



British Chamber of Commerce Foundation

Report from:

Richard Dargie - Scholarship 2009



Dear Trustees,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you again for your generous support of 2000 € from The British Chamber of Commerce in Germany towards my studies this year, for a MSc in Medical Neurosciences at the Charité Universitätsmedizin, Berlin, from September 2009 – 2011, as an extension to my general medical education from the University of Edinburgh. I have thoroughly enjoyed my first few months here, and I thank you very much for assisting this.

Course

The winter break, 18th December – 11th of January, brought an end to the first half of a busy first semester. The majority of my teaching has taken place within the MSc Medical Neuroscience programme's 'Block A', designed to provide a thorough background in basic neuroscience. This comprised lectures each day, usually from 9am to 4pm at various locations around and outside Berlin, in hospitals and research institutes. These lectures, which worked more like large seminars due to the small class size (my programme has 16 students), were often followed by practical sessions in the laboratory of the lecturing professor. There have also been many designated laboratory sessions.

In general I have been very impressed with the intensity and quality of teaching that I have received here, although it has been very different in comparison to my undergraduate education in Edinburgh. There has been a heavy emphasis on factual learning, as opposed to analysis of scientific papers and methods. However, I am glad for the rigorous basic education, and feel I can take good neuroscientific knowledge into the more applied and medical sections of my MSc course ahead.

I have attended practical sessions in microscopy, electrophysiology, tissue preparation, histology and human anatomy. I was extremely impressed by the level of quality offered, and the time that professors gave to practical demonstration and giving advice.

I have also recently completed a five-week laboratory rotation in the lab of Professor Phillip Sterzer, at the Psychiatry and Psychotherapy department, into visual perception, and specifically the perception of emotionally-relevant stimuli. We investigated how emotionally neutral faces, that have previously been linked with monetary rewards or punishment are processed in the early visual cortex. For this I learned the techniques of basic computer programming, fMRI analysis and data analysis. The project report will be finished by the end of January.

I will complete three such lab projects, before commencing with my one-year masters project.

I am also following elective courses outwith my programme, one in the science of Pain and its Management, one in the implications of neuroscience for society, as well as some neurology lectures offered by the general medical course at the Charité.

Examination

The Block A examination consisted of a single three-hour exam, in which 40 multiple choice questions, and 8 essay questions from 10, were to be completed.

I achieved a grade of 76.5 % (91/119), placing me 4th in my year group. I also qualified for one of the scholarships awarded by my MSc programme on a basis of exam performance (see below).

Financial Situation (all currency conversions with xe.com on 4/1/2010)

I have found living in Berlin extremely pleasant and affordable. I have been living slightly above the £5-6000 yearly estimate I made at my time of application.

There have been unforeseen expenses in my time here, for example:

- University administration fees of 260 € per semester. (1040 € / £930 over 2 years)
- Rent has also proven higher than expected, at 300 € (£270) per month (estimated as £220), as have living expenses (food, bills) at approximately 200 € (£180) per month (estimated at £130) (£100 per month; £2400 over two years)
- My parents have also not been able to provide me with as much money had been hoped, due to problems with the education of my other three siblings and the general financial depression. My mother has also recently retired and cannot provide me with much financial support.

- Due to the weakness of the pound my earnings of last summer (£2000) have also not helped me in Germany as much as I had hoped.
- Due to the illness and then deaths of two relatives this winter I travelled twice at short notice to Aberdeen (each approximately £220), one time extending my stay.

On these grounds I think a more realistic two-year estimation of my studies here to be ~ £14 500.

Due to my exam results, I was recently (December 17th 2009) awarded a scholarship of 550 € per month for the remaining 18 months of my course, on the condition that my grades do not deteriorate and I do not enter any form of employment. This will provide for the majority (£8920) of my newly-estimated £14500 two-year costs.

I understand of course that this award may affect the support offered to me by the BCCG. I await your advice on this matter.

Extra-curricular Life

In general, I have enjoyed living in Berlin these past months. The last month and a half have often been difficult, on account of problems with my family at home. Two of my close relatives, my uncle and aunt, on separate sides of my family, suffered and died of cancer this winter. My uncle's diagnosis especially was made extremely late, giving him little over a month to live. I travelled home for 10 days in November and again in December to visit my relatives and to be with my family. I made my course administrators aware of my family situation and fulfilled all requirements of my courses during these difficult times.

In perspective to this, my time in Berlin has been little trouble to me, and most enjoyable. I found it easy to find accommodation and to make my way around the city, and I have made many friends here. I feel my command of the German language has greatly improved, and I hope to be fluent within the next few months.

I have been lucky enough to enjoy the cultural opportunities that living in Berlin has offered me. The main building of my university is around the corner from the Deutsche Theater, where I have attended German-language productions of 'Endgame' and 'Heart of Darkness'. I have also made extensive use of a year ticket to Berlin's beautiful state museums that I received as a present. I play guitar and violin in a small band I recently formed with friends and flatmates. I have also been to many very different performances around Berlin, at the Philharmonie, and Deutsche Oper as well as less impressive venues.

I have been lucky enough to have had time, funds and companions to travel around Germany, to a large Botticelli exhibition in Frankfurt am Main. I plan to visit Dresden in the spring.

In general, I have been extremely happy with my time here, I feel I am profiting much from my course, and I look forward to my courses in the coming year. The second Block of my studies is in Neuropathology, where I hope to utilise my neurobiological knowledge gained this year to understand more about diseases of the nervous system. I am also extremely happy living in Berlin, I feel that I have made the most of the many cultural and practical opportunities here.

I thank the BCCG Foundation once again for your extremely generous support of me. I would of course be more than happy to give you any more information as to my progress, e.g. a transcript of my exam results, references, my laboratory report once finished.

Yours sincerely,

Richard A. Dargie