

Laidlaw Scholarship Reflective Essay

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Thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation

I began the Laidlaw Program with a limited understanding of what it truly meant to be a "leader" or to be part of the "future generation." My goal was to contribute to a project that would challenge me to "lead in helping vulnerable communities affected by today's leadership" and work towards a more sustainable future. I had little experience with intercultural communication and lacked the confidence to effectively convey ideas across cultural boundaries. Additionally, I struggled with imposter syndrome, often doubting my abilities. However, I am proud to say that through hard work and dedication, I seized every opportunity that came my way and accomplished everything I set out to achieve. This includes public speaking, enhancing my communication skills, gaining cultural experience, excelling in scientific research, and developing my own leadership style, all while pursuing something meaningful and sustainable.

Below I delve deeper into how I progressed through the program and the main takeaways I received. I address how I am taking what I gained from Laidlaw into the future, what I am doing give back and the scholarship really did dictate my life after completion.

What I gained from the overall programme

1) Self-belief

I think the strongest motive I gained from the program was a sense of self belief. I began each of my projects with a viewpoint of "can I do such a thing", both projects were far beyond anything I had ever experienced or attempted before. I can confidently say that in future my ideology will now be "how will I". In my first summer, I signed myself up for a project that aimed to reconstruct the dates of volcanic eruptions in order to improve climate modelling using data from polar ice cores. In this project, my goal was to understand and improve a computer model. However, I couldn't quite comprehend how I was going to understand and improve a fourth-year project that involves complex mathematics that took 6 to 12 months to complete with a basic competency level in coding and no experience in statistical problems and have something to show for it by the end of 6 weeks? I prepared as much as I could through external reading and completing an online course in Matlab (a computing language) that took at least 25 hours. However, during the project I can't say the preparation helped much at all. My project was linear, which meant any time I came across a problem I had to fix it before moving on. The internet was of little use, and I often researched for days on end to fix each problem. Imposter syndrome came as standard. I was thrown in to the deep end and at points was very close to giving up completely. I found the advice of my fellow peers and the compliment given by my supervisor when they checked in enough to keep me going. Although the work remained extremely challenging, I managed to complete the six weeks, and in hindsight, what I achieved was far from what I had originally set out to accomplish. That said, this could be attributed to my perfectionistic nature, as at any point when someone reviewed my work, they were impressed. I also realised that I was naïve in my understanding of how scientific research truly works. My original goals I had set myself were extremely unrealistic. One key lesson I learned was that research often carries a bias towards positive results. My supervisor, in particular, was pleased

with the progress I made, likely because they understood the difficulty of the project I was tackling and could see the effort I had invested. I also gained an award for the poster I made alongside which was a nice surprise. Over time, I began to overcome the gap between what I had initially aimed to achieve and what I actually accomplished, and I started to take more pride in what I had managed to do. This realization was especially evident after completing subsequent computing modules, where the level of difficulty in my research was arguably much higher. I achieved a first-class grade in those modules, which helped me recognise that, despite how challenging the work felt in the moment, I was often performing better than I had realised.

2) Business acumen

This is a skill I never imagined I would acquire. During my Leadership-in-Action (LiA) summer in Tanzania, I suddenly found myself focused on creating a business to help the NGO secure funding. I explored every avenue I could think of to support the NGO's financial needs. Initially, I believed I could turn the NGO into a self-directed safari company. I spent a significant amount of time researching funding organisations that might be interested, but I only managed to find one. This application, The Conservation, Food & Health Foundation, based in Boston, MA, took a full week to complete, requiring me to utilise my time management skills while balancing teaching responsibilities. However, this fund would have been a one-off payment and still would not provide a long-term, sustainable solution. So, I continued with my idea of turning the NGO into its own business. I had several private meetings with the NGO's directors, where I bounced ideas off them. I also reached out to various charities and sought advice from bird-focused organisations. The more work I did, the more I realised that, although this idea could be feasible with enough time and effort, it simply wasn't the smartest move. I was only there for six weeks, and creating a self-led business is an extremely difficult task, particularly without initial investment and experience in the field. I needed to rethink my approach.

Fortunately, I made an extremely useful contact—Alec Ingram, who was volunteering alongside me during some of my time in Africa. Alec was attempting to create his own web-based business to help sustainable safari companies and promote local charities, allowing them to stand out in a saturated market. It was at this point that an opportunity arose: one safari company showed interest in starting a bird-focused safari. Alec and I, both incredibly passionate about the NGO, started bouncing ideas off one another and eventually secured a meeting with the safari company's director. The interview was highly successful, where I promoted the work ABC is doing and discussed how the NGO and the potential new safari company could help each other. My passion for this initiative still continues today, as I am now acting as a convenor between the safari company and the NGO, with the hope that this new safari company will come to fruition in the future.

