

Reflective Essay: Leadership Development

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Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for providing the opportunity to partake in such an enriching experience. I would also like to thank the outstanding University of St Andrews Laidlaw Team for their support and guidance, especially during my Leadership in Action Project in Uganda. My gratitude also extends to my supervisor, Dr Ian Smith, for his immense knowledge and expertise and patiently mentoring me through my first research project. Last but not least, I am grateful to Women Rights Initiative (WORI) for the opportunity to put all my developed leadership skills into practice while providing the space for further development.

Reflecting on my journey as a Laidlaw Scholar, I'm filled with mixed emotions. I look back with a smile, yet there's a touch of sadness as I realise this remarkable experience is nearing its end.

Being selected as a Laidlaw Scholar alongside other talented students was an exciting feat - I applied for this prestigious scholarship program as a friend who was a scholar at the time and talked highly of the programme. However, beneath all my excitement, I feared that I might not measure up to the "standards" of a scholar. I had barely finished my second year, and due to COVID, I had yet to experience the authentic university experience; academically, I still felt like I had not upgraded to university "standards". On reflection, most of my fears and worries arose because I had placed too much emphasis on the academic aspect of the program, worrying that my lack of prior research experience would be a significant hindrance.

In hindsight, I've realised that my initial concerns were largely unwarranted. The Laidlaw programme is a dynamic and evolving journey - I have grown as a researcher, person, and leader. Through my time in the program, I've discovered that it isn't exclusive to perfect students but individuals who possess curiosity and a willingness to undergo personal development. In the following sections, I will delve into my personal development and highlight key moments from my journey as a Laidlaw Scholar.

Understanding myself and how I interact with others

One of my first interactions and memories with the programme was a catch-up call with fellow scholars who had missed the notable weekend away at Hospitalfield (I could not attend at the time as I had tested positive for COVID-19). In that conversation, I gained insights into the program's leadership focus, particularly on self-awareness and its impact on interpersonal interactions and leadership style. A tool that I and my cohort used in this process was the DISC (Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Conscientiousness) assessment. Unlike previous personality assessments, the DISC assessment not only reaffirmed what I already knew about myself but also presented my personality traits in a way that clarified my strengths, stressors, and interpersonal dynamics.

The assessment revealed that I have an "iS" personality (see Figure 1), emphasising my value for connections and inclusivity. While this highlighted my strong interpersonal skills and approachability, it highlighted some stressors I had previously overlooked. Specifically, I avoided being direct in expressing my views, disliked being objective when providing feedback, and hesitated to push others to meet deadlines. Reflecting on these stressors, I realised they stemmed from a fear of causing a rift in my relationships or unintentionally hurting others.

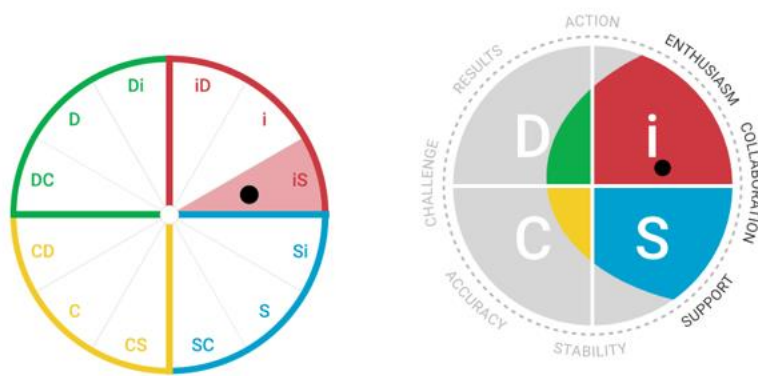


Figure 1: DiSC Profile

To address this, I discussed the issue with my peers and gained valuable insights. One piece of advice that resonated with me was the importance of leveraging my strong communication skills. I recognised that by choosing my words carefully and conveying my intentions positively, I could be both direct and gentle in my approach to feedback and motivation.

As a result, my primary goal for the upcoming summer and the rest of the year became clear: to maintain my people-centred and empathetic approach while embracing a bolder and more direct communication style, delivered with gentleness and good intentions.

