

## A Reflective Essay on the Changes and Challenges of Laidlaw

My journey starts with me changing my mind. Exactly one day before the deadline, at 10pm in Dundee, I began my application for Laidlaw. I had been going back and forth about the application for weeks, putting it off as much as possible with excuses like – ‘I just need to finish my exams first’ or ‘I would never get accepted anyway’. At the time I held a strong belief, like many people do, that leadership (let alone leadership scholarships!) were only for those people with a natural dominance and assuredness. I certainly did not think they were for people like me! However, the opportunity seemed too promising to miss and so, in the end, I submitted an application.

Unbeknownst to me, that was the last time I had any tangible control over my Laidlaw experience. For the next two years, I can safely say that the most important thing Laidlaw has taught me is how to cope with change. Change in my plans, my views, even in myself. Therefore, I want to narrate this essay in terms of some of the larger changes I have experienced as a scholar and the life lessons I have learned throughout the process.

### **Change 1 – Switching Roles**

The first big event in my journey and, coincidentally, the first big change I encountered, was during summer one - while I was carrying out my research.

Like many other science students, the thing that really drew me to Laidlaw was the research opportunity. Consequently, when I saw an advertised project to work as a field assistant out in Iceland, I was incredibly keen. The advertised role was to support a team of scientists as they conducted behavioural observations on killer whales using direct observation and tracking. Thrilled at the opportunity to gain some experience in behavioural observation, a skill I had practiced many times at University, I signed up.

Upon arrival in Iceland however, I very quickly discovered I would not be a behavioural observer but, in fact, would be the assistant technician for the team. This role involved being responsible for the care, programming, data management and repair of the tracker tags that the team (of very important and revered scientists) needed, and it terrified me. As someone with no computer science education, little understanding of electronics and only basic coding skills in an irrelevant language, I felt completely unqualified for this position.

You see, up until this point, I had been taught that the way to get a job was to be the most qualified person in the room. That it wasn't even a consideration to apply for something which you weren't already able to do with your eyes closed and, for me, this meant a crippling sense of imposter syndrome for new things. But through the Laidlaw training days at my university, I had slowly begun to fight these ideas and push the

boundaries of what ‘strong’ self-leadership looked like. At St Andrews there is a very strong emphasis on challenging the idea that all leaders must be completely self-assured and that there are other traits like dedication, empathy and willingness-to-learn, which can also create great – if not better- leaders. So, in what I will admit was an immense challenge to my self-leadership, I pulled on these qualities and took my role head-on.

To my surprise, with this diligence and open attitude, I picked up my new role quickly and, by the end of the summer, I was trusted enough to complete the 45-minute programming process on the tags completely unsupervised. (I’ve included a photo of myself with my first solo tag after a successful deployment below– I don’t think I could look more proud if I tried!) And so, the main lesson I took from my first year of Laidlaw was that being a good leader is not necessarily about your qualifications but about your character and that this, in turn, does not necessarily mean overflowing confidence and arrogance. Rather, nurturing traits like integrity and optimism can bring success to any task, regardless of one’s skill level going in.



*Some pictures of what my tasks looked like as a technician – certainly not the whale watching experience I had envisioned!*



*A photo of me retrieving a tag I programmed from the ocean after a deployment. Picking this up marked the moment I knew I had programmed it to release from the whale at the correct time as well as to 'call out' at the correct radio frequency and rate, allowing us locate it as it floated in the water – a good feeling!*

## **Change 2 – An Impromptu Trip**

Following the success of my Iceland escapades, I found myself armed with a much stronger sense of self belief and so I set myself the challenge of saying yes to novel opportunities more often. A chance to test this soon came when, in autumn, I was invited to change my schedule and take a trip to Dublin to attend the Laidlaw Conference on conversations.

Looking back now, this was one of the most inspiring weekends I spent with Laidlaw, and I am glad I made the decision to attend. The conference itself began with a genuinely captivating address from Dr Linda Doyle in which she gave me what was probably one of my biggest life lessons in the statement that: 'your energy should be viewed as a finite resource as much as time or materials'. Therefore, just because you have more time in the day, this doesn't mean you can do more. I thought this was a great lesson to speak about so boldly and one that I probably had to hear from someone else to fully accept.

The conference that then followed Dr Doyle's opening statements focused on the concept of how to have a productive conversation when the participants disagree as to how to move forward. We explored the idea that we need to call people back *in* to the

conversation instead of just calling them *out*, combatting the common inclination to retreat from difficult conversation. I thought this was a very necessary and novel focus for a conference and the techniques I learned through this weekend are ones I still return to when I find myself in such scenarios.

I think these tangible skills are some of the biggest adverts for Laidlaw. Sometimes it can be easy to write off 'leadership training' as being very concept driven and somewhat impractical when applied to real life. However, being able to pick up techniques such as specific frameworks and phrases to use in managing disagreement are tactics that I would have taken years to discover for myself and that I really value having been taught.

