, *Normal People* (2018) by Sally Rooney, and *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt. By using texts set in three different countries, universities and time periods, a diverse analysis of social class in literature set in education can be achieved in six weeks.

##### Detailed Explanation



A very pressing current concern is the effect of the pandemic on educational equality. Many students have had their path to third-level education ruptured by a global disaster. We have seen how, while this experience is, at its core, universal, it has affected the quality of education people receive to varying degrees, and class and wealth have been key factors in that. Scholars have not addressed these longstanding issues. My project serves to fill the void in the academic works and place the challenges faced by students into a broader perspective.

The novel *Normal People* follows a modern Irish love story that is amplified by tensions surrounding class, education and the contrast between urban and rural life. The setting of Trinity College Dublin is especially significant because, as a student there, I can identify with some of the issues raised. The contrasting social standings of both protagonists incite differing college experiences in the same institution due to social divides. Exploring the friction in their relationship catalysed by their backgrounds will be central to my study.

*The Secret History* is a thriller novel which gives an American perspective of class and education. This story also follows a working-class protagonist who finds himself in a prestigious university. It focuses on important themes such as privilege, power and morals. Today, as we have become all too familiar with corruption perpetuated by the wealthy in political and judicial systems, it is useful to explore the genesis of such corruption, and *The Secret History* shows how this can be traced back to university.

The play *Educating Rita* is set in an industrial city in early 1980s Britain. It follows the story of Rita, a working-class young woman who is pursuing her degree slightly later than many as she feels her current job as a hairdresser is unfulfilling and her knowledge of the world too limited. It is not a typical coming-of-age novel. It explores the lesser-told stories of the return to education as a mature student, which brings its own unique challenges.

University shines a glaring light on class difference in these three texts; primarily differences in wealth, views and morals. Their settings raise questions about human behaviour, showing that confronting class can instigate miscommunication, distrust, insecurity and shame.

Literature Review



Through my examination of critics such as Cynthia Lucia, Fatemeh Sara Pakdaman, Hannah Makela, and others, I will generate a synthesis of scholarly work, which will inform my own independent research and prove a great addition to the field.

The interdisciplinary nature of this research project insists on engagement with sociological works. Marxist literary criticism analyses class constructs and class struggles. I will use this criticism to deepen my sociological understanding of the themes explored in the three texts, from a progressive perspective. I will look at the texts as vessels which carry a certain ideological function and suggest what that may be depending on how class and wealth are depicted in the different university settings. The country in which the texts are set, the political affiliations of their writers and the time period in which they were written impact my approach to studying these three texts.

The work of important scholars, such as Elizabeth G. Cohen's work on improving competence expectations of working-class youth, and Ann-Marie Bathmaker's work on higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals, will also be invaluable in broadening my research.

While my research focuses primarily on fictional characters, it is also important to learn from real-life stories of a similar nature. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) gives an insight into his experience of class and university of someone from the "scholarship generation" while also providing empirical data and theory. The section 'A Note on the Uprooted and Anxious' specifically addresses the separation that can be imposed on working-class children in the pursuit of education. The characters Connell Waldron (*Normal People*) and Richard Papen (*The Secret History*) both experience this issue to varying degrees.

Other useful secondary sources include Cumings' *Housing, Class and Gender in Modern British Writing, 1880-2012*, and *Theorizing Social Class and Education* by Reay and Vincent. Both books discuss how gender relates to class and education. This will be particularly valuable when examining Rita's story in *Educating Rita*.

### Methodology

In the first period of research I will carry out a close reading of the three main texts, examining the main issues of class and education as well as details like language and descriptions of clothing and



scenery. I will then examine secondary criticisms of the texts in order to add another dimension to my understanding of them. I will focus on secondary criticism that deals with equality and class dynamics. Studying the live play *Educating Rita* will allow an examination of classes' visual portrayal. Finally, I will study the sociology of class dynamics in university and education in general, using Marxist literary theory and referencing an extensive collection of works on class and education by leading sociologists.