

## **Part One: Impact Report**

### ***Project goals, objectives, and outcomes***

For my Leadership-in-Action project, I worked with the English-Speaking Union (ESU) at their London headquarters. The ESU is an education charity that specialises in public speaking and debating, organising various competitions and training opportunities for young people across the world. Since first taking up competitive debating at the start of university, I have grown so much and accessed so many opportunities. Beyond the actual ability to speak in public, this activity has given me confidence, critical thinking skills, exposure to new perspectives, and the capacity to structure my thoughts into clear arguments. Knowing how much public speaking has offered me, my goal with my LiA was to ensure that less advantaged young people, particularly secondary school students, could access the same activity and related opportunities that I did. The ESU was a particularly appropriate partner organisation due to the large array of bursaries offered to students, covering between 50% and 100% of the costs of an ESU programme. This allowed for any young person to access the opportunities available at the ESU, regardless of their background.

My work revolved around two main responsibilities. Firstly, I delivered public speaking workshops in state schools to students between the ages of 12 and 14. Secondly, I created the curriculum for the ESU's annual week-long summer camp, the 'Debate Academy'. I then attended the Debate Academy as a coach, taught the other coaches how to use the lesson plans and how to coach students in three different formats of debating, and led the training of the advanced stream for the week. I wrote approximately 80 lesson plans for students of four different ability levels, ranging from absolute beginners to very experienced debaters.

### ***Relevant stakeholders, events, and activities***

The first key event of my LiA was a training day for prospective debating coaches that was hosted in the second week of my project. I was attending both in my capacity as a future coach for the Debate Academy, but also as the architect of the Debate Academy curriculum. I was asked to deliver a mini workshop on debating, as not all the coaches were experienced with public speaking. In preparation, I created part of a PowerPoint presentation, then delivered approximately thirty minutes of training to the other volunteers that would be coaching on the summer camp. I introduced the rules and structure of the three subtly different debating formats that would be taught at the Debate Academy. I also offered insight into how to give feedback in a constructive and empowering manner, striking the

balance between identifying points of improvement for students and still encouraging them and praising what they had done well. This was one of the first elements of my LiA that I took lead on, and I was delighted that I could draw upon my experience to help others understand the format.

Providing full-day public speaking workshops for state schools was another critical event in my LiA. Part of the personal development aspect of my LiA was to learn how to teach and work with secondary-school students. While I had coached debating in the past, this was exclusively with university students and I wanted to know how to ensure younger students could benefit from similar training. I was somewhat thrown in the deep end with the public speaking workshops, which came earlier in the summer than the Debate Academy. We were teaching mixed-ability classes of 25-30 students and, unlike on the Debate Academy summer camp, the level of interest in the workshops varied hugely. This was in part because students at the Debate Academy chose to spend part of their summer debating, while our workshops were delivered on an ordinary school day which these students had no choice but to attend.

For me, delivering these workshops was a tremendously valuable experience. I learned a great deal from my coworkers, many of whom had previously been teachers, and grew in confidence as I delivered more of these workshops. At the beginning, I would co-lead workshops with another volunteer, but by the end I was sometimes leading workshops for the whole class on my own. It was also hugely rewarding to see, even on a small scale, the impact that public speaking can have on a young person's ability to articulate and advocate for themselves. Near the end of a day-long workshop, students had the opportunity to write and deliver a speech. I watched so many students grow in confidence across the day: painfully shy girls who wouldn't even raise their hands to speak at the beginning were reading out speeches by the end of the day, and class clowns often allowed themselves to take the activities seriously and shared genuinely thoughtful insights with their classmates. It is not an easy thing to do to stand in front of the whole class and speak in public, particularly at 12 or 14. Seeing students transform throughout the day, however, affirmed my belief that these skills matter and have a transformative impact on young people.

Finally, for the Debate Academy itself, I had the opportunity to put all my new skills to use and teach a small class for six days. I ran lessons, judged debates and provided feedback, and also participated in a show debate with other coaches to demonstrate what a competitive debate might look like. I was genuinely astounded both at the talent of many of the young people I was engaging with, but also at

their dedication to improvement and openness to feedback. And here, too, I saw many students of all ability levels from hugely different backgrounds transform and grow in confidence when exposed to concentrated, structured public speaking training among their peers. Most students who attend this summer camp return the following year, and often come back to coach. In talking to some of the coaches who had once attended as students, I was struck by the long-term impact this had on their confidence and life trajectories – everyone who attended had genuinely left with new friends, the ability to come up with and make structured arguments, and a self-belief which most teenagers lack. Again, I felt confident that public speaking and debating really can change lives.