Research Project

As my second year drew to a close, I faced the prospect of a summer research project that initially seemed daunting. However, it ultimately became one of my most significant academic achievements and highlights. Despite my lack of prior experience in academic research, I embarked on a six-week exploration of the evolution of Rotary International (RI) from a strictly exclusive club to a more inclusive global organisation.

Fortunately, I had the invaluable support and guidance of my supervisor, Dr Ian Smith, who had previously lectured my Microeconomics classes. While I was eager to learn from my experienced professor and delve into this new topic, I also felt nervous and inadequate in the face of the challenge. I candidly expressed my concerns to my supervisor, who reassured me that the research process was well-structured and there was no need to be worried.

This experience turned out to be incredibly rewarding as I gradually acquired new research skills and became a mini-expert on Rotary Clubs, a development I had never anticipated. More importantly, it taught me the immense value of curiosity and seeking assistance when encountering difficulties. My supervisor's well-organised approach had a profound influence on me. I began creating weekly plans at the start of each week, scheduling regular meetings for updates and guidance, and proactively seeking clarification when needed. This proactive approach resulted in a fulfilling and enriching learning experience, both academically and personally.

Summer Talk Sessions

During the summer, I and my fellow cohort were fortunate to hear from six distinguished expert speakers, and two of these talks left a lasting impression on me.

The first impactful talk, centred on imposter syndrome, was delivered by Tom Burdge, a St Andrews alumnus and Laidlaw Scholar. My key takeaways were:

1. Feeling like an imposter is a common experience, and not feeling that way might indicate an unhealthy amount of pride.
2. Refrain from comparison and instead embrace my own unique journey.
3. Accept positive feedback without discounting it and learn from my weaknesses rather than fixating on them.

Given my previous doubts about my knowledge and capabilities as a Laidlaw Scholar, this talk resonated with me. I found Tom's insights genuine, considering we had both been in the same shoes.

The second talk that deeply resonated with me was delivered by Bodie Guy, who had extensive experience in finance and philanthropy — a career path I aspire to have. During

Bodie's discussions, I found another application for my "Is" personality in conflict resolution, where building personal connections is essential. This perspective shed a positive light on a trait I sometimes viewed negatively, as I tended to care too much about others to my detriment. However, taking Tom's advice from earlier, I held onto this newfound appreciation for my communication style while actively working on expressing my views when necessary.

Furthermore, Bodie's discussion challenged my autocratic view of leadership. Through a practical example of servant leadership in his own role, he illustrated the importance of first serving others, particularly in his work with disadvantaged indigenous tribes entrenched in long-standing conflicts. His narrative underscored the significance of comprehending the context, culture, and people you collaborate with and adapting your leadership style accordingly. This real-world example reshaped my understanding of effective leadership and reinforced the value of empathy and flexibility in leadership roles.

2022 Laidlaw Conference: Change Maker, Not Change Talker

One of my highlights of the programme was the 2022 Laidlaw Conference held in London. With the theme "Change Maker, Not Change Talker," the conference proved to be a wellspring of inspiration, collaboration opportunities, and a chance to broaden my network. It was remarkable how one evening I could engage in discussions about entrepreneurship and venture capital with Susannah Kemp and the following day delve into the intricacies of new technology for snow sport injury recovery with a fellow scholar. This experience underscored the significance of having such a diverse network of scholars and deepened my appreciation for the opportunities to contribute to and gain from the Laidlaw network.

During the conference, I was challenged to step outside my comfort zone and collaborate with individuals I had just met. Together, we were tasked with creating a presentation on a pressing issue in education and proposing potential solutions. Initially, selecting a specific topic proved challenging, given our varying perspectives on what was most crucial in education at the time. However, we devised a brilliant idea of creating an acrostic poem using the word "impact" (see Figure 2). This innovative approach secured our victory in the presentation competition and taught me a valuable lesson – that everyone's viewpoints can be expressed, reinforcing my confidence in sharing my ideas.



Figure 2: Presenting Impact Acoustic during the 2022 Laidlaw Conference (Photo: Laidlaw Foundation)

During the conference, I wrote down several thought-provoking quotes:

- Sally Newton's insight to "link arms with others to push for change when you feel discouraged or need more power" reminded me of the collective strength of collaboration.
- Gina Miller's wisdom, advocating not to exhaust oneself to incapacity and emphasising the Triple Bottom Line—People, Profit, and Planet—underscored the importance of a balanced approach to achieving meaningful change.

