

## **From Coding to Craft: My Laidlaw Leadership Development Journey**

*Word Count: 2058*

### **Introduction**

In January of 2023, I submitted my application to the Laidlaw Scholars Leadership and Research Programme. I was excited for the opportunity to expand and continue my ongoing research project that I had started in my first year of university, coupled with formal leadership training and experiences. I am an incoming fourth-year student studying biochemistry. After graduation, I aim to pursue a PhD in Biochemistry to work towards my long-term aspiration to be a research scientist. Being a scientist requires research skills, as well as leadership skills for project and laboratory management. The Laidlaw Scholars Programme provided a unique opportunity to develop important research and transferrable skills for my future goals within the same programme.

My time as a Laidlaw Scholar has been such a valuable enriching experience. In my first summer in the programme, I worked on a computational research project with my mentor, Dr V Anne Smith. For my Leadership in Action (LiA) experience this summer, I spent six weeks in Kerala, India for the inaugural session of the centrally organised CraftHER project. As a Laidlaw Scholar, I gained valuable research experience, an enriching international experience, an understanding of leadership styles and how I function as a leader, networking opportunities, and lasting friendships.

### **Laidlaw Summer Experiences**

Initially, one of my primary motivations for applying to the Laidlaw Scholars Programme was to conduct research, develop valuable scientific skills, and grow as a leader within a research context. The research experience I gained from my first summer in the programme was very impactful. I worked on a computational biology research project doing a meta-analysis studying the correlation between mRNA and protein expression. Through this, I developed important concrete research skills in programming, data analysis and presentation, scientific writing, and statistics. These allowed me to develop skills I have developed through my biochemistry degree programme. As a computational project, most of my work was computer-based, coding, reading research papers, and analysing data. As such, I worked from home. Through this structure, I fostered self-leadership skills, essential in scientific research, such as initiative, discipline, problem-solving, and project and time management. I also aimed to improve my communication skills through the Laidlaw programme. While working on my research project, I practised scientific communication aimed at different target audiences. I have

had the opportunity to discuss and write about my project for a general audience in my Laidlaw research report and poster. This was challenging due to my research's abstract and computational nature. It provided an excellent opportunity to practice communicating complex ideas clearly and accurately to a general audience, an important skill in science. On the other end of the spectrum, I am gaining practice writing about my research for a scientific audience as I continue to work on writing up my Laidlaw research for publication. The skills I have learned about scientific communication I will continue to apply and develop throughout my scientific career.

Another goal I had at the beginning of my Laidlaw journey was to grow my leadership skills in an unfamiliar context, which I did during my LiA experience on the CraftHER project in India. Our CraftHER cohort comprised six Laidlaw Scholars from various universities. Started by the Indian ethical fashion brand Swara - Voice of Women<sup>1</sup>, this life-changing experience centred around entrepreneurship and the amplification of women artisans in the handicraft sector. This unique experience deepened my global awareness and broadened my perspective by being immersed in an unfamiliar culture. Throughout the project, we worked with five partner organisations: Save the Loom<sup>2</sup>, Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Kerala<sup>3</sup>, Swara, Archana Women's Centre<sup>4</sup>, and Forest Post<sup>5</sup>. Although these organisations had different structures and strategies, what they had in common was their goal and work supporting women workers and entrepreneurs, including women artisans in the handicraft sector, such as tailoring, weaving, and pottery, as well as other diverse fields. We met and connected with women artisans, entrepreneurs, and activists. Through these interactions, I practised and learned the value of active listening and clear communication, especially when talking through a translator. I learned so much from these talented women, and I am truly grateful to them for sharing their time and stories with us.

My confidence grew over the six-week CraftHER project, and I learned much about myself. Living in such an unfamiliar environment was helpful for self-learning because it helped me uncover what traits of mine are consistent across many contexts and how I respond to unfamiliar situations. In addition to the profound personal impact the CraftHER project had on me, it presented an opportunity for me to develop skills that are not typically covered within my biochemistry course at

---

<sup>1</sup> Website: <https://swaravow.com/> ; Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/swaravow/>

<sup>2</sup> Website: <https://www.savetheloom.org/> ; Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/savetheloom\\_org](https://www.instagram.com/savetheloom_org)

<sup>3</sup> National SEWA Website: <https://www.sewa.org/> ; SEWA Kerala Website: <https://sewakerala.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Website: <https://www.archanawomencentre.org/> ; Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/archanaijpt/>

<sup>5</sup> Website: <https://forestpost.in/> ; Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/forestpost.in/>

university such as entrepreneurship, marketing, publicity, graphic design, fashion, artisanship, personal reflective writing, and intercultural communication. The project's focus on entrepreneurship and marketing allowed me to learn about digital networking, like social media marketing. In an increasingly digital world, this practice and experience will be valuable in the future. These skills are transferrable to my future career in science, helping me grow as a well-rounded person.

