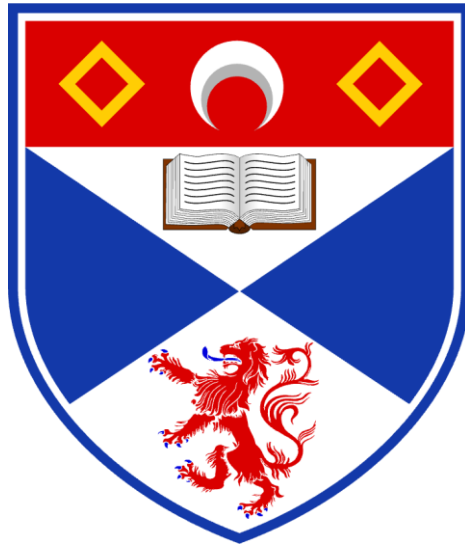


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Reflections on My Laidlaw Experience



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Before Laidlaw

When I first came across the Laidlaw Programme in 2023, I had little academic experience beyond my course and only a vague idea of the career path I might pursue, both studying Geography and Earth Sciences. What drew me in was the chance to undertake a research project in a discipline I was passionate about, and at the time I saw the other components of the programme as secondary. Looking back now, however, I can say with confidence that the experience as a whole has had a far greater impact on me as both a person and a leader than I ever anticipated. Laidlaw also helped solidify my choice of becoming a full-time Earth Scientist given how much I enjoyed my research project.

Building up to my first summer, my experience was anything but straightforward. I applied late, faced rejection from two supervisors, and had nearly convinced myself that the competition would be far too strong and that I had not achieved enough so far to deserve a place. When I was unexpectedly accepted, I felt elated but also slightly in disbelief. At the same time, I was anxious about the social and leadership aspects of the programme, which I knew would challenge me to step far outside of my comfort zone.

Summer I

In the first summer, this programme granted me the opportunity to undertake the biggest scientific research project I had ever done - one that gave me a level of independence I was not used to, which was both a challenge and a blessing. I felt heavily underprepared in terms of skills and worried about whether I could produce research I would truly be satisfied with. Yet, by the end of the summer, I had completed a project in which I designed and ran an independent bioinformatics study testing whether phosphate-metal cotransporters (PitA/PitH) could have arisen early to address Archean phosphorus scarcity. Reading that description back, I can imagine my pre-Laidlaw self having a headache just at this description. I would like to say that I could not have asked for a kinder or more supportive supervisor than Joanne Boden, who was always there to clarify, encourage, and guide me. The research itself was fascinating, and I was able to make the most of the experience to both gain technical computing skills and also narrow down my interests for my future professional life. Beyond the research, that first summer also gave me the chance to meet my cohort, who ever since have been a joy to spend time with. It has been very beneficial to my academic journey to spend time with like-minded people who strive to achieve and who continually keep me on my toes.

Through the research project I undertook in my first summer with Laidlaw, I had the chance to work closely with my supervisor and build valuable connections. Over the past year, I was able to use this network to secure a position as a lab assistant with one of her colleagues, I believe my project experience which was directly related to the lab's work helped me to obtain this role. So this project not only gave me an exciting research opportunity but also allowed me to form meaningful connections within my department of Earth & Environmental Sciences, for which I am very grateful. In addition, while not a traditional form of networking, I was granted the status of Associate Researcher at Carleton College in Minnesota during my first summer, which allowed me to access their remote computing cluster for my project.

Summer II

In the second summer, I was given an even bigger challenge which at times felt almost overwhelming to undertake alone. This was by far the most eye-opening real world experience of my life beyond our relatively comfortable western bubble. Of course, this project was about leadership in action, but a key reason I chose it was because it aligned with my personal ambitions relating to conservation and wildlife - and sharing their value with the world. Over the course of 6 weeks, I contributed to gathering field data and processing it digitally to support conservation studies. I also helped deliver environmental education workshops for schools and rural communities to raise awareness of the importance of the Amazon and its biodiversity. Having now completed this project, which was the first time I truly acted on my conservation goals, I know this is something I will continue to pursue for the rest of my life, most likely by volunteering for research because it really means a lot to me. I also feel better equipped, as going to these places allows you to understand the reasons behind certain issues much more clearly than learning about them from a comfortable lecture hall.

