

# **Reflections on my Time as a Laidlaw Scholar:**

## **Lessons Learned & Leadership Development**



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### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to offer my immense thanks to the Laidlaw team at St Andrews for this incredible opportunity and all the help along the way, to my fantastic mentors in the lab at Tufts, Dr. Elizabeth Byrnes and Kerri Budge, the team at GVI Nepal for eye-opening, unforgettable memories, and my family and friends for all their support.

To reflect on my experience in the Laidlaw program is to look back on my time at university as a whole. For, after all, I first learned about the scholarship in October of my first year, applied shortly after, and am now completing the program during my final months of undergrad. In this time, I've been afforded countless incredible opportunities that have challenged and inspired me, ultimately pushing me to evolve and develop as a leader, and on a broader scale, as a person. I've spent a summer pouring over brain samples, another working to increase health literacy in Nepal, while honing presentation, leadership, and communication skills through regular leadership training in the interim. For these opportunities to indulge my curiosities, meet incredible people, and learn so much in the process, I am deeply grateful.

In reflecting, a natural starting point is my application to the program. As an eager first year, full of passion and ambition, but little practical experience, I wrote: "For me, the ultimate professional ambition has always been to couple clinical medicine with academia: to work in labs investigating contemporary health issues and translate the findings into individual and public health contexts". In saying this, I was admittedly somewhat naïve and hopeful. I idealised this goal and certainly thought it was what I wanted, but it was untested. At its core, the Laidlaw program has offered me the chance to accrue a range of significant experiences that now better inform my next steps. Two years later, somewhat comfortingly, my goals remain the same: to engage in research that incites real-world impact. But now, my passion has been furthered and my skills and experience strengthened, making this a more realistic, grounded future trajectory.

### **Summer 2024 – Boston, USA**

Starting by looking back on my time at Tufts, I spent six weeks at the Byrnes-Vassoler lab studying how maternal opioid use during pregnancy affected offspring neurodevelopment and behaviour. It was a fantastic experience, where I felt practically giddy to be in the lab setting – it was a dream come to fruition that truly challenged my perceptions of what I'm capable of. The learning curve was steep, but that came with a great increase in my skills and knowledge: learning how to do RT-PCR, being able to navigate brain anatomy and collect brain tissue samples daily, even anesthetizing rats and watching surgery for a concurrent project. Where I had heard the lab environment could be repetitive and isolating, I instead found it immensely stimulating, with interesting developments constantly arising and opportunities to critically think about. Simply put, this experience was an 'in' to a world I want to be a part of.

For all the solo time at a lab bench, the summer was also a lesson in the value of good mentors and a strong support system. In the lab, my supervisor and Kerri, the lab technician, were incredibly patient. With little lab experience going in, they took the time to show me the ropes without complaint and with an openness to my many questions. I consider myself lucky to have received this tutelage. It can be easy to get frustrated or impatient with someone developing their skills, but they showed no signs of this. The environment they curated demonstrated the kind of leadership I hope to emulate. People perform their best in a context that they feel welcomed and 'comfortably' challenged, and, if I occupy leadership positions in the future, I will emphasize these practices of empathy and understanding to recreate their mentorship.

Lastly, I felt inspired by my environment at Tufts. A purpose driven lab, led and almost entirely staffed by women, was wonderful to see. Neuroscience, a heavily male-dominated discipline, can feel tough to break into. Yet, in having these role models and holding career discussions as women in STEM, the barrier to entry was felt diminished.

### **Academic Year 2024/25 – St Andrews, Scotland**

Fall 2024 saw multiple Laidlaw waypoints. Firstly, there was our September leadership training. After spending the research period in Boston, as opposed to in St Andrews with the cohort, I felt like I did not know the other scholars as well as I would have liked. However, this training – and the conference in quick succession – gave me the chance to get to know them as people, their research, and their interests, which was wonderful. To meet such a passionate, driven group has been such a privilege and a large part of what makes the program so special.

October brought the Laidlaw scholars conference in Leeds. I was fortunate to be selected as a presenter, sharing the work I'd undertaken over the summer. Though thrilled at the opportunity, I was admittedly intimidated by the public speaking element, especially in front of scholars from a wide range of disciplines. I had only presented on smaller scales before; amongst peers and people I knew. This was a step further. To capture an audience's attention, maintain their engagement, maximise their understanding, all the while being eloquent and calm – seemed no small feat. As such, it became a significant point of development. I remember prepping for hours: trying to get the slides just right, the content approachable, and the speed of delivery manageable. I asked family and friends for feedback until I could prepare no more. In the end, the presentation went relatively well – I felt like I got my findings across satisfyingly enough – but it was really the process that was so rewarding.

### **Summer 2025 – Pokhara, Nepal**

The Leadership in Action (LiA) component was the program highlight. I cannot fully capture how much I enjoyed it and how much I learned, yet ironically, it was also the component that afforded me the most stress.

