

My Leadership in Action Reflective Report

Personal Introduction

Hello! I hope you are well :)

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this reflective report about my Laidlaw Leadership in Action Project. I hope that this piece will give you a moment to be present and centred. I hope that, within these words, you'll find something that resonates, something that changes your perspective and/or something that sparks meaningful conversation. Before we start, I would like to invite you to take a moment with me to breathe in and breathe out, together.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Let's begin :)

A little bit about me

My name is Deep Thakkar, and I am a third-year undergraduate studying Biology at Pembroke College, the University of Oxford. I am also a Laidlaw Scholar at the Oxford SDG Impact Lab and Laidlaw Foundation, part of a global community of students committed to helping change the world for the better. I am passionate about using biology to advance the UN Sustainable Development Goals, student empowerment, and reimagining education to empower young people to realise their full potential and become the next generation of positive change-makers.

As part of the two-year Laidlaw Scholars Programme, I have had the opportunity to strengthen my leadership skills and character and apply what I have learned in local and global contexts. During my research summer in year one, I worked in an interdisciplinary team of Laidlaw Scholars to investigate which character strengths the University of Oxford should focus on cultivating through its new local school engagement programmes. Over the past year, I have also actively strengthened my virtues of transcendence, humanity, courage and integrity through the Laidlaw Scholars Character Development Programme run by Virtuosity and the Oxford Character Project.

Introducing My Leadership in Action Project: The Memphis Biosolutions Lab

This summer, for my Leadership in Action project, I spent six weeks in the USA working alongside Nikki Wallace, Biology teacher and Director of Research and Innovation at Crosstown High and founder of Bee Innovation Lab; KeShaun Pearson and Ra'Kelle Lavon from Memphis Community Against Pollution; and Dr Andrea Jacobo from Protect Our Aquifer. Together, we created something I am so incredibly proud of: the Memphis Biosolutions Lab.

The Memphis Biosolutions Lab empowers high school students with the skills, mentorship and opportunities to become the next generation of bio-innovators, engineering solutions to local and global health and environmental challenges.

We created the Memphis Biosolutions Lab because we recognised a problem and opportunity that we were uniquely able to address: our communities are facing increasingly complex health and environmental challenges, yet the young people most affected by these challenges often face significant barriers to accessing STEM higher education and careers.

Our mission is to equip high school students with the skills and character to become positive change-makers, while nurturing their confidence, identity and sense of belonging in STEM. In doing so, we hope to increase the number of students from underrepresented communities successfully applying for and graduating from STEM courses in higher education. Ultimately, our goal is to empower more young people to pursue and thrive in STEM careers that advance the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals—because every young person has the potential to use science to drive meaningful change.

SDG Alignment

Something that still amazes me is how closely the Memphis Biosolutions Lab resonates with ideas from the UN's *Synergy Solutions for Climate Change and Sustainable Development Goals Action* report, which I first read while preparing for my Laidlaw interview—a real full-circle moment. The report emphasises the importance of breaking down silos, empowering communities, recognising cities as drivers of innovation and finding solutions that advance multiple SDGs simultaneously. By integrating project-based, community-connected, skills-driven science learning experiences within programmes that connect students with mentors and role models from backgrounds similar to their own, we are doing

exactly that with the Memphis Biosolutions Lab. Through the programmes we provide, we will be directly advancing SDG 4 (Quality Education); SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities); SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure); and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals). By giving our young scientists the chance to design a bio-solution addressing a health and/or environmental challenge affecting their communities, the Memphis Biosolutions Lab will also help advance SDG 2 (Zero Hunger); SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being); SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation); SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities); SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production); SDG 13 (Climate Action); SDG 14 (Life Below Water); and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

My Contributions

Because of the Laidlaw Scholars Programme, I was able to help turn this incredible vision that my co-founder, Nikki Wallace, had from an idea into reality. And I am really glad to say that, during my time in Memphis, I contributed not only my time, but also the unique skills and perspectives I've developed through the Laidlaw Scholars programme and more broadly from high school and my first two years at Oxford.

In the run-up to the program, I helped translate the curriculum that Nikki built into a 10-day innovation sprint summer pilot program for students from Southwest Memphis. This was the first time I really learned about what goes into designing project-based, community-connected, skills-driven learning experiences. And it was completely transformative! Being given this responsibility and opportunity challenged my limiting assumptions about what education can look like. It emboldened me to dream new, imaginative, ambitious possibilities and turn them into reality.

As we designed our pilot summer programme, I found myself reflecting a lot on how much I benefited from attending a summer programme similar to the ones we're creating at the Memphis Biosolutions Lab back in high school. Having that experience gave me empathy as well as insights and perspectives that helped me create a meaningful, engaging and empowering programme.

This Leadership in Action project also reignited my creativity and gave me the exciting opportunity to apply it in new ways! I helped transform our physical classroom spaces; created slide decks, name badges, welcome packs, innovation workbooks and certificates; and designed our website and programme posters. I also

found immense joy in harnessing music to create an inspiring backdrop for our different activities, especially the awards ceremony on the last day.

