



University of  
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# *Leadership Development Reflective Essay*

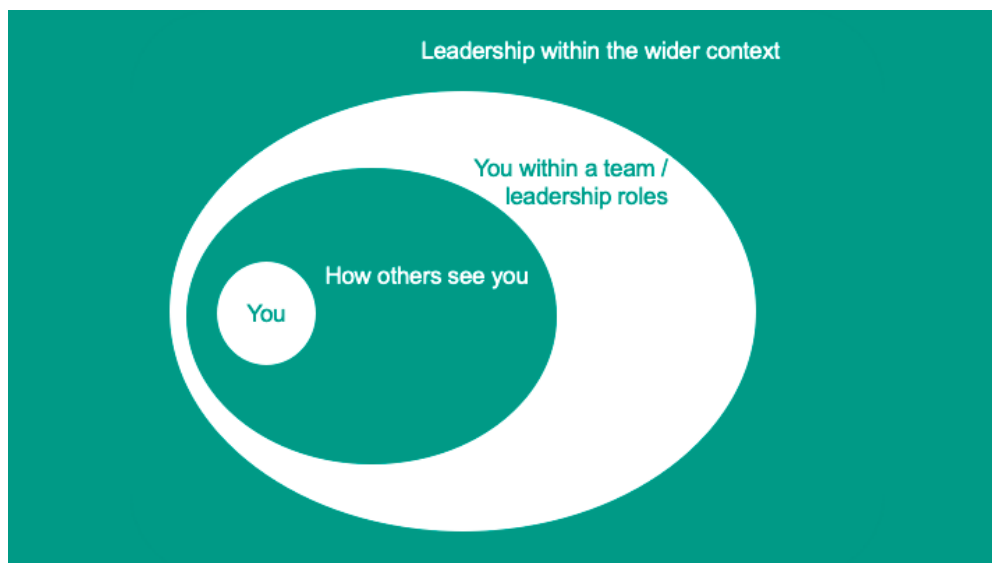
**Growing as a Person, a Researcher, and a Leader**

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When I think back on my time as a Laidlaw Scholar at the University of St Andrews – considering long days of research in the library, summer nights spent chatting with fellow scholars, train rides to Edinburgh for my Leadership in Action project, and a bus ride where nobody knew where we were going – one image comes to mind when I try to encapsulate my personal development over the course of two memorable years. I am transported back to a cold morning in the Scottish seaside town of Arbroath, in a grand picture gallery inside a nineteenth-century house, where an image of concentric bubbles appears on a PowerPoint slide on the subject of leadership themes. The smallest bubble is labelled ‘you’, surrounded by another bubble reading ‘how others see you’, which is in turn encircled by another bubble that reads ‘you within a team’. The teal-coloured field surrounding these three bubbles also has a label, designating it as ‘leadership within the wider context’.



**The PowerPoint slide about leadership themes from ‘Leadership 1 - Day One’, by Celina O’Connor.**

On that brisk, slightly sleep-deprived Saturday, I’m not even entirely sure whether I had grasped the idea of the smallest ‘you’, let alone the other bubbles on the slide that foretold my growth as a young leader. Yet as I sit down to write this essay, that image from our first leadership weekend in March of 2022 still continues to persist in the summer of 2023, leading me to consider just how much the ‘you’ that I was as a second-year undergraduate and newly-minted Laidlaw Scholar has changed, learned, and grown into the ‘you’ that I am today.

One of the first topics that we discussed during the leadership weekend at Hospitalfield was the concept of 'limiting beliefs', a subject which very much resonated with the person I was in the early stages of my journey as a Laidlaw Scholar. When I began to consider applying for the scholarship, my sense of self was in a constant battle against the heavyweight champ of lifelong perfectionism. Even in moments of success, I habitually found myself thinking about the things that I could have improved upon, rather than celebrating my achievements. So even when I received the congratulatory email confirming my acceptance into the Laidlaw programme, the next eight days leading up to the residential weekend were filled with me repeating the same question to myself while having breakfast, going to classes, packing my bags and boarding the bus to Hospitalfield: 'what did *you* do to get here?' It was only much later that I stopped repeating that question to myself and finally answered it.

