

Summer School 2018 – Our trip to Hasselt, Belgium – Sara Hettrich

The Summer School at Hasselt University took place from September 24-27 in 2018. The topic was functional Coatings, or, as Mister Wim Deferme called it, FUNctional Coatings. About 54 people from Belgium, Germany and Turkey took part in the program and spent three days together. On Sunday, the 23rd, I met up in Zweibrücken with four of my friends. Lea, Victoria, Sophie, Michael and I jumped into Michael's car (or more his dad's car) and started our car ride. After about an hour, we ended up in a traffic jam, which was due to an accident. After about half an hour of not moving a single inch and of eating lots of food and singing along to our Spotify playlist, the cars in front of us finally moved and we followed. It didn't last for a long time – a couple minutes later, we had to stop again, this time right on top of a bridge. It was a traffic jam with a view – a view of the beautiful Mosel valley. Lea served some cookies from Northern Germany and nothing could seem to destroy our good mood. It didn't take long for the cars to start moving this time, and after that, nothing could stop us. After another hour, we seemed to drive straight into the apocalypse. It started raining heavily and the clouds became darker and darker. Our excitement to get off the car to take a look at the city of Liege got bigger and bigger with every raindrop that hit the windows of the car. When we arrived there, it had stopped raining luckily. It was quite cold, but we still started exploring the city. On our way to the tourist information center, we passed by a little café that had lots of big dolls inside, hanging on the wall and sitting in the corners. It was nothing but creepy, so we ignored the need of a hot drink and continued looking for the info center. It was warm there and they had lots of information on the city (obviously). We saw a photo of a staircase of 274 stairs and decided that this would be cool to see, so we went back outside. About two and a half hours later, we admitted to ourselves that we wouldn't find our stairs today. They can't be in Liege. It was cold and rainy, and we decided to find a place to warm ourselves up again. We had a cup of tea and made our way back to the car to drive straight to Hasselt. At the hostel, our friends from the second car were waiting for us already. We checked in and Sophie and I had a look at our room, before meeting the others again to get some food. We basically didn't have a choice on where to eat cause every restaurant in Hasselt seemed to be closed on Sunday nights at eight except for one. I had a chicken sandwich, which was quite delicious. After dinner, we were all happy and tired, but Sophie, Marie, David, Michael, Victoria and I decided to have a beer at the local Irish Pub. We didn't stay there for a long time since we were really exhausted. The boys wanted to go to another pub, so I went back to the hostel with the other girls. We had made one huge mistake and had just followed David on our way to the pub, without actually trying to remember the way. Of course, this had consequences and we saw streets of Hasselt that we hadn't seen on our way earlier. It didn't take us long to find back to the hostel though, and we saw a cool table made of two bicycles right next to the street. Maybe it's true that 'everything happens for a reason'!

Back at the hostel, Sophie and I started watching an episode of Grey's Anatomy. I finished the episode, Sophie fell asleep after ten minutes.

The next day, our adventure went on. We decided to leave early since we had no idea where we had to go. Our first challenge was parking. There seemed to be two million cars and six parking lots. Since we thought we had to go to building H, we parked close to that building and walked there. We couldn't find the others, so Sophie called David to ask where they were. "Building B", she told us, and we walked all the way back to building B. It was exactly ten when we arrived, and we still couldn't find the others. Someone texted David again, and it turned out that it was building D that we had to go to. We asked a student where building D was, and finally we arrived there twenty minutes late. Luckily, everyone was very friendly and nobody judged us for being late to our first master class. It was a class on surface preparation, characterization and thin film deposition technology and it was quite interesting. It made me remember some things I learned back in my first semester in our micro system technologies class.

After the first class, we had our lunch break and they offered us really delicious snacks, tea, coffee, water and soft drinks.

One and a half hours later, we attended our second master class, 'ink formulation – from solution to a printable ink'. Since we haven't really learned anything about this in any of our classes, it was quite difficult for me to follow and I had to force myself to keep trying to understand what the speaker is explaining. To be honest, I can't remember much of it although I tried really hard. I guess that's because what she explained and talked about is very different from the things I usually learn in Zweibrücken, and it was quite a high level since she was an expert at what she was talking about. I still think it was interesting, it was just a bit too complicated for me to understand since I was missing the basics.

After the second master class, we had a coffee break of half an hour, followed by a get-together of all the participants of the program, and after that, there was a reception where they served amazing food again. Unfortunately, most participants seemed to have forgotten about this, so there was way too much food for the few people that were still there. Eventually, Lea and Michael ended up offering food to some students of UHasselt that were hanging out in the same room.

In the evening, we went to a restaurant since some of us were still hungry. We tried to decide on where to go afterwards, and since one person of our group really wanted to go to the metal bar we had heard about, we agreed on going there. I was a bit scared because I expected heavy metal music being played extremely loudly, but when we walked in, I was surprised – in a positive way. The bar was honestly comfortable, the music was not loud at all and it turned out to be a rock and metal bar, which means that they also played music that I know and listen to. The bathroom was very interesting too. The door of the toilet cabin was made of a chalkboard, and inside the cabin, there was chalk, so you could draw and write on the door from outside or from inside the cabin. Of course we had to get creative. After a while, we started asking the bartender to play Africa by Toto, and we sang along. It didn't sound great, but it was fun. The highlight was something else though – he granted us another wish and played Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody, which we had perfected already on our car ride. None of us is a good singer, but every single one of us knew when it was their turn to sing and let me tell you we nailed it. It was loud and we weren't ashamed because we had so much fun (and nobody there knew us anyway).

