

Laidlaw Programme Reflections: Ambition, Adaptability and Moving Forward

Shrey Patel · Laidlaw Scholars Programme Reflection

Looking back on two summers as a Laidlaw Scholar, from researching why people cooperate to working with young people in Ahmedabad. The biggest lesson was that good leadership is not about how big your plan is, but about what still stands when the plan falls apart.

My journey

I applied to the Laidlaw Programme because I wanted to learn how to lead in a way that actually helps people. I already ran my own small education business, so I thought I knew something about getting things done. What I did not yet understand was the difference between leading something you control and leading in a place where you have no authority at all. The programme taught me that difference over two summers.

Research: learning to work with someone else

In the summer of 2025, I worked on a research project called *The Cooperation Puzzle: What really drives people to cooperate?* with my project partner Ivanna Piven, supervised by Dr Konstantinos Ioannidis. We carried out a meta-analysis of studies on Public Goods Games, a kind of experiment where people choose how much to put into a shared pot that benefits everyone.

The research was about cooperation, and doing it taught me about cooperation too. Ivanna came from biological anthropology and I came from economics, so we often looked at the same study and saw different things. Learning to treat that as an advantage rather than a disagreement made our work far better than either of us would have managed alone. It was good practice for what came next, because in Ahmedabad almost everyone I worked with saw the world differently from me.

The Laidlaw conference in Durham was another important moment. Meeting scholars from other universities who were working on such different problems reminded me how many people care about making a difference, and gave me ideas about what I might do with my own Leadership in Action project.

Adaptability

The capacity I developed most was adaptability. My Leadership in Action proposal was detailed and ambitious, with a week-by-week plan for six weeks in Ahmedabad. Within days of arriving, the plan started to bend. Meetings moved, schools had their own timetables, and things were often arranged at the last minute. At first this frustrated me, because I am used to plans being followed.

My Lions Club contact, Rameshmasa Samved, helped me see it differently. He was practical about everything. His question was always whether something would actually work for the young people we were trying to help, not whether it matched my plan. I slowly learned to hold my plans more loosely and to make the most of each day as it came.

The real test came when I became ill in late August and had to fly home after about three weeks. Everything I had planned to do in person was suddenly impossible. Being adaptable here meant asking a different question: not “how do I rescue my original plan?” but “what is still worth doing, and what can I do from where I am?” The answer was to build a complete course that Lions volunteers could run without me, called *Aagal Vadho*, meaning “move forward” in Gujarati. It was not what I set out to do, but it may last longer than the workshops I had planned. Anyone can use it for free at aagal-vadho.vercel.app.

Change Maker Values

Before the programme I would have said I was mostly Curious. Looking back now, the value I grew into most was Determined.

Getting ill abroad and coming home early felt like failing. It would have been easy to write the project off as bad luck and move on. What kept me going was remembering the young people I had met, especially the teenager who built his first working app with me (more on that below). They had shared their ambitions with me, and I did not want my illness to be the end of that. Being determined did not mean refusing to stop. It meant stopping when I had to, and then finding another way to carry on.

Character

The Oxford Character Project introduced me to the idea that a good character trait can tip over into a bad one, a virtue becoming a vice. I recognised this in myself most clearly with ambition.

Ambition is part of why I applied to Laidlaw and why I run a business. But my LiA proposal shows where it can go wrong. I promised at least 12 workshops for at least 150 young people and eight trained volunteers, all in six weeks, in a city where I had never worked, with partners I had only just met. Those numbers looked impressive on paper. In reality, they left little room for listening, for setbacks, or for the slow work of building trust. When I became ill, the gap between my plan and reality became impossible to ignore.

I have since come to think of good ambition as being about what lasts, not about how big the numbers are. A smaller thing that local people own and keep running is worth more than a large programme that disappears when you leave. I also learned that perseverance has its own limit. When I started to feel unwell, I kept pushing on because stopping felt like weakness. Looking back, rest would have been the more responsible choice.

The moment that changed me

During my time in Ahmedabad I spent a lot of time talking with young people about their futures. Most of them only knew a handful of careers: doctor, engineer, a government job, or going abroad. They were brilliant on their phones but had rarely used them for anything other than entertainment.

One afternoon I showed a group how to use AI coding tools, such as Codex, to build something themselves. One teenager had wanted to build a food delivery app for India for a long time. He assumed it was something only engineers at big companies could do. He described what he wanted in plain words, and together we built a simple working version: a menu, a basket and an order screen. When it worked, his whole idea of what was possible changed in front of me.

That moment changed me too. It showed me that the gap between those young people and the opportunities I have had was never about talent. It was about access, and about someone taking the time to show them what they could do. It is the main reason I kept working on the project after I came home.

I was also moved by a Lions service event, where members helped local families directly, with no fuss and no interest in credit. Towards the end of my time in India, Rameshmasa suggested that I become a full member of the Lions. I have thought about that a lot since. To him, service is not a project with a start and an end date. It is a way of living.

Concluding thoughts

If I had to sum up what the Laidlaw Programme taught me, it would be this: ambition is only useful if it serves other people, and plans are only useful if you are willing to let them change. I came into the programme wanting to lead big things. I am leaving it wanting to build things that last, alongside people who understand their communities far better than I do.

I am grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation, to Jane Mumford for her support throughout and especially around my early return, to Ivanna and Dr Ioannidis for a brilliant first summer, and to Rameshmasa and the Lions Club in Ahmedabad for showing me what service really means.