

# Reflections on My Time as a Laidlaw Scholar

Reflective Leadership Development Essay, Joel Beckles

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Those who know me through Laidlaw would well be aware that it has become tradition for me to attend any Laidlaw event with an unspecified dress code wearing my iconic blue Laidlaw hoodie. Gifted to each of the scholars in my cohort in our first summer, I have come to ponder the words which it displays – the “Laidlaw alphabet”: ambitious, brave, curious, determined, extraordinary, fast, good.



Figure 1: A picture of me in my treasured Laidlaw hoodie [Photo Credit: Nicole Entin]

Despite the at times comical references these words have made into the lore of my cohort, I would like to take a moment to consider the relative strength of these qualities within myself before and after the Laidlaw program.

I think it is fair to say that I was an ambitious individual before starting Laidlaw. As an international student, I was driven (not literally) towards a small Scottish town in the opposite hemisphere by my desire to engage in the amazing opportunities it has available. In my first two years at St Andrews, I was active as a student ambassador and had some, though little, leadership experience from a university-run enterprise project on math history.

Tied to, and perhaps directing, this ambition has also been my curiosity. Although I had heard about Laidlaw before in passing, what seriously motivated me to apply was my interest in a quantum physics project funded by Laidlaw and organised by my eventual supervisor, Dr. (now Professor) Johnathan Keeling. Although I thought myself vastly underqualified to work on the

project, I was sufficiently curious to send him an email asking for more information about the project. I am glad I made that leap of faith; joining Laidlaw has changed the trajectory of my life at university thus far.

I think my “bravery”, has been improved as a result of the Laidlaw program. As I will discuss, both my research and leadership-in-action (LiA) summers have given me a new sense of confidence for tackling failures and my own self-doubt. I also think that I have gotten “faster” through this program – I now feel better equipped to handle situations involving quick decision-making and time-sensitive communication.

The eagle-eyed amongst you might realise that I have neglected to touch upon the words “extraordinary” and “good”. I feel like these are descriptions that only others should decide about me, but what I can say is that I have continually been impressed and inspired by the work of my fellow scholars.

### **Leadership Training with my Fellow Scholars**

Some weeks after intensely working on and submitting my application, I was elated to learn that I had been accepted into the Laidlaw scholarship programme. My first meeting with other Laidlaw scholars was on a weekend trip to Hospitalfield, a destination which was initially shrouded in mystery by the Laidlaw team. We all set off on a bus to an unknown (at the time) location, excited by what we might be doing and just very mildly concerned that we were getting kidnapped.

I met a couple familiar faces in the Laidlaw program from my Physics classes but, by and large, most of the scholars were persons whom I had never met. From as early as the bus ride to Hospitalfield, what stood out to me was how motivated the other scholars were about their projects. This should not have come as a surprise given that these were the candidates who were accepted, but I found their ambition infectious. The enthusiasm with which other scholars have spoken of their goals, and proceeded to execute them over the past two summers, has driven me further to follow through with my own.



*Figure 2: Fellow scholars and I in a fierce game of Uno at Hospitalfield [Photo Credit: Supakorn (Nikko) Juengsophonvitavas]*

At Hospitalfield, we engaged in several leadership activities over the weekend, including talks about leadership styles and clue-finding group activities. We discussed the DiSC (Dominance, influence, Steadiness, Conscientiousness) profiles, models of workplace styles and interaction. Personally, I make it a point never to read too deeply into such personality type tests as I feel like overly trusting the results can lead to a somewhat self-fulfilling prophecy – one’s personality affects the tests’ results but internalising the results may in turn make one feel more rigid about who they are (and should be). That being said, some of the points about my personal DiSC style, conscientious-steady, were spot-on. Looking back on them with fresh eyes after having completed my leadership-in-action project, while there are still aspects of my profile description with which I disagree, points about my patience, appreciation of high standards and dislike for situations involving a lot of confrontation were accurate.



Figure 3: Image of my DiSC profile [image by author]

Over the course of the many other Laidlaw leadership talks and events I have attended, what has become apparent to me is that there is no singular way to be a good leader. Through discussion and debate with other scholars, we have been encouraged to challenge notions of traditional leadership, and even to challenge the frameworks through which team structures can be understood (such as Belbin’s conception of team roles). From these leadership events, what I have taken away is a greater self-awareness when in positions of leadership – I ought to practise self-reflection regularly and be able to accept criticism graciously.