This was my first time visiting South America and by far the most unfamiliar environment I had ever navigated alone, making it a truly international experience compared with my home and studies in Western Europe. During my time there, I met volunteers from across the world and gained first-hand exposure to the culture and customs of Peru. While in Peru, I also had the chance to speak with a senior member of Wilderness International (parent organisation of Fauna Forever). We discussed the environmental impacts of mining in the region and research being conducted by an organisation called CINCIA. Thanks to his connections, he offered to reach out to them on my behalf for potential opportunities for researchers or internships. This was particularly exciting for me, as my professional ambitions lie in the fields of sustainable resource extraction, and this connection could be valuable for my future career path.

Leadership Training

In the first year of this programme, I completed the DISC Flow behavioural and emotional intelligence profile. At the time, I didn't think much of it, I assumed it would help to some extent. I was very wrong. It was surprisingly accurate in identifying, for example, my strengths and my weaknesses, and I was a little unsettled when I first read through it. It also gave me strengths and weaknesses I hadn't previously been aware of and I did deny them initially, but I gradually came to recognise these in myself too. The leadership profile built in the report input felt like a very accurate description of who I was, and it has helped me play to my said strengths and work on my weaknesses such as "being uncomfortable with unexpected and abrupt change" (from the report), and generally become more self-aware of who I am both as a leader and outside of academia.

I found that applying the leadership training to my Leadership in Action project was also very useful. To give a specific example, I recall preparing a section from "Learning Service: The Essential Guide to Volunteering Abroad", while also reading through the other sections assigned to other people. The preparation I did and the content of this book stayed with me, and when it was time to carry out my project, I remembered what I had read and tried to apply it. In particular, my section on having a lasting impact beyond the immediate project influenced how I approached my work. As I have mentioned in my weekly logs, I made a conscious effort to pass on digital skills I had to other volunteers such as QGIS, knowing that some of them would remain for an extended period after my stay and could continue using those skills to help with processing data for reports.

I also feel that I have developed or further improved certain skills that I did not typically associate with leadership before applying to Laidlaw. For example, self-management and others which are shown in the leadership attributes page. In the first summer, the research project was a major opportunity to develop my self-management during my research project, as I had to work toward a clearly defined goal while independently organising myself over a six-week period to achieve it. In my second summer, I faced a similar type of objective but with even more responsibilities, which made the goal more 'dynamic' and felt harder to track. This meant I had to put in more effort and be more adaptable, and in turn I can feel that this helped me strengthen my self-management skills even further.

Laidlaw & Beyond

Looking back on my Laidlaw experience and toward the near future, I see the first summer as having set me on a strong academic trajectory aligned with my ambitions after St Andrews. That initial project was my first real opportunity to design and manage a substantial piece of scientific research, and it gave me both the confidence and the practical skills to take on greater responsibilities later in my degree. As I mentioned earlier, the connections I formed through that project opened further opportunities, including lab assistant work during my third year, and these experiences together have given me clarity and self-assurance as I am starting my dissertation. I now intend to channel everything I have gained through Laidlaw and my bachelors into pursuing a research master's at St Andrews after completing my final year.

Beyond my studies, I feel that being a Laidlaw Scholar has given me a much stronger sense of confidence when facing new challenges and unfamiliar situations, particularly through overcoming the many obstacles of my Leadership in Action project. This confidence is not something I would consider outwardly visible, but rather a self-assuredness that helps me stay grounded and not become overwhelmed in such situations. It also ties in with a personal principle of mine - that the more one does something difficult, the easier it becomes - which I find quite hard to put in to action but I always notice how it helps me. In addition, I now carry Laidlaw as a significant accolade, one that has already acted as a catalyst for other opportunities and achievements, and which continues to give me more confidence and initiative when applying for new challenges.

I intend to remain actively engaged with the programme by making myself available to be contacted to answer any questions about it and to provide guidance to students who are exploring similar research areas, or who may encounter challenges with related projects. I am also committed to supporting those interested in undertaking Leadership in Action projects in Peru or with Fauna Forever as I believe that I now have a good foundation to know about navigating the country and the organisation's work.. As I have been able to do recently, I hope to help future participants to benefit from my experience and potentially strengthen the connection between Fauna Forever and Laidlaw.

To conclude this essay, I should reiterate that my research project in the first summer, as well as being a major accomplishment on the outside, has been extremely useful to me personally, as it allowed me to discover the kind of research and work I most enjoy and to narrow down how I wish to shape my professional future. Also, my Leadership in Action project was an extremely eye-opening and rewarding experience, it gave me the chance for the first time to make a meaningful contribution to ecological conservation and to help spread awareness of its importance. For this,

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Lord Laidlaw for making these opportunities possible.