

"A technique can be learnt but not a state of mind – everything is possible if you're motivated and positive"

Dylan Liabeuf, a first-year Master's student in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the uB's Faculty of Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences, undertook a 10-month internship at the [Cambridge Stem Cell Institute laboratory \(University of Cambridge\)](#) as part of his gap year in 2017-2018. Here he looks back at his remarkable and formative experience.

A clear goal from the start

I really wanted to discover and explore the world which I was potentially going to work in. Going on a [gap year](#) allowed me to keep my status as a student, something which is essential to undertake an internship, and receive specific grants based on my situation. I had two goals: to be at ease speaking English and to see what the world of science was like.

A brave internship search

I started by looking for internships on [LinkedIn](#); I sent applications to businesses or establishments, replied to adverts, but it was not going quickly enough, I was only receiving a few replies and I told myself that I had to change my strategy. So I decided to go to the UK to find my internship there. I went from town to town; during the day I went around the place and in the evening I sent speculative applications to laboratories and researchers. My English was basic and clumsy, but I forced myself to use the language and I made progress through hard work and conversations at the hostels which I was staying at.

One day, when I was in Brighton speaking to a German and a Quebecois, I saw a post on LinkedIn about a congress developing the themes of the genetics of tomorrow and stem cells based therapies, something which I am very interested in. I wrote to the congress members including Ludovic Vallier, a renowned French researcher who had been living in Britain for some 15 years. I spent three days drafting the email, telling myself that he would never reply to me. I continued my journey and a week later Ludovic Vallier let me know that my profile interested him and gave me an appointment. I worked on his bibliography a lot and I prepared my interview extensively, which went well. Two days later I found out that another part of my adventure was about to begin – I had been accepted for an internship at Cambridge.

Before leaving for the UK I had given myself two months to find an internship, and in the end it had only taken me 2 weeks.

Working in a prestigious laboratory

The principal domain developed by the laboratory which I worked at was regenerative medicine. The group, directed by Professor Vallier, had obtained a grant to work on short bowel syndrome (SBS). Helped by my internship coordinator and all the team members (students preparing theses, post-doctoral students), I was the only one working on a project on a European level, mainly using human induced Pluripotent Stem Cells (hiPSCs) to eventually 'recreate' an intestinal epithelium (mucosa). This study allowed me to collaborate with a number of researchers, clinicians and engineers. Today I am still working on this project with the potential goal of publishing a scientific article.

I would describe my work as highly interesting and varied with a positive atmosphere in a multicultural environment – we were a team of 25 people of which 2 were English!

Sometimes I started the day at 7 in the morning and finished it at 2 at night after an exciting experience. This was on my own initiative, as I really enjoyed this aspect of research.

Ludovic placed particular importance on team cohesion – once a month he organized a night out and we also spent three days in Portugal all together for a scientific seminar with cultural and sporting activities.

Most long-lasting memory

It had been three months since I had been working on stem cells and I was starting to feel at ease in this domain. Just before I went back to France for a few days of holiday, my boss told me that when I came back a Danish professor working on the same programme would be coming to the laboratory. He asked me to prepare the meeting to exchange my findings with him, with the aim of proposing a collaboration.

Once I was back from France I worked hard to thoroughly prepare my talk for this person who I had a lot of respect for and who I only knew through his research. In the end everything went well, we spoke a lot, the exchange was fruitful and we were able to collaborate together.

After this experience I realised that I had grown up even more and that I had not been afraid in the face of such an important person. This renowned author of scientific papers seemed inaccessible to me but turned out to be someone who was very friendly and welcoming.

Day-to-day life

Apart from my colleagues I spent a lot of time with the Iranian family with whom I was staying. I could share my feelings easily with them and they always supported me. Sometimes it was tiring to speak English in the evening as well as I didn't have a lot of energy left but making this effort was very useful for my linguistic level.

Each Monday I went with a German housemate to free conferences on different subjects organised by the University. At Cambridge, you can spend entire days at conferences if you want to, something which is truly exceptional. These scientific visits were very useful for me as I learnt a lot about communication and developed my professional network, which is very important.

In terms of logistics, I think I found my accommodation relatively quickly. I paid £550 a month for my room and evening meals and I didn't have any other bills to pay.

I arrived in the UK in October to find my internship which began in November and finished in August. I was not paid, even though Professor Vallier worked hard to 'fix this injustice'; but this is common practice in the UK, where pay is only obligatory after one year of working.

In total I had a budget of 10,000 euros, which consisted of the CROUS student centre grant based on social criteria, specific grants related to my personal situation and money I had saved up while working.

Personal development

It is impossible to measure how much this experience gave me.

Before taking the decision on whether or not to become a researcher, I wanted to gain experience in this field to know if I really wanted to go into research. And I received my response – it is exactly what I want to do. This experience also allowed me to open up to people and to speak English fluently. I am no longer reluctant when I have to speak in front of an audience and my vision as a researcher has also changed.