### **Growth from my Summer of Research**

I thoroughly enjoyed my summer of research in 2022. It was an incredible opportunity to spend six weeks (paid) doing work on something I genuinely find interesting, and to also have a good enough work-life balance to include some fun times with scholars and interns.

I came away from my summer research with greater physics knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, improved self-confidence. Whether this was the confidence to make a decision about code design or the confidence to ask for help without thinking that I have a “stupid” question, completing my internship gave me valuable experience in tackling my self-doubt in the face of difficult research. I learned how to sift through mounds of complex (at least for me) material about open quantum systems to find what was relevant to my project. I was also

pleased to find myself getting a better gauge on how long certain tasks should realistically take. Sometimes, an extension to a coding project can be implemented in under half an hour; other times, it may take several days. Being able to reasonably estimate how much I can accomplish within a given time frame has been invaluable, and a skill that is certainly useful when communicating with a supervisor and/or potential colleagues.

Another aspect of my Laidlaw research that I have enjoyed is being able to explain it! I must say that answering the question “What are you researching this summer?” has not always been an easy task, not least because I initially did not completely know the answer. Condensing the answer “I am working on simulating many-body open quantum systems, with focus on strong light-matter coupling for polariton condensates” into something more digestible has been an iterative process. Some of the most useful feedback for simplifying and refining my explanations came from discussions with other Laidlaw scholars. I am grateful for the action learning set conversations I had with Lia Da Giau, Lola Mors and Alex Beckett in which we shared our experiences working on our projects. From recycling in the fashion industry to Northern Irish identity to rock-smashing, it was fun having diverse conversations while sharing similar struggles.

In October of 2022, I was very fortunate to have been given the opportunity to present my research poster at the Laidlaw conference in London. It was a rewarding experience to explain my findings to scholars from other universities with many less looks of confusion than had been received a few months prior.

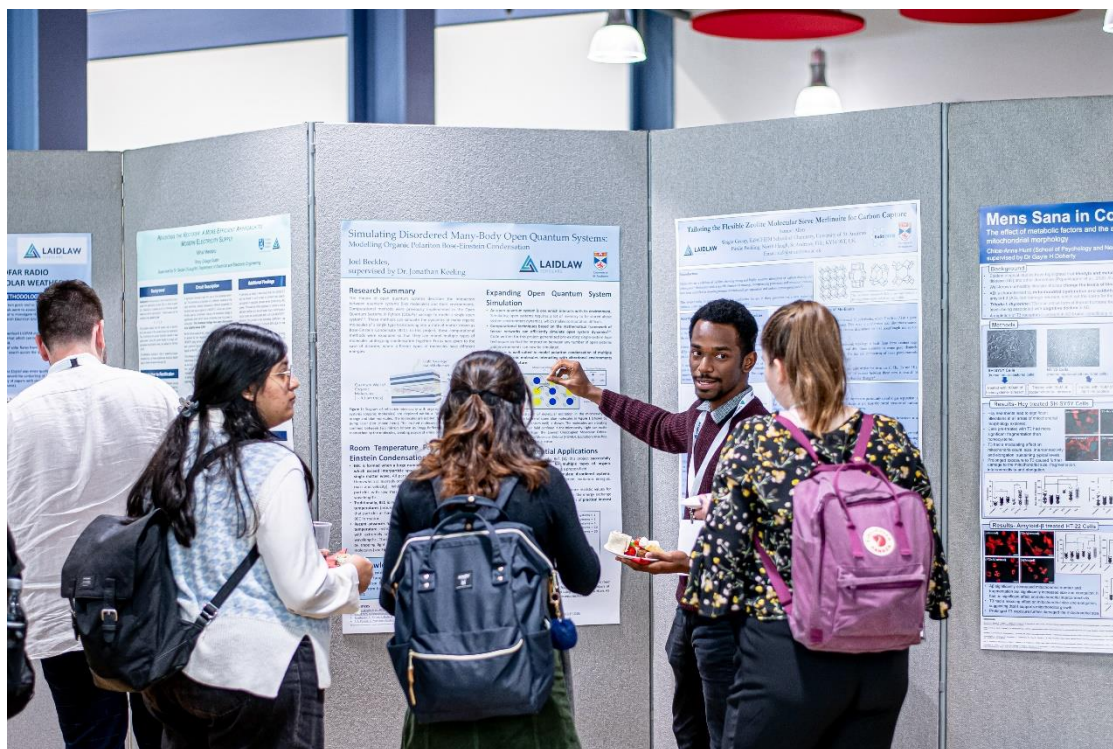


Figure 4: Presenting my research poster at the 2022 Laidlaw Impact Conference, London [Photo Credit: Laidlaw Foundation]

Over the course of my research summer, I came to meet so many more students than I had previously known. Additionally, I was fortunate to be able to network with a lot of the physics researchers in the department, which has given me a great “lay of the land” in terms of how academia works past the undergraduate level. Because of this, I now also have a stronger idea of the research field within physics that I would like to pursue after my undergraduate degree.

