

**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and
Research Programme
End-of-Programme Reflection**

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Introduction

Two years later, as I wrap up the program, it is incredible to think about first getting the email informing me that I was accepted to the 2025 Laidlaw Scholars Cohort at the University of Toronto. I had no idea what I was in for. The program has strengthened me as a leader, broadened my horizons, and given me opportunities that will serve as a foundation for my future. Most importantly, perhaps, it has allowed me to forge friendships with people I would never have met otherwise.

Summer 1: Building research skills

My first summer was a whirlwind of research: I had just participated in the Jackman Scholars in Residence research program, and then it was time for Laidlaw. There were some unexpected challenges, such as the fact that my research supervisor had many other responsibilities and was often (understandably) too busy to interact with me, but every challenge also came with an unexpected bright spot, such as the fact that her PhD student was incredibly generous with his time and helped me at every step of the way.

My research focused on the impact of work integration social enterprises on youth in Toronto, part of a larger faculty-led project on social enterprises. That summer really taught me independence in research: at the beginning, I was nervous everything I did, worried about gaps in my literature review, not sure if I would make a good interviewer. By the end, however, I was confidently approaching social enterprises to ask for an interview, and the themes that connected them and key questions leapt out at

me. Interviewing people about their life experiences is a source of information unlike any other; it is not created to convince you of something, nor edited or polished, and it was endlessly fascinating to me. That work made me see the landscape of employment issues, and my own city, and very differently.

Summer 2: Helping actualize projects I didn't know were possible

Work integration social enterprises are all about helping people build economic and social stability in the midst of raging inequality, and my second summer, interning at Yorspace, put that theme into action. Yorspace is a community-led affordable housing developer and land trust in York, England. Their goal is to expand non-market housing by developing cooperatives that are sustainable, shaped by meaningful input from their residents, and affordable for the long term. Many in the housing industry would say that these goals are incompatible, that one of them must be sacrificed in order to get anything built, but Yorspace is proving that wrong. What Yorspace does is the definition of long-term impact: once one of their developments is built, it creates a new community of mutual support, as well as a physical community asset that is protected from speculation, a refuge from rising rents. Imagine the city in 50 years if they keep doing what they are doing!

I am an urban planning student, and I hope to go into housing development as a career. Getting to be a part of the nuts and bolts of delivering exactly the kind of housing I know we need to solve the housing crisis was a dream come true. I could not imagine a better or more relevant summer experience to act as a foundation for the rest of my career. Other planning students have internships, but to have had an internship in

exactly my area of interest in an international context will truly set me apart. More than setting me apart on a resume, though, it matters to be because of how much I learned about how to be bold in innovating in the sector and how to get things build without sacrificing the core values of the project.

People I Wouldn't Have Met Otherwise

Most of my fellow Laidlaw Scholars agree that the best part of the Laidlaw Program is meeting new people you would never otherwise meet, and I am no exception. The relationships are the most important long-term outcome of the program. In a generation where not caring is cool, where a sort of affected cynicism is popular, the students I met through Laidlaw did the opposite. They all care deeply about their subjects and love to talk passionately about them. They are not afraid to be seen trying their hardest and making mistakes. They come from diverse life experience but their drive to lead and to make a difference is shared. It is a group I am honoured to be a part of.

However, it was not just my fellow Laidlaw Scholars that I forged relationships with. The team I joined at Yorspace embraced me and were beyond generous with their time and expertise. People from that team showed me how the abstract principles of good leadership we talked about during the Laidlaw seminars look in practice. Their earnestness in pursuing their mission to make their city a better place, and their relentless dedication to it despite setbacks, was deeply inspiring.

Finally, and unexpectedly, I made lifelong friends in York. I had been told that the UK would be a colder, more reserved place than Canada, and I was prepared for that. Nothing could be further from the truth, at least in Northern England. People were happy to spend time with me and share their lives with me despite my obvious status as an outsider and the fact that I would be gone in a few weeks. They patiently explained cultural differences, helping me understand the place in a way I never could have otherwise. From all-day hikes to World Cup watch parties to live music in the park, the time I spent with my York friends will always be my most cherished memories of my LiA.

Moving forward

As I prepare to graduate university and move into the world, I know that Laidlaw has made me far more confident, independent, and prepared than I would otherwise be. I used to be wary of travel, but after a crash course of 6 weeks on my own in a place where I knew no one, I feel ready and excited to take it on. I have seen how travel can make life so much richer. I have friends whose lives are very different from mine, who live on a different continent, but who will continue to be important to me. What an amazing gift that is. As an example of how Laidlaw has strengthened my resolve, I am now in the process of applying for the Rhodes Scholarship. I have no idea if I will get it, but most Rhodes Scholars from University of Toronto were first Laidlaw Scholars, and Laidlaw has helped give me the confidence to take the leap, to set my ambitions as high as possible. Even I don't get it, what I learned about getting housing right and getting leadership right will set me up well for the rest of my career. I am grateful beyond words

for the transformational experience that Laidlaw is, and I would say to my younger self (and anyone considering applying): apply. Do it. You never know what will happen.