My decision to go into the unknown was the right one as this pushes us to always move forward, to leave our comfort zone and face problems, with ourselves or the outside world. The challenges are an integral part of my life.

The beginning of my stay, when I was looking for my internship, was extremely tough – I barely spoke any English, I came across close-minded people on my travels, sending lots of applications without receiving a response is mentally very tiring and sometimes I was tempted to stop, but it was highly formative and it was what I wanted.

I really appreciated working with Ludovic Vallier. He is someone who is very intelligent but also very human and direct – he does not mince his words when he speaks and I appreciate that, and this quality does not stop him from being empathetic.

Important advice

Everything is possible when you want it but you have to plan well. If you really want something you must develop it as much as possible, whether that be on a scientific, professional, logistical or administrative level.

Before leaving, I had the chance to work in an emerging startup in the fields of healthcare diagnostic devices and personalised medicine in oncology. My experience at LXRepair played a huge role in my scientific preparation and allowed me to increase the budget I set aside for my gap year. I did not want the financial aspect to block my experience abroad in any way. I also carried out several administrative procedures to receive all the grants possible and so that I could leave on a gap year.

If you are passionate and motivated, people see it immediately. I think motivation counts for more than knowledge. Someone can tell you 'You have not got the skills but you are willing and everything can be learnt'. A technique can be learnt but not a state of mind. You must be motivated and always stay positive because we always find solutions. By staying positive we attract positive people and we go forward. You must not be closed-off and you have to let life carry you along.

Plans for the future

If I stay in France next year I would like to do the second year of Master's studies linked to stem cells in Paris or the second-year [Cellular and molecular signalling](#) Master's programme at the [Faculty of Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences](#) at uB.

I am currently in contact with several people in Scotland and Israel to see if I can eventually do my thesis there. I am eager to go abroad again as this will allow me to grow even more, share things with others and help others in my work – because helping also makes us learn about ourselves.

I have understood that I want to go into research, hence my plan to continue doing a thesis, which will allow me to learn all my life. Then there is also the fact that going abroad is an adrenaline rush for me in the long-term, without forgetting the intercultural richness which will form part of my identity.

Photo gallery



Coloured houses in Brighton. Brighton is unofficially considered the capital of the LGBT community in the UK.



The 'Seven sisters' ferry which took me from France to the UK.



Brighton. The Royal Pavilion: former royal residence of George IV.



Brighton. The contrast between the Royal Pavillion and a street bar.



English breakfast.



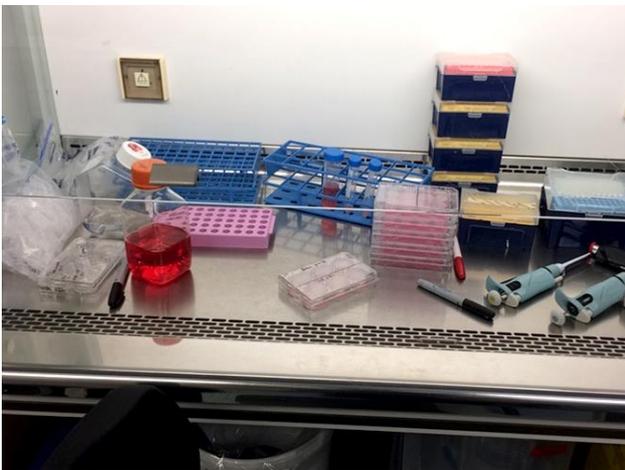
Bristol cathedral.



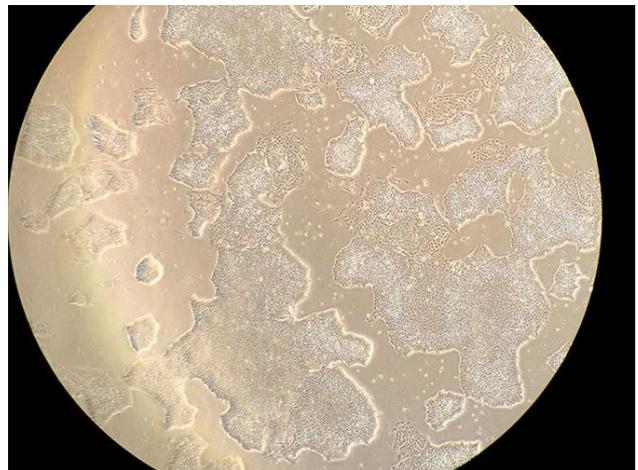
Willen Lake, Milton Keynes.



Stirling in Scotland.



Work under laminar flow cabinet.



Cell culture.



Norwich. Human intestine sculpture.



Trip to Portugal with colleagues.

More information

→ Find [other firsthand accounts](#) from uB's students.

→ Want to go abroad? Take a look at different possibilities at [Going abroad](#) rubric.