

A Reflective Essay on My Laidlaw Scholarship Journey

The Laidlaw Scholarship has been one of the most transformative experiences of my academic and personal development so far. It uniquely combines the rigour of independent research with immersive leadership training and meaningful hands-on global experience. Across twelve weeks, I had the opportunity to dive deeply into two contrasting yet complementary areas: a six-week academic research project focused on the role of Russian émigrés in Anglo-Russian relations during late Victorian Britain and a six-week Leadership-in-Action (LIA) placement in Medellín, Colombia, working with the global social impact organisation 'MakeSense'. These two elements - academic and applied - allowed me to grow intellectually, culturally, and emotionally in ways I could not have anticipated. This essay reflects on what I gained from the programme as a whole, including the leadership training and international experience. I also consider how I intend to carry forward the values of the Laidlaw Scholarship into the future.

What I Gained from the Overall Programme

From the outset, the Laidlaw programme encouraged a blend of academic curiosity and real-world practical impact. My research piece explored the historical role of Russian émigrés in shaping Anglo-Russian relations during the late Victorian era. I sought to understand how émigré voices influenced British political discourse, policy and perceptions of Russia during a time of growing imperial rivalry. Engaging with both historical and contemporary émigré narratives provided me with an unexpected but compelling bridge between past and present. By interviewing current Russian émigrés, I was able to draw comparative insights into patterns of political dissent, cultural assimilation and the role of diaspora communities in shaping bilateral relations. I also discovered how these differences had both evolved and yet at times remained consistent over a broad span of history.

The academic research process itself was revealing. Up until this point in my History degree, I had primarily worked with secondary sources. However, the demands of Laidlaw research introduced me to the complexities and joys of primary source work. Navigating archives, dealing with incomplete or biased sources (sometimes in other languages) whilst making judgment calls about what to include or exclude taught me the importance of selectivity and in maintaining clear focus. The skills I developed have since enriched my undergraduate coursework, enabling me to craft more coherent and evidence-driven essays.

Beyond the content of the research, the programme also pushed me to reflect on the ethics of academic inquiry - particularly when dealing with sensitive or politicised subjects. Understanding how to approach interviews with émigrés who had left Russia under difficult circumstances and how to ethically use their insights in historical

comparison, forced me to think deeply about power dynamics, consent and the responsibilities that come with storytelling. Reflecting on how best to maximise the benefit of their insights strengthened my understanding of using current insights in historical debate and research.

The second part of the programme, my Leadership-in-Action project in Medellín, was equally transformative. MakeSense placed me in a team of scholars to work with local grassroots organisations, including *Mi Barrio Mi Sueño* and *Corporación Picacho con Futuro*. The contrast between Victorian British archives and the vibrant, fast-paced streets of Medellín could not have been greater. Yet both environments taught me valuable lessons about communication, empathy, and adaptation.

In Medellín, I worked on community-led projects that focused on sustainability, the circular economy championing urban regeneration and resilience. With Picacho con Futuro, the small Laidlaw team co-developed a community bazaar and created a mural that celebrated local identity and sustainable practices. I worked alongside the community and the children of the Ludoteca exploring both their own understanding of the community as well as their own desires shaping our projects outcomes. With *Mi Barrio Mi Sueño*, I contributed to the physical construction of a new community space - building, lifting, clearing and working in tandem with residents. These were tangible contributions and seeing the immediate impact of our efforts reminded me that ethical leadership is not always about grand vision - it is also about showing up, listening and being willing to get your hands dirty.

Recruiting and working with local volunteers from the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana (UPB) taught me how to navigate leadership in a multilingual, multicultural environment. I had to communicate ideas clearly and respectfully in Spanish, often adapting to different cultural expectations and visions about how our project should be implemented. This immersion sharpened both my interpersonal skills and my resilience. The experience, alongside visits to key historical and cultural sights, also deepened my appreciation for Colombia's complex history and vibrant communities. It left a lasting impression and has inspired me to continue studying Spanish and consider working in Latin America again in the future.

What I Gained from the Leadership Training

The Laidlaw leadership training provided a critical foundation for my growth in both research and practical actions. At first, I thought of leadership as something external - something you "do" to others. But through the workshops and reflective components, particularly those linked to the Oxford Character Project, I began to understand leadership as a deeply internal process rooted in values, self-awareness and ethical decision-making.

The workshops introduced me to core leadership frameworks such as design thinking, adaptive leadership and the importance of purpose-driven action. Practical sessions on public speaking, project planning and volunteer management gave me tools I used immediately in Medellín. For example, learning how to set shared goals and co-create deliverables was vital when collaborating with community partners on initiatives like the mural or the sustainability bazaar.

The Oxford Character Project was especially valuable in shaping my understanding of what kind of leader I am and what kind of leader I aspire to be. Through reflective exercises, I recognised my key strengths - empathy, curiosity and collaboration - as well as identifying areas for growth, particularly assertiveness and strategic decision-making. These insights allowed me to act more intentionally, particularly when leading small groups during the LIA project.

