

Final report

(Erasmus+ Internships – SMP)

General information on the internship

Subject of studies:

_____ Biochemistry _____

Course of studies (Bachelor/Master/Staatsex.):

_____ Master _____

Time of internship:

_____ August-October 2021 _____

Place of internship:

_____ London, UK _____

„Internship title“ (z.B. „Internship at the Goethe Institute London in the library department“):

_____ Internship at the University College London/ Francis Crick Institute in London _____

Planning and preparation intertwined with excitement

Doing an internship abroad is always a good idea – it allows you to grow both personally and professionally, you build new connections and friendships, but most importantly you get to see first-hand how is working and living in a certain country, which could be quite important when choosing the next steps in your career. So, deciding to go on an internship abroad it's not the hard part. The hard part is finding the right host institution for you and then convincing them to take you on board.

When planning and deciding on where to do the internship is important to have a goal in mind – picture yourself in 5-10 years from now and then build an imaginary staircase that will take you from where you are now to where you want to be, where each stair represents a goal you have to achieve to get there. With this idea in mind, you start exploring the vast world of possibilities simply by Googling. It obviously helps if you already have some preferred countries or institutions. In my case it was the latter. I knew I wanted to do the internship at one of the best institutes in Europe or UK, because this is where I would picture myself in the future. After shortlisting a few institutions, I started looking into more detail at the specific research groups and how their research area fits with my interests. My final list had different research groups from different institutions ranked by my interest to work there. Starting from the top of my list I wrote emails to the Principal Investigators (PIs) of each group, where I would introduce myself, briefly explain my past experiences but most importantly express a specific interest in their research. For the email to be convincing, I would say it's almost necessary to read the latest



published papers of each group and not just look at the lab website. The website gives you only an overview of their research, but the latest papers allow you to get a more detailed insight on what they are focusing at the moment. Needless to mention that referring to a past paper in the email definitely gives you bonus points, as it shows you really took the time to read it and understand it, but also makes the email more personal and not just a “copy and paste” standard email that you would send to every PI. The secret here is to never give up – even if you don’t get a reply to the first and second email, keep writing emails to other PIs, but also write follow-up emails to the ones that didn’t reply. PIs are usually quite busy and not getting a reply can be the result of many factors, including the right timing and sometimes even luck.

I was beyond happy when I got a positive reply from Prof. U from The Francis Crick Institute in London, UK (he is originally affiliated with the University College London, but his lab was seconded to The Francis Crick Institute). After a few emails we had a mutual introduction via Zoom and during the call we discussed the possible dates of my internship and the research project I would be involved in. From that moment on, we started preparing all the required documentation for my internship, which took quite some time, because of the new Brexit regulations. Luckily, both my host institution as well as the employees of the Career Service of the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich were really helpful and together we managed to get everything sorted in time. Want an important advice? Start planning well ahead, because thanks to Brexit, getting everything ready takes an eternity.

A month before my planned starting date Prof. U introduced me to my mentor, Mr. F (a postdoc in the lab). With F we started planning in more detail the experiments I was going to perform and he also suggested me a lot of literature so I could prepare well in advance on the topic.

Tips & Tricks for future Londoners

Finding housing is the first priority. My host institution wasn’t able to provide me one, but they gave me some tips on where to search for accommodation. Based on my experience, the demand in London is very high and it’s a waste of time if you start searching before you are actually there. The number of scammers is proportional to the demand; therefore, the first advice would be to never send money before seeing the room/apartment in person.



I was lucky that Prof. U was on vacation the first week of my visit in London and he kindly offered me to stay at his place until his return. This gave me enough time to find my own accommodation. If in your case the professor's apartment is not an option and you can't send him on vacation, I would suggest renting an AIRBNB or a hostel for the first few days.

I was searching mainly on "SpareRoom" (sparerroom.co.uk), but also on many Facebook groups (for example: "London House/Flat/Spare room to rent", "Rent Houses & Flats & Rooms in London", "London – Rent Room House Flat Apartment Studio Roommate", "London rooms to rent/ Houses Flats Apartments Studios Rooms Flatmates", etc.). While searching I didn't mind the location as long as it was less than 45 minutes of commute time from the Francis Crick Institute where I would work and that the underground station would be at walking distance from the apartment. The price for renting a room ranges from 400£ to 800£ per month (or even more). Be aware that sometimes you can also have the price displayed per week which can't just be multiplied by 4 because it should be calculated for 30 or 31 days. As there is no formula set in the legislation, agents, landlords and tenants may use any number of different methods to calculate monthly rent, therefore is always better to ask ahead. Additionally, one important thing to ask is if the rent covers also all the living costs (water, electricity, internet, etc.).

I would always suggest to rent with signing a rental agreement and to always double check every word before signing it. Pay special attention at the deposit section and in which cases and when it's returned to you. Don't be surprised but ads on SpareRoom and posts on Facebook are mainly posted by agents and not actual landlords or roommates. By law, they can't charge you for their services, so you can also contact them not only for a specific room, but also to help you find others that they offer. Agents receive a high frequency of calls, emails and messages every day, because each of them covers multiple accommodations, so don't be discouraged if more than half of the people you tried to contact doesn't respond. Always remember that persistence is the key.

