

Laidlaw Scholarship Reflective Essay

Noor Zohdy

Thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation

My experience with the Laidlaw programme has been unlike anything I could have anticipated. My interests in the world and across cross-disciplinary networks; my confidence in my ideas and my excitement and initiative in connecting with others personally and academically; my global consciousness and ambitions for the future — through these and other still-unfolding ripples, the Laidlaw scholarship has profoundly and invaluable altered my personal life, perspective, and future ambitions. From giving me the extraordinary opportunity to develop a close professional relationship with my academic supervisor to sending me to the moorland wonderland of the Brontës; from a serendipitous conversation with a fellow Virginia Woolf enthusiast at the Laidlaw conference to my heartfelt experience of travelling alone to Peru and teaching the most remarkable young people I have met—through these unforgettable two years, I have made memories and friendships to cherish.

Being a Laidlaw scholar has enriched and broadened my university experience, giving me the individual and global consciousness I aimed to achieve before entering the professional world. Being a Laidlaw scholar and part of the scholars' community has fostered my courage, ambitions, and individuality whilst making me a more global and cross-disciplinary thinker. Hearing the ambitious and passionate words of my fellow scholars gave me the chance to connect not merely on shared academic interests but across marvellously disparate fields, all interconnected across the complex world we each so individually and valuably perceive. Whilst

fostering my leadership confidence and competence, the Laidlaw programme has also grounded my belief in the enduring value of the topics that matter to me, situated in the rich world of research and discovery.

The Laidlaw leadership training was the most unexpected benefit of my experience. It gave me chances to actively engage with and challenge my preconceptions on ethical leadership; the workshops drew my attention to the extraordinary importance of understanding diverse voices and experiences through my fellow scholars and the various reading and media materials I encountered. Together, the dynamic structure of these workshops cultivated a unique atmosphere of independent thinking, collaboration, and innovative ideas. What I particularly valued was the chance to sincerely and unguardedly probe into questions of ethical leadership, which I would not have explored conversationally with my peers otherwise. This model of productive discussion throughout the programme's teaching has made me more open, inquisitive, and interested in asking others about their experiences and perceptions on complex themes. The training also gave me more courage and confidence in my voice and perspective as I learnt the indispensable productivity of speaking out to foster dialogue, debate, and the active exchange of ideas. Through this, I developed multifaceted relationships with my fellow scholars at St Andrews and beyond; and this taught me the importance of collective thought and collaborative learning in nurturing one's leadership potential and that of a team of variously motivated thinkers. Going forward, I will be aware of the profound benefits of learning about oneself whilst learning with others. At the start of the programme, I was highly focused on my independent ambitions through the academic project; the leadership training has brought me to a point now where my conception of success and ambition goes outside and beyond myself to a more deeply fulfilling sphere of dialogic engagement.

The programme has provided me with opportunities to expand my global awareness through networking and international experiences. When attending the conference, I made friendships and connections with whom I still keep in touch and from whom I've been able to learn, aiding critical decisions concerning my future professional ambitions. I have also connected with former scholars at my university. I received advice and mentorship this past summer from a former English student and Laidlaw scholar of St Andrews who is starting at my top-choice master's programme. Additionally, conversing with other scholars during the poster presentation portion of the conference gave me the opportunity to learn to articulate myself and my research interests. Through these opportunities, I was given the chance to practice networking for the first time. Before Laidlaw, I was intimidated by the prospect of discussing my academic interests with people I did not already know; being a scholar has therefore equipped me with new capacities in this respect. Further, the Laidlaw scholarship gave me the opportunity of travelling alone outside of Europe or Canada—something I had not done, and which I could not have financed without the Foundation. Living alone and working in a charity-funded school in Oropesa, Peru, for six weeks has been among the most formative experiences of my life. It brought me to a new sense of self, ambition, and independence, and it further fostered within me global curiosity, open-mindedness, and the initiative towards cross-cultural communication.

Being a scholar has equipped me with skills that I will carry with me beyond university. The programme has made me more open and keen to discuss my research with others. The Laidlaw conference provided my first real experience of this despite my interest in postgraduate study since my first year. As I apply to and work towards future master's programmes, I will be able to immerse myself in the postgraduate community confidently and eloquently, exchanging ideas with other students and academics. I have developed strategies of time management,

planning, and organisation, and the ability to adapt when things do not go according to plan, whilst in a leadership position. Particularly through the Leadership-in-Action component, I learnt to work in new, unfamiliar settings, situations, and cultural contexts. Realising I can cultivate this ability has given me a sense of independence, which will help me in my future: as I trust myself more in making decisions; as I reach out for help when I need it; and as I work to be unafraid of learning in settings I am unfamiliar with but excited to explore. Through the opportunities the programme has given me to practice public speaking and discussion, I have been able to overcome my perfectionistic tendencies: I have had to do my best in expressing myself relatively unprepared and find fulfilment in the process of finding my voice. Now, I aim to grow, learn, adapt, and change; rather than being fixed upon rigidly insular and inflexible goals, I am excited for the potential of a varied, dynamic, and unknown future.

