

Reflecting on My Laidlaw Journey

Introduction

It was a January Wednesday. I was riding the bus back home to Dundee when I noticed I had a new email in my Outlook inbox. A lecturer of mine informed me that the student she intended to be a supervisor for under the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Programme was no longer able to apply and asked if I would like to apply in their stead and have her as my supervisor. Without much thought, I agreed and drafted my application that same night. Little did I know that this unexpected turn of events would be the beginning of an extraordinary two-year journey during which I have been the beneficiary of unique and outstanding opportunities, and grown as a student, scientist, leader and overall, as a person. As the end of this journey is fast approaching, it is worth reflecting on my trajectory as a Laidlaw scholar.

What I gained from the programme

Leadership training

Before the Laidlaw programme, I had been led to believe that leadership had a very rigid shape. An effective leader was someone who captured attention and power, someone who was stoic, hierarchical and somewhat unapproachable. It is through the leadership training that I could appreciate that there are plenty of leadership styles which are dynamic and evolving. Leadership, like many things in life, is a spectrum.

I recall with fondness our first leadership event in Hospitalfield where we were exposed to several different styles and assessed our own preferred styles through the DiSC profiles. This was accurate to the extent that it made me recognise how often I am very goal-oriented when it comes to group work sometimes neglecting the importance of the social dynamics among teammates and the priority that wellbeing must have both for the effectiveness of attaining the end goal and simply for the sake of empathy.

Through the other presentations and exercises on team building, communication, etc., I have expanded my view of what leadership means. Since then, I have tried to play around with my leadership style and compensate in the areas that I find myself lacking. This acquired a practical dimension during my LiA project in which that classical view of leadership was inapplicable; however, I could see myself and others leading according to these newly learnt (for me) styles with commendable results.

Summer 1: Research

This was my first opportunity to participate in a scientific research internship. It consisted of investigating the impact that the physical phenomenon known as Dzhani­bekov's effect could have on Earth's rotation and magnetic field. To this end, I spent several weeks building devices that allowed me to record in slow-motion scaled-down models of the planet rotating in free fall to simulate how Earth moves in space. The project almost exclusively involved DIY materials and demanded a lot of hand labour.

What I learnt from this internship was invaluable. I experienced first-hand the hurdles of research: the unpredictability of results, the flexible hours (often tending towards stretching), the frustration of failure, etc. I came away from it with refined manual practical skills, more physics knowledge in a specialised field of research previously foreign to me, and greater adaptability and resourcefulness. I developed a better capacity to handle stress and formulate alternative solutions when things do not go according to plan. Furthermore, I became more confident in attempting some of my ideas first rather than discarding them preventively out of fear that they were not perfect from the start. I accepted that in research you are bound to make mistakes and not arrive at your desired result the initial time or the first few times or maybe at all, but daring to ask, try, fail and persevere will enrich you in more and different ways than you can predict at first glance. As Einstein is said to have remarked, 'If we knew what we were doing, it would not be called research.'

Despite how passionate I am when retelling my summer internship, this along with other research experiences has made me realise that academic research is not what I wish as a

career path. Even though to some this would be a harsh realisation for a scientist by training I am grateful to have had the opportunity to partake in research and acquire more clarity regarding my future.

Summer 2: Leadership in Action

I selected Think Pacific as the organisation I wanted to work under. The project I applied to was focused on Public Health, though a combination of circumstances resulted in it being fused with the Youth Empowerment scheme. This encompassed five different elements: the construction of a health dispensary/local clinic, a culture course, assistance in the delivery of workshops on mental health and Communicable and Non-Communicable Diseases, and participation in a Think Tank to propose ways to make the project results sustainable. As someone whose mother has been immersed in the field of public health promotion at all levels of governance for as long as I have been alive, I felt personally drawn because of the tangible impacts on people's physical and mental well-being that I expected this project to have. As well, as a STEM student entering my final year of university, this meant to me an opportunity to engage in work and acquire skills mostly unrelated to my degree programme, allowing me to diversify my experience toolbox.

This was a fantastic ordeal. I had the chance to fully immerse myself in a culture so far removed from my own. I stayed with a host family with whom I created meaningful bonds, I learnt a new language and several rich traditions, I saw the most amazing landscapes, and I had delicious food.

Nevertheless, not everything was idyllic. The management, planning and supervision of the project were often lacking, and the project involved less work and achieved less than I would have liked. Additionally, there were times when I and many of the other Scholars sensed that our travelling to Fiji and volunteering in this form was an ineffective way to attain the project goals. We felt that most of the work that we did could easily have been done by local people who would have benefitted a lot more and had a greater need for the resources that had been spent to take us there. This is easily a criticism that can be

applied to most volunteering, but perhaps I would not have formulated it with such conviction had I not come on this trip.

Either way, I did benefit massively from this experience.

