

# Reflective Essay: My Laidlaw Journey and Leadership Development



University of  
St Andrews



Celia Irving

[ci23@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:ci23@st-andrews.ac.uk)

September 2025

I applied for the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme in January 2024, on what I would now describe as somewhat of a whim. Perhaps ‘whim’ is an overexaggeration, but in hindsight, I certainly could have put more care and deliberation into my application. I distinctly remember only securing my Letter of Recommendation on the very day my application was due (a fault of my own, not my supervisor’s). My research proposal — The Role of the Performing Arts in the Development of the Esperanto Movement — drew on themes I was well-versed with, namely theatre history. Yet I knew ever comparatively little about Esperanto, beyond seeing its Duolingo course in passing. The proposal was in many ways a clever fusion of my own interests and those of my supervisor.

In fairness, I genuinely hoped I would be accepted into the Programme. Coming from a high school experience where I had thrown myself wholeheartedly into extracurricular leadership, by the end of my first semester at St Andrews, I was in search of an activity outside of tutorials and coursework that could both provide me with intellectual fulfilment and offer leadership opportunities. I also missed the process of conducting independent, lengthier history research driven by my own curiosity as opposed to curriculum — research resembling what I was able to produce for the History Internal Assessment and Extended Essay in the International Baccalaureate. The Laidlaw Leadership & Research Programme appeared to offer an opportunity and structure through which I could find this gratification and sense of purpose.

The uncertainty and ambition that characterised my Laidlaw application was largely reflective of the transition I was experiencing. From about the age of fourteen, I had held a solid sense of self and direction — certain about who I was, what I wanted, and how to achieve it. Arriving at St Andrews at eighteen, although incredibly exciting, was the first time I lacked that sharp vision. The plans that were once a distant future became the reality of my daily life, and I was unsure what lay beyond them. I tried to think ahead — postgraduate careers, professional pathways — to gain a foresight that seemed equivalent to what I once had. The goals seemed vague, and the tangible steps to reach them even more uncertain. I briefly considered law, but as I fell in love with my history degree, the prospect of academia became enticing. These considerations were not actually important, nor were they particularly stressful — all the same, I lacked the clear sense of direction that had previously come so naturally to me.

The Laidlaw Scholarship Programme contributed to my reclamation of clarity that went briefly missing: not by providing a distinct pathway to my future, but by elucidating my passions, curiosities, and sense of leadership in this new era of my life. While I ultimately

realised academia was likely not going to be my calling, it made the chance to immerse myself in theatre history once more – combined with linguistic and political history – all the more fulfilling. Moreover, I developed a more refined understanding of leadership and interpersonal relationships: who I am as a leader, how I best contribute to community and work contexts, and how people can work together to inspire the best in one another. At Hospitalfield, I remember vividly getting the results for our DISC leadership profiles, comparing our various results and reflecting on our contrasting yet complementary approaches to leadership. Starting with those ruminations and continuing through subsequent leadership days and later the Oxford Character Project, the programme consistently urged and empowered us to understand leadership as dynamic and interpersonal: considering our strengths and weaknesses, specific contexts and adaptations, and developing both individual and shared aspirations. These insights were applied beyond the workshop ‘classrooms’, as I incorporated these skills in my extracurricular initiatives, my Leadership-in-Action project, and even small moments in university tutorials.

But on the cusp of completing the Laidlaw Programme, I can confidently say the most salient gift of these two years has not been the research of leadership frameworks. I could have hardly anticipated this when applying, but likely would have said as much by the end of my first summer. To put it as a “network” seems callous and transactional – more accurately, the people and community I gained from the Laidlaw Programme are invaluable. At our first leadership weekend at the ornate, drafty historic house of Hospitalfield, I left with memories and faces more than names. But by the end of my first Laidlaw summer, I considered several cohort members to be close friends. This was only affirmed during my second year and travelling to Leeds together for the Laidlaw Scholars Conference – celebrating birthdays, supporting each other during presentations, and even passing library catch-ups. As I write this from Melbourne, it is admittedly strange and bittersweet to think of the completing the programme together back in St Andrews. Equally, I know many of these relationships are lasting ones. When anyone asks me about Laidlaw– be they prospective applicants or not – my first response is always that, above all, the most valuable part of the programme is the people.