That pivot was practical leadership: admitting that running tours in-house would overextend capacity, and moving to a partnership model that leveraged existing logistics, marketing channels, and capital, while the NGO contributed unique expertise and local knowledge—a reciprocal structure with higher odds of success. This was my first lived lesson in business model fit, stakeholder alignment, and value exchange.

Furthermore, I also negotiated existing contracts within the NGO that were not being fully utilised and launched a small fundraiser to help sustain the NGO in the short term. This involved drafting a financial model to present to potential donors, where I projected future profits from a cycling initiative that the NGO could run for future volunteers and clients. In this effort, I created

a graphic, set up a GoFundMe page, and wrote several letters to promote and spread the message about the valuable work the NGO is doing.

What I gained from the leadership training

A significant part of my achievements over both summers can be attributed to the leadership training I received through the Laidlaw Foundation. Without a clear, methodical approach to managing my tasks, there is no way I could have completed all the goals I set, let alone the additional work I took on. The training emphasized the importance of structured planning and prioritizing 'high impact breaks', which became a vital part of my workflow. By organizing my day and setting small, achievable goals; flexible enough to accommodate unexpected setbacks; I was able to plan my high-impact breaks strategically. These breaks, whether through physical activity, throwing a ball, or catching up with a friend over coffee, allowed me to recharge and step away from the stress of the work. This approach proved to be incredibly beneficial and even healthy. During my first summer working on a coding project, it helped me stay focused on the bigger picture, reminding myself of the importance of my work, which fueled my motivation. Without these high-impact breaks, I would have easily become overwhelmed as the work piled up, but taking time to pause and rethink my strategy often led to breakthroughs and success.

Another key skill I developed was the realization that leadership is deeply intertwined with teamwork. The best leaders, in my view, are those who excel at collaborating and drawing on the strengths of their teams. During the training, we participated in numerous group activities where I interacted with scholars from a range of diverse backgrounds, each bringing expertise in areas I had little knowledge of. It became clear that everyone has something valuable to offer. The challenge, however, was learning how to effectively utilize each person's strengths for the benefit of the group.

This understanding became especially apparent during my Leadership-in-Action experience. At the start, my primary role was teaching, as this was the main responsibility for previous volunteers. However, I soon realized that I had much more to offer than just teaching. I created a roadmap to share with Dilenga, the vice director of the NGO, outlining what I wanted to achieve during my time and how I planned to accomplish it.

This was where my teamwork and leadership skills merged. I began to delegate tasks to NGO members who possessed greater expertise than I did in certain areas. By doing so, I was able to maximize the impact of the work I achieved. Another example came when I recognized an opportunity with a fellow volunteer's project. We collaborated on this initiative, which not only led to a productive partnership but also to the development of a strong friendship. This experience reinforced the value of leveraging the skills of others and the power of collaboration in achieving successful outcomes.

Perhaps the most important skill I gained was understanding the importance of listening. Not only did this allow me to gain a deeper cultural experience from my time there but it helped me realise what my focuses should be. Listening to students about their lives in Tanzania changed how I taught, reshaping the classroom into a space where their perspectives mattered as much as mine. Listening to the NGO revealed that their biggest obstacle wasn't vision, but funding capacity, which redirected my focus entirely. And listening to fellow volunteers was perhaps the most eye-opening of all. I realised many previous volunteers lacked training and were often dropped into classrooms with little preparation, which limited their impact and sometimes even set students back. That insight shifted my priorities: I worked to influence how the NGO selects

future volunteers, stressing ability and preparation over simply willingness. I also began drafting a detailed guide for future volunteers—a guide that would help them step into the classroom with structure, resources, and a clear sense of purpose. What started as casual conversations evolved into a recognition that volunteer effectiveness was just as important as funding. Furthermore, I found that by listening to my fellow peers I heard how important religion and a sense of community was to them – this awareness helped me better graft my lessons when dealing with concepts such as the big bang theory and evolution.

Networking/international experience and how being a Laidlaw Scholar will help me in the future

The Laidlaw Scholarship has provided invaluable networking and international experience, especially during my Leadership in Action (LiA) summer in Tanzania, where I worked as a convenor between Attraction Birds Conservation (ABC) and a local safari company. Facilitating this partnership has been a powerful lesson in negotiation and business development, offering me the chance to work in a foreign country and build relationships that will be beneficial for future collaborations. If this business venture becomes successful, it could lead to a paid role, further strengthening my career prospects.

