

Leadership development reflective essay: Laidlaw 2024



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I still remember the day I learned that I had been accepted into the program; little did I know what was awaiting me.

It was an ordinary afternoon at the St Andrews Main Library. I was sitting in the cafeteria with three of my closest friends; the scent of coffee in the air and the chatter of students discussing their assignments around us blended into a recognisable universitarian atmosphere. We were deep in conversation, exploring ideas for our next International Relations essay, when my phone buzzed on our table. A notification immediately popped up: "Laidlaw Leadership and Research Programme 2023/2024."

For a moment, I literally froze, unsure whether to open it or not. My heart started to uncontrollably pound as I looked up at my friends, searching their faces for some kind of tacit advice. One of them said, "Go on, open it."

With a mix of excitement and anxiety, trembling fingers, and tapping feet, I picked up my phone and navigated to my email. What surrounded me seemed to blur, lose its shape, as I scrolled through my inbox, searching for the message that could potentially change the course of my university journey. Finally, I found it: took a deep breath before opening it. Done.

And the rest is history.

Exams were done, people were already leaving town, and summer was just around the corner. We all knew what that meant: Laidlaw time! Despite the fact that excitement would be running through my veins every time that thought popped into my head, I could not help it but to also be uncontrollably invaded by an intense sense of self-doubt and insecurity... + The opportunity was enormous, but so was the pressure: do I have all the skills required to undertake my chosen project? Am I going to be able to complete it or is it going to be a complete disaster? All these questions, depicting not only doubtfulness but also clear markers of impostor's syndrome, populated my head, since I was one of the only people whose research was not directly connected to their degree: why is someone who is studying International Relations and Psychology doing a project on microorganisms and bioinformatics, despite me having done similar research in the past?

Nevertheless, this context allowed me to develop, showcase, and implement a self-directed leadership style, giving me the perfect opportunity to cultivate new skills, capabilities, and the knowledge required to complete my research. Accordingly, the first few days of my project entirely focused on, firstly, setting my overall objectives and then subdividing them into smaller, more achievable short-term goals, and distributing them along the six weeks. Once my goals were in place, I turned my attention to self-assessment by identifying the skills I was lacking and the potential areas of improvement, and started looking for any resources needed to acquire and develop them. From there, I implemented a strategy of continuous self-monitoring to track my progress by setting aside time at the end of each week to evaluate my improvement against the goals I had established, leading to a successful completion of my research! This strategy of regularly reflecting upon how the week had gone not only kept me accountable but also allowed me to develop a strong and resilient mindset that allowed me to continuously learn from the challenges faced, problems solved, and strategies adopted.

This first Laidlaw Summer, then, not only represented the foundational pillar that allowed me to effectively carry out and finalize my research, but it also provided me with invaluable tools that extended far beyond the scope of the project itself; it became a transformative experience, equipping me with essential skills that

have determined, molded, and shaped both my academic and personal life in terms of time management, task allocation, and self-directedness. Through this experience, I realized that leadership in itself is not only about what you know and staying within your comfort zone, but rather about confronting self-doubt and growing through the process itself.

My preparation for my Leadership in Action project started early on, around October, since I already knew that I wanted to collaborate with NGOs that focused on animal well being and biodiversity conservation, specifically regarding elephants. After doing some research, I found the Kindred Spirit Elephant Sanctuary, and immediately felt deeply inspired by their mission of helping former captive elephants, bringing them back to their natural habitat, and raising awareness about the plight of these majestic creatures among the adjacent tribal communities. This project would entail me going to the North of Thailand and immerse myself into a hill tribe village, hike around the area, collaborate with local schools, assist them when facing human-elephant conflicts, and design workshops and fundraising events!

Nevertheless, twisting my ankle while climbing led to a long recovery that prevented me from embarking on this thrilling adventure... Despite the initial frustration and daunting thought of not having an LiA project, by showing resilience and a sense of responsibility, given that I was already the Youth Ambassador of “Voices for Asian Elephants”, I got in touch with the founder and cooperatively design an LiA project that fulfilled the program’s requirement, expectations, and goals. Next thing I know, I am leading an international group of university students in the creation of collaborative blog posts, an e-magazine, and conservation-based workshops!

This project taught me a myriad of ways in which leadership skills can be displayed and implemented. From the process of finding a new LiA to its actual execution, the first thing I learnt is that being a leader is not only about following pre-established guidelines of what ought to be done, but also, specially when facing unforeseen challenges, about innovating and finding creative paths to follow by not being afraid of changing how things are to make them better. Leadership, therefore, comes from a collaborative initiative to question the strategy that has been conventionally followed and creatively adapt it to the present needs.

