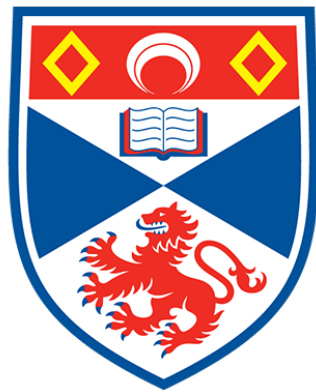


My Leadership Development During The Laidlaw Scholarship



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September 2025

What surprised me most about the Laidlaw programme was not the outcomes I achieved, but how much I came to enjoy the process of inquiry itself: asking questions, uncovering unexpected answers, and learning to see obstacles as opportunities for development. Throughout my two summers conducting both my research project and Leadership in Action (LiA) project, I realised that real growth – as a leader and personally – came in the moments between my milestones of a finished essay or a presentation at a conference. While certainly reaching these milestones were important and I am deeply proud of the outcomes I have produced, again and again I found that it was the challenges and obstacles I faced, the interviews I conducted that required empathy and self-awareness, and the connections that I built with other people that taught me more about what it meant to be a leader than the achievement of any single goal. In this essay, I will reflect on my leadership development from the experiences I have had throughout the entire Laidlaw programme. I will explore how the experiences I had helped me develop in four leadership areas, and how these lessons will continue to shape both my future and my contribution back to the programme as a Laidlaw alumnus.

When I applied to the Laidlaw programme, the four leadership areas that I particularly wanted to develop over the two years were: my emotional intelligence and communication in unfamiliar contexts, becoming more resilient and adaptable when faced with challenges, the ability to inspire and empower others, and finally teamwork skills such as decision-making and delegation. As I look back on the programme, these four goals are a useful starting point for reflection: did I see development in these areas over the two years, and how was this enabled through the components of the programme?

First, when applying, I saw the Laidlaw programme as a good opportunity to take me out of my comfort zone and practice maintaining my skills in being emotionally aware and communicating effectively with people from different backgrounds and experiences.

Reflecting on the experiences I have had over two years, I believe I have effectively developed this in a number of ways. For example, when first meeting the rest of my cohort of scholars, many of whom came from very different disciplinary backgrounds, I developed the skill of explaining my research to people with no prior knowledge of the field in a clear, accessible, and engaging way. One moment that stands out was when I had to explain my research to a physics student: I was halfway through my explanation when they asked for historical context which I had assumed would be known by everyone. I realised that what is ‘common knowledge’ in my field, might not necessarily be obvious to different audiences, such as those from scientific disciplines. This experience reminded me that when communicating my research, I always need to keep the audience in mind and adapt both content and delivery to meet the knowledge, interests, and perspectives of the audience while still ensuring complex ideas are meaningfully communicated.

I was able to put this early lesson in effective communication into practice numerous times throughout the programme. For instance, when writing my research essay and creating my research poster, I always kept in mind that a non-specialist could read them and it was important that they could understand the ideas I was trying to communicate. Additionally, I had the opportunity to present my research on two occasions: first, at the Laidlaw Scholars Conference, and second, as a lecture during an honours module run by my supervisor. These two presentations differed from each other in two key ways: first, the conference presentation was only six minutes long, whereas the lecture needed to last an hour; second, the conference presentation was for a non-specialist audience, many of whom had no prior knowledge of the subject area, whereas the lecture was for 3rd year students who were specifically studying this topic. Thus, I got to practice presenting the same research in two very different formats, which was incredibly valuable in developing my communication skills.

The international experience gained as part of the programme has also significantly developed my emotional intelligence and empathy in unfamiliar contexts, in particular through my LiA project, which involved in-depth, one-on-one interviews with participants where they shared their personal lived experiences of being a national minority in the Denmark-Germany border region. These interviews required me to practice active listening sensitively and empathetically, so participants felt their voice was being heard and appreciated. The interviews also required me to balance sharing parts of myself to build a connection with participants, while ensuring the focus remained on the participants. It felt important to me, considering the personal nature of the topics discussed, that the interviews were not purely extractive, and I was also vulnerable with my participants to create a feeling of reciprocity. Over the course of the interviews, I believe I refined this approach well so that I found a balance with when to share versus when to just listen. The skills I developed over my LiA – active listening, empathy and self-awareness – will be ones I will certainly take with into future professional and personal interactions and has reinforced my belief connecting with individuals is at the core of leadership.

