



Laidlaw Leadership Development Essay:

Learning, Growing and Developing as a Leader

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Learning, Growing and Developing as a Leader

The Beginning

I applied for the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship in the second year of my joint undergraduate degree in Geography and Sustainable Development at The University of St Andrews in January 2022. I was excited to find out that I made the interview stage in February and ecstatic when I was offered a place in March. Reflecting back to that time in the beginning of my Laidlaw journey, I was a significantly different person. Although I did display confidence, ambition and determination when applying to the scholarship, those values have grown significantly. All of my leadership attributes have developed, such as effective communication, critical and creative thinking skills and research and project management skills.

Summer One

My research activities from summer one of the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship were extremely memorable. It was the first time I had conducted an independent research project of this magnitude which was incredibly exciting. For my first project last summer, I investigated the impact of land use on soil organic matter. I measured moisture content, bulk density and soil organic matter content in a rural farming estate called Balcaskie in the eastern corner of Fife, Scotland. I extended this project in December and conducted elemental analysis to also measure total organic carbon. My results highlight that agricultural land management practices can have a profound effect on soil organic matter and carbon content and therefore soil health and fertility.

I thoroughly enjoyed the entire project in which I gained knowledge, independence, professionalism and laboratory experience. However, what particularly stood out to me was conducting the field and laboratory work. I collected 100 samples from 25 fields across Balcaskie Estate and analysed them in the School of Geography and Sustainable Development laboratory at The University of St Andrews. I collected samples from fields mostly by foot which was a demanding but fulfilling experience. Working in the laboratory was an incredibly valuable experience. I was supervised by the laboratory technician, Dr Hiles, who talked me through the methods I had chosen to conduct loss-on-ignition and elemental analysis. He also taught me the lab protocol which I adhered to with great purpose.



Figure 1: A photo of soil sampling in the field. Figure 2: A photo of crucible samples in the furnace. Figure 3: A photo of the Elementar soliTOC Cube sample tray.

My research project was supervised by Professor Austin from the School of Geography and Sustainable Development who has vast knowledge and experience of carbon sequestration through blue carbon research and teaching. A few months after I had completed my research project, Professor Austin contacted me to enquire whether I would be interested in participating in a paid laboratory internship for a research project that he and his colleague were conducting. I was honoured that he had chosen to invite me to be a part of the soil sampling preparation for his research and happily accepted the offer to return to the lab. This demonstrates that I learnt and could be trusted to run complex methods to contribute to other professional research projects.

Summer Two

My Leadership-in-Action (LiA) project in summer two of the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship was a challenging but rewarding experience which taught me so much about independence, organisation and leadership. My LiA project, inspired by my research project and my passion for sustainable development and sustainable agriculture, centred around effective and sustainable agricultural practices in and around Williamsburg, Virginia. I chose a self-defined project to challenge and push myself out of my comfort zone to shift and develop my leadership further. I quickly gained strong resilience and persistence and learnt to adapt rapidly.

My LiA project involved interviewing farmers in Virginia, academic researchers at the local university, The College of William and Mary and the manager of the Williamsburg Farmers Market. From these interviews I learnt invaluable information about sustainable agriculture which I used, in addition to my own personal research, to produce a brochure to present at the Williamsburg Farmers Market. The brochure includes information about how each interviewee personally defines sustainable agriculture and sustainable agricultural practices

being implemented in Virginia. These practices included cover cropping, crop rotation, non-synthetic inputs and nature-based fertilisers amongst others. The brochure also includes reflections from interviewees about the current level of sustainability in Virginia, incentives for becoming more sustainable as a farmer and advice for moving towards a more sustainable future.



Figure 4: A photo of myself at the Williamsburg Farmers Market. Figure 5: A photo of Tracy Frey, the manager, and I. Figure 6: A photo of my brochures at the Williamsburg Farmers Market.

