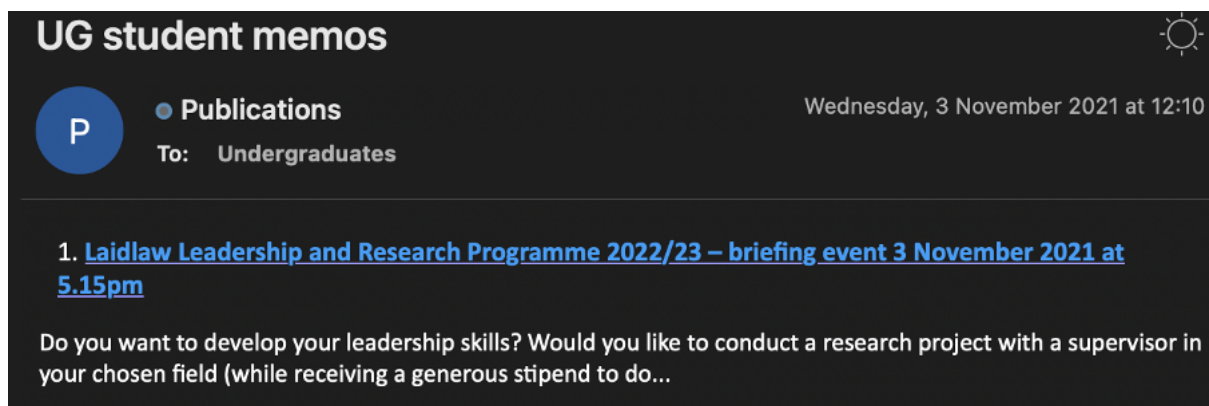


Laidlaw Scholarship: A Reflective Essay on my Leadership Development

Over the span of the past two academic years, the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship programme has contributed in many ways to my development as an undergraduate researcher, leader, and holistically, as a person. Some of those ways perhaps impacted me more unexpectedly than others. The Laidlaw programme has turned out to be much more than just a scholarship. Many of my most treasured experiences during my time at university would not have happened if it weren't for this scholarship. As my journey within the two-year programme is coming to an end, I think it is worthwhile to look at where I started, and reflect on how I have gotten to where I am now.

The Beginnings

I found out about the scholarship more by chance; as I was sorting the emails in my inbox into their little folders (my favourite procrastination activity), a *UG student Memos* email happened to catch my eye.



The email through which I first found out about the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme

This email happened to reach me during a time when I was questioning my degree choice. I initially joined the University of St Andrews as a student in Management and Sustainable Development. After dropping Sustainable Development following a depressing semester of COVID-mandated online lectures, I was left wondering whether or not my initial intentions of going to university to study Management still aligned with my values. Given my parental and class environment, academia had always been something that I wasn't just unfamiliar with, but perhaps even unaware of. I had come to university not with the intention to conduct academic research, but instead, to receive a piece of paper, to eventually go on and work in some kind of business or start my own, and maybe switch jobs every once in a while. Luckily, the flexibility of the Scottish Higher Education system meant that I had the opportunity to dabble in subjects beyond my degree subject. And – Germans call this *Glück im Unglück* (*blessing in disguise* one could say, but that doesn't quite hit the spot) – thanks to COVID, I got to attend Social Anthropology classes, which under normal circumstances would clash with the lecture times of Management. It was then, when I discovered my academic passion.

I had always considered myself as naturally drawn to leadership positions; I grew up as a very social and empathetic person and had a running record of being elected class representative throughout my school years. Combined with my plans to go into Business

Management and my work experience up until that point, one could classify then-me as a classic *corporate girlboss* – except I'd like to think that I was more into start-ups than I was ever into *big corpo*. However, my conceptions of what leadership was and what kind of person a leader is, was quite narrow. Despite my own personal leadership values being primarily based around people skills (empathy, communication, team work), I had absorbed the image of a leader as a solitary, self-reliant, and perhaps slightly domineering character. And even looking back through my application for the scholarship, my main motivations for developing my leadership skills were to fulfil my career ambitions in business, and framed as “key to any successful enterprise”.

So there I was, with some letters on my screen offering me the chance to delve deeper into academia and do *research* (whatever that meant), and also develop my leadership skills. I was clueless about academia, but had freshly discovered something I was passionate about. Leadership roles came naturally to me and have always been something I enjoyed and that aligned with my ambitions. Laidlaw sat at the intersection of a long held interest and ambition, and something fresh and new that I was just discovering. I asked an acquaintance who had previously completed the programme, and she spoke very highly of it. That was the confirmation I needed. So, despite feeling like I had no idea what I was doing, I decided to give it a chance and apply.



A mirror selfie from the first Laidlaw event in Hospitalfield

Starting university during COVID19, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests and the seemingly never ending anti-Asian racism, I came freshly out of what I now call my “racial awakening” and with the burden of a gender identity crisis in, and on my head. I was angry at the world and its injustices. When I joined the Laidlaw programme, I had green hair, I was hanging out with the LGBT, BAME, BPOC, *ABCDXYZ* crowd whose labels sometimes erase as much as they make visible. I struggled to come to terms with my intersectional identity in a town that was even whiter than the environment I had grown up in, but threw me into more critical and queer theory than I could have ever anticipated. I’ve become quite a different person to when I first embarked on my journey as a Laidlaw scholar. As I write about these things and “past selves”, I am not negating or ridiculing them. They made me who I am and

are inarguably still part of me. My Laidlaw journey has been as much about gathering knowledge about my research topic, as it has been about discovering myself (granted, the two are closely linked to each other). Things all make sense in retrospect, as they so often do: one thing had to happen for another thing to happen, for me to end up where I am today. It all “happened to turn out this way”, but these happenings have so fundamentally shaped who I am and how I understand myself.