Embarking on the Laidlaw Scholars program, another key goal I had was to improve at networking, a skill that I have found challenging in the past. I have had many opportunities as a Laidlaw Scholar to practice networking through leadership training events and my research project. I especially got to put into practice what I learned about networking from the earlier part of the programme during the CraftHER project. Travelling around Kerala and meeting incredible people, I practised networking and forging meaningful connections, often across language barriers. At the beginning of the project, I did not feel confident asking questions to the incredible people we met. My confidence increased throughout the project, allowing me to develop deeper and more meaningful connections. My experience on the CraftHER project has provided me with continued opportunities to practice networking by working to maintain the friendships and connections I made in India now that I am back. These experiences have helped grow my confidence in networking. I am excited to put these into practice when I attend the Laidlaw conference in Leeds this October.

On the CraftHER project, I also had the opportunity to develop my leadership skills in a team setting, complementing my first Laidlaw summer working independently on a project. Our cohort bonded quickly both as friends and as a team. We quickly learned each other's strengths and skills, and our teamwork grew with each partner organisation we worked with. I learned about how I function within a team through real experiences and reflection. I also learned that leadership roles do not necessarily have to be appointed roles. During CraftHER, each of us stepped up and led various aspects of the project at different times. Our cohort grew together as a wonderful team and group of friends. It provided an excellent example of a well-functioning team. Jayshree P.K, an incredible renaissance woman we met at Archana Women's Centre, imparted a striking piece of advice: "Use your space." This message wonderfully encapsulates my takeaways and experiences from my time in Kerala.

## **Understanding My Leadership Style**

Outside of my primary Laidlaw summer experiences, I learned a lot from the program's leadership training. They provided vocabulary and frameworks to understand leadership, group dynamics, my work style, and others' leadership styles. In the first leadership event, the retreat at the start of the programme, we received our DISC profiles. DISC is a personality type model that categorises people based on their personality, communication-, and workstyles from a questionnaire. The four key styles described by the DISC model are Dominance (D), Influence (I), Steadiness (S), and Compliance (C). The model also describes other styles between the four key styles, such as di and sc. Each style encompasses certain traits and tendencies.

We each received a report with our intensities for each style. My report showed that my core style was Influence with a high intensity. Adjectives listed about my style in my report were upbeat, optimistic, confident, influential, sociable, flexible, talkative, and enthusiastic. I was initially surprised by this result. When we were learning about the styles, I saw myself within the Compliance and Steadiness boxes. However, my perception has changed since then from reflecting on my experiences before the Laidlaw programme and my leadership experiences since starting the programme, working on the committee of the Disabled Students' Network at my university, directing a musical, and the CraftHER project. I now think the Influence style did fit better than I initially thought. I have learned that while I value productivity, structure, and accomplishing goals to a high standard, particularly in the work that I produce, when working with others, I especially prioritise fostering positive interpersonal dynamics and the group's well-being. However, I still do not entirely identify with my DISC profile result. No personality model is fully representative of reality. However, it was a valuable tool to learn about leadership and different leadership styles. The DISC framework provided by the Laidlaw leadership training facilitated further reflection that changed how I perceive myself as a team member and leader.

## **Conclusion**

I have gained so much from my experience as a Laidlaw Scholar. By reflecting on who I was before starting the programme and who I am now at the end, I have grown a lot as a leader and person. I am sure I will continue to see the full extent of my growth from the programme moving forward. The formal leadership training has and will continue to help me better understand myself as a leader, understand others, and how people function within a team. The discussion and activities in the training also facilitated reflection, allowing me to identify areas I would like to improve and take

meaningful, concrete steps towards this self-improvement through effective goal setting. The research experience and skills I gained through my Laidlaw research project will be an important stepping stone in my career. Through my research project, I have had the opportunity to present my research poster at the St Andrews Interdisciplinary Science Conference (SISCO), and I am working on writing up my research to submit for publication. The CraftHER project increased my thoughtfulness as a consumer, improved my cross-communication skills, networking, and teamwork skills, and, most importantly, greatly expanded my worldview through international connection and collaboration. I have also noticed an increase in my confidence in communication, asking questions, and networking, which were some of the primary goals I had for myself during the programme. The different experiences provided through the Laidlaw programme have increased my knowledge about myself in several different situations, which has helped me understand how I function as a leader, team member, society member, and friend. Finally, I have gained wonderful friendships and human connections from this programme, which I will cherish.

As I approach the end of my time as a Laidlaw Scholar, I have reflected on how I can give back to the programme and remain an active member of the Laidlaw community as an alumnus. Firstly, I intend to stay connected and active on the Laidlaw Scholars Network website. Developing mentorship skills was one of my goals for the programme. Active participation in the Scholars Network as an alumnus will be an excellent way for me to continue to contribute to the programme and continue developing as a leader. My long-term aspiration is to be a scientific researcher in academia. If one day I have my own lab at a university that has the Laidlaw Programme, I might even have the opportunity to be a research mentor for future Laidlaw Scholars.

### **Acknowledgements**

*Thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation and Lord Laidlaw for their generous support, which has made my experiences and growth as a Laidlaw Scholar possible. Thank you to my research advisor, Dr V. Anne Smith, for her mentorship and invaluable support during my Laidlaw Research project. Thank you to everyone involved in the CraftHER project for making my LiA experience unforgettable, especially project leaders Asha Scaria and Preetha Mathews for all their hard work and support. Finally, thank you to the 2023 St Andrews Laidlaw cohort and the St Andrews Laidlaw team for their continued support and guidance through the programme.*