What did I do to get here? The short answer is that I had taken a leap of faith. The slightly longer, multi-clausal answer was that I had created an interdisciplinary research proposal on a topic that I was passionate about and believed had contemporary relevance, contacted two academics who had been happy to supervise my project, gone through two rounds of applications and rapid-fire interviews, and now I was *here*. Perhaps one of the first lessons that I learned from the programme on that leadership weekend, sometime in the space between completing group activities based on our DISC profiles and playing ruthless games of UNO over hot chocolate, was that if you never try, you never know. If you keep defining yourself by the things that you aren't, you will never have opportunities to define yourself by the things that you have become. Even if I didn't know it in the moment that I hit 'send' on my application, actively working to reframe those limiting beliefs would not only lead me to become a part of a community of dedicated and like-minded scholars who constantly inspire me with their drive, inventiveness, and curiosity, but also to grow my confidence while developing valuable leadership skills.



**The first night at Hospitalfield – nineteen Laidlaw Scholars hungry for knowledge... and the best food they've had in months. Photo by Celina O'Connor.**

While discovering who I was and who I could become during the weekend at Hospitalfield gave rise to the first lesson that I learned from my time as a Laidlaw Scholar, the second leadership day in October of that year provided me with the next important insight. During this session, we were tasked with delivering a two-minute 'elevator pitch' about our leadership skills, discussing both our strongest skills and the skills that we would like to develop in the future. The goal of the activity, however, was to learn how to provide positive and constructive feedback to our peers after each presentation. I noticed that when my group would identify the positive aspects of each pitch, they would praise a common set of traits displayed in the presentations. These included clarity, a relatable and personal tone, speaking positively about ourselves, and most of all, confidence. Over the course of the Laidlaw programme, I realised that building confidence is key to being positively perceived as a leader – not only the superficial projection of confidence in high-stakes settings such as presentations, but true confidence that comes from being content with your sense of self.

After realising how many positive things happened simply by surmounting my limiting beliefs to apply for the programme, I resolved that I would make the most out of my time as a Laidlaw Scholar, even if I initially lacked confidence in my abilities. The first time that the opportunity arose to present our work at a reception for scholars and key figures in the Laidlaw programme, I didn't

express my interest because I thought that I lacked the experience to deliver a successful presentation. But after building my skills in academic research and project management during the first summer of the programme, participating in Action Learning Sets with my fellow scholars, listening to inspiring talks from guest lecturers, and even running an activity for local high school students at a leadership day, I realised that I had grown more confident as I developed valuable insights about leadership. So when I finally did volunteer to present my research project at a subsequent Scholar Reception, little did I know that I would be speaking in front of Lord Laidlaw, the CEO of the Laidlaw Foundation, and the principal of the university. In the end, it was a truly unforgettable opportunity that enabled me to share a research project that I was proud and passionate about.



**Members of the 2022 and 2021 Laidlaw Scholar cohorts with Lord Laidlaw, Susanne Kempe, Dame Principal Sally Mapstone, the Associate Deans for Arts and Divinity and Science, and members of the Laidlaw administrative team.  
Photo by Gayle McIntyre.**

I continued to employ my newfound motto of ‘you get out of an experience what you put into it’ when I signed up to attend the Laidlaw Scholars Conference. The conference helped me to develop my skills in team building and collaboration, test my effective communication when I presented the outputs of a group activity to all the conference attendees, and experience London with the people who had become some of my closest friends over the course of the programme. Opportunities for undergraduate students to attend academic conferences are few and far between, so having had the

chance to network with inspiring leaders and academics in the UK and build experience that will help me as I continue to postgraduate study is all due to the support of the Laidlaw Foundation.

After having significantly developed my internal confidence in order to improve how people perceived me as a leader, I found that the more I ‘put myself out there’ – volunteering to give presentations, seeking out new and challenging environments, and gradually stepping outside of my comfort zone – the more people began to take notice of me and my work as a Laidlaw Scholar. Two of my proudest achievements during the programme were being chosen for a Scholar Spotlight profile on the Laidlaw Scholars Network and being awarded the prize for the best research poster in the Arts and Divinity Faculty at the Scholar Celebration event in November 2022. While these recognitions have positively reflected ‘how others see me’ as I progressed on my academic and leadership journeys, neither of these accomplishments would have happened if I hadn’t resolved to be more assertive and take more initiative during my time as a Laidlaw Scholar.



