

Name of intern: Nicola Ede

Home university: University of Oxford

Subject: Chemistry

Guest university / institute: Universität Paderborn

Name of supervisor: Patrick Schnippering



During the summer of 2017, I spent twelve weeks living in Paderborn, working in the Department of Chemistry at the university there. My supervisor was Patrick Schnippering, in the group of Professor Michael Tiemann in the Inorganic Chemistry division. The project focused on the synthesis and characterisation of magnesium ferrite nanoparticles. I was introduced to several new techniques, such as physisorption and dynamic light scattering. It was exciting to finally see some of the theories I had studied in the first three years of my degree put in practice.

A typical day began with a fifteen-minute walk to the university campus. Greeting my colleagues in the lab, I would check that my overnight reaction was still stirring properly, take a product out of the furnace or prepare some samples for X-ray measurements, making sure to record everything in my lab journal – which, being in German, was usually in bullet-point form with many diagrams. To cries of “Mittag!” at 11:29 precisely, the group assembled for lunch in the Mensa (university cafeteria). This was the most challenging part of my day, because conversation flowed so quickly that I could barely understand what was going on. One time they started talking about prosthetic feet made from titanium, though I have no idea how *that* came up. The afternoon would be spent either doing more chemical synthesis or analysing data on the computer. My evenings were then free, either to explore town or just stay in and relax. I was housed in a spacious apartment in a student block: comfortable and inexpensive, but often rather lonely as a lot of the other students had gone home for the summer. I took advantage of the reliability of Deutsche Post to communicate with friends back home, but also met up with other foreign students living in Paderborn.

If the lab I worked in is anything to go by, chemical research in Germany is characterised by extreme order and cleanliness. Every drawer was labelled and waste was separated into many different containers. We all did our fair share of washing and tidying, and I never found reason to complain about the mess made by other students – a welcome change from my undergrad teaching labs.

I was impressed that presentations at our weekly seminars were always in English. My research group was about 80% native Germans, so that was naturally the working language, although everyone was happy to repeat things (sometimes several times) if I didn't immediately understand. I particularly enjoyed making friends with the Chinese students, as we had similar levels of language ability. Coming from the UK, it's all too easy to become complacent about foreign languages because English is so global, but other people are always pleased when we make the effort to learn their language. I insisted on doing my final presentation in German, which required a considerable amount of preparation but was absolutely worth the effort.

My home university consists of lots of very old buildings dotted around the city centre, in between houses, shops, offices and restaurants. Therefore, it was very interesting to experience life at Paderborn, a modern campus-based university. Everything that you might need is available on-site, though it's only a twenty-minute walk into the city centre. I am also impressed that tuition fees in Germany are low and frequently include a lucrative public transport deal. My "Semester Ticket" from the university allowed me to travel all over Nordrheinwestfalen by bus or regional train, and I enjoyed exploring Germany at the weekends: Köln, Bonn, Aachen, Münster, Hannover, Göttingen, Leipzig... There were also many interesting places in and around Paderborn, which boasts a splendid cathedral, 1000-year-old chapel, the world's largest computer museum and "Germany's shortest river" (the Germans do love their superlatives). I went hiking in the Teutoburger Wald, watched the Pied Piper open-air theatre in Hameln market square and consumed an unhealthy amount of *Currywurst*, chips and ice-cream during the Paderborn LiboriFest.

My stay was punctuated by small personal victories in speaking German: giving someone on the street advice on the best bus to take to the hospital, helping a lady on the train with an app on her smartphone, or making an appointment with the housing association for my departure. Compared to my first weeks in Germany, when I relied heavily on my supervisor for translation in case of difficulty, it's obvious how much my confidence and language skills have improved and I'd love to repeat the experience in another country some time.

Another definite highlight was returning to Heidelberg, where I had twice taken part in a youth music exchange, for the RISE scholars' meeting in July. It was great, if slightly disorientating at first, to be suddenly surrounded by three hundred English speakers. I made some new friends with whom I met up at the weekends later on, and spent a lovely evening catching up with my former host family.

Germany is a country in which I could happily live for a longer period of time. Despite some moments of annoyance (why can't I buy an emergency pint of milk on a Sunday evening?) I have thoroughly enjoyed many aspects of the culture, and been rather amused at others, such as the absolute insistence on waiting for the green *Ampelmann* even when there's no traffic in sight. I would certainly consider applying to jobs or PhD studies in Germany after graduating and am extremely grateful to the DAAD for funding this enriching experience.

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