Additionally, there is information included from the Williamsburg Farmers Market manager, Tracy Frey, about how the market is promoting sustainable agricultural practices with and for their vendors. The brochure I produced synthesises and showcases my research and was printed and presented to promote sustainable agricultural practices in Virginia and encourage positive change at the Williamsburg Farmers Market on Saturday the 24th of June 2023. I was delighted to receive some very positive feedback from members of the public and the interviewees who took part in my project. I was also very pleased when the manager of the Williamsburg Farmers Market, Tracy Frey, reposted my LinkedIn post to share my brochure and promote my project and sustainable agriculture.

Leadership Training

The Laidlaw leadership training I have received throughout the programme has been transformative. Through this training my knowledge and understanding of leadership has grown and developed considerably when learning about DiSC profiling, Belbin roles and team characteristics and contributions. The DiSC leadership profiles at the beginning of the programme highlighted my leadership style and made me more aware of how leaders differ, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. My DiSC profile taught me that I have a CS style, C representing conscientiousness and S representing Steadiness. This typically means that I prioritise stability, place a high value on accuracy and value support. CS styles come across as orderly, precise and well-prepared but this can come with drawbacks such as avoiding taking risks or making rapid changes. I learnt that my leadership style can be overly cautious and

should increase effectiveness through showing more flexibility and urgency. The DiSC profiling exercise also taught scholars in my cohort and I how to connect with other leadership styles and key strategies for working together effectively.

We also learnt about Belbin Team Roles which describes the importance of a system of roles on team performance. There are three categories of roles, action orientated, people orientated and cerebral roles. Within these categories we learnt about 9 specific roles that contribute to team dynamics: specialist, plant, resource investigator, co-ordinator, shaper, monitor evaluator, team worker, implementor and completer finisher. Through analysis of each of these roles I discovered that I usually find myself in the implementor and completer finisher roles. The implementor role is responsible for planning, organisation and strategy with associated strengths of being practical, reliable and efficient and weaknesses of being inflexible and slow to respond to new ideas. The completer finisher role involves evaluating and perfecting work at the end of a task ensuring it is to a high standard which is associated with strengths of being conscientious and careful and weaknesses of being reluctant to delegate.

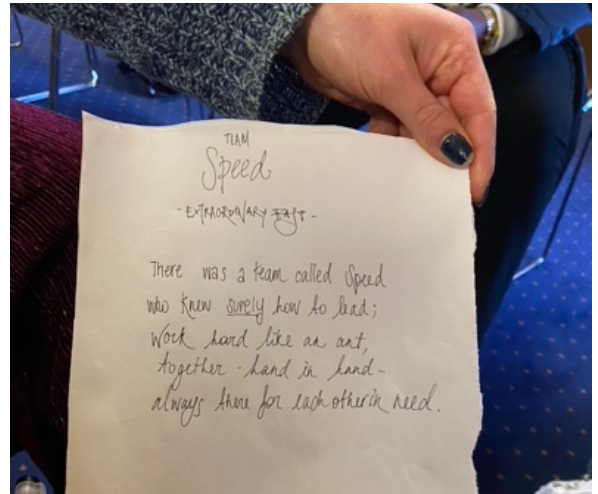


Figure 7: A photo of a poem that my group created as part of Leadership Event 3.

I resonated reasonably strongly with both the DiSC profile and Belbin Team Roles. It was interesting to learn about the different type of leadership styles and team roles within a working environment. I absorbed how these styles and roles collaborate with one another and the contributions they make to a group. Learning about how leadership styles and roles differ within the Laidlaw Programme expanded my understanding of leadership and highlighted that leadership is not clear cut, it can be seen and represented in an array of differing ways. It has also aided my understanding of how my personal style and approach to leadership is valuable and how I can more effectively communicate within a team. This has helped me to grow and develop significantly as a unique leader and make more valuable contributions to various tasks. However, I think it is important to note that critical reflection on the limitations of DiSC profiling and Belbin Team Role frameworks is important to promote discussion and analysis of everchanging leadership approaches. These frameworks may provide a good starting point and structure but may not promote the full complexity and interconnected nature of leadership and team roles.

