

Experience Report

Internship in Cognitive Science and Consciousness Research

Topic: *The Neurophenomenological Dynamics of Attention and Pain in CRPS Chronic Pain*

Placement: Consciousness & Cognition Lab, Cambridge

Supervisor: Tristan Bekinschtein

**Lara Charis Eileen Bräuchle (Master's student in Cognitive Science at Ruhr University Bochum, now PhD Student with Lucia Melloni and Tobias Schlicht at RUB)*

Internship period: October 1, 2023 – March 31, 2024

First of all: Please do an internship. For you personally, for your skillset, for your CV, for your academic network, for your future career; just in all aspects: Do it! It can be challenging, but it is really doable and so worth it all! Be brave and be flexible in how it might turn out. It won't be exactly like you imagined it, and that is a good thing. It means you learn something. It was one of the best experiences of my career and life so far.

Preparation

My fascination with the philosophy of consciousness and my desire to combine it with empirical methods from neuroscience and psychology led me on an exciting journey to find the right internship. I wanted to gain practical experience to become a well-rounded cognitive scientist. During my online search, I discovered the Consciousness & Cognition Lab (CCC) in Cambridge – working on exactly the kind of questions I'm passionate about. I sent an email application with little expectation but a lot of hope. When I received a positive response and an invitation to a Zoom call, I was thrilled.

Pro tip: Don't just write to the lab's general email – those often go unchecked. Reach out directly to the PhDs or postdocs leading the project you're interested in! Don't be general. People hate copy-paste mails. Make it specific and personal about this researcher, this lab, this project and it's previous projects and papers. And yes – that takes time. Applications are annoying and time-consuming. But they are worth it!

After a promising conversation, it was clear: I'd be joining the CCC team for six months during the 2023/2024 winter semester.

To be fully honest: I was also nervous, as my impostor syndrome kicked in – Cambridge. A Neuropsychology Lab for me as a former philosopher. But I chose to ignore it and just try and then learn on the way. Smart decision. (Preparation helps, though).

Also I had wanted to go just for 2-3 months, so I could do it in summer and not "waste" an entire semester. Now I can only laugh at that thought. 6 months was just enough to actually take it all in. I definitely recommend 5 months plus, if possible. Many labs (like this one) would only accept you for a minimum of 5-6 months anyways. They say (and I agree to a degree) I is not really worth it for less. But if really only 2-3 months are possible for you – it's better than not at all! This point is just to illustrate how I had to be flexible in my expectations and it was worth it in the end.

The Erasmus scholarship was not difficult to get and organise. So no need to be too worried about financing. Huge shout out to these guys making our lives so much easier and making our dreams possible, advancing our careers vastly with these opportunities!

Finding housing was, surprisingly, less complicated than expected. Thanks to the platform Spareroom, I quickly found a cozy little house to share with lovely roommates – and a cat! I was lucky – housing in Cambridge isn't exactly easy or cheap. Being early and writing kind, personal messages really helps – just like when applying for internships.

The lab even lent me a bike, which turned out to be incredibly useful in Cambridge.

The Internship

The internship at CCC exceeded all my expectations. From the start, I felt welcome and supported. I had an incredible amount of freedom in designing my research project – both a challenge and a privilege.

Biggest lesson: Don't be afraid of vague ideas. Every great project starts off a little blurry. Talk to lots of people, stick with it, and over time, something great will come out of it.

My biggest learning wasn't just technical – I gained a deep understanding of the social and organizational side of research. I learned how research is structured, what academic conventions exist, and what's needed for a career in science. I also improved my programming and statistics skills and learned how to structure a research project. Recruiting and preparing study participants and helping organize a study were new and enriching experiences for me.

Some of my biggest successes were:

- Presenting my results at a major conference in the field
- Contributing to a publication
- Laying the groundwork for a potential PhD project

These experiences shaped not only my academic path but also opened exciting future opportunities. Honestly, doing an internship is absolutely essential for developing your expertise and academic career! What I'm doing in my PhD now wouldn't have been possible without this internship – both in terms of skills and networking.

Aside from the professional growth, the internship also brought lots of personal highlights. I made valuable connections, discovered new hobbies, and enjoyed life in Cambridge. Personally enriching – but especially for my career, I couldn't recommend internships more! The Erasmus grant was a big help – even in the UK. Start planning early, and with curiosity, passion, good questions, and friendly emails, you can get really far. Just go for it – problems will arise, but you can tackle them one at a time. Reach out to people who've been through it – that helps a lot too. And feel free to email me if you have questions or need motivation :) I really, honestly, wholeheartedly recommend it.

TLDR; Best part and key challenge

The best part of my internship was the overall learning experience. The skills I gained, the deeper understanding of how research works, and the professional opportunities that opened up were truly invaluable.

The hardest part? Sometimes struggling with imposter syndrome – doubting whether my work was enough or if I was doing things right. But even that became part of the learning process. It pushed me to keep growing and giving my best. I'll probably never get rid of those doubts entirely, but I'm working on not letting them get in the way of my work.

Conclusion

This internship at the Consciousness & Cognition Lab in Cambridge was far more than just a career step – it was a turning point in both my academic and personal development. The hands-on experience, deep dive into cognitive science and consciousness research, and the chance to do real scientific work fundamentally shaped and expanded my understanding of the field.

Learning about academic culture and research structure, growing my programming and stats skills, and helping organize a study all strengthened my expertise and sense of agency. The opportunity to present at a respected conference and work on a publication opened new perspectives and solidified my wish to pursue an academic career.

It was also a time of significant personal growth. I'm still working on handling imposter syndrome, but I've learned new strategies. The new connections, friendships, hobbies, and cultural experiences enriched my life immensely.

All in all, this internship was an extraordinarily enriching experience. It strengthened and confirmed my passion for research, gave me valuable insights into the world of academia, and helped me sharpen both my personal and professional goals. I look back with gratitude – and look forward to all the opportunities that will grow out of this experience.

Huge thanks to Erasmus for the financial support, and to Beate and the Cognitive Science Program at RUB for the fantastic organization – this research wouldn't have been possible without them!

Best,

Lara C. Bräuchle

PhD Student in Consciousness Research at Ruhr-University Bochum