And then, things just kept happening

The Laidlaw programme threw me into various opportunities for learning and growth. From public speaking skills to DiSC profiles, the programme offered me insight into more systematic and structured ways of understanding leadership. I grew up enjoying personality tests like the MBTI that would categorise my entire person based on how my answers to their questions fit into their model. Reading my DiSC profile reminded me a little of that enjoyment. While I have grown to be more critical of such models, I did still encounter many elements in my report that resonated with me. More importantly though, learning about other peoples’ DiSC profiles and how I relate to them was valuable, as it let me get out of my head and take on a broader perspective on how to approach leadership. Leadership, something that I thought was constituted by innate traits that some people just possess more of than others, could be nurtured and trained. I appreciated being prompted by the programme to reflect on my values, my limiting beliefs, and my goals. In that way, the programme taught me ways in which I could better understand my leadership style and myself.

Beyond the structured training in the programme, though, I believe that what I value most and has impacted me most fundamentally within my time as a Laidlaw scholar, are the relationships that I formed. I remember; meeting the cohort of fellow scholars was equally exciting, as it was intimidating. Clueless as I was about this whole new world of academia that I had just recently discovered, I was struck very early on by an overwhelming sense of imposter syndrome. Everyone seemed to burn with passion for their research topics, each scholar as clever and driven as the next. Did I fit in? Should the scholarship have gone to that one other person who didn’t make the cut after our group interview instead? I was grateful for the Laidlaw team and St Andrews for organising social events for the scholars, and glad that restrictions were easing, so we could actually meet one another face to face more often. Because soon enough, friendships started forming and, although I still had to work on that imposter syndrome of mine, I really liked spending time with the cohort. Out of those friendships, a close creative collaborative relationship had formed between me and another scholar (Campbell), leading to the formation of a band, which has now become one of the biggest parts of my life at university. Being part of a scholarship programme like this, meeting my fellow scholars, and also working closely with a supervisor, let me realise that *academics*, too, are just people at the end of the day.

Reading literature surrounding my research interests taught me the vocabulary to fit my ideas into the English language (and German, and Mandarin Chinese, to some extent). Laidlaw first let me discover the joy of having an intense discussion with someone who was equally passionate about something I had read hundreds of pages on in solitude, something that seemed so specific and personal to me that the solitude of learning about it seemed inevitable. The discussions started in St Andrews. But halfway across the world in Taipei during my Leadership in Action project, I found myself having hour-long discussions with someone whose research interests just happened to overlap with mine, someone who

ended up becoming one of my closest relationships today. The relationships I formed in Taipei are characterised by unconventionality. Speaking to my co-workers, my classmates, flatmates, language exchange partners, people in bars and at events – they all made me realise that I, as someone who already considers themselves very open-minded, am still sometimes constricted by my beliefs of what is normal, conventional, expected, adequate, acceptable, appropriate, good enough.

Sometimes, I'm not sure what *exactly* happened this summer, even when I run through everything chronologically. But I am certain that whatever the Laidlaw programme threw me into contributed to it, profoundly – on top of being the very reason it was possible for me to embark on this journey, anyway. I have become an astounding amount more emotionally aware compared to what I was like at the beginning of the programme. The discussions that Laidlaw facilitated also enabled me to more deeply understand myself and my place in the world. I learnt about myself, as much as I did about leadership, and if what I learned about leadership is true, then the two are inseparable. The Laidlaw scholarship made it possible for me to go to Taiwan, meet people I would have not otherwise gotten to meet, and in turn discover more about myself, my language, my heritage, my person. And I am grateful for the flexibility of the programme, as it let me shape this journey to be so personal to me.

So *that* happened...?

Coming back from my Leadership in Action project, I felt like I had fundamentally changed. But I was going back to an environment that I had now known for years. I could tell how my embodied experience of moving through St Andrews was one that was shaped by habit: my legs know exactly the distance between each step in the staircase of the library, I recognise the smell of my apartment, and barely notice the sound of seagulls yelling like they were born to do nothing else. It felt like nothing here changed. The summer ended and the semester briskly started anew. Did I actually ever leave? Did I change? Did any of that happen?

But I can sense it in the small ways: in the ways I think and reflect, the ways I show up in the world. So it's hard to answer the question of how having been a Laidlaw Scholar will help me in the future, without saying "In every way". I think the experiences I have gained through the programme have fundamentally shaped who I am as a person. They have changed my career trajectory, my outlook on life, and my understandings of myself. Two of my closest relationships today have formed thanks to the programme. I am more sure of what I value, and what it is I look for in life, where I want to go, what my pitfalls are, but also what I bring to the table. And when I say "Things happened to turn out this way" it is not to deprive myself of agency, or disregard the active efforts I had to put in to get to where I am today. I am thankful to myself for coming up with semi-productive procrastination activities that caused me to go through my emails so diligently. I am thankful that I had the courage and motivation, that I was willing to just give it a try and apply. I am proud that I wrote a compelling enough application, and even before that, that I got into this university. In saying "things happened to turn out this way", I acknowledge that, in addition to all of the aforementioned, getting here has also been a series of unexpected, but fortunate events. But of course, it all would not have been possible without the support of Lord Laidlaw, the Laidlaw Foundation, and the team at the University of St Andrews, to whom I am deeply grateful.