

Final report

(Erasmus+ Internships – SMP)

Personal data and general information on the internship

Subject of studies:	Course of studies (Bachelor/Master/Staatsex.):
<u>The neural correlates of emotion processing in trans-gender persons</u>	<u>Master</u>
Time of internship:	Place of internship:
<u>19.10.2020 – 18.04.2021</u>	<u>Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium</u>

„Internship title“ (z.B. „Internship at the Goethe Institute London in the library department“):
Internship at Ghent University, in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Department of Experimental Clinical and Health Psychology

Internship Report

1. Planning and preparation

In my master's programme, we had the chance to do our thesis either in Munich or elsewhere, so I decided to use this chance. I was very happy with the 2-month internship I did for my programme, so I contacted the research group and asked them if I could come back, this time for 6 months. They were happy to have me back as I had already worked with them, was familiar with the study and the data. I also decided to go back as that would mean I wouldn't have to take the time again to familiarise myself with the topic, the method and also with the city I would be living in. So, I spent 6 months in Ghent, in Belgium at Ghent University. I did an Erasmus at this very university in my bachelor's, so that is how I kind of knew one of the professors leading the research group. I had very fond memories of the city, so I was happy to be going back even in the middle of this pandemic.

To register myself at the university, I contacted the International Office and the coordinator was lovely and very very helpful. The registration process was very fast and easy. There was also lots of helpful information on the UGent site. As accommodation is not arranged for you (you can apply for a place in the dorms, though), I was hunting for a place months before leaving for Belgium. It was quite difficult as seeing the place is very important, thankfully, a friend of a friend could go see some of the places for me. In the end, I decided to take an AirBnB for my first month so I would definitely have a place and so I could go and see the rooms and apartments I liked. Back in October, no PCR or antibody test was necessary, so I just had to book my flight. My first flight got cancelled (which I did kind of expect), but luckily the new flight was just 3 days later. The journey went smoothly, the trains were also running smoothly when I was in Belgium, so getting to Ghent and to my AirBnB was easy. I didn't attend any language courses beforehand as the research group operates in English and I'm fluent. I did do a bit



of Dutch on a language learning application, but I have taken a course in the past and can manage in the language. I was as well-prepared as I could've been.

2. Internship

During my internship, I worked with data acquired with a magnetic resonance imaging machine (MRI), I had created a pipeline for cleaning and analysing the data the last time I was in Ghent so we got to use that. I learned additional techniques for analysing and cleaning the data and learned a lot during the months. I also got to work with the data from the questionnaires and run some initial analyses, I also used some of that data for my thesis. I was also provided a safety training so I could assist with the MRI scanning sessions. In addition, I was keeping an eye on our virtual drive and making sure that and a general data sheet that had the questionnaire data from all participants were in order. I also took part in some of the team meetings to stay up to date with what the rest of the research group was up to. I had several things to do, however, I was not overwhelmed. I think this is partially because I was already familiar with the group and the topic, but also because I have gotten quite good at managing and planning my time. I finished my tasks in a timely manner, meaning I did usually have the weekends off to enjoy the city or to go on walks with friends.

My typical working day started at 10 (sometimes at 11) AM, I mostly worked at home as working from the University was not recommended, unless it was necessary. I would start with checking my emails and then I would work with either data from the questionnaires or from the MRI scans. I would also assist with the MRI scans a few times a month (about 3-7 times in the first 3 months, 2-4 times a month in the last 3 months) which meant biking to the university hospital. I also had meetings with my supervisor once or twice a month, but we were constantly discussing things over email. During my internship I worked closely with one of the PhD students, so I also had meetings and working sessions with her as I taught her things I'd learned about analysing the data and she would teach me the analyses I wasn't familiar with. I usually worked until 4 or 5 PM, but that depended on the day and the workload as I also had days when I was done at 3 PM or days when I had to do extra things until 7 PM. My supervisor and the PhD student I worked with checked up on both me and my work, so I did feel looked after. In addition, the University sent weekly emails regarding the regulations in the country and how that affected the students. The International Office also organised an online meetup event for exchange students with some fun games.

During my internship, I got more familiar with analysing fMRI data and combining it with data from questionnaires. Before, I only had a basic understanding of the analyses as that was what I had had time for during my 2-month internship. In addition, I learned more about MRI as I had the safety training and I had to prepare for that by going over the materials. During my master's we did have an introductory course to MRI but having the chance to be there at a scanning session and to help prepare the participants for the scan was a completely different experience. In terms of data analysis, I also got



the chance to learn to compare group means with taking covariates into account (ANCOVA), which is something I haven't been taught before (I've only heard of it and read about it), so I was happy to use it in my thesis as well. Additionally, because I was in the environment, I also had a chance to improve my Dutch as I lived with a Belgian and tried to use the language as much as I could. This meant reading the news, watching shows in just Dutch and using as much Dutch as I could at shops and places. Luckily, most people in Belgium do speak very good English so I could always switch to that if I got completely lost. I did consider taking a language course, but in the end it was difficult to plan for that as the MRI scanning schedule for each month was different and not up to me.

3. Accommodation in the host country

As said, the first month I chose to stay at an Airbnb so I could go and see the apartments and rooms I was interested in. In Belgium, you can use websites and realtors to find a place, but a lot of people – especially students – use Facebook groups. So, I kept an eye on multiple of them and in the end a girl messaged me saying she was leaving for 5-7 months and was looking for someone that would take care of her room until she gets back. So, it paid off to not only message people who had posted ads, but to also make a post saying you were looking for a place. Once in Ghent, it was easier to look for a place, but it did take me 2-3 weeks. I could've also applied for a room in the university dorms, but I preferred an apartment that I would share with someone. Luckily, Ghent is not a massive city, so it doesn't matter too much where you live. Because I have looked for a room in Ghent before, I used the groups I used last time and asked around. In general, the rent prices have gone up so I did end up spending more on rent than I wanted, but since we would soon start the second semi lockdown, I wanted a cosy apartment.

