



THE LAIDLAW SCHOLARS  
UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP AND  
RESEARCH PROGRAMME

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# Leadership Development Reflective Essay

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## **Gratitude and Thanks**

I want to take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to Lord Laidlaw, the Laidlaw Foundation and the St Andrews Laidlaw Team for their generosity and hard work in making these unique learning opportunities possible through the Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme.

I also want to thank both of my supervisors, Dr Rehema White and Dr Jessica Thorn, who have supported me in navigating the challenges of my research and leadership projects. It has been a privilege learning from kind and ambitious women who are experienced in the fields I aspire to contribute to in the future.

Neither my research project in St Andrews nor my Leadership-in-Action experience in India would have been possible without the organisations I have collaborated with and learnt from. In particular, I am grateful for the support and insights from Transition University of St Andrews and Bali Nature and Wildlife Conservation Society (BNWCS).

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# My Leadership Development as a Laidlaw Scholar



**Image:** Me presenting with the Climate & Sustainability group at the 2022 Laidlaw Conference in London. Photo by Nicole Entin.

The Laidlaw Scholars Leadership and Research Programme aims to develop a new generation of leaders to tackle the complex challenges of the twenty-first century. Since March 2022, I have had the privilege of being a Laidlaw Scholar at the University of St Andrews. The scholarship has provided me with many opportunities for growth and exploration, ranging from networking in Copenhagen at the *Building for Biodiversity* conference to walking barefoot in the mud of the world's largest river delta and mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, on my way to interview locals about climate change impacts. What follows in this essay are my reflections on how these and many other experiences have formed my leadership development over the past two years as a Laidlaw Scholar.

In July 2021, I had just finished my first tumultuous year at the University of St Andrews. I had completed my first semester of studies in person during a COVID-19 lockdown and in my second semester I was asked to study remotely. It was quite a challenge to adjust to virtual studies, limited in-person interactions and little

opportunity to explore Scotland. Especially because I had spent the four years prior to University immersed in project-based learning, travelling and meeting new people when completing high school in India and taking two gap years. I decided to apply for the Laidlaw Scholarship because I wanted to get the most out of my University experience - I wanted to go out of my comfort zone again, learn more about myself in new environments and get clarity about my next steps after University. As a catalyst for my personal leadership journey, the Laidlaw Programme enabled me to achieve this and more through leadership training and personalised learning opportunities.

## **Leadership Training**

One way in which the scholarship has supported my growth and development is through leadership training. In one leadership training session, we were guided to explore our teamwork and leadership preferences and priorities using the DiSC Workplace Profile. My personal DiSC profile highlighted my leadership qualities and characteristics, many of which I was already well aware of. For example, it confirmed that I enjoy challenges and high levels of responsibility, that I believe shared excitement for a common goal is important, that I have a need for variety in my work and that I value flexibility, innovation and creativity. It also revealed some of my weaknesses and basic fears: impatience, pushing myself too hard, not having independence and sustaining interest in routine projects. While most of these were known to me, the exercise prompted me to reflect critically on both the benefits and challenges of my unique leadership style.

While the DiSC profile showed my leadership style as 'Di' ('Dominance' and 'Influence'), I also resonate with the characteristics of 'Steadiness' such as patience and humility. These may seem to conflict with the typical 'Di' persona, but I know from experience that I also possess these qualities and sometimes struggle with the challenges typical for this leadership style too. At another leadership training event, we were also introduced to the nine Belbin Team Roles which is a model based on different clusters of behaviour that are effective in enabling team progress. In this framework, my preferred Team Role is the 'Plant' which involves coming up with new ideas, dealing with challenges, solving problems and thinking laterally and creatively. The Belbin Report highlighted the strengths and challenges of this role and also gave valuable advice on how to manage these when working in a team. However, after receiving the 'results' of these assessments, it was important for us as a group to discuss and be aware of the limitations of approaches such as the DiSC and Belbin frameworks. Needless to say, these assessments can never capture the full complexity of a person's leadership style(s) or teamwork role(s). Regardless, the discussions with the other scholars about how different leadership styles relate to one another and are perceived by others during teamwork were useful. Personally,

these exercises also allowed me to reflect on how my leadership style differs from others and to gain clarity about what my unique skill set is and how I can contribute best when working in a team.

Moreover, the leadership training gave me an opportunity to reflect on leadership theory. I am a big advocate of Adaptive Leadership and Conscious Leadership and have previously received training in both. During the leadership training sessions, we were encouraged to engage critically with the frameworks and theories we were presented with. I took this as an opportunity to explore how the leadership theories I am familiar with relate to the Belbin and DiSC frameworks. In combining familiar and new approaches, I thought about how an individual's leadership style can change over time and depending on context. For example, the limitations of a leadership style or team role in the DiSC or Belbin frameworks may be more prominent when a person is under pressure. Personally, I was able to understand how I can manage the typical stressors of the 'Di' style or the 'Plant' role much better when I am taking care of myself and nourishing my mental and physical health. Consequently, when I am burnt out I am less able to control my response to the external stressors I am prone to - which in turn affects how I show up as a team member and leader.



**Image:** DiSC workshop at Hospitalfield during the Leadership Event I in March 2022. Photo by Celina O'Connor.

## Personalised Learning

The Laidlaw Programme has been a key part of how I have taken responsibility for and created my own learning experiences while at University. The programme has given me a space to explore the topics I am passionate about; urban design and land-use planning, nature connection, nature-based solutions and community-based ecosystem conservation. As someone who has greatly enjoyed project-based learning in the past, I have missed more immersive learning opportunities since joining the formal learning spaces of higher education. Designing my own meaningful learning experiences through my research and self-defined Leadership-in-Action projects has therefore been invaluable to my leadership development.

