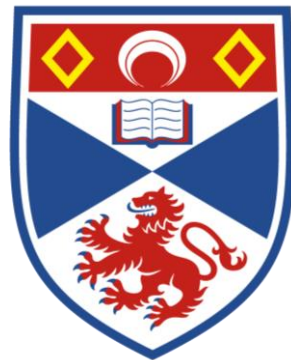


# Reflections on Leadership: My Experience as a Laidlaw Scholar



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## 1. Discovering Laidlaw

I'd like to preface my leadership reflection with an acknowledgement that my involvement in the Laidlaw Scholars Programme was entirely by chance. Research in particular was not something I had ever thought about: throughout high school and the beginning of my university career, my academic priorities had simply been getting on to my course and achieving specific grades. I had given very little consideration to extra-curricular activities and development outside of societies, as this seemed more than enough to be getting on with. I heard about Laidlaw Scholarships by word of mouth, and it was only the enthusiasm of my roommate that saw me attending the November information session less than two months after I had started at St Andrews. Even though it remained on my radar throughout the semester, it wasn't until the winter break that I began my application and found a supervisor. I'm extremely grateful to the support I received during that process, as I knew very little about how to propose research or pitch myself in such a context. The interview, too, was a slightly chaotic process: it landed on the day after our mid-semester exam, leaving very little time to prepare. Somehow, though, in mid-March I received an unexpected email and began a new chapter of my university experience.

Throughout my Laidlaw journey at St Andrews, I've been surprised by how few Scottish students at this Scottish university are on the programme. Having such an international student base is an incredible advantage, as through Laidlaw I've met and learned from such a wide range of people that I otherwise would never have encountered. It has, however, made me reflect on the education system that I grew up with here, and how this has influenced my attitude towards academia. I can only speak from personal experience, but in my case the intense nature of the Scottish high school examination system left very little room for independent research. It wasn't actively discouraged, but it was never explicitly discussed as a career or discipline, meaning that it was not something on my radar when I started at St Andrews. This was also the case in the first year of my relatively prescriptive medicine course, where the intensity of lectures and practicals left very little time for independent learning. While this has since improved as we move towards our dissertations, it meant that when I was applying for the Laidlaw Scholarship I actually had very little idea about what the "research" aspect would involve, or its wider academic context. Moreover, at that stage, however exciting the Leadership in Action component sounded, thinking about the end of my second year was unfathomable. I was very much diving into the unknown, and even by applying I was starting a trend of taking the initiative and improving my decision making skills.

I'm so glad I did, and I am amazed at the long-term impact it has had. I hope here to explain at least some of this and show how my experiences have shaped my attitude towards my education and future work.

## 2. Summer 1: research

My biggest concern at the time of applying, something I've later identified as some slight imposter syndrome, was that I simply didn't know enough about my subject to be able to conduct meaningful research. I was only 17; I was late to apply; I had limited background in my subject; and it became clear that my only remaining options would have to be self-defined projects. This began a nerve-wracking period of emailing academics, something completely outside of my comfort zone. I'd never faced potential rejection in such a manner, and it loomed

particularly harshly when I was the one reaching out and explaining my interests. It felt very vulnerable, and when I found my eventual supervisor I was amazed by how supportive and enthusiastic he was. In the end, we directed my research topic towards something more personal, which for my first foray into academia was the perfect solution: I was better able to appreciate the individual impact of research on people's lives, and find out more about a health condition that may one day affect me.

The highlight of my research summer came right at the start, when I was able to attend a conference my supervisor, Professor Peter Donnelly, was leading. These were an eye-opening few days, as I not only got to listen to the speakers and poster presenters, but I also got to help with the organisation of the event. Having never attended a conference before, I came away with an in-depth understanding of their importance, structure and administration challenges. I was building up my awareness of the importance of research, too: its international links, real-world impacts and interconnectedness of different projects.

That being said, most of my research summer was independent, commuting between St Andrews and my home in Edinburgh whilst writing my first literature review. The skills and knowledge I developed have since been invaluable: further consolidated by a lecture series on "evidence-based medicine", they have provided me with a much stronger base of critical analysis skills that I can use in my upcoming dissertation and beyond.