Alongside development in empathy and communication, I think perhaps the most substantial growth I have experienced throughout the Laidlaw programme has been related to my second leadership goal: resilience and adaptability when faced with challenges. During both my research and LiA project, I encountered unexpected obstacles which derailed my initial plans. For instance, I initially planned to conduct interviews as part of my research in Summer 1. However, the topic was more sensitive than anticipated, and I struggled to find anyone who was willing to be interviewed. Ultimately, I only completed one interview and did not achieve my initial interview targets. However, what I perhaps would have seen as a ‘failure’ before the research process, ended up forcing me to reflect on *why* there was consistent scepticism, and ultimately the rejection I was met with became a driving insight of my research. This obstacle

thus changed my perspective on resilience: it is not just about relentlessly ‘pushing through’ when something is not working. Resilience can also be remaining committed to achieving a goal, while allowing myself to adapt my approach and embrace creative solutions.

Another major challenge I faced that developed my resilience and adaptability was during my LiA when I was told once I had arrived that I would need to get ethical approval from my university to do the project. With it being summer, I was concerned about whether I would be able to complete the ethics process during the time I was actually in Germany. Therefore, my entire project was suddenly up in the air: I did not know whether I would be able to complete it at all. Thankfully, I did ultimately get ethics quickly, but even so my project was delayed by about a week, during which I was unable to start conducting interviews, or even search for participants. In the moment, this time was incredibly stressful but looking back, it was an important part of my personal development during my LiA. In the first instance, it was another reminder that some things are out of your control and that it is rare for things to go perfectly as you planned. It encouraged me to be flexible and think about creative solutions, such as using the time when I could not conduct interviews to visit Denmark and learn more about the region from the other side of the border. It also made me rely on others for their help and guidance because I would not have been able to solve this problem without them.

While the first two goals I set for my leadership journey focused on inward-facing aspects of leadership, the Laidlaw programme also gave me opportunities to embody leadership outwardly to develop my third goal of inspiring and empowering others. Presenting my research at the Laidlaw Scholars Conference was one such moment: while the presentation was short, I made sure that my passion for the topic came through. I was also particularly pleased with how many questions I received during the session and that I was approached after the presentation to discuss my research in more detail. To me, this was a positive sign that I was not only sharing my work but also encouraging others to think more deeply about the topic.

Beyond this, I believe my LiA project drew heavily on this goal to inspire and empower: through the interviews, I wanted to empower my participants to share their lived experiences as a minority, and then turning interviews into digital stories aimed to inspire the wider world to engage in dialogue with people from other cultures. These experiences taught me that inspiring others is not about exerting authority but about showing that ideas and contributions can matter, and in turn giving others confidence to share their own.

In contrast with the progress I made on the other three goals, believe I had fewer opportunities to develop in my fourth area: teamwork, decision-making, and delegation. This is largely because both my research project and LiA were highly independent in nature and consequently I often relied more heavily on self-leadership than collaborative leadership. That said, during my LiA, I did develop some aspects of my teamwork skills because I had to integrate into existing broader teams at the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI). For example, I needed to ask other researchers at the ECMI for help in finding participants, with them often making first contact on my behalf. In doing so, it reminded me that asking for help or guidance is not a weakness, but a way of recognising others' expertise. Therefore, although teamwork was the area where I developed the least during the programme, I did gain foundations that I can build on when working in more collaborative environments.

Reflecting on my growth in these four areas I highlighted prior to the programme, demonstrates how much my leadership has been developed through the experiences I have had over the two years. I now am looking to the future and how I can continue to develop the skills and leadership values I have developed throughout the programme. I think the most immediate impact has been on the confidence that I have. Through the experiences of sharing my research, working independently and integrating into an established team, I have grown more comfortable voicing my ideas both in academic and professional environments, and am more willing to take initiative. Equally significant are the transferable skills that I have: skills such

as communication, listening empathetically and resilience will remain central to how I engage with others as a leader. In the long-term, I believe that my leadership development through the Laidlaw programme has laid a strong foundation for my future by giving me a model of leadership rooted in openness, curiosity, and connection.

As my time as a Laidlaw Scholar comes to an end, I feel a responsibility to give back to the programme and future scholars as an alumnus. One way I have already begun to do this is actively promoting the scholarship at my university and raising awareness of the opportunities it provides. I hope to also provide advice and guidance to future scholars on how to deal with the challenges that can arise during research or the LiA, and how they can make the most of their time in the programme.

My two years as a Laidlaw Scholar has profoundly shaped my growth as a leader. Beyond the skills and milestones, it has taught me to approach challenges with resilience, to connect with others empathetically, and to inspire through example. As I move forward, I aim to continue to embody the values of the Laidlaw programme in my own life and career, by continuing to lead with empathy and integrity.

Acknowledgements

I would also like to thank the Laidlaw Foundation and Lord Laidlaw for funding my projects through my participation in the Laidlaw Scholars Leadership and Research Programme. I would also like to thank my research supervisor, Dr Stavroula Pipyrou, for her invaluable support, guidance and mentorship during my first summer. Finally, I am grateful to my research participants during my LiA who so generously shared their stories with me, and to the European Centre for Minority Issues for hosting me during my LiA project.