

Final report

Internship abroad

Personal data and general information on the internship

Subject of studies: Neuroscience

Bachelor/Master/State exam: Master

Time of internship: 01/10/2024 – 02/12/2024

Place of internship: Leuven, Belgium

Internship institution: KU Leuven

My personal experience as a Student in the City of Leuven.

I am currently pursuing my master's in Neuroscience at LMU-GSN. After experiencing Munich, I thought it would be a great idea to explore new places. Thus, I decided to do an internship in a different country. This country ended up being Belgium, and the city is called Leuven.

And then the journey begins. The first step was the application process for both universities. It required some time to familiarize myself with the requirements, but it was feasible in a short amount of time. As I was in a rush, I was really glad to receive quick responses from the people I needed. All in all, the application process went smoothly and quickly for me. Noteworthy is that both people from the Erasmus Office at LMU and KU Leuven were really supportive.

The second step was finding accommodation. At that moment, I realized that it's not only Munich that poses challenges to students in finding accommodation at an acceptable price. The same happens in Leuven. However, many owners collaborate with the university and offer rooms. They are still quite expensive for a single room with a shared kitchen, but at least there are many accommodations that accept only students. So, students don't have to face the extra challenge of whether the owner will choose them or someone else who has a job.

After this part, the internship comes. First of all, I would like to mention that my supervisors and colleagues gave me a very warm welcome. During my first days in Leuven, and specifically at the office, I felt safe and happy. Regarding my project, I initially had the opportunity to explore topics and choose where I would like to focus on, during my two months of research. Eventually, Early Mathematics, meaning mathematics in preschools, seemed the most interesting to me. More specifically, in my project, I focused on early patterning, which has recently been considered an important aspect of early mathematics. It has been shown that children's performance in different patterning tasks predicts higher math competencies later in primary school. Delving deeper into my tasks, after familiarizing myself with this new concept, I first had to "code" the data collected through observation based on a coding scheme that my PhD supervisor and other colleagues created. After exploring the data and getting a better idea of its meaning, my supervisor and I discussed a few research questions that I could further explore. And that's what I did. Guided by the agreed research questions, I started further analysis. I initially did some descriptive analysis, and then, as time allowed, performed some statistical analysis as well.

The whole working experience was very positive for me as I was lucky enough to have my own desk and monitor, which made things much more comfortable. I also had the opportunity to work from home when I needed my own space, which I very much appreciated. Sometimes, I felt I needed my space, and my apartment was a better place for me to sit, concentrate, and do my tasks. Therefore, my whole experience with my supervisors and colleagues was exciting and interesting.

Moreover, during the internship, I had the opportunity to apply knowledge gained from my courses, especially knowledge related to data exploration and analysis. In my case, it was also interesting to see how findings in neuroscience regarding how our brains evolve, how fast, as well as how different brain areas are more active in specific actions and their connections, make educational psychology and its findings much more exciting for me to explore. During this project, I honestly found myself being completely in the zone, excited to learn and explore more, discuss my colleagues' projects and ideas, and get inspired by them. It helped me realize the importance of my work.

However, when it comes to doing an internship or working on something, the environment plays a significant role. I was quite lucky, as when I arrived, it was the beginning of the academic year. So, people from the lab organized a lecture and then a small reception. Thus, I had the opportunity to talk with some of my colleagues, introduce myself, and get to know them a bit in a more relaxed atmosphere. Additionally, even though my internship finished, I was invited to join the Christmas breakfast they organized in early December. I strongly believe that such activities bring people from the lab even closer, allowing us to get to know each other's personalities outside the focused mode that the job requires. Moreover, my colleagues were very friendly. They helped me not only with work-related matters but also with adjusting to everyday life in Leuven. In my honest opinion, that is very important when it comes to being new to a city. It makes things much easier and enjoyable.