Perhaps most importantly, the leadership training helped me build confidence. Prior to Laidlaw, I had often shied away from leadership roles, unsure of whether I had the authority or personality to lead. The programme reframed leadership as situational and value-driven rather than hierarchical or personality-based. In Medellín, I stepped into roles that required me to take initiative, facilitate dialogue, and support others - none of which would have been possible without the grounding the training provided. I discovered leadership is a skill I have an aptitude for.

Networking and International Experience

One of the most enriching aspects of the Laidlaw Scholarship was the international exposure and the opportunity to build a global network of changemakers. Working in Colombia was a dream I never thought would be within reach. It not only allowed me to immerse myself in a new culture, but also to develop a greater sense of my own place in the world.

The friendships I formed with my fellow scholars - both those who travelled with me and those I met virtually through Laidlaw events - were central to my growth. We came from different universities, disciplines and cultural backgrounds, but were united by a shared commitment to learning and leadership. Collaborating with them taught me how diverse perspectives can strengthen decision-making, creativity and outcomes. I learned to listen more, assume less and adapt constantly.

Working in Medellín introduced me to new ways of organising, leading and sustaining impact. Exposure to grassroots organisations like *makesense* and *Picacho con Futuro* showed me that systemic change often starts at local level. They work without large budgets or international acclaim, but with immense heart and commitment. Seeing the

way they built trust in communities, empowered local voices and created spaces of joy and resistance was deeply moving.

This experience has also inspired me to continue developing my intercultural communication skills. I was proud of how much my Spanish improved during the placement and I now intend to continue learning the language, not only for travel or work, but as a way of connecting with more people and perspectives in the world. I have also come to realise how important global experiences are in shaping well-rounded, empathetic leaders - and I hope to pursue more of these opportunities in the future.

How Being a Laidlaw Scholar Will Help Me in the Future

The Laidlaw Scholarship has equipped me with a powerful and unique combination of research competencies, global awareness and leadership confidence - tools that I believe will serve me in any future career path I pursue. Whether I go into academia, policy, diplomacy, or international development, the ability to ask critical questions, synthesise complex information and lead with integrity will be invaluable. Whilst the connections I have made with my fellow scholars will prove a key platform for any future pursuits.

My research project has already had a direct impact on my academic work. It improved my ability to handle historical sources, frame research questions and develop coherent arguments. These are foundational skills for any historian, but also broadly applicable in many fields. The ethical considerations I grappled with during the research also made me more thoughtful and careful in my academic approach.

Beyond the technical skills, Laidlaw has changed how I think about my career trajectory. Before the scholarship, my interests were diverse. Now, after working in Colombia and conducting original research, I feel more focused. I am particularly drawn to roles that combine international engagement and social impact. I know that my experience as a Laidlaw Scholar will strengthen my applications - not only because of the programme's prestige, but because of the genuine growth I can demonstrate. Whilst the opportunities provide a unique experience that highlights real challenges and leadership development.

Perhaps most importantly, Laidlaw has given me the confidence to aim higher. Seeing what other Scholars are achieving and knowing that I have contributed meaningfully to projects in a global setting, has given me the courage to pursue opportunities I once thought were beyond my reach.

How I Intend to Give Back to the Programme

I am deeply committed to giving back to the Laidlaw community. This scholarship has given me far more than financial support - it has given me direction, confidence and a community of like-minded individuals. In return, I hope to play an active role as an alumnus.

First and foremost, I would like to mentor future Scholars. Starting a research project or planning an LIA can feel daunting and I want to be a supportive presence for new students navigating that journey. Whether through formal mentorship schemes, one-off Q&A sessions or informal chats, I am eager to share what I have learned and help others get the most out of the experience.

I also hope to contribute to future Laidlaw events - whether as a speaker, workshop facilitator or panellist. Sharing my experiences, especially with students who might be unsure whether to apply, is one way I can ensure the programme continues to grow and diversify.

Longer term, I would love to stay connected with the broader Laidlaw Foundation and explore ways to collaborate with other alumni across the globe. I believe in the power of this network, not just for career support but as a way to create meaningful impact together. Whether through joint projects, research or local initiatives, I want to keep the Laidlaw spirit alive in my future work.

Finally, I will continue to live by the ethos of, "leading with purpose." Whether in my community, my studies or my future career, I will carry forward the values of integrity, curiosity and service that define the Laidlaw Scholar identity.

Conclusion

The Laidlaw Scholarship has been a cornerstone of my university experience, transforming me into a more capable researcher, a more empathetic leader and a more confident global citizen. From the archives of Victorian Britain to the colourful streets of Medellín, I have grown in ways I could not have anticipated. As I move forward, I carry with me not only the skills I have developed, but the responsibility to use them for good - and to support the next generation of Scholars on their own journeys.