



University of
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Leadership Development Essay

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Introduction

As I sat down to reflect on my experience as a Laidlaw Undergraduate Leadership and Research scholar, I grappled with where to start. I have learned so much about myself over these past two years, shaping not only my identity as a leader, but moulding me into an ambitious researcher, passionate teacher, collaborative colleague and curious learner. The Laidlaw scholarship has been more than just a *scholarship*; it is arguably the highlight of my university experience. Throughout my time as a scholar, I have been taught invaluable techniques that are now integral to my daily life. Moreover, it has given me rare and unforgettable opportunities and placed me in a university family, introducing me to peers with diverse perspectives and interests, who I wouldn't have met otherwise.

Thinking back to September 2020, within weeks of matriculating at university, I set my sights on becoming a Laidlaw scholar after hearing about the experience from the school president at the time. As a psychology student, I was enthralled by the concept of gaining hands-on experience in both empirical research and in making a real-world impact, which is incredibly rare at the undergraduate level. When reflecting on my experience, I have realised that, yes, I have had these incredible opportunities, but the theoretical and practical leadership knowledge I have gained has been at the heart of my experience. This essay will explore how my leadership skills have developed throughout my Laidlaw experience.

Leadership Training

The leadership training embedded within the programme has significantly enhanced my self-awareness in relation to leadership and personal development. Through the training sessions, I have understood the importance of recognising my own leadership attributes, not only for personal growth but also for fostering interactions with others. I now realise that my specific leadership style may not be suitable for every situation. I am grateful to have been guided on ways to adjust my leadership approach and methods of seeking feedback from others.

Our first leadership session was held at Hospitalfield in Arbroath. This was the first time our cohort of scholars came together as a team, offering an excellent opportunity to bond and

discuss our projects and interests. The weekend was centred around our DiSC Style assessment. I was identified as having the 'C' or 'conscientious' style, indicating that I strive for rationality and accuracy. My DiSC profile provided me with the clarity on which I tend to be overly critical of myself and often overanalyse certain situations.

Subsequently, during the second leadership weekend, we discussed the application of the nine Belbin team roles within the context of our projects and our roles as leaders. When reflecting on my position as a leader and engaging in discussions with my peers, they suggested that I express attributes of the Implementer role. Interestingly, this role aligns with my DiSC style because it encompasses someone who 'plans a workable strategy and carries it out as efficiently as possible'. However, it also suggests that I may need to be more flexible and better at responding to new possibilities, which I somewhat disagree with.

Combining the work from both leadership weekends has significantly enhanced my self-awareness as a leader. When reflecting on my leadership journey thus far, I understand why these traits were assigned to me by my peers, especially when I think about my early experiences as a leader. Over the past 18 months, I have implemented the SMART Goals technique introduced at the beginning of the Laidlaw process and have revisited it throughout. During my Leadership in Action project, I pushed myself outside of my comfort zone by setting SMART goals related to my DiSC style and Belbin role. These included changing my thought patterns regarding communication and how I engage with the people I lead.

Leadership Journey and Shaping my Leadership Skills

I was fortunate to complete my first summer research project under Dr. Gayle Doherty at the School of Psychology and Neuroscience. My project explored how aberrant levels of metabolic factors can damage neurons, setting the scene for the progression to dementia. Notably, I observed how an active form of thyroid hormone acts as a central regulator in relation to sustaining mitochondrial morphology in the brain following exposure to metabolic stressors. While the prospect of planning and executing the project initially seemed daunting, upon reflection, I can confidently say that I enhanced my project management skills. The

research project allowed me to refine my planning and time management abilities as I broke down the project into smaller, more manageable components to work through. For instance, I broke the project into distinct phases, including cell line development and the various processes involved, such as imaging and steps in analysis. This honed my strategic thinking skills and encouraged me to consistently consider the bigger picture, something I do not often do, and to continually assess how my present work contributed to future steps.

The Laidlaw Scholars Conference at the London School of Economics provided an extraordinary platform for me to showcase my research project and network with scholars from other institutions. I was chosen as one of the three scholars from the University of St Andrews cohort to present my research poster at the conference (figure 1). This opportunity provided me with valuable feedback on my project, as well as allowing me to engage in conversations with fellow scholars who shared similar interests, some of whom I continue to stay in touch with. The conferences played a pivotal role in honing my public speaking skills in a professional setting. Despite my natural confidence, the prospect of presenting my own work and fielding questions initially felt somewhat daunting. Going forward, I plan to apply this newfound confidence to effectively convey my ideas and assume a more effective leadership role. Additionally, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a special commendation award for my research poster, and it was gratifying to see my efforts recognised by others.