With my research poster after having been awarded the prize of Best Research Poster in the Arts and Divinity Faculty. Photo by Leo Doherty.

On the penultimate leadership weekend of the scholarship programme, we had made it to the third bubble from the leadership themes diagram: ‘you within a team’. Throughout the first day, we discussed the characteristics that form a team, and discussed the importance of creating well-rounded teams with a balance of action, people-oriented, and cerebral roles. These were all concepts that were helpful to consider as I began to prepare for the second summer of the programme, dedicated to the Leadership in Action projects. If the reassuringly insular nature of the research project had been firmly within my comfort zone, the prospect of coordinating a project alongside groups of people from institutions and organisations across Scotland was significantly more daunting. This task became even more challenging as I struggled to form support networks and find organisations that believed in my mission of making the arts and humanities relatable to young people in our contemporary age.

Although I have often written about the significant theoretical difficulties in promoting the arts when governments are simultaneously slashing funding to cultural organisations and educational programmes, I rapidly encountered the saddening reality of this lack of interest. While attempting to promote my LiA project to local schools, I received radio silence in response to my countless emails and phone calls. Nevertheless, it was important to me to persist with this specific project, as one of the goals that I want to accomplish in my future career is to participate in bridging the gap between institutions such as academia, museums, and art galleries that have long been associated with a culture of elitism, and young people – especially those who face economic and social barriers to higher education.

Ultimately, the third lesson that I learned during my time as a Laidlaw Scholar was to form teams around common goals, passions, and visions for the future. When I made contact with organisations such as Impact Arts, a non-profit that ‘[tackles] inequality in Scotland through creative engagement’, and reached out to dedicated teachers at schools such as Madras College, the planning and execution of my LiA project became so much easier. With their support, I was able to design an activity plan for youth participants at Impact Arts’s CashBack Programme, organise a workshop for a group of high school students that included an hour-long lesson and visit to the Special Collections at the University of St Andrews, and plan an exhibition at Martyrs Kirk Library based on the creative outputs produced at that workshop. I was also able to plan continued partnerships with these

organisations, including working with Special Collections on new research projects, being a visiting activity leader at Impact Arts in the coming autumn, and being offered to host an event at Madras College centred on careers in the arts. Therefore, while I hope that my work as a Laidlaw Scholar has provided many opportunities for young people in Scotland by widening access to arts and cultural programming, I have also been offered several opportunities to continue to achieve this audacious goal while exploring potential avenues for future careers.



**Students from Madras College, St Andrews, participating in my workshop in Martyrs Kirk Library as part of my Leadership in Action project.**

Over the course of the journey that I have taken as a Laidlaw Scholar, I have learned about who I am as a person, a researcher, and a leader. I have gained awareness about how I present myself to the world, how others perceive me, and how to create strong teams around the pursuit of a shared goal. I have learned how to bridge the gap between self-leadership and leading others, how to identify my strengths and weaknesses in team roles, and the importance of community in realising ambitious goals. Now, as I prepare to step into the world of ‘leadership in the wider context’, I will take the lessons that I learned from the programme into my postgraduate studies and my eventual career path. When I envision the future that I aspire to build as a young leader and Laidlaw alumna, I picture schools that teach children how to look at paintings and appreciate poetry, and curricula at all levels of education that reveal the importance of previously overshadowed and underrepresented individuals

and groups in the arts and humanities. I picture students who understand the continued relevance of literature, art, and music from centuries ago in our contemporary age. I picture museums and galleries creating exhibitions and programming that reflect our globally diverse culture and histories. If my research and Leadership in Action projects have taken a tiny step towards achieving this future, I hope that by connecting to future Laidlaw Scholars and Laidlaw Schools Trust students, and sharing this message with them, we can begin walking towards that future together.

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