In my own daily life, however, what I really relish from this time is feeling more embedded in the medical school. I came from a very small school and close-knit group of friends, and so initially struggled with the large year group and impersonal relationships with lecturers and staff members at university. The first research summer really helped change my attitude towards this structure, as I was one of only a few students using the medical building in this period and meeting regularly with my supervisor and staff around the school. I gained confidence in my roles as a researcher and student, feeling more comfortable in an environment I had spent the last few months just getting to know. As it has continued, my Laidlaw Scholarship has provided countless opportunities to network with staff and students alike, both medical and interdisciplinary. Through anniversary dinners, fundraising events and showcases, it's been an effective way for me to learn about how universities work and the management structures on both the academic and business sides. Through my research experience, I was able to gain another research position in the medical school the following summer, a much more practical project that has further enhanced my understanding of what "research" can mean and involve.

### 3. Laidlaw at university

On this note, an aspect of the Laidlaw programme that I hadn't anticipated, and now think was key to my overall experience and leadership development, was the extent to which it permeated all areas of my university experience. From weekends away at Hospitalfield and conferences to summer socials and new friends, the two-year scholarship has been an integral part of my three years at St Andrews. When I was applying, my focus was almost solely on the research and Leadership in Action summers; despite being aware of it on paper, I failed to fully realise the greater commitment I was making. As this became more obvious, I was initially concerned about the impact it would have on my studying routines, as I'm someone who can sometimes struggle to find academic balance. The concept of adding another plate to those already spinning was a little daunting, but one I was willing to tackle when the time came. And again, I'm

so glad that I did! I've had such a diverse range of experiences throughout my semesters, including a private opera show and formal dinner with academics. It's shown me my own adaptability and time management skills, inspiring me to also jump at other opportunities such as presenting at other conferences and helping out at university open days.

I don't think I can identify a particular leadership training day or talk as being singularly revolutionary for me, but I believe that the holistic overview of leadership and the interdisciplinary work they have provided us with have had a significant impact on my attitude towards my university experience. Primarily through these sessions, it's my confidence in communication that I've noticed the biggest change in. This was a focus of my application to the leadership side of the programme, as while I had previous experience in adapting my communication methods to suit specific circumstances such as volunteering in a care home, I lacked overall confidence and experience in interacting with strangers and challenging my boundaries. Having a new group of people to regularly interact with has therefore been helpful to learn more about this aspect of myself, each time an opportunity to reflect on what I'm doing and learn from others. I'm definitely still quiet in social settings, but I'm more at ease with myself and slightly less prone to overthinking my actions. I'm writing this at the tail end of my Leadership in Action project, having spent the last 6 weeks with 5 other international Laidlaw Scholars. At the beginning of my first year, this would have been impossible for me: my homesickness, social anxiety and shyness were overwhelming. I appreciate that my improvement in these areas is a natural part of growing up, but in my case I think my development is inherently intertwined with my Laidlaw experience. Being placed in so many new and unfamiliar environments, interacting with so many new people and having so many of my views and preconceptions challenged has really shaped my abilities to speak up for myself and simply talk to others.

#### 4. Summer 2: Leadership in Action (LiA)

Despite my emphasis of how little I knew about research prior to my Laidlaw Scholarship, I at least knew the topic of my research, expected outputs and supervisor. The Leadership in Action project, however, was a different story altogether. While the initial application form required a broad overview of projects that might be possible for the second summer, it was only really at the Laidlaw Scholars Annual Conference in Leeds where I realised the potential and scope of what lay ahead. Listening to the variety of experiences undertaken by scholars in the cohort above us at St Andrews and institutions around the world was overwhelming. My research had a clear theme to it, but how on earth would I find organisations around the world looking for a specific volunteer? Or for that matter, did I want to do something completely different?