The scholarship has also helped me develop strong time management skills, enabling me to juggle research, fieldwork in Greenland, and my presidency of the School of Earth Science at the University of St Andrews. Balancing these roles required careful logistical planning, and I couldn't have taken on the presidency without the confidence I gained through Laidlaw. The skills I developed will help me continue excelling in high-responsibility roles in the future.

Beyond the technical skills, Laidlaw has provided me with an invaluable network of like-minded peers and mentors. Through this, I have formed lasting friendships and connections that will continue to support me both personally and professionally. My experience in Tanzania has allowed me to live my lifelong dream of creating a positive, sustainable impact, while further developing my leadership abilities.

Both summers have also tested my ability to work under pressure and cope with difficult situations. Whether through handling the complexities of my research or managing multiple responsibilities, I've learned how to stay focused and find solutions even when the workload becomes overwhelming.

Finally, I've gained a critical skill in writing effective proposals and communicating with professionals, which will be essential as I continue to navigate my future career. Laidlaw has also allowed me to complete actual scientific research which will go alongside my dissertation and help me stand out as an extremely competent candidate. As a result, I am confident that the Laidlaw Scholarship has equipped me with the tools to pursue a sustainable and impactful future

The Laidlaw Scholarship has deepened my understanding of ethics and empathy in practice, particularly through my work with ABC, where I witnessed firsthand how the NGO supports disadvantaged youth and women. The organization's focus on empowering local communities through training and employment opportunities has made me more mindful of how crucial it is to align plans with local priorities, ensuring that benefits remain within the community. This experience has broadened my global outlook, helping me understand the interconnectedness of global issues and the importance of creating solutions that are both sustainable and locally

relevant. Working with ABC has reinforced the need for ethical, people-centered development, where the primary aim is to uplift individuals and communities from within.

In the future, I envision the work I began during my LiA reaching its full potential. Attraction Birds Conservation (ABC) will be a financially stable NGO, partnering with safari companies to demonstrate how tourism can balance conservation with community development. Their programs will continue to empower young people in Tanzania (many of whom earn less than 3 euros a day) by giving them the skills and confidence to secure lasting employment as safari guides, educators, and conservation leaders. ABC will remain a place where disadvantaged individuals are welcomed, taught English, trained in bird conservation, and supported even if they cannot afford fees or transport. Crucially, it will also stand at the forefront of tackling climate change, showing how local communities can adapt livelihoods while protecting biodiversity. I see ABC as an example of how addressing poverty, conservation, and climate resilience together can create lasting impact.

What I am most grateful for is how the Laidlaw program helped me overcome the challenges I faced at the start. I lacked self-belief and had a limited mindset when it came to approaching my academics. However, the Laidlaw program provided me with a framework that allowed me to not only meet the expected outcomes but also exceed them; pushing me beyond what I thought I could achieve. For this, I am deeply thankful.

Giving back as an active alumni

Having received so much from the Laidlaw Scholarship, I am eager to give back to the programme and continue supporting its mission. As an active alumni, I will stay involved in mentoring future scholars, particularly those interested in sustainability and scientific research. I have been included as a Laidlaw spotlight also which is amazing as it gave me an opportunity to promote the NGO I was working with who need all the help they can get. I have also written material for Laidlaw Scholars Conference, that has a theme of 'Brave-Face the Fear' where my work has been focused on.

I am also excited about the opportunity to present my project and become a Laidlaw Ambassador where I can share my experiences with prospective applicants. By doing so, I hope to help others access the same incredible opportunities I had.

Moreover, I will continue to promote Laidlaw to my peers and encourage individuals from diverse backgrounds to apply. I truly believe in the transformative power of the programme and will do my part to ensure its continued success. Additionally, I plan to return to Tanzania in the future, supporting ABC's efforts and helping further the work I began during my summer as a Laidlaw Scholar.

Conclusion

The Laidlaw Scholarship has been transformative in every sense, equipping me with the tools to become a more confident, resilient, and effective leader. It has provided me with international experience, valuable networking opportunities, and the chance to develop both personal and professional skills. As I look forward to my future, I am confident that I will continue to leverage the lessons I learned through Laidlaw to make a sustainable and meaningful impact in the world.

I am proud to be a Laidlaw Scholar and am excited to give back to the programme that has shaped my future.