### **Growth from my Leadership-in-Action Project**

My journey towards a leadership in action project was by no means straightforward. My initial idea was to start a free physics summer school for secondary school (or international equivalents) students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, I encountered many hurdles in the path to achieving this. I had successfully made contact, and engaged in basic planning, with non-governmental organisations in the UK, Bulgaria and even New Zealand. However, despite my best efforts, none of these plans were able to come to full fruition before the self-defined LiA deadline.

After all prospects of carrying out a self-defined project fell through, I shifted my focus to potential self-defined projects. There was a period of time in which I was really concerned about the possibility of not having an LiA project at all. However, I was really pleased, and relieved, to have finally gotten acceptance into an organisation called the Timothy Smith Network (TSN), a non-profit whose summer program aligned closely with what I was seeking to achieve. TSN aims to bridge the digital divide by creating open and hands-on opportunities for people from the Greater Roxbury Area to learn about technology.

While not specifically physics-focused, TSN’s summer school, the Boston Design Academy (BDA), shared the spirit of democratising science and technology; the students get paid to develop their own technology-based projects. I had the honour of being an assistant instructor for Arduino and Python coding. This allowed me to both utilize and sharpen skills I attained in my physics degree to share new scientific knowledge with children aged 13 to 17. I learned a lot from the students as well. Teaching them gave me reason to introspect often on what kind of teacher I wanted to be perceived as. Managing a style that was both relaxed enough for the students to feel comfortable and stern enough for them to remain disciplined was often a challenge.



Figure 5: Classroom teaching at BDA [Photo Credits: Supakorn (Nikko) Juengsophonvitavas, Patrick Hughes]

One of the personal qualities which I have most improved upon over my time teaching in Boston was resilience. As one might expect, teaching a classroom of adolescents for weeks has had its challenges. Whether it was tending to a student whose circuit suddenly stopped functioning or having a talk with a student when they prioritise Instagram over what the teachers are trying to say, I have had to deal with several things not going according to plan. Adaptability and quick decision-making were vital in ensuring that the program ran smoothly for the students.

My experience at BDA, however, was in no way one in which I was alone. I worked alongside many other talented Laidlaw scholars, a couple of whom were fellow St Andreans. TSN placed a lot of responsibility on my shoulders but having others to share the load was immensely helpful. This has perhaps been my most fruitful experience of teamwork in a dynamic environment to date, and I feel honoured to have been in good company. My LiA experience has given me the chance to network on an international level, be it with other scholars or with others in and around Boston involved with TSN. I certainly plan to remain in contact with some of the great people I have met this summer.

### **Giving Back and Going Forward**

The opportunities given by the Laidlaw program have played an invaluable role in my development at university. While remaining in academia is my main goal for the near to mid future, I might also consider doing industry research or data analytics elsewhere. Whatever my next step may be, I can confidently say that Laidlaw has boosted my employability.

I will happily share my experiences (the rewards and the challenges) of the Laidlaw program with others within, and outside of, St Andrews. As I have already done in the Physics department, I will spread the word about the Laidlaw programs to new students and am happy to chat one-on-one with students who are interested in applying. Additionally, I remain open to talking about physics research, or my leadership in action project, with other scholars.

Over the past two years of this Laidlaw program, I have partaken in many rewarding activities and have developed both personally and professionally. The combination of a year of research and active volunteering has expanded my horizons far more holistically than if I were to have done just two years of research. Many (many) things have also gone wrong in my Laidlaw projects these past two summers – from code not running as expected to stressful cancellations of multiple self-defined LiA projects. However, I have come out at the end of it a more resilient person.

As I end this essay, I am in St Andrews dealing with having lost my luggage on the flight here, having anxiety about my upcoming studies, and having uncertainty as to whether I will be able to extend my time in academia in the UK. However, these are obstacles which will only be temporary, and obstacles which I am sure I can deal with – because I am, after all, a Laidlaw scholar.

## **Acknowledgements**

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