

By November of last year, when I applied to the Laidlaw programme, I had spent six months in the sticks of Donegal watching politics lectures at three times the speed and having undeniably repetitive Zoom “parties” with my course mates. It was the existence many of us had come to accept. We had to. As an extroverted and curious person, having very little opportunity to get to know new people in a meaningful way was difficult to sustain long-term, and my interest in my course of study was dwindling with each silent breakout room. Being chosen as a Laidlaw Scholar would not only see me reignite my passion for research, but also rediscover what it means to be part of a diverse community that was completely new to me.

The reality of the programme, at its core, matched my expectations. While I did not realise just how heavily leadership training would feature in the first summer, I am glad it did. In the past, I have been guilty of seeing personal development as a frivolous endeavour, which says a lot about what we value as a society. Through the programme, I learned that there are concrete steps that can be taken that can have very real and positive effects not only on a person, but the work one does and the way they work with others.

One would think that with most interactions occurring over Zoom, many people working full-time, and each of us researching such niche topics, there would be little opportunity for bonding. However, I have made, if not my closest, my favourite friends through this Laidlaw cohort. What bonded us? Stress? A superiority complex? A desperate need for human connection during a pandemic? Probably all of the above. Nevertheless, I am glad we made the effort. As my friend group expanded, so did my knowledge and empathy. The value of that is not lost on me.

The research period was made easier by my supervisor who was consistently helpful, attentive and kind throughout the process. Dr Rosie Lavan is an expert in her field and my experience and knowledge is minute compared to hers. However, at no point did she make me feel stupid for asking questions or expressing confusion about literature, research or writing.

Initially we had planned to meet three times: once at the beginning of the research period, once in the middle, and once at the end. I then found that more frequent meetings were useful, particularly towards the end as things were moving faster.

I had mapped out quite a detailed methodology that I thought I would follow almost to the letter. However, I quickly realised just how fluid my research was going to be. Honestly, I was lost at times. In hindsight I can see that this was part of the process, but it is not as easy to recognise when you are in the moment. I will remember this when I take on future projects, particularly those which are more long-term.

In addition, I found that a large portion of the project was simply thinking. There were a million thoughts that were never documented, and many tiny decisions made every week. The result does not necessarily reflect this, nor does it have to. I learned just how personal every piece of research is. I will be mindful of this when reading the research of others in future. We can try to be objective, but humans must make choices, and those inevitably shape the answers we find and the way in which we find them.

The most difficult part of the process was knowing when to stop. I chose a mammoth topic. I naively thought that focusing on just three fictional texts would limit my research to make it doable in six weeks. However, novels and plays are saturated with themes, issues, characters, and styles, and a lifetime could be spent studying them.

Having said that, it was easy to fill a poster. I had 5,000 words of notes by the end of my research period. I thought condensing them into one poster would be unworkable, but I instinctively knew what would be of interest to someone who was just glancing at the poster for the first time, not knowing a thing about my topic.

The structure of the Laidlaw project is backwards in a sense. We conduct extensive and complicated research only to minimise and simplify it in the end. At one point I found myself asking: "Why am I researching and writing so much when only a fraction of the output will be seen?" Then I remembered the purpose of the process. There is value in research for the sake of research and learning for the love of learning.

The most enjoyable part of the process was the analysis of the texts I chose. Having the time and space to sink my teeth into books I found genuinely interesting felt like an academic luxury. While I had my initial research proposal and some idea of the trajectory the project might take, I adored the freedom of being able to let each step inform the next.

There was also a downside to this loose format, which was that, at times, I felt directionless. I didn't have anyone telling me what to do and there was not one definitive answer that I had to find. The scope of the research was exciting but occasionally intimidating. Particularly at the beginning, I felt somewhat discouraged. This is where I was forced to improve my leadership, not of others, but of myself. Having the support of my supervisor and the structure of regular meetings relieved some of the stress that the uncertainty caused.

My ALS group was also a great support to have throughout the summer. The cohort is small so there are few people in Trinity who know exactly what the process of pursuing research in this way is like. Sometimes our group would have a Zoom call to vent for an hour about everything that went wrong for us that week. It may sound negative, but it was essential in building community and providing support to each other.

My conversations with other scholars highlighted the differences in our approaches and leadership styles. Personally, I have shorter bursts of energy, usually spurred on by one thought or a new piece of information. I need a spark to get started, and that inspiration is my fuel. I now know I work best during the night and when I'm under pressure. This is the opposite to some of my peers who find the 9-5 works best for them. I tried that but my energy and motivation levels are not consistent enough for me to function efficiently at set times every day.

Laidlaw scholars from previous cohorts also provided encouragement. I met them through other programmes/activities and, when we found out we were both Laidlaw scholars, there was an instant connection and a mutual respect. At one point I expressed to an older scholar that I felt I was spending a great deal of time researching but not yielding any concrete results. They reassured me that they too felt like that in the first summer and

advised me on how to get through that rut. Having someone who went through the programme and understood the challenges was a great asset to me.

The importance of patience became apparent during my research. At times, things seem stagnant, not for lack of hard work, but because not every part of the journey is efficient and enjoyable. Things just take time. You cannot will a breakthrough, you can only carry on in the knowledge that it will happen.

To me, good leadership is rooted in finding the balance between confidence and humility. Acknowledging your experience is essential. One can have gratitude for opportunities they receive and acknowledge when they have worked hard. In my coaching session, as I was talking about my achievements, I described myself as “lucky” to have had such opportunities. Orla Bannon said that she finds it is only women who use that word to justify their accomplishments.

It took time for me to realise how deeply insecure I was about my leadership abilities. Something I discussed in my coaching session was how much being a woman affects leadership style. I once thought that if I showed emotion or allowed people and situations to affect me, I would be perceived as “weak”. Being stereotypically feminine was a liability when trying to lead others and get a job done. I found it even came down to how I dressed. I would opt for more “masculine” clothing when I needed to be taken seriously. I remember Provost Linda Doyle addressing this issue. She said that how she looked was irrelevant. If anyone were to pay more attention to her clothes or her hair than they did her skills and her performance, that was a reflection of them, not her. That sentiment has stayed with me.

Throughout these months, my approach to personal challenges has changed. My perspective has broadened. Now I see setbacks as small parts of a much bigger, more significant journey. It was through leadership development and undergoing such a long (comparative to what I have previously done) research period that I came to realise this. The diverse experiences presented by speakers with varied careers reminded me that it is okay to try something completely new, and this can be done at any point. There can be practical barriers to this such as time and money, but often it is we who hold ourselves back.

The leadership days were stimulating and largely practical. From philosophy to public speaking, a varied education in leadership was provided. However, I found the attitudes of speakers and facilitators towards us as Laidlaw scholars to be highly generous. As a person, being told regularly that I am “special” or even a “high-achiever” ironically set off my imposter syndrome. I do not feel that I am better than others. I feel that I am luckier.

I now realise that we are special, but not because we are geniuses, gifted, or even above average. We are special because we have the unique privilege of taking part in the programme – an experience only afforded to a select few.

Another scholar, and now friend of mine, said that upon meeting Lord Laidlaw, he continuously remarked at how “bright” we all were and, while he acknowledged that access to the programme should be expanded, he also insinuated that not just anyone should be let in and that those from certain backgrounds would be more suited to the programme.

Having completed my first summer, I do not wish to gatekeep any of the opportunities I’ve had. I only want more people to have the opportunities too – not instead of me, but alongside me.