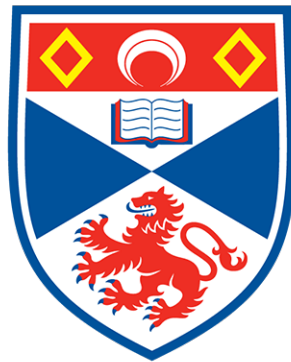


Reflections on the Laidlaw Scholars Programme

2 years of being a Laidlaw Scholar



University of
St Andrews

By **Allyson Grace Chai Yi Jing**

agc26@st-andrews.ac.uk

September 2025

As of writing this, I have completed my program as a Laidlaw scholar. In a couple months, I will have to rephrase “I am a Laidlaw scholar” to “I was a Laidlaw scholar” when I look back on this era; a tiny but bittersweet change which acknowledges that this time of my life has passed. In saying goodbye to what has been a big part of me over the last two years, it is about time to reflect on the growth and development I have experienced. Across Year 1 and Year 2, I have reached so many milestones and grown in ways I did not expect.

Year 1

Leadership Training: Gearing up for the two summers ahead

I vividly remember the first time I met the entire Laidlaw community. The air in Parliament Hall was not one of awkwardness, but rather excitement and nervousness at the same time. I recognised a few faces from the selection interviews, and others from people-watching in town, but almost all were new to me. When I applied to the Laidlaw Scholars Programme, any sense of leadership I possessed was instilled from my days of leading extracurricular groups in high school, and I knew that was going to change as I embarked on these two years. Simultaneously, I was anxious about being vulnerable in front of this new group of people right from the beginning, unsure of how they would perceive any stated flaws of previous experiences and what they would make of my character from there.

Our subsequent Hospitalfields retreat proved to be a marker of change. When we completed our DiSC Leadership Style quiz, I was half-surprised to find that my leader personality type is ‘Steadiness’. I say ‘half-surprised’ because the personality description for this type read as a summary of my fears and limitations: in essence, fearing criticism and the tendency to overly scrutinise myself. When doing sharings after a group activity where the scholars were separated into each type, a weight lifted off my shoulder; opening up about how certain leadership types could cause discomfort to those with other types was cathartic as it felt like I was talking to past collaborators I got into conflicts with. This time, vulnerability and accepting that there were gaps in my knowledge of leadership were not to be afraid of, but a state of mind that allowed me to eventually connect with other scholars in the long-run. Throughout the rest of my time as a Laidlaw scholar, I have since embraced my leadership

personality and worked through many challenges, bearing in mind the limitations of my approach and finding workable remedies.

Summer 1: Researching the role(s) of food in the assimilation of Edinburgh's Chinese/ Hong Kong diaspora with Dr Bridget Bradley and the Department of Social Anthropology

The research project to be completed during the first summer was something I was incredibly excited about. As Social Anthropology is the second half of my Joint Honours degree, the chance to engage in real processes of fieldwork research was invaluable. The six weeks of research and the approximate two months afterward were very transformative, as it opened my eyes to the rigor of academia and the fulfilling nature of investigating human culture to raise awareness of discrimination in the UK. When engaging with participant observation in eateries Chinese/ Hong Kong cuisine, I learned the art of what I would call “tuning all senses” — most would describe as being “nosy”. As opposed to minding my own business, I paid attention to every eating habit and conversation that brought me closer to an answer for my research question. With interviews, it was good training that demonstrated the need for flexible expectations as you will not necessarily be able to get all the information you need depending on the interviewee’s comfort and privacy level. The focus on food and consumption practices of the diaspora allowed me to contextualise my own eating habits and develop a greater appreciation for food. In completing the 3,000-word paper, it was a process that was sometimes humbling as it showed me areas of improvement I could work on for future research, especially as someone who enjoys writing research papers.

Conducting my own research project gave me a sense of independence and ownership over my work that truly empowered me and gave confidence. Nevertheless, I frankly also struggled with time management and writers’ block throughout, handling these crises in ways which in retrospect were not the smartest. For that, I would love to thank Dr Bridget Bradley for her utmost patience and dedication during this process, and most importantly her faith in me despite my shortcomings.

Year 2

Oxford Character Project (OCP) by Dr Corey Crossan: Leadership as an Exercise of Character

When I first heard about the OCP as a component of my Laidlaw program, I truthfully was unsure of what to make of it as I was sceptical of the difference that character would make in my leadership journey. I was quickly proven wrong upon meeting Corey.

Throughout the many months of daily Virtuosity app reflections and questionnaires, plus Zoom sessions with the global network of scholars, I understood the importance of character and values in helming leadership. Through the often pointed questions prompting me to reflect on periods in my life where I was exercising negative values and bad character, I learned to embrace my past wrongs and strive for a future where I know how to respond in situations with respect and dignity. Pertaining to the former, the deeper significance of that takeaway lies in the humbling reminder that one's image is not solely defined by their mistakes as growth is always an ongoing process. Nonetheless, finding comfort in this realisation does not mean it should be taken advantage of. Continuous accountability and marked improvement are not mutually exclusive, and we should always strive for excellence in every endeavour we pursue.