Networking and International Experience

Firstly, the scholar cohort that I have been a part of over the past two years of the Laidlaw programme have been some of the most enthusiastic, innovative and action driven people I have ever met. Conversing with them has been so enlightening and has been a networking experience that is a very important factor in my Laidlaw experience. I am very much looking forward to staying in touch with the scholars in my cohort to follow many of their guaranteed future successes.

Secondly, the Laidlaw Scholars Conference in October 2022 was an excellent networking experience. The conference took place in the London School of Economics and scholars from both the 2021 and 2022 cohorts attended. The conference had an impressive schedule and I met a number of inspirational and dedicated scholars from various universities. It was an enriching and exciting experience which has helped me to be confident in introducing myself to new people in different scenarios. Thirdly, the Laidlaw Scholars Network has been a useful online networking tool which has connected me to some of the scholars from the conference.



Figure 8: A photo from the Laidlaw Scholars Conference in London. Figure 9: A photo of Laidlaw scholars from my cohort and I attending the conference (from left to right – Nicole, Chloe and Mana).

International experience is a highly important aspect of the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship. My summer two LiA project gave me direct international experience through my month-long stay in Williamsburg, Virginia. Living and conducting my project in Williamsburg helped me to develop as a global citizen through collaborating with new people, including academic professionals and local farmers to both collect research from and share research with towards a shared goal of sustainable development which requires and benefits from global perspectives. It was such a privilege to have the chance to travel to and work with people in and around Williamsburg and it was a fascinating experience to

compare how their culture, knowledge, practices and leadership differ from those local to me.



Figure 10: A photo of Charlie, one of my interviewees, giving me a tour of his farm. Figure 11: A photo of a few members of Charlies farm team and I. Figure 12: A photo of part of Charlies Farm.

Looking Forward

Going into the fourth and final year of my Geography and Sustainable Development degree at The University of St Andrews, I will carry the leadership and research experience I have learnt from the Laidlaw Scholarship into my dissertation. I believe that being a Laidlaw Scholar has effectively prepared me for my dissertation through the various attributes I have developed that are essential to any successful academic assessment such as integrity and critical thinking. In addition, my confidence has improved tremendously and as I approach my dissertation, I am filled with excitement rather than resistance that I might have experienced if I had not applied to the scholarship.

My proposed dissertation involves measuring the carbon sequestration potential of The St Andrews Forest with an aim to produce a carbon stock assessment baseline. I have the same supervisor, Professor Austin, for my dissertation as I have had for both of my Laidlaw projects over the scholarship. This is highly advantageous because we have built a strong professional relationship through our frequent communication and collaboration. Both the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholarship and my supervisor Professor Austin have inspired me to strive to make impactful and long-lasting change in the world. I will deliver this in my future when I enter a career in nature-based solutions research and policy implementation to contribute towards a more sustainable future.

Becoming an Alumni

The Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholarship has been a defining chapter of my undergraduate experience at The University of St Andrews, a catalyst for my leadership development and a foundation for my future. Through my journey as a Laidlaw scholar, I have learnt to be more self-aware, confident and constructive among many other capabilities that will guide me to excel in the future. It has been a privilege to part of a Laidlaw Scholarship cohort which has taught me to harness my potential to learn, grow and develop as a leader.

It is with this appreciation that I speak very highly about the Laidlaw Foundation and the scholarship that they offer. I will enthusiastically promote this scholarship to students I connect with. I am therefore also very keen to be an easily approachable and helpful alumni in the near future. I say this because I know through personal experience how important an alumni can be as a mentor. When I first heard about the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship I was eager to get opinions, reflections and tips from someone who had completed the programme in the past. I reached out to an alumni that I had been connected to through a friend and we arranged to meet to discuss her experience and answer some of my questions. I gained some very helpful and confidence building information from this meeting which I was very grateful for. I feel it is my duty to do the same for the next motivated students who are applying to this invaluable experience which I had the honour to be a participant.

Acknowledgements

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