

*Only halfway through my time at university and I have been able achieve my zenith of ambition.*

In the summer before university, I thought about what I wanted to achieve, besides setting the foundations for a career in medicine. I knew I did not want to graduate university as the same person I was when I started. I wanted to be someone who had faced challenges and overcome them. Met different people and befriended them. Done things that were very much out of my comfort zone and most importantly have stories to tell. The problem with that goal was that I did not know how to go about achieving it. The Laidlaw Programme offered me these personal tests. With my journey now coming to an end, I will be telling the story of how I was able to develop as a person these past two years, what I have learned from the leadership training I received, the obstacles I have overcome and what this journey has taught me.

## **Leadership development**

My first Laidlaw encounter requiring me to step out of my comfort zone was the application process. It meant putting myself out there in search of a project and supervisor but, having recently developed an interest in medical research particularly in vision and the eyes, I was determined. After sending out emails to different people and multiple rejections, I was introduced to my supervisor whose focus was on Cerebral Visual Impairment also known as CVI, one of the most common forms of visual impairment amongst children<sup>1,2,3</sup>. This marked the beginning of what will be a career long interest in CVI.

Our first leadership event was in March 2023, when the cohort got to spend a weekend away. During this, we got to learn more about the programme as well as our personality styles and communication preferences through the Disc model. I found this useful as the profiles helped me put into words the challenges I face with communication and teamworking, so that I can work on these in the future. We were also given an opportunity to put into practice what we had learned with group activities. These taught me a very valuable lesson in teamworking, the groups would be made up of students from different disciplines meaning many diverse opinions and views were contributed when working on our end-goal. This was a new and interesting environment to work in; it taught me how communication styles can vary depending on who you are speaking to.

My first Laidlaw summer despite being focused on research was an incredible self-leadership learning opportunity. My biggest challenge that summer was managing myself in uncertainty. I was faced with diversions throughout my project and as someone who likes routine and consistency this was unsettling. But with the help of my supervisor and through the Laidlaw summer teaching sessions, I learned the value in embracing uncertainty and found by the end of my project that it was the part I most enjoyed. I was able also to improve my ability to problem solve in times of uncertainty.

The Oxford Ethical Leadership programme consisted of six sessions focused around leading with Purpose, Growth, Love, Integrity, Wisdom and Practice. This leadership training introduced virtues around leadership that I had not heard of before like how to lead ethically and allowed me to focus on developing self-leadership. I enjoyed the break-out rooms in each session as I was able to speak with scholars from around the world and it was a great opportunity to practice what we had just learned through group activities.

Our last leadership event took place before we went away for our summer and helped quell my concerns going into my project, through speaking to other scholars about their projects and how some felt the same way. We also discussed more aspects of ethical leadership that could be applied to our summer. These were things like dealing with prejudice and bias and the impact making decisions using our own virtues and beliefs has on others.

## **Leadership project in Sri Lanka**

My Laidlaw research project in the summer of 2023 was aimed at understanding the best way to help teachers in the UK understand CVI and measure their level of awareness of CVI. The results from this showed that 98% of primary school teachers and 80% secondary school teachers had not heard of CVI. However, after learning how a child is affected by CVI especially in a learning environment, teachers were willing to make simple cost-free changes to their classroom and teaching to support a child. After seeing the impact knowledge had on increasing CVI support, I knew I wanted to continue raising awareness. So, this summer I travelled to Sri Lanka to conduct a CVI awareness outreach project in partnership with the international charity CVI Scotland.

### **Preparation**

When my self-defined project got approved, I was overwhelmed with emotion. I was excited as I would be fulfilling my goal of stepping out of my comfort zone and learning more about myself whilst doing work I am passionate about. However, it would be my first time solo travelling and my first time being away from home for a very long period. So naturally, I was quite anxious, and I didn't know what to expect.