After one week of extensive search and with a little bit of luck, I found a nice room in North West Zone 3 for 550£ per month with all the bills included. The location was great, as I had a Tesco store across the street, the underground station 10 min away by walk and the commuting time to work was only 25 minutes. I would say that the most difficult part was finding someone



to rent me the room for such a short period of time (less than 3 months), so if you are staying longer (let's say at least 6 months) I'm sure it will be way easier.

Another aspect to keep in mind when searching for your future room/apartment is that London is separated by transport zones. Transport in London is really expensive, but it's also really fast and well connected. Zones 1-2 have the lowest transport fares but obviously a higher monthly rent because they are near the city centre. As you move to the surroundings you pay more for transport but usually less for the rent. Before definitively deciding to rent a room or when deciding between two, always check in which zone is your nearest station and use the Single Fare Finder on the Transport for London website (<https://tfl.gov.uk/fares/find-fares/tube-and-rail-fares/single-fare-finder>) to calculate your monthly expenses. The Single Fare Finder calculator is also useful when deciding if you should buy a monthly travelcard or pay for each trip individually.

For the mobile telephone operator, I would suggest "giffgaff". You can buy a SIM card in your local Tesco store for 1£ or order one online for free which is shipped the next day. It's very fast and easy to set everything up via their app. You can choose between different monthly packages depending on your needs, but I would recommend the one for 10£/month which includes 15GB of internet, unlimited minutes and unlimited texts. The best thing is that you can cancel for free anytime.

In London you will rarely need cash, because you can pay literally everything by card (even every street performer that I came across had a POS terminal for tips). Contactless payment is an increasingly popular way of payment in the UK, because it avoids the need to enter your PIN and inserting your card in the terminal – basically you can pay everything with your mobile phone. An easy way to get a Contactless paying method is to make a Revolut account (you can have two different accounts one for Euros and one for Pounds). I wouldn't suggest paying everything with your standard bank account in Euros because you would lose a lot of money due to the constant conversion. Also setting an account with Revolut is really easy and since it's a mobile bank you can set everything through your phone, which is way more convenient.

Finding friends in a country where you don't know anybody can be quite hard and there's a chance you will feel lonely at first. Besides trying to befriend your co-workers, I would suggest



making a Bumble BFF account. Bumble is a mobile app, where you can search for a friend, for a partner or both (depending on the settings you choose). I used it only to find friends and it really helped me find likeminded people. Another useful platform for me was the Facebook group “London / Girl Gone International”. Girl Gone International (GGI) is a strong community that you can find in any major city. As the name says, it’s meant for women expats, so if you are a guy, I’m sorry but it won’t work for you. The community is very active with admins often organizing different social events where you can meet other girls that are in your same situation. You can post there any question you have (as long as it complies with the group rules), but most importantly you can also just introduce yourself, explain your interests and simply say you are looking to make new friends (bonus tip: add a picture of yourself – it makes the post more appealing). Trust me, many girls will reply and some of them could be exactly the friend you’ve been searching for.

In between lab experiments and exploring London

Entering a building like The Crick for the first time is always intimidating. On the contrary, as soon as I went up the stairs and met Professor U’s group the nerves vanished and excitement took over. They were one of the nicest lab groups I’ve ever worked with – they made me feel as part of the group right from the start and were always really helpful. My work was focused on uncovering the non-canonical functions of the spliceosome that have many implications in the regulation of cell cycle and proliferation rate, which are important aspects of disease and development. I was entrusted my own research project right from the start, which consisted mainly on doing smFISH microscopy experiments and discovering the cellular localisation of specific mRNA transcripts. In between my experiments I would occasionally also help my supervisor with his. Towards the end of my research visit I also learnt how to perform iCLIP – a complex multistep technique which is essential to study protein-RNA interactions that are of great importance in normal cell functions as well as many human diseases.

I really enjoyed working with my mentor, because besides offering mentorship through hands-on research work on my project, his management style was oriented towards career development and personal advancement. He encouraged me to work on my soft skills, critical thinking, and perseverance, which are qualities of immense importance for a fruitful career in science. In addition, the atmosphere in the U lab was always collaborative and encouraging,



which provided countless opportunities for interesting multi-disciplinary discussions with researchers from diverse fields. Additional opportunities for scientific growth were provided almost every day by all the workshops and lectures offered at the Francis Crick institute.

In between lab experiments I also had plenty of time to explore London. During the weekend I would spend my days strolling through London vivid streets, immerse myself in discovering the museums, but also go on day trips like Brighton, Bath and Cambridge. And if you are wondering, of course there was also time to party!

Not only did my research visit advance my academic development and enhance my methodological knowledge, but I also met people that made my time in London unforgettable and made friendships that will last a lifetime (both inside and outside of the lab). I am extremely grateful to both my mentor F and Prof. U, as well as Erasmus for enabling this research visit, which helped me grow as a scientist and provided many exciting opportunities for future collaborations.