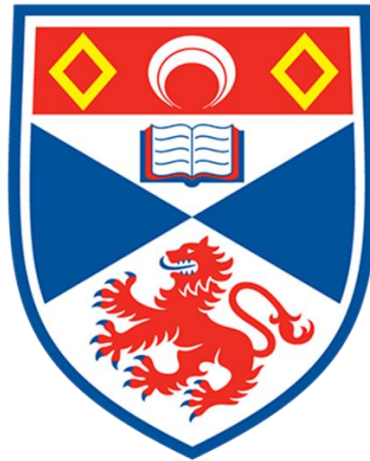


Leadership Development Reflective Essay

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Words: 2002 (excluding cover page and acknowledgements)

When asked to write this essay and reflect on my experience of the Laidlaw Scholars Leadership and Research Programme and how I have developed as a leader, I did not know where to start. Looking for inspiration, I turned back to the leadership development statement from my application. It was only by rereading this that I realised how my goals, ambitions and understanding of leadership have shifted over my time as a Laidlaw Scholar.

What is a leader? What kind of leader am I?

One noticeable change over the past two years has been in my understanding of leadership and my self-conception as a leader. In my application, I wrote about how I favoured “logistical and organisational leadership” and that I hoped I would “develop the skills to become a passionate and charismatic leader.” I thought that the best leaders were visionary and able to build camaraderie, motivating the team. I thought that I should become more like this to be a better leader.

Today, I can say that this is no longer something I am explicitly aiming for and that my conception of leadership is broader, recognising the value of different leadership styles. The Laidlaw programme has given me greater self-awareness of my skills and strengths, the confidence to honour them, and the humility to always find areas to develop further. I have learned to balance self-development and challenging myself with honouring my strengths.

The Laidlaw leadership events have played a significant part in this, particularly in helping me to better understand my strengths and how these can be a valuable contribution to a team, including as a leader. They have also offered me the language and concepts to better articulate my thoughts about leadership. For example, at the third leadership event we learnt about Belbin Team Roles. This helped me to see that my ability to think strategically, practically, and critically means I often adopt ‘Implementer’ or ‘Monitor Evaluator’ roles. Conversely, I tend to avoid roles that generate ideas, drive a team or are outgoing in developing opportunities. Learning about this model helped me to see the value in my contributions, including how I can best support this, and the importance of diversity in a team to fulfil a range of roles.

Additionally, looking back at my DiSC Styles profile from the first leadership event has given me insight into why I may have wanted to develop my passion and inspiration as a leader. Having been characterised as an ‘S’ or ‘Steadiness’ style, I learnt to recognise how I enjoy cooperating with others, avoid conflict and can be inclusive and humble in my leadership style, looking for consensus. The DiSC tool has helped me to understand how my initial desire to be an inspirational leader may rather be an expression of my loyalty and enjoyment of working with others.

Synthesising the insight from these two tools, I have come to see how my personality and favoured team roles complement each other. Strategic roles which allow for thinking time, good planning, and efficient organisation in an established team suit my tendency to cooperate with others and to favour stability, calm, and dependability. Over the course of the programme, I also held a significant society leadership role, which focused on the administrative, supportive, and strategic parts of leading a team. With the insight from my leadership training, I can see the value in me choosing this role and working closely with someone else whose skills enabled them to inspire the team and offer direction. I was also able to see this in practice at the Laidlaw leadership events. During the tasks and activities, I

could see that I was naturally favouring these kinds of strategic and operational roles and learnt that I should honour my preference for them.

The insight and confidence to honour my strengths that the Laidlaw programme has given me culminated in my self-defined Leadership-in-Action project this summer. I worked with Rape Prevention Education, an NGO based in Auckland, to evaluate and review the sexual violence prevention education programme they deliver in high schools. My project focused on internal and external consultation and literature review, and it formed the initial stages of their wider programme review process. Consequently, I worked closely with the Programme Development Lead, and it was important that my project fitted well within the overall programme review.

Especially early on, I sometimes felt that I was not sufficiently 'leading' my project and that I had insufficient agency over it. I think some of this resulted from unhelpful comparison with other Scholars' projects, but I also think it comes back to my mistaken conception of a leader as being transformational, giving direction and driving a project from the front. Whilst I had been working on changing this misunderstanding throughout the Laidlaw programme, it was only during my Leadership-in-Action that I really understood the value of leading from within a team.

When planning the project, I wanted to ensure that I was able to make a significant contribution to my partner NGO. I wanted to have an impact on them beyond the impact I knew it would have on me. I came to realise that placing my project within the NGO's wider evaluation project was the best way to make a meaningful contribution. Me individually driving an independent project would have been insensitive to their needs and far less impactful. With this in mind, I started to reconceive of leadership as being the impact one has on a team or the difference that you make by being there. A leader need not be the one standing at the front and talking loudly; they can lead from within a team. Considering my leadership style and team role preferences, cooperation within a team and the opportunity for strategic and critical thinking were the best ways for me to have impact and therefore to lead.

