

Leadership Development Essay

Looking back on my time as a Laidlaw Scholar



University of
St Andrews



Next-Generation Leaders
for Global Good

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With gratitude to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation, to my first-year supervisor Dr
Nicôle Meehan, to the entire team at Karuna-Shechen, and lastly to everyone who has
brought joy to this journey.

Whilst this reflective essay marks the end of my Laidlaw scholarship it is by no means the end of my journey. This essay seeks to reflect on my time as a scholar, looking at how I have grown and what I have learnt in the past two years while setting out how I will carry my learnings from Laidlaw into life going forwards. I will start at the beginning of my journey with Laidlaw, inspired by a conversation I had with my dad after returning from my Leadership in Action in Paris. He asked whether, if I could go back two years, if I would apply for the scholarship again. In short, the answer was yes. I am treating this essay as the explanation.

I applied for the programme as I saw it as an opportunity not only to grow academically but personally too. I had to create two statements in my application that reflected this, one in reference to the research element of the programme and one in relation to my personal growth as a leader. Within the research aspect, my aspiration was to work with someone who shared a passion for art and the environment; learn new research techniques; build my knowledge base and create a real-world impact through my academic work. The first of my goals was more than met as I had the privilege of working with Dr Nicôle Meehan on a project that combined scientific, data driven insights with artistic culture and the world of visual arts. I learnt from Nicôle the importance creating a space in which others can learn, and in trusting people to take on work. I also learnt how to challenge and support others to stretch their belief in what is possible, and the value of other perspectives and experience in order to build collective solutions. The opportunity to work with Nicôle actually set me onto the course of reflecting on my choice of degree. As a result, I have switched to a Joint Honours degree with Art History and Geography. The research element of my Laidlaw Scholarship enabled me to see the benefit in broadening my academic insight beyond my area

of specialism - enriching and deepening my passion for my core subject (Art History) and the impact I could create.

As a result of this first element of the scholarship, I have learnt a range of applicable research techniques that go well beyond what I would have expected in my first couple of years at St Andrews. Further, by organising and conducting workshops and interviews I have learnt how to interact with different stakeholders. Ultimately, I have also learnt how to pull together and communicate my research findings in such a way that they are of interest to others – my findings from the first summer were accepted into the 2025 British Conference for Undergraduate research and to the Energy in Motion Conference.

By no means least, my work with Nicôle set me up to be successful in the Leadership in Action project. By the time I was standing on the platform to catch the Eurostar to Paris this summer, my research work meant I was more confident stepping into unfamiliar environments and surroundings, felt immediately more comfortable in interacting with people and had validated that I can create meaningful work to assist others.

My journey to Paris had begun while building my original leadership goals. I had set out the aim to develop my thinking, behavioural, and social leadership in ways that would help me to excel beyond the two years of the scholarship itself. I had hoped to do this by working with the Karuna-Shechen Foundation, due to an alignment of personal values and a longer-term connection between the Foundation and my late mother. I am delighted that they were kind enough to, and saw a benefit in, incorporate me into the European team of their organisation.

Ultimately my personal development goals were to enrich my learning, challenge my

thinking, and build my confidence. Living in Paris for six weeks and working across three very different cultures (Indian, Nepalese and French) challenged my existing perspectives and gave me the opportunity to learn from others' life experiences and journeys. As a result of this exposure, I am now even more open to new ideas and new ways to view problems that may arise. In turn, this has gifted me greater adaptability and resilience as I encounter new situations.

Secondly, I have seen the value in learning new languages and living within a new culture – as a way of enjoying the world and connecting with others. Therefore, following my summer in Paris, I will continue learning French in the hope of developing a much greater proficiency in it as a second language and, in the long run, potentially broadening my career options.

I also learnt to challenge my own thinking, especially when faced with ambiguity - as I initially feared that I could not bring value to Karuna and the project I was working on for them. But I stepped into the situation that I was afraid of, sought clarity and built relationships – I broke the challenge down into meaningful and tangible steps, acting for change. As a result, I became much clearer on my role, on how I could add value and where to focus. The feedback I have received from the team indicates that my contribution has been hugely appreciated.