These takeaways on community and leadership were only substantiated during my second summer, when I undertook my six-week Leadership-in-Action project. I volunteered as an intern for the Trust for Social Achievement (TSA) – a Sofia-based nonprofit focused on bridging achievement gaps for the Bulgarian Roma population. With around thirty staff members, I was

often the youngest person in the room, surrounded by people in a quite different stage of their careers and lives. Yet the wisdom I gathered from them – insights on professional practice, personal resilience, and the intersectional issues faced by the Roma – were deeply impactful, aiding my understanding of the nonprofit and my own objectives in conducting fulfilling work. One day, a colleague would help me find a fridge repair service for my flat; the next, I would hear their story of leaving corporate life for nonprofit work. Their commitment to the Bulgarian Roma community was evident in every conversation and left a lasting impression on me.

I am particularly grateful for the community I had in Bulgaria given that it was such an odd, transitional point in my life. Just before leaving for Bulgaria, I bid St Andrews farewell and quickly returned home to Hungary for my sister's graduation. Just after returning from Bulgaria, I spent my last days in Budapest and moved to Australia for a year, during which my parents will relocate to Prague. My six weeks in Sofia and my colleagues at TSA offered grounding and purpose, a sense of stability and belonging that were increasingly rare.

This project also aided my continued leadership development. Arriving at TSA with little non-profit experience and no Bulgarian language skills, I was worried about how useful I would be and how I could grow as a leader. But under the TSA Team – particularly Aylin Dzafer, the Head of Gifts and Partnerships – I was consistently provided with work that tangibly impacted their day-to-day, as well as longer-term, operations. Within my first two days, I accompanied Latvian government delegation to Bulgaria's largest Roma neighbourhood, Fakulteta, to observe TSA's Nurse-Family Partnership programme. Later that week, I joined two TSA members in representing the organisation at the annual Roma Children's 'Open Heart' Festival in the city Veliko Tarnovo, run by one of TSA's largest grantees. Throughout my six weeks, I translated over a dozen articles, authored content for the TSA website, produced a promotional video for the opening of a new playground, conducted market landscape research for internal use, and kickstarted two new marketing projects, including interviews with board members and interns. Through the personal and professional support I received at TSA, I sharpened my practical leadership skills – communication, critical analysis, project management – while simultaneously building on qualities such as perseverance, adaptability, and curiosity.

Most importantly, my time at TSA renewed my faith in the NGO sector and the pursuit of the common good. At a time when I often felt disillusioned by the state of global affairs, witnessing the determination of the TSA staff to improving the lives of Bulgaria's most marginalised population – the Roma, one of Europe's most disenfranchised groups – was restorative. Their

comprehensive initiatives across healthcare, education, entrepreneurship and housing worked to ameliorate, alleviate, *and* empower the Roma. Yet my time in Bulgaria also illuminated domestic frustrations and systemic roadblocks. It was disheartening to see the Bulgarian government's reluctance to address Roma inequality, as well as the apathy and prejudice of the greater public, and how these realities made TSA's mission ambitious and arduous. It was interesting to be in Bulgaria at a time when it seemed to be at a crossroads. There was a discernible tension, common amongst former Soviet Satellite states, between competing conceptions of Bulgaria's cultural and political future: a more pro-EU, liberal democratic trajectory versus a nostalgic, more isolationist alignment with Russia. This friction was manifest in events such as the announcement of Bulgaria's adoption of the Euro, various corruption scandals, and the shift in which Hungary, not Bulgaria, became the EU's poorest country. Experiencing this firsthand – whilst also watching Hungary, my country of upbringing, drift further backwards – was an interesting and notable background to my Leadership-in-Action project. In these complex conditions, the work of TSA and the growing Bulgarian non-profit sector a source of conviction and hope.

After graduating from St Andrews in 2027, I intend to pursue a legal career, likely in the UK, Australia, or Canada. My time as a Laidlaw scholar has given me a solid foundation: research skills, leadership experiences, and people I can trust as collaborators and peers. Equally, I know that this plan could easily be subject to change – an uncertainty I have come to terms with, knowing how much has shifted in just the past two years. Wherever I end up, I am guided by the principles of ethical leadership, intellectual curiosity, and community service Laidlaw has fostered in me. I trust that these will ensure not only professional achievement, but personal fulfilment and a meaningful contribution to any environment I join.

## **Acknowledgements**

This programme is the product of the meaningful contributions from various individuals for whom I am grateful. I would like to thank Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for the generous funding and opportunities to conduct both my research project and my Leadership-in-Action project. In terms of these projects more specifically, I would like to thank my research supervisor, Dr. Bernhard Struck, and the Trust for Social Achievement – particularly Sarah Perrine and Aylin Dzafer – for their trust and mentorship. I would also like to thank the St Andrews Laidlaw Team, led by Celina O’Connor. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation for my fellow scholars for their inspiration, camaraderie, and friendship.