Noteworthy is that, even though it seems that people here differentiate a bit between the work environment and personal life, meaning they don't create many connections from work and bring them into their personal life, they organize team-bonding activities. For example, we organized a variety of activities. A normal coffee meeting was one, but the interesting moments were when we had fries-lunch and pasta night. Here in Leuven, they have the so-called "Frituur," which is a kind of fast-food place only for fried items. It is very famous because they have a bunch of choices when it comes to sauces, and people enjoy that very much. When it comes to pasta night, here comes the difference in cultures. One of our colleagues was from the Philippines, where they have pasta only on special occasions, so very rarely, while for us, especially as students, it's a default choice. That evening was really nice, we cooked pasta with different homemade sauces and laughed a lot, sharing idioms and rhymes in our languages.

Now, going to everyday life, I would say that life went quite smoothly here in Leuven. First of all, the most important thing for me was to be able to communicate, and as Leuven is a student city, most (if not all) people speak English. Their native language is Flemish/Dutch, but they switch immediately once a person speaks in English. On average, people are quite friendly and willing to make you feel welcomed and safe in the city.

Describing the city itself, Leuven is a small city with quite a bit of nature, but in general, very safe. People here, especially students, commute with their bikes. In most places, there are bicycle lanes, and thus it is quite safe. Actually, I've heard that they want to make the city bike-only, and

that is interesting. I find this idea very nice, as it is a small city and going from one side of the city to the other takes just 20 minutes by bicycle. Also, it is possible to travel from city to city by bike, for those who enjoy cycling. Furthermore, Leuven is a student city, thus there are many clubs with free entrance -not my style, but I know it is attractive for some young people. Another positive aspect of this city is that is very close to Brussels. It is around 30 minutes by car and 40 minutes by train and 40 minutes by car. There are frequent trains going from Leuven to Brussels. Other cities are also easily approachable by train. Finally, when it comes to weather, it is a bit cold. There is a lot of rain and rarely snow. However, it is sustainable.

When it comes to hobbies, I love Latin dances. Even though a small city, Leuven offers opportunities to the funds of salsa, bachata, kizomba. Coming here, I immediately joined some classes. I found very nice people there as well, both natives and internationals. They made me feel part of their group from the first day. Needless to say, we traveled a couple of times back and forth to Brussels for dance events. This experience will stay with me forever. Very loving and supportive people and they were there for me whenever I needed an extra support as new in the city.

It is true though that Leuven is quite an expensive city. The prices in supermarkets are a bit higher than in Munich, and the overall cost of living is high. However, it seems to be manageable based on the salary, and people who work here can get through their daily life comfortably enough.

The challenges I faced were few. I had a small problem regarding health insurance. They are a bit strict on this subject and want things to be stated clearly, regarding what the health insurance offers. This incident caused a bit of discomfort but was solved quite fast. When it comes to my project, based on my results and grade outcome, I believe that a more fruitful feedback would be beneficial not only for managing my project better but also for becoming a better researcher.

Some tips I would like to give to people considering going to Leuven are to bear in mind the cost. Especially for people aged 26 and above, as they cannot get student discounts, thus buses and trains are a bit expensive. Additionally, when natives start talking, they sometimes forget that others might not understand, but surprisingly enough, that is mostly with younger people. Older ones show better respect when there is someone who doesn't speak the language. Furthermore, checking for accommodation as soon as possible can save some money. There are quite good

dorms with more affordable prices. Finally, KU Leuven offers a gym card at a very low price for the whole year, and the facilities are varied. From swimming pool, to dancing, to yoga classes. The extra positive in all this is that Leuven is a small city, so the gym facilities are all concentrated in one area, which is easily approachable by both bike and bus.

In conclusion, I would like to say that my experience was above my expectations. From the people I met to the city itself. Living in such an environment for two months made me realize that living in a friendly, welcoming, and open-minded environment is so important for joy and facing life's challenges with much more strength, motivation, and positivity. Every city has its disadvantages, but overall, I would say my experience was very positive.