I built my confidence in many ways throughout the summer. Firstly, through always attempting to communicate in French on a daily basis (I have only been learning the language for just under six months). Additionally, I have challenged my comfort zones by staying with strangers for six weeks, exploring a new city on my own and eating out alone. I am now considerably more confident in presenting my work to people other than fellow students – I

presented a summary of my work and findings to the Foundation's senior team - and talking with people from very different cultures, finding ways to connect and engage with them.

I have also developed certain practical skills, such as my personal organisation and communication. My work in Paris required me to be highly organised to meet the team, work across different time zones, and understand the work at Karuna while allocating time to capture stories and write up a full draft ahead of publication. In terms of my communication, I have learnt to speak more confidently, clearly and intentionally, while actively listening – rephrasing back what I heard to show that I had understood and create a space for correction if that was not right. I also learnt how to write to a wider, diverse and non-academic audience, setting an intention for each of my testimonies and the emotion I wanted to evoke within every article.

In terms of leading others, I was lucky enough to both speak at length with and observe in practice, Karuna-Shechen's CEO. As a result, I have learnt the value of leading horizontally not hierarchically. This is important for it creates a space in which others are able to bring their strengths, ideas, and experience to create a far richer, more diverse and thus successful culture than traditional top-down leadership affords.

The biggest growth and learning has, however, been in building meaningful, and hopefully lifelong, friendships with people who initially I felt that I disconnected from. I discovered that by being inquisitive, interested, trusting and sharing about myself that our commonalities far outweighed any differences.

Through my scholarship, Laidlaw has offered many opportunities and resources to grow as a Leader – both through in-person leadership workshops and the Oxford Character Programme. The latter provided the opportunity to grow and focus explicitly on different aspects of my character and values essential to good leadership. As a result, I am even more acutely aware of the importance of understanding and living my values, and of instituting a habit of reflection into my day. The lessons that were shared on the calls and within resources created a valuable insight into aspects of my character that will serve me to be a better version of myself going forwards. Further, on the Oxford Character Programme I was able to meet other international scholars, connecting through our journey and our projects as well as other shared interests.

Throughout the programme the St Andrews team also hosted leadership days that created a structured space to learn how to effectively pitch our ideas and projects. This taught me valuable skills in communication and created a meaningful space to reflect on my values and construct tangible effective goals to bring meaningful difference in the work that I conduct.

As well as being beneficial days, the sessions also offered a space to spend time with my Laidlaw cohort with who I have cemented friendships and connections with over the last two years. The nature of the Laidlaw programme offers the opportunity to connect with 24 other like-minded individuals and develop friendships. This was especially meaningful to me as I entered the scholarship as a first year and therefore was able to meet students in the year above me.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, my aim is not only to reflect on the last two years but to consider my ongoing Laidlaw journey. Essentially, there are two core elements to this –

how being a Laidlaw scholar will help me in the future and how I can give back to the programme in the future as an active alumnus. Of course, these two elements are by no means mutually exclusive. In relation to giving back, there are informal and formal ways in which I believe I can contribute. Informally, I will be able to act as an ambassador for the scholarship by sharing my learnings and rich experiences as a scholar and promoting the programme to other students. I will also be promoting the scholarship by embodying the qualities of leadership that I have learnt on the programme. The scholarship will open subsequent future opportunities as I will be able to show my employability and suitability for other internships and academic programmes. From a formal perspective I am open to mentoring other scholars through their own journey on the scholarship.

There are many ways that I believe being a Laidlaw scholar will help me in the future. Given the prestigious international reputation of the programme, I have already significantly enhanced my CV. I have applicable experience in both a specific research project and within the humanitarian sector, growing skills and the confidence that will greatly broaden what I can apply for and achieve in the future. I have gained a taste of international work experience and as a result it has given me the insight into the importance and value of working within, and across, multiple cultures and in creating outputs from collective collaboration.

Ultimately, as I look back, I am delighted that I challenged myself to apply for the Laidlaw scholarship two years ago. It has enriched my academic thinking and skillset, broadened my personal experiences and developed my personal leadership. As such, as I mentioned previously, this is really the beginning of my Laidlaw journey as I know have the opportunity to apply these learnings and behaviours in my remaining academic career and beyond this in my professional journey.

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