

Laidlaw Scholars Program

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A six week research on The Concept of *Adhikāra* in Sanskrit Jurisprudence: Rethinking Rights and Justice through the Manusmṛti and Medhātithi's Commentary

AND

A six-week Leadership-in-Action placement supporting free legal assistance for people navigating the asylum process on Lesbos.

What I will carry from Laidlaw

Experience

When I began the Laidlaw Scholars Programme, I thought of research and leadership as separate achievements: first produce a strong research project, then do something useful with the opportunities it opened. My summer research on adhikara in the Manusmṛti and its commentary by Medhatithi, followed by my Leadership in Action placement with European Lawyers in Lesvos, made that division harder to maintain. In both settings I learned to question the assumptions I brought to a text or a person and to account honestly for what I could not know.

Under Professor Elisa Freschi's supervision, my research took me to Varanasi and conversations with scholars at Banaras Hindu University. I had to work patiently with a tradition I could not reduce to a quick contemporary conclusion. In Lesvos, the pressure felt different: notes and country of origin research might support a lawyer preparing a real case. I expected my Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi interpretation skills to be central. I interpreted directly once, and adapted to the work most needed instead. That was a more useful lesson in leadership than the role I had imagined for myself.

Team

The programme introduced me to people whose expertise and backgrounds challenged how I thought. Professor Freschi and scholars in Varanasi pushed me to take sources and interpretive choices seriously. Leadership development sessions and the Oxford Character Project gave me language for reflecting on what kind of person I was becoming; conversations with the wider Laidlaw cohort, including at the annual conference, reminded me that scholars can approach responsibility from very different disciplines and places.

At ELIL, Vicky made it possible to take responsibility while asking basic questions. Lawyers, interpreters and legal assistants worked through a case together, each with knowledge the others needed. Megi, Natalia, Shirin and colleagues who arrived for brief pro bono placements made an unfamiliar place feel like a community. I learned that I do my best work in a team where precision and warmth can coexist, where people explain what they know and are comfortable saying what needs checking. I want to sustain those relationships and seek out people whose experiences unsettle my assumptions.

Individual

My strengths are close listening, detailed note taking and persistence with difficult questions. My work as a court reporter helped me record interviews accurately; research training helped me organise a memo and assess sources. I also discovered a recurring weakness: when I first enter a new environment, I can mistake uncertainty for being unqualified. On my first camp shift I

thought I needed an answer to every question. Later I could say, without embarrassment, that I needed to check with a lawyer.

The character habit I worked hardest on was intellectual humility. In legal aid it meant listening without filling gaps in a person's account myself and recognising the boundaries of my role. Moral courage may sometimes mean challenging a confident but unsupported statement, including one I made. I hope to keep practising that in work where schedules are busy and a quick answer feels tempting.

Critical thinking

Research on *adhikara* taught me to read closely and ask how an interpretation is justified. I brought that discipline into country of origin research on Egyptian blood feuds, risks affecting Shia people in Afghanistan, and the verification of Bangladeshi birth certificates. I learned to distinguish Hazara ethnicity from Shia religious identity and to question whether evidence about a whole country answered a question about one person's circumstances. In another assignment, I could not substantiate a proposed transfer mechanism between Crete and Lesbos. Saying so was more useful than repeating the premise.

I would not describe myself as a wise thinker yet. I am better at noticing when a category hides a complication, checking a source and making the limit of a conclusion visible. Those are habits I can keep developing. The Oxford Character Project's emphasis on character feels concrete when I remember that a careful sentence in a memo may matter to someone I will never meet again.

Translating skills and experiences

For an employer or a graduate programme, I can describe this experience in concrete terms: I researched complex questions across unfamiliar legal and cultural contexts, prepared interview notes and case memos in a multilingual team, and adjusted my contribution to an organisation's needs. My summer research demonstrates sustained independent analysis and willingness to learn from specialists. The placement demonstrates that I can use those skills collaboratively, with care for the people affected by the work.

If I could tell a first year student one thing about Laidlaw, I would say that it gives you room to take an idea seriously and then asks how you behave when real people and unfamiliar contexts complicate it. That lesson will matter as I build a legal career, whatever area of law I eventually choose.

Big picture

World Refugee Day in Lesbos gave me a picture I keep returning to: a map on which people coloured where they came from and left messages to the world. I coloured India and thought about how much freedom to move depends on geographic luck. A person's legal status can matter enormously, but it never captures an entire life. Ethical leadership, for me, means keeping both truths in view while using my skills without taking over someone else's story.

In the next three years I want to learn deeply from front line legal work and become a colleague whom others trust for accurate, humane work. In five years I hope to have developed clearer legal expertise and a way to support access to fair processes across borders or within the communities where I work. In ten years I want to be able to look at decisions I made under pressure and recognise the same habits I practised in this programme: fairness, resilience, care with evidence and willingness to hear a correction. I cannot predict my exact role. My uncertainty is about the path, while my confidence is in the practice of learning from colleagues and staying answerable to the people affected by my work. I will continue seeking mentors, feedback and spaces where I can connect research with responsible service.

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