

A leader with a sense of self

The importance of having a strong sense of self in being a good leader

Whilst reflecting on my two-year Laidlaw journey, the attribute that I feel I have developed the most is my sense of self and how I stay true to that. A person's sense of self is defined as one's perception of themselves and the awareness of who they truly are. A sense of self is the back bone of knowing one's values, building self- confidence, and self-esteem. On a personal level, within the last six months I have managed to build a stronger sense of self that has enabled me to become more resilience, confident and happier. Being a Laidlaw Scholar has very much contributed to this. Throughout this essay, I will touch base with the things I have learnt as a Laidlaw scholar and how this relates to building a stronger sense of self. I also want to explore the importance of having a strong sense of self and how that relates to being a good leader.

Back in January 2021, it was a 'spur of the moment' decision to apply to become a Laidlaw Scholar. I would love to say it was because I went to all the introductory talks about the Laidlaw application progress that were strategically set two months before the deadline to help enhance your application. Or that I was inspired by previous Laidlaw scholar's work. However, the reality was I was living in a one-bed studio flat in St Andrews during lockdown wanting to do something different. I didn't know what but just something different, interesting and exciting.

I came across the Laidlaw scholarship by chance, a dropped word in a conversation. It was a conversation between two people who were top of the class of everything with 20 this, 19 that marks (for people who don't go to St Andrews University that is the equivalent of 95%-100%). Both of whom had applied previously but didn't get in. This intrigued me, as we are taught from an early age in school that good grades equal success. Very good grades equal immediate success. Therefore, on hearing that a renowned scholarship program had declined two top class students was unexpected and intriguing.

The Laidlaw Scholarship program stands apart from other scholarship programs in my eyes. It looks at a person holistically, rather than on grades alone. Yes, it does mention that it wants applicants with a strong academic background, but the interview process was more on problem solving / potential leadership skills rather than purely on an individual's academic transcript.

Generally, the interview process doesn't consider enough the experiences a candidate brings, and the skills developed from these. The Laidlaw Scholarship program has chosen to focus on a candidate's personal qualities, which are too often ignored and in my eyes to the detriment of society.

I stand by this due to my own experience of growing up within a state school. I watched numerous peers ~~failing~~ being let down within in the school system. The opportunities of achieving good academic results and as well as a range of "wider" experiences to help 'CV buildings are heavily dependent on a child's surroundings and circumstances.

During the teenage years, waves of physical and emotional turmoil torment a child in different ways, shaping them. The focus of grades can be detrimental. A lot of damage can be caused by making top grades have the same value in everyone's eyes. Academic grades can never give a holistic view of someone's intellect, but they make an easy metric to contrast and compare. The effect of encouraging children to base their value on achieving top grades negatively impacts a child's ability to understand what they value in life and can prohibit them developing a stronger sense of self.

To clarify, I am not saying the United Kingdom's education system should be overhauled but instead we should be aware of the values that are enforced on us and what we truly value. This is how I interpreted as to what the Laidlaw Scholarship program also valued. Admittedly, this is a rather long-winded way of saying I eventually applied to become a Laidlaw Scholar and my application was successful.

At this point, I was still unsure what I wanted to get out of being a Laidlaw Scholar, but I knew I wanted to make a positive change, for myself and others. My research project in my first year involved creating a quantum stimulation to improve physics student's understanding of the difference between quantum and experimental uncertainty. If I am very honest, I didn't enjoy this project.

I mainly joined Laidlaw for the leadership development programme rather than the research side. I felt I was reluctant going along the path of what a "smart" person did and realised that a career in physics and maths was not for me. Continuously getting top grades in physics and maths during my high school years made me feel obliged to follow the "smart" person well-trod route of either doing a medical degree or doing a PhD. This made me extremely unhappy during my early years at university which inevitably led to my grades dipping. Looking back on my research project and my early years at university, I felt I spent most of the time aligning my values to everyone else's values which unsurprisingly didn't make me happy.

Key moments of developing my sense of self did occur through meeting fellow Laidlaw scholars and the Laidlaw leadership weekends. Meeting my fellow cohort in person for the first time allowed me to meet people from all backgrounds with a wide variety of interests. I also found it really inspiring listening to people's passions and finding what they valued in life and staying true to themselves. It was really inspiring to see a scholarship allow scholars the freedom to follow their values within their individual projects. For example, one of my fellow scholars created a workshop to using discussions around the work of the ancient Roman poet, Catullus to understand of what it means to be queer.