Apart from meaningful lessons of value and character, I thoroughly enjoyed sharing with scholars across the global chain of partner universities. Despite the lack of / limited contact time with counterparts in other schools, it was refreshing to hear their perspectives on values and character in leadership especially when I realised some of them have once been in the same boat as me. Every scholar I have had the pleasure of interacting has collectively epitomised what excellence looks like, and I am excited to see what they accomplish in the near future. I wish them all the best of luck!

I would like to thank Corey for dedicating her work and career to creating a thoughtful curriculum that addresses areas of leadership that are often overlooked, and for bringing the global Laidlaw scholars network together during this time to learn from one another.

Summer II: Leadership-in-Action at the Wellness and Recovery Program, Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

My Leadership-in-Action (LiA) project allowed me to apply knowledge from the first half of my joint Honours degree in Psychology and simultaneously my leadership training from prior months.

My designated position throughout the twelve weeks at MMHA was as a psychosocial rehabilitation facilitator intern. Apart from the times I conducted rehabilitation sessions, I got to try my hand at 'on-the-ground' outreach efforts to raise awareness of mental health, and experienced how much administrative processing is needed to run an effective and smooth-sailing (for the most part) mental health NGO. Prior to this LiA, my real-life practical experience with mental health matters was near-zero due to such opportunities usually being unavailable for undergraduates. Despite my lovely program manager Daphne constantly reassuring me that my lack of experience would not hinder the quality of care I would provide, I could not help but feel anxious given the complex ethics and sensitivities of mental health. Eventually, I acquired many life skills across the following twelve weeks.

Firstly, planning and executing rehabilitation sessions. I would like to highlight the very first one that I had conceptualised and carried out on my own, as it was a big stepping stone in my learning journey. Drawing on the previous section about the OCP, I used my knowledge about character to design a class on mapping values in the workplace using a bingo sheet. The positive reception to this session and the feedback I received once again illustrated how crucial knowing one's personal values is in establishing personal boundaries, a key learning outcome of the program at MMHA. Moreover, the beneficiaries' keenness to encourage me whilst also providing feedback reassured me that we were building a healthy working rapport with one another. Secondly, over the twelve weeks, I could see the bigger picture of how societal nuances play a big role in education and awareness. Being sent out to do outreach events at hospitals and universities, as well as to distribute flyers to the general public, showed me that the complexity of language used in mental health education can hinder willingness to understand it. In my own sessions, I learned to explain certain concepts in simplified terms so that the beneficiaries could grasp the learning points better. Similarly, in outreach, my English explanations were mixed with some Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu vocabulary to adapt to the thinking modes of some members of the general public. The processes of adapting and reframing throughout my LiA strengthened my capacity for patience, as well as increased my overall compassion for the field. I truly do admire my supervisors for the hard work and unwavering dedication to improving the lives of mental health patients through their work.

Post-Laidlaw: Plans for engagement as an Alumni

As some of my fellow scholars and Laidlaw advisors know, I became aware of the Laidlaw Scholars program because of my close friend who was a fellow scholar (now-alumni) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). While this cannot be exactly classified as a form of alumni engagement, I think it is a good example of why it is important. Seeing the opportunities my friend received during her program motivated me to also be a recipient the same curriculum to reap its benefits, and I would like future scholars to reach their maximum potential across a wonderful 2 years. I would like to share my experience with the program to future scholars to show them what possibilities they can create for themselves, as well as to lend a hand during the difficult parts of their leadership journeys.

Having enjoyed the process of undertaking a Leadership-in-Action (LiA) project immensely, I envision myself “giving back” to the scholarship programme through this area as well. More specifically, I would like to arrange and coordinate LiA projects that focus on raising awareness of prevalent mental health problems and working towards increasing the accessibility of healthcare services for such causes. The chance to have hands-on experience with MMHA’s beneficiaries is a rarity due to ethics boundaries and other training concerns in the industry. But, I believe that involvement in the movement championing for mental health causes should not be limited to professionals in the field — at the end of the day, balancing mental health is an intrinsically human struggle. Moreover, while working with groups of neurodivergent individuals appears to be a small effort, rehabilitation (instilling confidence and encouraging them to rebuild their lives) has an undeniably large impact on the individual and community levels of society. Nonetheless, since manpower is a key resource in this movement, I am more than happy to guide future scholars towards and through meaningful projects tackling such causes to create a generation of humans who have compassion and dedication to bettering lives on this scale.

Conclusion: Acknowledgments and Giving Thanks

At the end of the day, despite my best efforts, a 2000-word essay, 3-minute video, numerous blog posts and reflections are insufficient to fully capture all my memories of being a Laidlaw scholar. It truly has been one of the greatest experiences of my university life, and I am deeply grateful for the privilege to be in the company of such

a special community. Firstly, thank you to Dr Bridget Bradley, Daphne Low, and Jamie Ooi, for their guidance through my Research Project and Leadership-in-Action projects respectively. Secondly, thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation for giving me numerous opportunities to discover my passions, my calling in life, and most importantly, a lifelong friendship network I share plenty of niche memories with. Lastly, thank you to Lord Laidlaw for recognising our potentials and for nurturing past, present, and future scholars to serve our community in the ways that we have and will.