I could fill this page with quotes, but I want to emphasise that the conference allowed me to engage with ethical leaders who were genuine change-makers in their respective fields. Their wisdom and experiences reaffirmed why the Laidlaw program strongly emphasises leadership and the cultivation of values needed to become catalysts for positive change in our society.

Leadership in Action: Women Rights Initiative (WORI)

This summer, my Leadership in Action (LiA) Project led me to collaborate with Women Rights Initiative (WORI), a grassroots NGO run by women in Jinja, Uganda. Choosing to work with WORI was driven by our shared values encapsulated in their vision statement: "A society free from violence that recognises the needs and rights of women and youth." This vision resonated deeply with my passion for addressing the inequalities girls and women face, particularly in Africa. Additionally, I looked forward to the opportunity to experience what it meant to work in an organisation where my directors and supervisors were women, recognising the relevance of such experiences for my future corporate roles.

My designated role as the "Organic Demonstration Farm Intern" initially left me uncertain about my responsibility. However, I reminded myself that just as I had become proficient in understanding Rotary Clubs in a mere six weeks, I could similarly excel in this role.

My time with the WORI team proved to be an enriching experience. In my first week, I participated in a leadership training program reminiscent of the Laidlaw experience, focusing on Strategic Communication and Impact Reporting for Visibility. This training proved invaluable, especially given that a primary aspect of my role involved fundraising. It equipped me with the necessary tools to develop an effective fundraising strategy.

In my second week in Jinja, I delved into the intricacies of my role, and I was granted significant freedom and flexibility in executing my tasks and projects. This newfound autonomy allowed me to apply the leadership skills I had acquired over the past year. Although this freedom was exhilarating, it posed initial challenges as I grappled with many ideas. However, I had to remind myself of the constraints of time and resources, which compelled me to become a more discerning decision-maker. I learned to carefully select which grants to pursue and which fundraising strategies would be most effective for the Organic Demonstration Farm Project. Occasionally, I wrestled with setting unrealistic weekly goals, but I reminded myself that I had a six-week timeframe and that quality consistently outweighed quantity.

While my role primarily revolved around proposal development, grant writing, and resource mobilisation for the Organic Demonstration Farm, my background as an Economics major initially presented challenges regarding the writing aspect. I expressed my difficulties to

Director Rose, who encouraged me to contribute to other roles within the organisation. This allowed me to channel my creativity into creating infographics for economic empowerment programs, recording and producing videos featuring the girls and women in the shelter, and assisting with the visibility strategy—collaboratively creating a LinkedIn profile for WORI alongside my supervisor, Miria.

Working within the tight-knit WORI organisation, collaborating with women in diverse roles, and witnessing their profound impact in Uganda's Eastern region was an incredible experience. In addition, I learnt the need to strive for balance when pouring all your energy into your role and remembering to care for yourself, echoing Gina Miller's quote. Overall, my time at WORI reaffirmed the potential of a team led by dedicated and selfless leaders who work together effectively to effect positive change.

Future as a Laidlaw Scholar

Looking back on my transformative journey as a Laidlaw Scholar, I am immensely grateful for the invaluable space and network this program has provided. It has catalysed personal growth, fostering introspection and offering unwavering support. This experience has shaped me personally and empowered me to become a more assertive and fearless leader, unafraid to champion the changes I aspire to see in the world.

As I transition into a Laidlaw Scholar alum, I eagerly anticipate the next chapter of my life, armed with the knowledge and insights I've gained. I aspire to extend the same support and empathy I've received to those around me while gently motivating them to make strides towards growth and transformation.

Numerous ideas for giving back to the remarkable Laidlaw Foundation and Scholars Network swirl in my mind. Foremost among them is establishing a discussion group or mentorship program tailored to scholars from underrepresented backgrounds, connecting them with scholars with similar interests and goals. Such a platform would provide mentorship and support, particularly during moments of self-doubt. I firmly believe that with the extensive network of scholars, implementing such an initiative would be feasible and profoundly beneficial to all involved.

While I still have a couple of months remaining as part of the St Andrews 2022 Laidlaw Cohort, I am filled with anticipation, wondering about the unique opportunities and experiences that the remainder of this journey has in store for me.