My project this summer had two parts to it. The first, carrying out a screening programme for CVI amongst children in mainstream schools in Sri Lanka and the second, to carry out CVI talks to spread awareness and understanding of the condition. These would be delivered to the community to empower people to learn about CVI for themselves and to help them understand how they can support children with CVI. In theory, it sounded like an amazing idea, however, to carry out this very ambitious project required a lot of work. When my supervisor and I met to figure out how we would carry out this project, we found ourselves staring at what felt like a wall, a very blank one because we had no connections in the island. Through networking, by the time it came to me leaving for Sri Lanka, we had managed to put together an international team of doctors based all over the world to help carry out this project. I left for Sri Lanka feeling determined for what lay ahead.

## **My leadership learnings**

I quickly hit my first obstacle, which was trying to get my foot in the door. To carry out the first aspect of my project a lot of permissions were needed so I spent my first few weeks reaching out to schools and organisations. This was quite a challenging time; I was either ignored or told 'no', repeatedly. I then faced delays organising the research aspect of the project, which meant it would not be able to take place this summer. So, just a few weeks into my project and I already felt quite defeated.

I had arrived in Sri Lanka with great expectations, and I was left wondering where everything had gone wrong. I reached out to my supervisor with these concerns and after speaking with her I realised that this was what the summer was all about. I wanted to make an impact this summer and help a community. To do this was not going to be easy and what I was facing now was my first challenge and there would be more to come. Realising this prompted me to then reflect on my leadership training in the past and I began to think which leadership qualities I could apply in this situation:

1. Problem-solving
2. Courage
3. Adaptability
4. Compassion
5. Gratitude

My leadership development goal this summer was to gain confidence in myself, and my abilities and I realised to do this I needed to do and be these five things. So, I sat myself down and tried to figure out what things I would need to do to move on with my project and how being courageous for example would help.

My summer took off from there, I focused my efforts on the second aspect of my project which was to hold CVI talks. While organising these talks, I made it my aim to implement these five qualities into everything I did and in doing so I really saw a difference, not just in the success of my efforts, but also experience. I really understood the value in approaching challenges with a growth mindset which I believe was fundamental in turning around my summer.

Additionally, carrying out these CVI talks gave me an opportunity to connect with people from the community and I was able to establish international networks. It was rewarding to hear from participants on the impact these talks had in helping them understand the condition, especially when participants were parents or carers of children with CVI. Through the talks, I was also able to develop my skills and gain more experience in public speaking. The talks that were carried out varied in length with some being ten minutes and others two hours. They also varied in content as I delivered talks to healthcare professionals, carers, teachers, therapists and parents. I was able to further develop my communication skills because of this.

## **The future**

Having now completed my Laidlaw programme journey I feel as though my future is much clearer. Through the opportunities provided, I have been able to discover a passion for medical research and found that along with a career in medicine this is something I would like to pursue. I intend for my work in CVI to continue and I plan to return to Sri Lanka to continue raising awareness for CVI and widening the long-lasting communities of support that have been created. Also, I hope to carry out the research we had set out to do as it will be incredibly valuable to know how many children in mainstream schools in Sri Lanka potentially have CVI so they can get the support they need. Again, this was all achieved by the experiences Laidlaw has allowed me to have but also the teaching along the way. Through the programme, I have learned what it means to be an effective leader and a good team player and what I can do based on my personality and skill set to achieve this. I have been able to develop my communication skills for both professional and personal situations. This will be valuable to me as a future doctor for effective teamworking and patient care. Also, I have been given the opportunity to carry out networking on an international level making friends and colleagues all around the world. It is because of this that I intend to be an active alumni through the mentorship programme and by encouraging future scholars to apply.

Most importantly, I have been empowered. This programme has allowed me to gain confidence in myself and my abilities, something I was lacking before. I have been able to develop as an individual discovering where my strengths and weaknesses lie but now also knowing I can deal with them.

## **Appreciations**

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## References

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