4. Social interactions

I already knew my colleagues from beforehand, but when I first met them it was very easy to talk to them and everyone was super friendly and happy to help me when I needed it. Because the group is already kind of international and all members of the group speak English fluently, there were no problems with communication. I did meet some people outside of work but because I moved to Belgium right at the start of the second lockdown, there wasn't a lot of chances – or places – to meet new people. However, as said the university did organise an evening for international students and the Expat group on Facebook also started organising video hangouts or walks. I didn't have a chance to take part in the Expat events, but it was good to know events were being organised. I also met some people through my flatmate because she has been living in Ghent for a while. I also met some people through some other friends in Belgium.

5. Everyday life and leisure



Because most things were locked during my time in Ghent, I mostly went for walks or coffees with friends, worked out, read books, watched shows and worked on my thesis. I also spent time brushing up on my Dutch independently. Me and my flatmate also had fun movie nights and we would also have dinner together.

The public transport in Ghent is well-organised and quite punctual. It is easy to buy tickets via their app, however, most people use bikes to get around. I was lucky that I could borrow a bike from the girl who's room I was living in, but it is very easy – and quite affordable – to rent a bike or even buy one. There are lots of bike places in the city and students often get a discount.

For future students, I suggest checking your host university's website or visitgent.be, they have a lot of very useful information! And don't be afraid to contact the coordinator – or ESN office – at your university, they are happy to help! [Stadgent.be](http://stadgent.be) can also be of great help.

6. Financing (voluntary)

Because I spent more money than I wanted to on my room, my monthly costs were higher than I planned. However, because most things were closed and since I usually cook at home and got to borrow a bike for free, it was okay. Usually, the rooms and apartments in Ghent cost around 350 – 700 euros a month depending on the location, the size of the room and the apartment. I think the rooms in the university dorms were around 500 euros. I received the Erasmus+ salary during my internship, however, I also had my own savings and got some financial support from my family. My flat ended up costing 600 euros a month, but my room was massive. And in the end since I was looking for a place for a time that didn't match with the semesters in Belgium (they start in mid-September and end in January or February), I couldn't take over a flat or a room of someone also going on an Erasmus. So that made finding a place more difficult and that's why I settled on the flat I did. In terms of shopping, there are both Aldi's and Lidl's in Ghent, but they are outside the centre. I was lucky to live next to one so that made it easier. I did often go to Albert Heijn that is a bit pricier, but they do have quite good deals at all the food stores so if you keep an eye on them, you can also save a good amount of money. In general, I spent around 40 euros a week on food.

A tip I can give however, is consider getting a Belgian bank card if you're staying for more than 2 or 3 months. They have updated their card readers, but years ago, most stores and cafes only accepted Maestro cards (I don't know why). Luckily, I have a German ING DiBa card that is a Maestro, but taking out money at the ATM still cost me extra because it was a foreign card. Cash is not super common in Ghent, but it's always good to have some with you. Some cafes or shoe shops (I had to get extra keys for the flat and get my boots fixed) only take a Belgian card (so they don't take Maestros) or cash. It doesn't happen often but it's better to be prepared.



7. SINIK: Intercultural Seminar at the LMU

I didn't have the chance to participate in the Intercultural Seminar, but because I had lived in Ghent before, I felt it would be okay if I wasn't able to attend. But if you have a chance, I definitely recommend attending!

8. Internship and studies

I was able to apply the skills and knowledge I learned from both my master's at LMU as well as from the internships I did before this one. Because I had worked in the research group before, I got to go more in depth with the topic and the method and really enjoy the process. During the internship I saw once again that I really enjoy research and definitely want to do it in the future. I will be taking a gap year or two after finishing my master's, however, I now know for sure that I want to do a PhD in the future. I really enjoy research, even the more boring parts related to cleaning the data and pre-processing it. It can be very frustrating at times but seeing the results and even the writing up are very fun to me. Working with groups outside your university can be really helpful if you're thinking of going into research because networking is really important. And to do research, extra experiences really help. And you will get letter of recommendation as well.

9. Conclusion

Honestly, my main expectation for the internship was that I could finish it. Because the pandemic has created a lot of uncertainty, I was just hoping that we could do our scans and data analyses and that I wouldn't just be sitting at home the whole time I was there. Luckily, we were able to continue scanning as the second wave and I could even work at my office at the university from time to time. In addition, I of course also wanted to finish my thesis as that was why I was in Belgium. Luckily, both expectations were fulfilled! As said, I had some problems finding a place at the beginning but luckily it worked out in the end. I would definitely recommend doing an internship abroad but be prepared that things can change very fast during a pandemic. I think Ghent University does accept interns, but you have to contact the lab or professor yourself, so it's good to do some research beforehand.

As said, during my internship I really got to see that I want to go into research and do a PhD, but after the stress of moving to Belgium and back home during a pandemic, I want to stay put for a bit. It was definitely worth it though! Thanks to this and other great experiences I've had abroad, I am definitely looking at PhD offers that are in various countries, and not just in the one I'm in right now. Of course, that would be the easiest, but my previous experiences have shown that I am able to adapt quite fast in a new environment and have the determination to make it work.