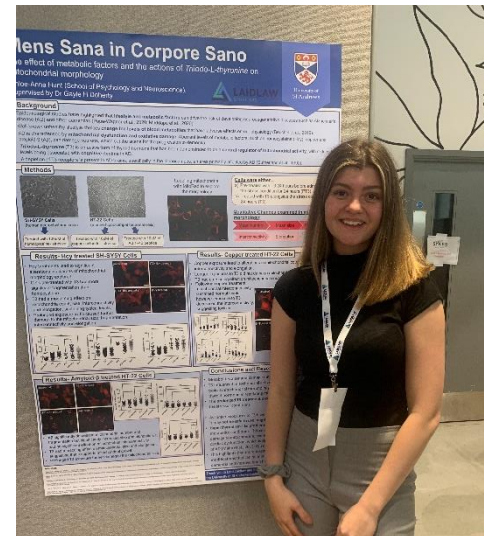


Figure 1: Myself in front of my first year research poster at the Laidlaw Scholars Conference

My initial aim for my Leadership in Action project was to develop a lifestyle modification app to improve social connectivity and enable individuals to track their lifestyle choices. Leveraging the planning skills I had developed during the first year of the scholarship, I reflected on the successes of the previous research project and considered my next steps after completing my undergraduate degree. Consequently, I decided that gaining clinical experience would be more fitting for my Leadership in Action project, which I undertook at the Long Island Alzheimer's and Dementia Centre (LIAD). At LIAD, my primary focus was the day centre, where specialised dementia stage-specific activities were organised in designated rooms catering to early, moderate, and late-stage patients. In each room, there were activities tailored to the cognitive abilities of the patients; for instance, the early-stage room focused on word games, while the late-stage room focused on cognitively stimulating

activities and socialisation. I had the opportunity to lead the sessions in these rooms, and the larger activities such as chair exercise and music therapy sessions.

I maintained a relentless curiosity throughout my Leadership in Action project. During the first week, I analysed numerous papers covering topics related to dementia, including different types of dementia and preventive measures; I aimed to embrace the diversity in the research and understand how the methods intertwine. Furthermore, I sought to learn as much as possible about the staff and clients I was working with, along with the invaluable contribution that LIAD Centre made to the local community. This curiosity led me to develop a more holistic perspective of my working environment and Alzheimer's disease in general. This curiosity, in turn, drove me to enhance my communication skills. I increased my knowledge of how to talk to individuals with dementia in a way they could comprehend by prioritising clarity and encouragement. In sum, the second summer of the scholarship is truly what you make of it. I immersed myself in LIAD's activities, while utilising my free time to explore the city and fully embrace the international experience.

Personal Growth and Giving Back

The Laidlaw scholarship program has and will continue to play a pivotal role in influencing my decisions and future. The opportunities I have been exposed to during the scholarship have enhanced my leadership development and have given me a unique that I would not have been given otherwise.

My personal growth has been an integral part of my leadership development. My dedication to my personal growth allows me to set a positive example and contribute to the continuous improvement of others. While working as a Laidlaw Schools Trust Mentor (January to May 2023), I mentored five girls leading up to their GCSE examinations. I supported them in developing habits like a positive mindset, sleeping well and physical activity. The training sessions facilitated by Jamie Peacock were incredibly insightful and encouraged me to draw from my personal experiences when guiding the girls. Reflecting on my initial aims when starting the program, I wanted to learn new skills to become a better leader. Not only have I achieved this goal, but I have also successfully shared this knowledge with others.

I feel a refreshing sense of confidence and ambition, which was not there to that extent at the beginning of the program. I will utilise this increased self-confidence as I continue my personal growth journey and take on new challenges and opportunities.

Looking Forward

The structure of the Laidlaw Scholarship program is undeniably beneficial for future leaders, irrespective of their next steps. If I'm honest, the self-confidence and skills I have acquired as a scholar played an important role in applying and campaigning to be President of the School of Psychology and Neuroscience at my university. Notably, during one of our leadership sessions, we focused on SMART goals, and I set a goal to improve my eye contact while speaking in public. I utilised this skill to forge connections with students and be more successful with the campaign.

I often find myself advocating for the Laidlaw scholarship on campus, regularly engaging in conversations with my peers to share my first-hand experiences with future cohorts and students. Further, I advertise the scholarship heavily in my role as school president. My research findings and participation in Leadership in Action have sparked conversations with students and academics, equipping and preparing them for their journey as scholars or supervisors within the program. More importantly, I have and will continue to utilise the Laidlaw Scholar Network. It has been an incredible platform for discussing my experiences and research with others and forging meaningful connections with people with genuine interest in my work.

In terms of my future career, the research project and implementation of the research have equipped me for postgraduate study applications. I plan on applying for master's and DClinPsy qualifications over the next 18 months, and the research aspect, accompanied by the practical experience, will be at the forefront of my applications.

Closing Comments

The main lesson I have taken away from my Laidlaw experience is that a leader's role is dynamic, requiring continuous self-reflection and growth. I will continue my aspirations to lead with integrity and a commitment to making a positive impact. I am eager to embrace the

new opportunities and challenges that come with my next steps and use my Laidlaw experience to contribute meaningfully to the betterment of my community and beyond.

Acknowledgements

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