Expeditions Fund Report: Global Health Challenge in Berlin

I wanted a challenge, I wanted to do something I had never done before, I wanted to delve out of my comfort zone and so when the opportunity rose to visit Berlin for a Young Entrepreneurs event on Global Health I was determined to go for it. To travel to a place I’ve never been before, not knowing anyone there and not speaking a word of German - I think I had crossed all of these boxes here, and the Expeditions Fund helped me to achieve that.

I arrived in Berlin Schoenefeld Airport with only an address of the Airbnb I had booked a week prior in my notes, with no sense of how to get there. I used my trusty ‘CityMapper’ app and figured out the manual train ticket machine, and left feeling totally chuffed with myself, got on my train and relaxed. It wasn’t until maybe the 4th stop in that I realised I had caught a train travelling in the totally wrong direction to where I needed to go and I just started laughing. I had no data on my phone, my carriage was nearly empty except from a young mother with a crying baby, who was occupied on her mobile and an elderly man who was sound asleep. I decided to get off at the next stop and noticed it was somewhere called ‘Zuethen’; a beautiful place nonetheless, but not where I needed to be.

So, long story short; I crossed the platform, got on the correct train, arrived in Berlin, climbed out of the Metro Station and there was the Brandenburg Gate, gleaming under a clear blue sky and in about 29+ degrees. Surreal really, I remember sending a video to my family and friends like “well, I guess I made it to Berlin then, huh?”. Anyway, I knew I was tight for time and so I rushed to find my Airbnb, located beautifully just South of the Tiergarten park and I was just so excited to freshen up, and explore the area. However, without any data on my phone, I hadn’t realised that my Host had been trying to reach me and when we met on the street, she, extremely stressed, explained that she had an urgent meeting to attend and that I could drop my bags down but could not give me the keys until she debriefed me later that evening. So, picture me, no bags, extremely sweaty in too-many-post-flight clothes for 30-something degree heat, and no sense of where I was!

Anyway, I managed to kill a couple of hours in exploration, buy a sim that worked for my phone, and make it to the CIEE Global Institute where the events conference was being held. I registered in and immediately met some friendly people who probably remember me as the ‘crazy, slightly frazzled-looking girl, who’d never been to Berlin before’…to be honest, I would have called me that too.
During the first day we had an introduction and welcome speech for the event, met the organisers which then followed with a networking event where we were able to meet each other and learn about everyone’s backgrounds. I remember feeling incredibly out of my depth as everyone around me was either an undergraduate taking medicine, had mastered in Global or Public Health, or are currently working as a GP, nurse, or other related medical-profession. And then there was me, a penultimate year, Human Geography student from London who has an incredible passion for the health realm, but not really a lot to show for it. To my delight, though, this didn’t really matter and people were just interested to hear my story (and of course, my telling of that mornings events created some giggle!).

The second day began much the same, however this time we were put into our teams for the challenge that was the officially start that afternoon. The YLH Social Entrepreneurship Challenge in eHealth 2019 was about tackling non-communicable diseases and air quality. And this year’s focus was on air pollution; a topic of global relevance but one that’s invisible nature often means that it gets ignored. The challenge was basically to come up the design, target group and basic blueprints of an eTool that can be used in societies particularly prone to poor air quality. My team comprised of 5 people: our mentor (from WHO!), 3 medical students from Berlin, a Msc student of economic public health from Italy, and me. We spent the duration of the day and night brainstorming what our eTool could be, what target audience to focus it on, in what region of the world and for what setting. This continued into the following day and by about noon, just before we all hit breaking point, we had it.

Our solution to both monitoring but also mitigate poor air quality is: AQua. A policy intervention simulator designed to calculate the expected port-related emissions of air toxics. We believed there to be a significant gap in how a policy is assessed both before and after implementation. Our eTool was designed to fill this gap; to allow policy makers to assess health effects and related costs of a specific policy scenario, and thus assess its efficiency and economic risk in scenario. I want to add that we did not come to this decision with ease, for there were many tears, corpus amounts of Club-Mate consumed and after seeing the sunset and then rise again we had it. At 5:30am on the Thursday morning we finished our 2000-word write-up detailing the ins and outs of our eTool, we finished our presentation and corresponding speakers notes and with only 4.5 hours until we were scheduled to present to panelists, we each rushed back to where we were staying, showered, ate some (proper) food and came back determined.
We were the 3rd group to present. We each had 6 minutes to present our idea and respond to the panelists in their q&a session that followed. I took the role of head speaker and, after a grilling q&a session we were done, our hard work was over and we all just hugged each other up on the stage. 5 people who just 3 days prior had never crossed paths before, were all feeling the same sense of relief, proudness and (goes without saying) exhaustion! Much to our delight we came runners-up and as a team we celebrated getting ice cream nearby as a well done for our hard work, but also a farewell. I was staying in Berlin an extra day to see some of the sights before coming home and so I met up with some of the group members from the other teams for a drink that night. It was lovely to chat to people from different corners of world, hear everyone’s stories and form life-long connections with some of the loveliest people I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. I walked back to my Airbnb feeling extremely reflective; I flew to a foreign city I had never been to before, where I didn’t know anyone, and left with countless new friends, some of which I met up with later on in the summer!

I genuinely feel incredibly proud of myself for embarking on this little journey. As someone who is not the most out-spoken person, who is not a medical student, or had never heard of the word ‘simulator’ out of the context of a sci-fi movie, I truly did tick off the ‘try something new this summer’ box and being granted this Expeditions Fund helped to assist me in realising my true potential.