I also drew heavily upon the skills I developed at Oxford. The presentation skills I developed through tutorials helped me facilitate the learning activities in our programme. The research skills I've cultivated over the past two years were also incredibly useful. These research skills helped me mentor students as they designed their group bio-innovation projects and enabled me to co-design a way to evaluate the success of our pilot programme. I am now continuing to apply my research skills by helping to write a paper discussing the creation of the Memphis Biosolutions Lab and what we learned from the pilot.

Personal Growth: Courage, Community and Global Citizenship

During my time in Memphis, I was forced to strengthen my courage. With this being a solo Leadership in Action project, I had to be brave and put myself out there in order to foster a sense of community, belonging and home. To do so, I leaned on my curiosity and compassion. I tried my best to start embracing every opportunity to ask questions, learn new things, and talk to people who were once strangers. Slowly, with each introduction and conversation, I began to find my rhythm and place in Memphis and was inspired by the strong sense of community there. From friendly conversations with Uber drivers and people working at the local gym, cafes and restaurants; to working with Memphis Community Against Pollution; to an impromptu karaoke sing-along at The Four Way soul food restaurant; and being in spaces like the incredible hub that is the Crosstown Concourse, I was taken aback by just how open, welcoming and kind the people I met in Memphis were, and how passionate they are about nurturing and fighting for their communities. I particularly want to shout out the amazing culture and incredible people at Crosstown High School, who so generously hosted me and welcomed me to their team during my time in Memphis. Through all of this, I began to really appreciate, for the first time, just how much of a positive difference we can make by investing in and cultivating our communities—the hope and joy and sense of empowerment we can spark. This lesson is probably one of the biggest impacts Memphis has had on me and is something I will be taking with me wherever I go.

This Leadership in Action project also invited me to finally start acting as a global citizen. Living in a different country and becoming a part of these different communities, learning about our shared and different struggles, our hopes and

dreams, was paradigm-shifting. I began to really appreciate how I'm becoming part of a global community of positive change-makers, spanning beyond single organisations, regions and countries—a community of people all looking to make this world a brighter, kinder, more loving, safe, just and empowering place to be. Knowing that has strengthened my virtue of transcendence; it has given me hope and a renewed sense of purpose and ambition in everything that I do.

Leadership Lessons

Throughout my Leadership in Action project, I also had the privilege of witnessing and learning from the incredible leadership of my collaborators and peers. From KeShaun Pearson, I learned the importance of meeting people where they are. I saw just how much of a difference it can make when you start an activity by genuinely checking in with people rather than immediately jumping to the task at hand. From Nikki Wallace, I learned the power of cultivating human connection and being fully present, especially in this age of AI. From the wider team at Crosstown High, I saw what can happen when an organisation integrates their mission, vision and values into everything that it does—I experienced the culture it can create, the impact it can have and the possibilities that it opens up.

Building on My Laidlaw Research Summer

Something that was really rewarding was seeing my two Laidlaw summers begin to connect.

During my first summer, I learned how human flourishing is a product of not just strong skills, but also a strong character. Attending the Association for Character Education conference that summer introduced me to so many incredible schools focusing on nurturing their students in becoming people of good character. This second summer exposed me to the innovative ways in which schools such as Crosstown High and the other XQ schools are empowering students with the skills to become positive change-makers. As I reflected on my experiences, I discovered an exciting opportunity to bridge these two worlds. I began sharing with the team at Crosstown High what I had learned about character education during my first Laidlaw summer, and found so much joy and excitement in hearing that these ideas were resonating. This led me to start dreaming big. I started to explore and eventually pitched an innovative way for Crosstown High to begin actively and intentionally cultivating their students' character, in addition to their skills and knowledge, which we are now trying to slowly implement! I'm so proud to have been

able to contribute to Crosstown High in this way, in addition to helping prepare for the new school year by setting up classroom spaces and helping develop the new biology learning experiences.

Looking Forward

Words cannot express just how much the Laidlaw Scholars Programme has changed my life. It has taught me so much and opened up the world to me in ways I could never have imagined. It has brought into my life a renewed sense of purpose and some of the most incredible friends. It has given me the experience, skills, character and confidence to start making a positive difference in this world in bigger ways. Getting accepted into the Laidlaw Scholars Programme inspired me to start my own online empowerment project through YouTube and Instagram. It also gave me the opportunity to co-found the Memphis Biosolutions Lab, which we're going to try bringing to Oxford! I am so, so excited to continue these projects and create more positive impact through them.

I want to end by sharing some thanks. Thank you so much to the Oxford SDG Impact Lab and Laidlaw Foundation teams for this incredible, incredible opportunity. Thank you to Ruby-Anne Birin and Benjamin Margetts, the Laidlaw programme managers at the Oxford SDG Impact Lab, for making this all possible. Thank you to my former biology teacher and now mentor, Clare Foreman, for helping me with my application. Thank you to my amazing Laidlaw Scholar friends at Oxford and from across the world! Thank you to Corey Crossan for being the most wonderful and inspiring mentor. Thank you to Nikki Wallace, the rest of the Memphis Biosolutions Lab and Crosstown High team and everyone else who helped turn the Memphis Biosolutions Lab into a reality and made my time in Memphis as special as it was. And thank you to all my other incredible friends, teachers and mentors, my sister, mum, dad and the rest of my family for believing in me, encouraging me, supporting me and cheerleading me on. I appreciate you all so, so much.

Sending you so much joy and light,

Deep :)