### **Change 3 – Rebalancing Workloads**

While at the conference we also had a minor focus on developing character as a leader and highlighting the parts of yourself which are helpful to others while consciously stepping back with the parts of your personality which are less so. In many ways, these conversations took me back to my first Laidlaw training weekend with my St Andrews cohort in Scotland, where we had done similar work exploring our personality types and leadership styles through DISC profiles. It was so interesting to discuss these topics with a new and much more diverse group of people from all over Europe. At the time I had no idea I would have the opportunity to broaden these discussions on character to the global scale with the advent of the Oxford Character Project.

The Oxford Character Project is a six-month programme designed to enhance its participant's understanding of how traits such as integrity, love and purpose are central to good leadership. It explores the nuances behind each of these traits with activities and examples during weekend workshops that include every Laidlaw university. As this programme initially was not part of the scheduled Laidlaw diet, I did have to adjust my time management and working expectations to encompass it. However, that in and of itself taught me how to adapt to unforeseen responsibilities that will likely appear in any future role I may undertake and to use my time and energy more efficiently to accommodate a worthwhile cause.

## **Change 4 – Last Minute Cancellations and Contributions**

This practice in more efficient use of time certainly showed its value when I began my LiA summer out in Mexico City. This is where the lion's share of changes happened on my Laidlaw journey – far too many to fit in this essay. But mostly all stemming from the fact that this time, I was working with people. If I've learned one thing, it's that people are full of change, and this can be uniquely challenging to work with. Certainly, it's a contrast from the self-management I had worked so hard on up to this point!

For example, throughout my LiA (which centred around producing a catered event for my chosen NGO), people would very often change their minds and, consequently, our plans with them. We had volunteers commit to tasks they never quite finished, vendors promise items that never materialised and a last-minute cancellation from our venue two days before our event! (Even the attendees surprised us when only one fifth of those that RSVP'd 'yes' arrived on the day).

All these changes brought their own stresses with them as you might imagine, however, by the end of the summer, I feel like my team were able to take anything in our stride. With the confidence that only experience can give you, I found we stopped seeing changes as frightening and more as inevitable challenges that a little re-planning could almost always fix. This transformation is, in no small part, thanks to our amazing mentors at Make\_Sense who truly taught us how to navigate these challenges with a level head and which I am extremely grateful to Laidlaw for providing us.

In addition to this, we also found that there could be a lot of positive last-minute changes worth embracing which were also often inspired or fuelled by people. Examples include: decorations one of our volunteers unexpectedly brought for the event, a logo made up in spare time and crockery brought along unprompted. As it turned out, all these things proved crucial to making the event a success and which we would never have had without the decisions people make out with their leadership.

Reflecting on this, it feeds well into a concept that we focused heavily on during our mentorship in Mexico and that is: 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far go together'. In my opinion this quote really encompasses all that I learned during my LiA. I like that it acknowledges that it can be difficult to bring people along with you to your vision and that it takes a lot of time and effort to organise one's team but, ultimately, what you produce in the end will be so much better than you ever imagined if you manage it. That, when everyone is clear on the task, they can pour out so much more of their creativity and skills to produce an eclectic result. Therefore, this lesson – that investing in people is what makes a good project- is one I will ensure I remember for the future.



*Pictures from a focus group we ran within our event. Here, a team member had the idea to use sticky-notes as visual aids the morning of the event and we were able to incorporate these easily into our plans to produce a more interactive and engaging activity. I think this is a great example of embracing last-minute changes and how an aligned team of people can create much better results than one person can conceive alone.*



*This is another photo from our event where we can see the fairy lights one of our volunteers brought as decoration making so much positive difference to the atmosphere.*

## **A Rare Constant and Conclusion**

As I conclude this essay, I want to briefly highlight the one thing that didn't change throughout my two years as a scholar - the support of my amazing cohort. At St Andrews we are privileged enough to be part of a programme that really pushes the idea that Laidlaw is about community and dedicates a lot of time to providing us with chances to build this into a reality. As such, I have created relationships that I know will persist long beyond this programme and it has been amazing to grow alongside my peers and learn from their discoveries as much as my own.

It is with this great support that I have felt emboldened to explore myself and really take in all the lessons that I have discussed above. Being a Laidlaw scholar in this community has honestly been one of the most valuable steps in my university career and this became particularly apparent to me in a recent interview I sat at a conservation-company. I found that, as I interviewed, all the answers to the typical questions about teamwork, public speaking and confidence naturally had a Laidlaw related example.

With that in mind, and having now earned my place as an intern following this interview, I feel excited to 'graduate' from this programme and start giving back to the community. As I begin representing my new company at conferences and public engagement days, I know I have the perfect place to start. I am looking forward to practicing both the leadership and research skills I have gained through Laidlaw and putting my best foot forward to support a cause I believe in.



*My cohort at St Andrews during our research summer*

*My sincere thanks to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw foundation for giving me the opportunity to experience this incredible programme and to develop so many new skills. My thanks also to all of the mentors that have guided me along the way, both in St Andrews and beyond, and, of course, to my fellow scholars for all their support throughout.*