I exercised and refined my interpersonal skills by working with, networking and befriending Scholars from a plethora of places and disciplines, and by practising cross-cultural dialogue and understanding with the local Fijians. An important part of the latter took form when I collaborated with a fellow scholar to produce and deliver Spanish language and salsa classes for the locals, which they very much enjoyed and appreciated, exemplifying my planning and management skills too. Additionally, I managed to form cherished bonds with both the locals and the Scholars that I wish to sustain in the future.

However beautiful Fiji is, our stay in the settlement was not a paradise. We struggled physically, socially and mentally to adapt to a new and challenging environment. Many of us fell ill, felt homesick, and felt doubtful, but at the end of the day, we persevered and completed the project. We showed that we could take on a challenge head-on, adapting, and making the best out of it. We managed to create a support network among us and aid each other in facing the difficulties that arose along the way. One instance that I will cherish forever was when we, the Scholars, came to an agreement that the way the project was being handled by the leaders was below standard and that we had demands to make. I admire the soberness and level-headedness of the Scholars who directed our collective efforts to demand change and assert our concerns. The way this was handled was commendable and I wish to learn from it as much as possible.

Finally, I gained first-hand awareness of the harsh material conditions that vast amounts of the population live in every day. Coming from the University of St Andrews, known to be an elite and wealthy bubble, having that contrast has helped me develop more appreciation for the level of comfort that I am privileged to have, but it also has inspired in me a sense of duty towards abolishing these inequalities and difficulties that I hope one day I can transform into a tangible endeavour.

Networking and international experience

It is thanks to the Laidlaw Scholars programme that I met some of the most interesting individuals I have ever encountered, both in my university and internationally, spanning a broad range of backgrounds. I have been able to connect with a considerable number of highly educated, accomplished, intelligent, forward-thinking, admirable and inspiring young people, whose progress and successes in their lives and careers I hope to follow through my personal relationships and the Scholars Network. This list will only continue to expand, especially given that I have been invited to the Dublin conference this October, where I intend to connect with more outstanding Scholars.

Due to the summer research internship, I spent a significant amount of time conversing and sometimes consulting with the postgraduate students in the School of Physics. This gave me an insight into the reality of the lifestyle of a researcher and allowed me to peek at an extensive range of research topics. Likewise, thanks to the leadership summer presentations held at my university, I have become acquainted with many academics and professionals, who have helped to morph my outlook on several fields of knowledge and my conception of what leadership is.

As well, and as should be evidenced by the above, the Laidlaw programme has allowed me to set foot on places I had not expected to ever visit. The Foundation's commitment to fostering global citizenship has provided Scholars like me with an avenue to expand our horizons, which will be a massive advantage in this increasingly globalised world.

The path forward

Overall, the Laidlaw programme played a pivotal role in my professional, academic and personal development. I see the research, leadership, communication and teamwork skills, alongside the experiences, qualifications and connections that it has granted me as worthy assets that will shape and accompany me for life in my career and my personal endeavours.

I will also surely conserve and nourish the valued friendships that I have made along the way and continue to be inspired by the stunning group of bright minds that I have the

pride of calling my peers and fellow Scholars. I take with me the lessons, insights and reflections fruits of my interactions with them hoping that there will be more in the future and aiming to emulate the attributes that I have come to admire in them.

Giving back

The Laidlaw programme has bestowed me with opportunities I would not have imagined to be able to access when I first entered university, and I acknowledge the privilege that I have had to be one of the select few who could enjoy these benefits. Thus, it is fair to wonder: what do I do, or can I do to give back to the Foundation and programme?

Currently, still an undergraduate and a Laidlaw scholar, I am always enthused whenever the chance comes up to discuss my research or my LiA project. I am passionate about what I accomplished and experienced, and I enjoy analysing the ways they have helped me grow. Consequentially, I happily recommend the programme to all eligible undergraduates I encounter highlighting the opportunities they can have at their disposal, and the myriad of ways in which they will develop academically and personally through them. In the future, I will proudly and gladly continue to do so within and without the confines of St Andrews.

Furthermore, I would be thrilled to be contacted by the Foundation after the conclusion of my time in university to share my valuable experience with up-and-coming generations of Laidlaw leaders and researchers. I hope that my journey can serve as an inspiration and that the challenges I have overcome as a part of it make future Scholars realise the potential that lies within them and the extent to which they can go.

Acknowledgements

As a final remark to this reflective essay, I want to express my sincerest gratitude and appreciation to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for the creation of this fantastic programme, the unique opportunities I have received as a Laidlaw scholar, and the support and mentorship that I have been given during these two years. Furthermore, I want to extend my thanks to Dr Irena Vorgul for being my point of access to the Laidlaw Leadership

and Research Programme and acting as my research supervisor. Lastly, I want to thank all the Scholars who have accompanied me on this journey and have inspired me to be a better student, a better leader and a better person.