With this mindset, in conjunction with other members of the Youth movement, we redefined the approach to our project. We didn’t just stick to the usual social media channels employed by “Voices for Asian Elephants” or reproduce the structure followed by past workshops. Instead, we completely redefined the movement’s objectives, reach, and audience by using more engaging and easily accessible formats and platforms, an approach that led to positive feedback from the organization itself and its members! Consequently, this initial approach taken not only reinforced that true leadership involves a balance of respecting established practices and being open to change, but also demonstrated the importance of being innovative and flexible to effectively fulfill the initially established goals.

Nevertheless, the fact that the project was conducted online led to occasional challenges, including miscommunication issues, cultural differences, lack of coordination, notably different time zones, and language barriers. Although these obstacles inevitably affected some of the tasks we had to undertake, they also provided us with valuable opportunities to reflect on the additional skills a leader has to have. Particularly, these challenges highlighted the importance of finding a good balance between being an active listener and a proactive communicator. As a leader, it became clear that actively taking into consideration others’ perspectives not

only enriched the overall discussion, but revealed alternative and valuable perspectives and viewpoints arising from our diverse backgrounds. Promoting this behavior allowed us to effectively address misunderstandings and ensure that everyone's input was being taken into account. On the other hand, encouraging and embracing proactive communication allowed everyone to actively be more transparent and share their thoughts, questions, doubts, and ideas, an approach that did not hamper the project's progression but pushed everyone outside their comfort zone by engaging them in a more dynamic dialogue. By combining both, the initial challenges experienced gradually faded and opened the way for a more collaborative and cohesive online environment, allowing us to successfully accomplish our objectives.

Moreover, from these experiences, I realized how useful the leadership training sessions had been, since they not only provided us with a space to reflect upon our understanding of leadership as a concept, but also equipped us with the tools required to manage these kinds of situations effectively. Specifically, by reflecting upon real-world challenges and discussing strategies for various situations, the training sessions offered practical frameworks regarding how to act and manage those experienced challenges. Additionally, we learned to analyze our own responses and behaviors critically in conjunction with an in-depth evaluation of our leadership styles, allowing us to adjust our approaches as required and enhance our problem-solving abilities. These sessions, therefore, ensured that we were better prepared to handle future challenges with confidence and competence, allowing us to deeply reflect on what true leadership is, how we would respond in specific scenarios, and how to develop the skills necessary to address and resolve the experienced obstacles.

Gleaned from this last idea, I have also realized how the skills and knowledge acquired in terms of leadership, self-directedness, and management during the Laidlaw program have proven to be invaluable, not just for the project itself, but they will also profoundly shape, mold, and positively condition my behavior and development throughout my future academic and professional career. On one hand, the leadership skills I have developed have allowed me to reflect upon the most optimal way for me to guide and inspire others effectively, manage intragroup conflicts, and make strategic decisions with determination and confidence. Particularly, the emphasis on self-directedness has empowered me to take initiative, learn how to prioritize tasks, set my own goals and objectives, identify the ways in which those can be achieved, and work on the skills required to reach them, leading to a proactive mindset fuelled by continuous growth, both professionally and personally. On the other hand, these acquired skills and framework of action will not only condition how I will approach future challenges, obstacles, and opportunities on my own, but also how to cooperatively enhance group performance and sense of adaptability by fostering a culture of self-improvement, creativity, innovation, and communication. Therefore, these lessons learnt throughout my Laidlaw journey are not strictly confined to the program itself; rather, they represent foundational skills that are already showing to be invaluable to effectively manage myself as an individual and group member.

In the same vein, all the skills acquired and the several learning opportunities I gained through the Laidlaw program, can be equally beneficial to future scholars. The development of leadership, self-directedness, and resilience that I personally experienced was not only necessary and foundational for the successful completion of both projects, but also for personal and professional growth. These opportunities to reflect - especially thanks to the leadership weekends and weekly logs -, innovate, and overcome the challenges faced, are key elements

that future Laidlaw scholars could benefit from to make the most of their own journeys. This is the reason why I would consider myself fortunate to be able to “give back” to Laidlaw by participating in a mentorship program; by coaching and guiding incoming scholars, I aim to pass on and together reflect upon the valuable lessons I have learned, supporting them navigate their own projects and face the encountered challenges. Mentorship, therefore, would offer me the unique opportunity to guide and help future leaders, as I strongly believe that sharing my own experience as a scholar can effectively help and encourage other to explore their full potential and see how, through self-reflection, determination, and confidence, they can pave the way for themselves to a successful journey within the Laidlaw program and beyond! Finally, I would like to show my gratitude and appreciation for Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for having given me the opportunity to participate in this invaluable program, and for their continued support throughout the journey.