The next morning, we met up for breakfast and then went to Hasselt university again. It was mini conference day, which means that many different PhD students talked about their researches and presented their progress and results. I think every single talk could have been extremely interesting if I had had more basic knowledge about the topics. I didn't understand much (just like in the second master class the day before), because these people were so good at what they were doing, they were experts, and I was happy when I was able to figure out what they're talking about. This doesn't go for all the presentations of course. Some of them got close to the topics of my study program, but many just didn't. It was still interesting to see what people are working on and what we might see in the future.

Lunch was great again, and the tour of the laboratories and the 'Technologiecentrum' was interesting. After that, we attended the conference dinner, which was really cool. They had ordered a food truck and these people had put so much effort in creating a menu. There was awesome food, my favorite dish must have been the green soup that came in a cup, so it warmed us from inside and from outside. The dessert was amazing too, and after that, I felt like I was rolling instead of walking. We went back to the hostel soon and decided to have a gaming night. Sophie had brought a great game called 'Krazy wordz' and we had lots of fun playing it. It caused a lot of laughs that night. On Wednesday, we had mini conferences again, and in the end, Wim Deferme had some closing words for us. After that, we went to a thing called 'Frituur', because one of our friends told us the food there was good. It was not. Not at all. I was really frustrated after eating there because I was feeling full from something I didn't like and didn't even finish. No more Frituur for me again, ever!

Even talking about that food days later made me feel kind of sick again, so let's not mention it again. We went on to a fair that was taking place in Hasselt and got on one of the rides that you find on fairs. After that, we went into some random bar, but we left it soon to get back to our rock and metal bar. I'd go back to Hasselt any time just to sit in that bar again! I might have felt a bit weird there due to the great food I had had two hours earlier, but we're not talking about that anymore, right? It was still awesome, and we drew on the door again. I want that kind of door in my house on day. It was quite hot in that bar, so I joined the smoking people when they went outside for a cigarette. And it was quite cold outside. All in all, I hadn't been prepared for those low temperatures since I had been wearing shorts a week earlier. I hadn't brought a really warm jacket, so I always had to wear two or even all three of the jackets I had with me, but that was okay. In the bar, we sang Bohemian Rhapsody again. We've been listening to that song before we went to Belgium and we always sang along, but still, that song will always remind me of the trip to Hasselt from that point on. The next day, we had a lab on coating technologies, which was interesting. We got to work with plasma and learned about bar and spray coating.

After lunch, we went on to our next lab, which was on ink formulation. It was more of a chemistry lab and we were a bit overwhelmed, but luckily, there was a chemistry student from Leuven right next to us and he helped us when we didn't know what to do or how to do it. It was a great experience because everybody helped one another, and we got to talk to new people, even if it was just asking where you could find what you needed next.

When we were done with the lab, 'our car' had a picnic right in front of the building we had spent the last three days in. We ate the things we had brought from home, everyone shared and that made quite a good meal. After that, it was time for us to get on our way back home. We had to find a gas station first, which wasn't too hard since google maps exists. Then it all started again: DJ Lea did a great job, which led to a perfect atmosphere in our car, to lots of (bad) singing and most importantly, to very much fun. The only thing more important was safety, and our driver had us safe at all times although he was performing too. At some point, we took a break at a pull-in to move our legs and get some fresh (polluted) air. From yoga positions to handstands, we did it all there. And eating, of course. Feeling awake and content again, we continued our journey back home with a mix of 80s rock classics and some other feel-good bops, including a song called 'Autoparty', which is exactly what we were having. When we arrived in front of Sophie's house, where I was about to be picked up, we got off the car and opened all its doors, since 'Time to say goodbye' was playing. Although we were going to see each other the next day, it was a bit sad to think about the fact that that trip was over already.

All in all, the Summer School in Hasselt was a great experience and I would recommend everyone that has the opportunity to go there to do so. I really loved the fact that everyone there was very open and it was easy to start talking to new people and it was also a good opportunity to get some practice in English again, in both listening and speaking. Sometimes I felt a bit bad because of what these people were doing for us. We didn't have to book our hostel because Mister Deferme had done that for us, and not like other participants who presented their projects, we just had to listen to what people were talking about, and still we got all the amazing food and opportunities.

I think this program would be even more interesting for students of Applied Life Sciences if there were some more presentations on topics like biology or medicine, like for example the presentation on nanoparticles being used to cure diseases. Maybe one could try to find some more people presenting topics like that one to make the Summer School even more attractive for Applied Life Sciences people. Apart from that, the program is a great opportunity to meet new people, learn things that you wouldn't learn in your actual program and to improve and refresh your English (writing this, I noticed how much harder it is for me to write an English text than it was back in school, since we did it way more there). I already told my friends, who are in semester 3, to take the opportunity and go to Hasselt next year.