

DAAD RISE Julich - Summer 2018

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The DAAD RISE program was a wonderful opportunity to experience research at the highest level in a country renowned for its high level of science expertise. My placement was at the 'Forschungszentrum Jülich' (FZJ), which by the end of the trip I had nearly learned to pronounce. The FZJ is the largest multidisciplinary institutes in Germany, and one of the biggest in Europe. I was working in the 'Soft matter and theoretical biophysics' department, under the supervision of a recently finished PhD student. My work was investigating shape fluctuations of semi-flexible polymer membranes used to model cells under different conditions. This was simulation based physics and my day to day work was working on analysis code and interpretation of simulation results. This also allowed me the chance to liaise with other PhD students working on similar projects from an analytical perspective. Presenting results and cooperating with this other student-supervisor pair was a great way to hone my ability to present and communicate my work. I had a great deal of fun working in this area, and learned a lot about a branch of physics I was previously not familiar with. The coding and analytical skills I developed during the summer will be invaluable, and the results I believe may be published in the future. My time at the FZJ re-enforced my belief about the primacy of German science. Programs like RISE allow Germany to demonstrate to prospective students exactly why they should come to Germany for their future research.

As I'm sure with many people applying to do a DAAD RISE scholarship, I'm coming to the end of my undergraduate degree and have to decide whether I wish to continue in academia with a PhD. One of my key aims for this summer was to get a feel for what doing a PhD would be like, and whether it's something I can see myself doing. Having the chance not only to speak with many other PhD students at the institute, but to follow their work and experience over the course of 3 months was absolutely invaluable. There is no other way of obtaining experience and insight like this. Whilst I have to admit that my mind is still not decided either way, I can say without a shadow of a doubt that I will be far more informed about the decision when I do make it, and that is in huge part due to the RISE program.

If I was to pass on one single piece of advice to prospective RISE students, it would be to get to know your fellow students in whichever institution you are at. I had a slight advantage in this, in that being in a smaller town makes it easier to socialise with friends on a daily basis. I made a wonderful group of friends from a variety of countries, and most of my time outside of work was spent relaxing with them. It was a fantastic group of people, equally interested and in their own branch of science. Listening to people talk passionately about their own disciplines is a real pleasure. As a group we undertook numerous weekend trips to various cities, including ones I maybe wouldn't have seen if it wasn't for the enthusiasm of others to see as much as possible while here. That's a piece of advice specifically for my fellow British students; American and Canadian students paid a lot to come across to Europe and will likely be willing to travel and see as much as possible while here. Get involved with them and you will not regret it. My favourite of these weekend trips was the meeting in Heidelberg, where all of the RISE interns gather for a weekend. The city itself is gorgeous, and the atmosphere of having everyone there interacting with each other was fantastic. I'll look back on that weekend with fond memories.

Germany itself is a hugely enjoyable place to live. I was very impressed throughout with how kind the natives were in the moments where my somewhat shaky grasp of the German language failed me. There is a really multicultural vibe everywhere you go, and as such a huge variety of food and drink to try. I'd wager that I've met a larger variety of nationalities in the past 3 months than in the previous 21 years. Learning about such a wide variety of peoples home countries was a real pleasure. Getting involved with the local football (if you must, soccer) team was a great way to meet some of the locals and get a feel for the place, I highly recommend doing something similar if you get the chance. My Thursday evenings became a ritual of 2 hours of football, then beer and sausages BBQ'd in the scorching heat. You will learn that if there's anything Germans love, its beer, bratwurst and beer.

So all in all, whilst I can't say that I'm 100% sure that I will be doing a PhD, I can say for that if I do one, I will be applying to do it in Germany. My sincere thanks to all the staff at DAAD responsible for organising such a fantastic experience.

Auf weidersehen,
Sebastian Currie

I agree that my report and accompanying pictures may be used by the DAAD in printed materials, presentations, and on websites in order to inform funding organizations, sponsors, and students about the RISE program.