Once I started to think in this way, I could see the difference I was making. I noticed how my Leadership-in-Action project meant that the wider programme review was kick-started as I was coming to Auckland and continued despite the challenges we faced. I was able to be the consistent team member throughout the review process even whilst staff illness and teacher strikes threatened its viability, and this put me in the best position to have an overall sense of the themes and insight we were generating. These challenges also meant that I often had to work adaptably and independently throughout the project, anticipating what I could do to make my project the most useful. For me, my Leadership-in-Action is a significant example of the value of 'quietly leading' from within a team, rather than shouting from the front.

This experience, together with the insight that the leadership events have given me, gives me greater self-confidence moving forward. I am better able to recognise the value that I can contribute to a team and to communicate this to others and I am more confident in honouring my own style and preferences. This will be invaluable as I look to start my career.

Why a leadership and research scholarship? What does research have to do with leadership?

When looking back at my application to become a Laidlaw Scholar, I was reminded of my initial motivations for applying to the programme. Thinking that I would pursue an academic route after my degree, what stood out to me about the Laidlaw Scholarship was the opportunity to gain the kind of research experience that would not otherwise be possible at an undergraduate level. Whilst I thought that gaining leadership experience and training would also be useful, the research component was my primary motivation for applying. I did not really consider how the two would relate.

In some ways I was right. My research project was invaluable experience working on something I am so passionate about and interested in. I continue to be very proud of what I produced. As my first chance to work on one piece for six weeks, it was a novel opportunity to develop depth in my research and to manage my time in doing so. This became a useful bridge into the independence and challenge of Honours-level philosophy.

But my thoughts when applying were also wrong. Having expected that I would continue with further study after my graduation, I found myself unable to visualise myself working on research like this forever. I loved the academic challenge of my research, but quickly realised that working all week alone in a silent library with the meeting with my supervisor being the only chance to speak to someone else was not something that I could do long-term. I learnt that, for me, working with a team is more important.

At the same time, I started to have a bit of a 'wobble' about the value of research in philosophy (and consequently my degree!). Writing this essay, I also re-read the blog that I wrote during the project. This reflected my concerns about whether philosophy can ever provide any satisfying answers. Whilst by the end of the project I had come to recognise the value that philosophical rigour, criticism, and argument can provide, I was starting to realise that a future in philosophy may not be the best way to have the kind of real-world impact that I would like to have during my career.

With this sudden change of direction, my Leadership-in-Action project went from being something that nearly stopped me from applying to the Laidlaw programme to being the most valuable part of my Laidlaw experience. I was very hesitant about spending so long in an unfamiliar place, but my time in New Zealand enabled me to show a level of resilience and independence that I did not know I had.

Furthermore, my Leadership-in-Action experience showed me the real-world applicability of the skills I have developed over my philosophy degree. I saw how the analytical and critical thinking skills which are central to philosophy helped me to draw out the key themes from across the review process and consider the implications of them. I also saw how the skills of clarity and concision in written and spoken communication that my degree has developed were invaluable when writing my report and presenting to the staff. This project gave me great confidence in how my skills can translate to a non-academic context. This is a significant asset as I aim towards a career in policy and strategy. My Laidlaw experience has taught me how to speak about my skillset and how it aligns with this kind of work as well as to realise the value of my contribution.

My Leadership-in-Action project also showed me the important relationship between research and leadership. I developed this project to build upon my research, looking for a way to create real-world change relating to sexual violence. I was able to apply some of what I had learnt from my research into my Leadership-in-Action, particularly as I was coming from a different academic background than the staff at the NGO which meant that I offered a new perspective. My Leadership-in-Action project bridged research and leadership. The foundations of the evaluation were in research - a literature review and focus groups. Using this research to find areas for development and changes to make to the programme showed me the importance of using evidence in strategy and decision-making. Looking to the future, I have a stronger recognition of the importance of evidence as a basis for effective policy, which will be central to my career.

Where does this leave me?

I come to the end of my Laidlaw Scholarship with a newfound direction beyond university, far more self-awareness as a leader and a greater confidence in my skillset. Whilst I may not have achieved all that I set out in my application, I am so much the better for it. As an alumna, I look forward to speaking to future Laidlaw Scholars and to connecting further across the network as I continue my leadership and research journey.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to all those who have contributed to my time as a Laidlaw Scholar: to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for enabling it to be possible; to Celina O'Connor, Dr Cassice Last and the rest of the Laidlaw team at the University of St Andrews for putting the programme into action; to Dr Jade Fletcher for supervising and supporting me throughout my research; to Debbi Tohill, Lesley-Ann Guild and the rest of the team at Rape Prevention Education for saying 'yes' to my project and giving me an invaluable Leadership-in-Action experience; to the other St Andrews Laidlaw Scholars for being a wonderful community of likeminded friends; and to my friends, family and all who encouraged me to apply and supported me throughout the process.