### ***Future impact***

The intended impact of my LiA was to equip young people from all backgrounds – but especially those from less advantaged backgrounds – with public speaking and oracy skills that would open doors and enrich their lives. I believe that every student I taught over the summer gained these skills and will be better able to advocate themselves for years to come. The training resources that I created for the ESU will continue to be used in future editions of the Debate Academy and other programmes meaning that, into the future, my work will continue to help people. I have also learned a great deal from this experience about how secondary school students learn and how best to construct training programmes, teach, and provide constructive feedback for this age group. I will take these learnings with me in the future as I coach student debaters, judge schools debates, and provide workshops for Irish secondary schools – all responsibilities that I now feel more confident offering to schools and competitions. I have always cared deeply about access to the benefits of public speaking, but didn't feel equipped with the tools to help people engage with the activity. Now I do.

## **Part Two: Reflective Report**

### ***Good leadership***

As with many of my fellow Laidlaw scholars, I started the programme with a certain conception of what leadership looked like. I thought that becoming a better leader would mean taking on management positions and additional responsibilities within student societies, and maybe improving my time management. Though I do still think these things constitute part of leadership, I know now that being a manager or a leader does not necessarily make you a *good* leader, and there are far more ways to lead than I had previously understood.

I believe that a good leader is one who listens and makes people feel heard. At many points on the LEAD training days, I worked with other scholars from my cohort in discussion groups or on pitches and while we never selected any sort of 'team leader', I think we all practised leadership at the point where we worked together and listened to each other's ideas. The conventional understanding of a leader as some sort of manager whose sole priority is the bottom line misses, I think, the crucial ability of a leader to engage with their coworkers and understand where they are coming from. A key priority for me now is to always try to work *with* people, whether you are trying to teach them something or are working in a team together, rather than prioritise the end product over an engaging and inclusive process. This is a really important aspect of being a good leader.

I also think a leader needs to be true to themselves and their values. One of the rare opportunities of the Laidlaw scholarship was the chance to reflect on aspects of leadership that undergraduate students very rarely have the opportunity to do. When we travelled to the west of Ireland on our development weekend, our cohort devoted time to identifying what exactly our values were. I realised that one of the most important values I have is integrity – I don't believe that can or should be violated even if a goal is supposedly important. Good leadership must be value-led, otherwise a leader risks making trade-offs that they should not make.

### ***Leadership development***

Over the Laidlaw scholarship, my confidence in my own abilities and in my capacity to lead has improved hugely. Part of that came from the community of Laidlaw scholars that our cohort built, which has been an incredible source of support for me throughout the programme. I have also learned a great deal about self-compassion and treating myself with kindness when things are difficult. In the

times when I have struggled to believe that I was capable of something, or when the projects I was working on seemed like huge and insurmountable tasks, knowing that I had completed challenging things in the past and being able to respond to myself with compassion were critical for pushing through insecurity. At the end of my scholarship, I am a far more confident person and I truly feel capable of doing difficult things, even when a challenge feels daunting.

I have also learned a great deal about knowing when I am trying to do too much, and being willing to take a step back when I am too busy. Before and even during my Laidlaw scholarship, I have often been quick to commit to new projects and initiatives; I am genuinely passionate about many things and I want to help with issues that I think are important. But there are only so many hours in the day and it's impossible to do everything at once. If I am stretched too thin, I have learned, I won't be able to properly give my time and energy to any project. Over the course of the scholarship I have learned the importance of saying no to projects when I'm too busy. I have also learned the hard way that sometimes the best thing you can do for a project is quit – if I have too much on my plate, and if someone else with more time would be just as capable of doing a good job, then there are times when it has been necessary to reduce my role or even to quit entirely. I know now that doing so does not make me a bad person, but in fact is part of learning about who I am and how much I can give without approaching burn out.

Overall, my leadership journey on the Laidlaw scholarship has been one of self-discovery. I now have the confidence to know what I am capable of, and the courage to accept when I cannot take on any more. I have of course gained practical skills from the projects undertaken across both summers, but what I value most is the understanding about myself and my understanding of leadership that I have gained.

### ***Future steps***

The Laidlaw scholarship has been such a huge part of my university experience. The entire programme has been a series of challenges and opportunities to grow, and I have made some incredible friends over the last two years. Going forward, I feel equipped with the tools to tackle any challenge that will come and I know so much more about how to be a good leader than I could have imagined. I also found the opportunity to teach and make a difference truly inspiring. When I have completed my studies, I intend to gain my TEFL certificate so that I can teach English as a foreign language abroad –

this, I hope, is another area where teaching others will help them to unlock potentially life-changing opportunities.

The international aspect of my Summer 1 research project has also stayed with me, and I am currently applying to complete my masters degree in international law next year. My initial research involved the 2022 war in Ukraine, which continues to this day. I believe that this focus for my masters degree will allow me to continue to work on and research issues of critical importance to our world today, but from a different perspective than before. The Laidlaw scholarship has helped me in so many ways – to cement my values, to lead, to learn about things that I am passionate about, and to spread my knowledge to others. I will take all these learnings with me as I enter the next stage of my life.