In my first summer, I learned what it means for a research project to be designed with integrity, ethics and impact at its core. Getting hands-on experience with the research process has helped me be much more realistic in my expectations of myself. This was useful in finding a feasible dissertation topic and it gave me the confidence to begin writing a journal article based on my Leadership-in-Action project. For my second summer of the Laidlaw Scholarship, I chose to design a self-defined LiA project because I wanted to challenge myself as much as possible and maximise my learning. I spent six weeks on Bali Island; located on the border of a tiger reserve in East India, it is a remote island with no cars and an unstable electricity supply and which is highly vulnerable to increasingly frequent cyclonic events. While I have been to India before, the Sundarbans archipelago and river delta in West Bengal was a completely new context for me both geographically and culturally. This has been one of the most intense and impactful learning experiences for me.

I believe it is the combination of theoretical learning at the leadership events and the project-based learning over the two summers that makes the Laidlaw Programme so transformative. Through the leadership training, I became more aware of my strengths and limitations as a leader and team member. In my projects, I noticed how these manifested and importantly how others reacted. One of the most important realisations I gained from my two summers with the Laidlaw Programme is that I love working with people and that I am quite good at connecting with others and making them feel comfortable - something I did not previously consider an asset in a professional context. I also saw very clearly how my Belbin 'Plant' characteristics led to many notebook pages filled with new ideas and solutions for the organisations and communities I worked with. Due to the leadership training, I am now more aware of which people I need to collaborate with to improve and implement all these ideas. Going forward, I feel very motivated to continue to explore my leadership styles to better harness the potential I have to create positive change.



*Image: Group photo from the participatory scenario-planning workshop I facilitated during my self-defined Leadership-in-Action project in West Bengal, India in June 2023.*

## **Leadership Journey**

To me, the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme has not merely been an isolated experience for two years during my undergraduate degree. It has been both a continuation of my leadership journey that I began before University as well as a foundation for my future professional and personal development. My leadership experience prior to joining the Laidlaw Programme includes leadership roles in high school ranging from managing a student-led organic farm with a team of 8 people to mobilising a student response to the Rohingya refugee crisis representing 240 students. In my gap years, I also practised leadership skills when I co-founded the sustainability start-up Concept Zero and the non-profit Krogerup Student Fund. I have also been part of several leadership development programmes such as the Women2Women International Leadership Conference 2016, the Nepal Leadership Trek 2017 and the 2021 Second Time Founders Academy for Conscious Leadership. I was therefore well versed in leadership theory and had already held a range of leadership positions. But the Laidlaw Programme has been a defining part of my personal leadership journey because it pushed me to find new ways to learn and challenge myself.

My leadership journey has been and continues to be shaped by the inspiring, kind and talented people I encounter on my way. As part of my Laidlaw leadership journey, I have had the pleasure of attending several conferences and courses such as the *Build for Biodiversity* conference in April 2022 in Copenhagen, the *Erasmus+ Ecovillage Transition in Action* workshop in May 2022 in St Andrews and the *F5: Future, Food, Farming, Fishery & Forestry* conference in March 2023 in Edinburgh. These spaces have both been sources of inspiration for my projects as well as great networking opportunities. Speaking with professionals in the fields I am interested in - landscape architects, international development workers, sustainability consultants, researchers and grassroots activists - has helped me figure out my next steps after University.



**Image:** Me with my research poster after having won the Best Research Poster (Science & Medicine) 2022 in St Andrews. Photo by Sarah Clarke.

## Looking Forward

Today, in July 2023, I am sitting in Rector's Café back in St Andrews after returning from my Leadership-in-Action project in India. I am filled with gratitude for the people I have met and the life-changing experiences I have had. Looking back at these past two years, I see how being part of the Laidlaw Programme has given me a space at University to connect with myself outside of my academic pursuits and accomplishments. I was able to design my own unique learning experiences with objectives much greater than simply comprehending a new topic or learning to write an essay.

As my leadership journey continues, I look forward to further developing my research and communication skills when co-authoring a research paper based on my Leadership-in-Action project on nature-based solutions and eco-tourism for climate change adaptation in India. Through my Laidlaw projects, I have engaged with the complexities and challenges of land-use planning and have decided to pursue a related MSc, most likely in Environmental Management. While there are many goals I want to achieve but do not yet know how or when to, I now have a much clearer idea of what I am capable of and how I can use all I have learnt to be a force for sustainable change.

Going forward, I have no doubts that having been a Laidlaw Scholar will prove to be a great asset both personally and professionally. Through the scholarship, I have become a more confident and conscious leader, a better communicator and team member, and I have narrowed in on the topics I want to pursue in my career and further studies. I have also built invaluable professional connections in the UK, Denmark and India. The growing network of Laidlaw Scholars I am sure will also continue to be a great source of inspiration, feedback and new ideas, and I see the Scholars Network as a community in which to find potential partners for new ventures and projects in the future.

Finally, I am looking forward to supporting future Laidlaw Scholars who are interested in the topics I now have experience with. I have been lucky to have several mentors who have supported me in my personal and professional development, and so as an Alumni, I will be open to mentoring Scholars going forward.