Having experienced the support of the Laidlaw Scholars' Network, I look forward to giving back to the programme for the benefit of future scholars. I will keep myself accessible on the Laidlaw Scholars' Network and on LinkedIn to network with, advise, and answer any questions from future scholars concerning my experience. I will volunteer to present my summer project experiences whenever time allows, making myself available as a mentor and helping to connect scholars with the charity I worked with in my Leadership-in-Action project. Throughout the rest of my time at St Andrews, I will work to be a point of connection for potential and new scholars alike, helping to illustrate the opportunities provided by the Laidlaw programme. In my future career in either academia or journalism, I will remain engaged in the continued work of the Laidlaw Foundation and Scholars' Network to offer support to future scholars with similar interests and aspirations. Through this, I hope to be a point of connection, mentorship, and support, further sharing the opportunities for personal growth that were provided to me.

During my summer experience in Peru, I learnt to adapt and take on new and unknown challenges with independence, perseverance, and optimism. Before coming to Peru, I had grown apprehensive of leading lessons to children, particularly as my Spanish was basic. Having never travelled alone for an extended period, I was daunted by the many new experiences ahead of me. At the school, plans often changed, and unpredictable variables meant I had to be flexible and focus on quality over perfection. In the midst of the uncertain, I had to learn to accept imperfections, adapt to individual situations, and work to be as effective as I could notwithstanding. I learnt to curate lesson plans with allowances for several eventualities; I learnt to set my anxieties aside, set realistic goals, and trust my judgement. When I needed guidance and support in circumstances I felt unqualified to handle, I learnt to express my concerns without hesitation. Curiously, I found that as I learnt to manage my fears and anxiety and allowed myself to enjoy my time at the school and my imperfect growth journey, my relationship with the children blossomed into a special, unguarded, and genuine attachment. I believe the most formative lesson of my summer was the experience of human connection: despite the lapse of language, culture, age, and experience, I learnt that through managing my mental inhibitions, I was able to develop treasured connections and create beautiful memories.

Reflecting on myself at the start of my experience as opposed to now, what stands out is my developed resilience and ability to rebound when things do not go according to plan. In the past, I unwittingly ran on an all-or-nothing mentality, which put pressure on myself and the circumstances of my life to be perfect. This approach often made me daunted and uninspired by ideas and opportunities that would have otherwise brought me joy, excitement, and enlivened my ambitions. This summer, I learnt to see value in everything I was able to accomplish. I developed a proactive, solution-oriented mentality that has improved my emotional well-being, my

self-trust, and my courage towards personal initiative. Travelling alone to Oropesa and leading classes at Picaflor House taught me these practical and personal skills, as I had to rely upon myself more completely than I ever had before. Yet, my experience also taught me the importance of human connection and being unafraid to reach out for help. Staying in contact with my family, friends, and fellow scholars had a significant impact on my happiness, motivation, and well-being. Connecting with and receiving support from others enhanced my independence and success. This balance is something I had never fully appreciated, and it is an important realisation about myself and my motivations, which I will carry forward.

When I consider my future and what I would like to achieve as a Laidlaw scholar, several reflections immediately come to mind. The programme has taught me how broad and individual leadership can be. Through my ambitions in academia, journalism, and creative writing, I intend to keep in mind all I have learnt about myself and leadership throughout the programme. I will consider how my aspirations impact the world and how I can address and draw attention to global issues that are important to me: namely, the invaluableity of global access to education to cultivate self-awareness, self-reliance, and the freedom of creative self-expression. As a prospective academic, I will ensure these considerations guide my teaching, research, and job search. For instance, in reflecting upon possibilities for my dissertation, I have been interested in Emily Brontë's education as a Victorian woman, especially her exposure to Victorian medical science and psychiatry in her writings and philosophies. As a journalist and creative writer, I will continue to integrate what I have learnt through Laidlaw: regarding the importance of global, cross-cultural curiosity and the necessity to ask more questions of the world around me. One day, I hope to become the editor of a newspaper, having enjoyed the position during my time at St Andrews. In such a role, I would manage my newspaper on the pillars of growth, innovation,

collaboration, and discovery as Laidlaw fostered through my summers of literary research and working in Peru. I would do so by leading with an emphasis on global consciousness and facilitating writerly agency and creative, unorthodox opportunities for writers to represent their experiences and perspectives, such as through various artistic media and forms. Though at the end of my second summer, my future as a Laidlaw scholar is far from over, and I look forward to the avenues in which I may explore myself, the world, and leadership further.