As I've explained, before Laidlaw, diving into such an unknown was something I never did. Starting university was the most independence I'd ever had and enough of a struggle to deal with. Strangely – and despite the continued questioning by family and friends - I was never that intimidated by the practicalities of a Leadership in Action project, such as the language, homesickness or loneliness. Perhaps this was naivety on my part, but I also think that hearing about so many successful experiences from other scholars bolstered my optimism and determination to make the most of the unique opportunity.

Heading into a busy second semester of second year, I very quickly realised how much of an undertaking organising an independent LiA would be. Instead, I turned to the central projects,

and discovered what felt like the perfect solution: “Aging Well” with Make\_Sense, based in Marseille. Focusing on community engagement at a local retirement home, Les Jardins d’Haiti, this was tightly linked to my research on Alzheimer’s disease and the personal experiences that had drawn me to the topic in the first place. Furthermore, as someone who tries not to fly in order to minimise my carbon footprint, I could easily travel to France by train - a journey I had completed before. While still a significant challenge, this was a feasible option that aligned well with my values and goals for my Laidlaw Scholarship.

Staying in the South of France for six weeks as part of a group of six scholars, my project focused on supporting the development of the residence’s community garden, finding ways to help it benefit both residents and the local community. A range of leadership qualities were key to this daunting task, which included communicating in French, meeting with community groups and roaming the streets with a survey. Again, though, I was surprised by how these qualities that I had traditionally associated with classical, authoritative leadership positions really permeated all aspects of our life in Marseille, where almost everything from shopping to weekend plans with the group was a novelty. Self management and organisation were skills I already had a degree of confidence in through my studying habits, but this really placed their importance, alongside communication and determination, in a new context. I did have a few lonely evenings, but believe I ultimately made the most of this amazing opportunity.

Working with Make\_Sense was also a fascinating opportunity to explore different leadership styles in an organisational context. They don’t have a traditional hierarchical structure, instead focusing on democracy in decision making and collective leadership. This really resonated with me, as while I’m often confident in my decision making abilities, I dislike having to direct others or have overall responsibility for a project. This has been reflected in multiple personality studies we have engaged with through Laidlaw, from DiSC profiles to the Oxford Character Project, so while I know it’s something I can work to improve I’m also comfortable knowing that it may never be my strongest point. Moreover, the Make\_Sense structure is more reflective of the teamwork frequently used in the healthcare settings I’ll someday work in - just not something I had considered existing in an office environment.

## 5. Conclusion

My greatest takeaway from the Laidlaw Scholarship as a whole - not the leadership training, research or networking opportunities specifically - is the value I’ve gained from having non-academia related goals and experiences while at university. I’m someone who often places too much pressure on myself from exam results and is prone to overworking. I have always made time for friends, societies and socialising, but it’s easy for academics to become my sole fixation, especially during exams. Being able to plan and look forward to my Leadership in Action project, being able to use my research experience to apply for further research positions, making friends with different year groups and attending conferences have really helped me gain a new perspective on my education and focus on other aspects of my development. It’s not been without its stress, of course, but it’s enabled me to place timelines and exams in a broader context, with activities to look forward to beyond deadlines. I’ve gained confidence in my role at university and the wider world of academia, and far greater awareness of the many non-clinical jobs open to me that allow me to explore my love of medicine further.

It feels like a series of coincidences and good luck that led me to apply to this programme in the first place, and I never could have imagined everything that would come from this. I'd like to thank everyone in my Laidlaw cohort at the University of St Andrews, for the summer socials, questions and time we've spent together over the past 18 months. I'd also like to thank the staff involved here: the Laidlaw team at St Andrews under Celina O'Connor, everyone involved in the organisation of the Scholars' Conference, my research supervisor Professor Peter Donnelly and everyone else who helped me understand what a literature review was. For my second summer, I'm grateful to everyone working at Make\_Sense France, Les Jardins d'Haiti and MerTerre, in particular Emma, Jade, Marie and Marion, as well as the other scholars working in Marseille. I've been able to learn and explore so much in such a short space of time about both myself and others that I feel confident saying it's been a life-changing experience.