

Experience report – ERASMUS+ internship UK

Name: [REDACTED]

Study program: M.Sc. Molecular Sciences: Microbiology, Biotechnology and Biochemistry

Receiving organization: Kennedy Institute of Rheumatology, University of Oxford, UK

Funding period: 23.07. - 30.09.2018

Internship circumstances

During my studies of Molecular Sciences in Göttingen, I decided to go abroad for a summer internship after finishing my degree. My main motivation for this decision was to gain more work experience, travel new places and do something useful between my studies and the next step of my career. On top of that the funding situation for such placements is pretty good in Göttingen, since the ERASMUS+ program provides decent funding opportunities for internships within Europe that last at least 60 days. However, to apply for these scholarships, it is essential to be an enrolled student for the whole course of the placement. In my case this was not an issue because I received my last credits in July but the semester ends at the end of September, which gave me nearly 3 months of full enrollment without having to take any university courses in Göttingen.

The search for positions

In my case the organization of the internship position worked out fairly easy. For me it was pretty clear that I wanted to work on host-pathogen interactions with regard to intestinal microbiota so I just checked university websites in search for groups that have a common research interest with me. If you have no specific regional preferences for your internship I would personally recommend starting to look at institutions and groups that have a good reputation in the respective field. Of course, it makes things easier when you have a connection to the contacted institution/working group via another person that you know, such as a professor in Göttingen. However, for obvious reasons, it could also be beneficial to expand your connections and work with people that are not yet part of your extended network. I personally recommend to never hesitate to contact people, if you would really like to work with them. If you have suitable experiences from the past and show interest in their research, there is a good chance you might actually hear back. On the other hand, don't let it bring you down if you do not get any responses after numerous E-mails.

Getting in touch

After some time of web searches, I decided to contact Fiona Powrie, who is the head of the Kennedy Institute of Rheumatology at the University of Oxford and whose research interest seemed to be in line with what I wanted to do. The E-mail I wrote to her contained an introduction of myself, an explanation of my current situation and a short insight into my past research experiences and projects that I participated in. I think it is important to mention that funding will be provided by your home institution so that they know they don't have to pay for you. Also, it is useful to attach your CV to give a better overview about your career so far. A couple of days later I received an E-mail from a postdoc in the Powrie lab, saying that Fiona asked him to get in touch with me. We arranged a skype call, exchanged expectations and goals of the planned internship and it seemed to be a really good fit. From this point on, I was

in contact with the postdoc who I was working with and we discussed my project and dates via E-mail.

ERASMUS funding

Once I had the internship position figured out, I started dealing with the paperwork for the ERASMUS+ scholarship. The most important thing for this is to plan enough time. The deadline is three months before the actual start of the funding period so everything has to be submitted by then. To make it even more complicated, the documents have to be signed originally by all participating parties, your institution, your host institution and yourself. But once you meet the deadlines, the chances of actually getting funding via the ERASMUS+ program are pretty good. The amount of funding you get for your placement depends on the country you are going to, tables with rates can be found online. The UK, or at least Oxford is probably not the best place to go in terms of finances because living here can be really expensive. Due to the close proximity to London, rents are really high and on top of that the exchange course of the pound to the euro makes everything seem very pricy. In my case the scholarship was about 950 € for 10 weeks and rent alone was 450 pounds/month so it was not enough to cover all the expenses connected with the internship.

Organizing housing and finances

Because I was not officially enrolled at the university, I had no college association on Oxford, so I had to organize housing myself. The most common website for accommodation searches in the UK is www.spareroom.co.uk where I found a single room in a shared apartment not far away from my lab. A lot of landlords do not accept short term lets which makes it harder to find something but if you start looking early enough there should be no issues. As mentioned above, I paid 450/month which is pretty cheap for this area. Often, a single room costs around 600 pounds monthly. It should also be mentioned that housing in the UK, at least to me, seemed to be a little bit different than in Germany. Many of the houses are rather old and their equipment tends to be not the most modern. I had a similar experience during an earlier internship in Birmingham, UK where it was not possible to keep the room warm in the winter due to poor insulation. To me it was most convenient to pay the rent in cash since international transactions in a different currency normally come with enormous transaction fees. For grocery shopping and other payments, it definitely helps to have an international credit card. I found the one from DKB very helpful and cheap, since it comes without any international fees.

Final remarks

In my opinion, the ERASMUS+ program provides a great opportunity to gain work experience in a foreign country and broaden your personal environment. The funding which is provided by this program is generous and easy to acquire but in most cases, does not cover all expenses connected to the internship. However, it is more than you would get when staying in Germany for an internship. Hence, it is very helpful to make good use of semester breaks or times where you are still enrolled but do not have to be present in Göttingen.