For one, finding a project that felt true to my values and interests, while also balancing realism and safety, was tricky. In the field of health, most jobs required a completed degree, which I do not yet have and, what's more, travelling alone, I wanted a supportive environment, while still maintaining a degree of newness and challenge. While I eventually found a good match in GVI Nepal, scheduling then became an issue. I'd managed to land a separate summer research position that I was immensely excited about, but which occupied eight weeks. Between the LiA and research, this meant that 14 of my 15-week summer was scheduled. Having come out of an intense semester, both academically and personally, I was burnt out, without much energy to pour into anything, regardless of my passion for it. All the while, I was eager to see family in the face of a loved one receiving a terminal diagnosis and being abroad for months without visiting home. All around, I was simply not in the best headspace, feeling like the work ahead was just another task on an already full plate.

Retrospectively, I think I should have asked for help at this point given the sheer stress and anxiety I felt. That said, at the time, I did not. Under the pressure of my own

expectations, I just kept pushing forward. Luckily, as summer approached, things began to look up. I was able to arrange a hybrid model of research, allowing me to visit family while still capitalising on the research opportunity. Then, my best friend also received funding from their university to do summer volunteer work and arranged to overlap with me in Nepal. These unexpected twists of fate granted me a support system at a time I very much needed one.

Fast forward to the LiA itself, which took the form of teaching about health to local women's groups and schools around Pokhara. In a mere six weeks, I was immersed in a new education culture, figured out how to plan effective lessons, and leapt into teaching classes on topics ranging from germs and illness with primary-aged children to breast and ovarian cancer with local women. Looking back, the experience demanded significant flexibility and willingness to step outside of my comfort zone. But for all that, I had the time of my life. In fact, the work renewed my energy, rather than depleted it. I was thrilled to share my love of learning with others, and more so to be offered such wisdom in return. Particularly the last four weeks, when we taught the women, their enthusiasm, readiness to try new skills, and generosity were infectious and are qualities I hope to emulate.

A highlight of the summer was celebrating Teejs, a Nepali Hindu festival celebrating women. Being welcomed with food and dancing and dressed up in saris to attend the local celebrations was an authentic cultural integration. More significantly, the fact that they invited my friend, Blair, and I after knowing us a short time and across a language barrier was deeply touching. It felt like our work had impacted them as much as they had had an impact on us. Additionally, the serendipity of celebrating a women's festival as we concurrently covered women's health was incredibly empowering. Talking about often taboo topics, like menopause or family planning, the women really opened up and shared their stories. We gained insight into their lives, health scares, family histories – truly forging a close-knit bond. To me, this showed the power of knowledge and open communication. Coming from a medical background, I often took for granted knowing the physiology behind these topics, but this is not everyone's reality. Thus, I now have a greater drive to advocate for more equitable, widespread education on women's health since, as evidenced even by my short experience, it can have a huge impact on confidence and community amongst women.

All that said, the summer was not without its challenges. One was communicating and teaching across a language barrier. Despite phenomenal translators, it was sometimes tough to get key points across when we could not control over how they were verbalised. Over time, Blair and I navigated this challenge, learning how to format our materials and work with the translators to best convey content, practicing concision and non-verbal communication, but it was consistently an area of difficulty.

Beyond this, teaching the children the first two weeks was an adjustment as we were confronted with the differences between Nepali classroom norms and our own. We quickly learned the kids were accustomed to slightly more didactic teaching methods than what we had grown up with: as soon as we wrote something on the board, the students would copy it down. While this was good, it was difficult to tell if the kids were actually absorbing the information. For this reason, we shifted to more activities and non-written material, playing games and talking through content instead. But it was hard to tell if this was optimal either as everyone would talk at once, often over each other and in Nepali. Obviously, this was

frustrating, and our motivation faltered not knowing the impact our work was having. By the time we identified the challenges and began working to address them, we made the planned switch to the women's classes. The calmer nature of these lent itself better to the active learning we were trying to achieve and felt more successful in terms of comprehension and retention. However, I'm still left wondering if we could have done more with our time if we had more time to adjust to the school system or if we had made the switch to the women's groups earlier.

All that said, it is a privilege to love what you do, and I was fortunate to have loved my job for six weeks. Not to mention the LiA was a catalyst for immense personal growth. I realized how vital support systems are in helping us cope and, beyond that, to thrive. It made me more conscious about calling for help when I need it and also being there for my loved ones when they could use a hand as well. Additionally, for all the stress of choosing and planning a self-defined LiA, I do not regret it in the slightest for it was a real exercise in adaptability and commitment. Finally, I learned a great deal about humanity from women's kindness and generosity, as well as more about healthcare realities in a different part of the world.

## **Conclusion**

*"It is my fervent belief that education is a universal right, and that those who are fortunate enough to be equipped with one should use their own to promote that of others."*

I wrote the above as an eager first-year with little idea of how this value might be realized. Today, I see it not as an abstract idea but as a lived responsibility. Through Laidlaw, I have experienced first-hand the value of mentorship, the importance of empathy in leadership, and the transformative power of sharing knowledge - whether in a lab, classroom, or community abroad. As I look ahead to postgraduate study and a career at the intersection of research and clinical practice, this ethos remains unchanged, but my confidence, attitude, and experience are vastly transformed, in large part due to Laidlaw.