The Laidlaw Leadership weekends made me a lot more aware of my non-academic qualities. I was surprised that I did well at the communication project when for years I struggled to utter a sentence out loud or pronounce a word correctly. It also made me aware of areas to work on such as my inclinations to get fixated on certain aspects of a problem and not knowing when to take a step back and come back later to the problem with a fresher perspective. Discussion held within these sessions, highlighted that everyone had different values and that there was no right or wrong answer. Great minds don't think alike! This

helped me make the transition of being a people pleaser to taking ownership of being my own person.

A crucial point in my development of a sense of self was during my leadership in action project. I was successful in securing an internship with a non-government organisation based in Geneva, City Cancer Challenge (C/CAN). This is a multi-sectorial initiative supporting cities in low/medium income countries to improve access to quality cancer care. C/CAN's approach involves working across public and private sectors to create innovative and sustainable cancer care solutions. An important aspect of C/CAN's approach is that it works with local stakeholders who can use their local knowledge to ensure the sustainability of solutions and that these account for local nuances and culture. C/CAN stood out for me as I felt my values were well matched with those of C/CAN's.

My internship involved working on understanding how C/Can could leverage the existing policy landscapes to inform city projects. My work involved working alongside a consultancy firm. I really enjoyed working on this project, in particular learning about the world of cancer care policy and the variety of different topics my work addressed. On reflection, I feel I was a lot more motivated to learn when I was seeing the output of what I was doing and understanding the significance of what I was doing.

This was incredibly important to me as I often feel unmotivated at university as I feel my studies have a very loose connection to what I valued, and I lacked direction on what I wanted to do after university. By listening and acknowledging what I valued in life, I feel a lot surer of myself and my interests. My experience working with C/CAN has shown me a career route that I would never have encounter if it hadn't been for Laidlaw. It has also led me having a greater sense of self-belief as I feel my skill set matches a career within in health policy, which I really want to develop.

A brief interlude, to say after 18 years living with my mum who works in policy there may have been some sort of diffusion going on. Furthermore, I have a new found appreciation of my degree in maths as I have realised that I have gained certain analytical skills that I can utilise across other topics.

As I write this I am still currently working with a C/CAN as consultant on the project I started in July, which will finish at the end of September. The experience of having my contract extended has also made me a lot more confident and valued coming into my last academic year as I feel less inclined to compare myself to others and have gained an appreciation of where my strengths lie, and my post-university life. I have also felt more confident in working on my weaknesses. My C/CAN internship involved a lot of written communication, which as someone diagnosed with dyslexia (and a maths student), I have always been embarrassed about my ability to write and pronounce words. My tactic for the last 22 odd years was to avoid writing (and speaking in certain social situations till I was 17... not very practical). After 22 years, I feel like I have developed a capacity to write which I didn't think I was able to. This has made me less fearful of exposing myself to things I am not "automatically" good at.

My experience of working at C/CAN has also taught me how a strong sense of self plays an important role in being a leader. Observing different moments of leadership played out during my internship and how they follow on from having a strong sense of self. For example, the ability to listen openly to feedback and choose what to take away and what to 'park' but developing the ability to be selective. Another example was watching how to balance pragmatism and being innovative. The importance of knowing when to take an executive decision and sticking with it. However, the overarching lesson I learnt was what it means to be a leader, and that anyone can be a leader. There is no precise qualities that a leader should have. In my eyes, a leader is someone who knows their values, and is true to those values, while knowing the direction they want to take, bringing people with them whilst knowing when to take on other people's reflections.

My time as Laidlaw scholar has had a significance impact on the direction I want to take after completing my masters, but most importantly on developing and understanding my sense of self. I feel I have a heighten awareness of what is important to me and how I want to live by my values. The weight of living my own values, the values that I have created from my own individual experiences rather than absorbing values inflicted on me has made a lot happier. I hope I can stay true to this and use this to become the leader I'd like to be.

I want to thank my fellow scholars, the St Andrews' Laidlaw team, City Cancer Challenge and Lord Laidlaw for supporting me during my leadership development. I have truly appreciated it.