Zhang Ruirui

National University of Singapore. Faculty of Science (Pharmacy) i-RAP at Tel Aviv University, Israel.

The Summer Research Program at Tel Aviv University was an excellent programme with a small cohort of 23 students. Each of us was attached to a different professor. I got to meet like-minded students from top universities around the world, especially those majoring in Science, including students from Harvard University, University of California, Berkeley, and Imperial College London.

I was also amazed by the variety of research areas covered by the programme, ranging from chemistry to biology, to neurosciences, and even to quantum physics. The laboratory that I was attached to was Micha Friedman’s laboratory for bio-organic and medicinal chemistry research. An eight-week programme was too short for a comprehensive research experience, but it was great to experience cutting-edge research techniques first-hand. I am a Pharmacy major in NUS, and most of my research experience is based on biology, but I was fortunate enough to also get trained in organic chemistry in the programme. The chemical synthetic and analytical skills I gained were very applicable for my final year research project and my future endeavour in pharmaceutical research, as a pharmacist or as a pharmaceutical scientist.

From this eight-week programme, I got to experience the Israeli culture of work and study and living environment. The first thing that my professor told me when we met to discuss the research project was ‘whenever you are not sure, ask!’ Students and staff at Tel Aviv University are very outspoken and never afraid to debate with each other about their opinions. I find that
they are committed, and constantly thinking about how to develop their research further. Whenever an experiment failed, they would bounce ideas off each other to obtain a solution. Colleagues have made great discoveries in the laboratory while maintaining their work-life balance. On a working day, they would have lunch together to talk about interesting things in life. They don’t work on weekends (Friday and Saturday due to the Jewish tradition of observing Shabbat). I feel that this should be the way for research - it is a life-long commitment, and you should work hard, but also play hard. The working culture and their attitude in research and life have inspired me considerably.

Living in Israel, especially in the cosmopolitan coastal city of Tel Aviv, can be very expensive. However, the NUS Awards for Study Aboard (NASA) Enhancement Scholarship was able to cover most of my living expenses there.

My advice for other students going for the Summer Research Program at Tel Aviv University would be to choose your supervisor and research project wisely. Think of what you want to accomplish and learn within a short duration of two months. Research needs time. Don’t be too ambitious to finish a comprehensive project within two months. Be open-minded and experience different experiments and techniques, even if you need to work on different projects with other colleagues. Be proactive and talk to your professor and peers in the laboratory as often as you can. Never be shy about raising your opinions and think for yourself. Trust that you are valuable enough to contribute new ideas for the project. Israel is an amazing country to travel around, and contrary to popular belief, it is safe. Explore Israel during the weekends, but don’t forget that the main purpose you are in Israel is for the research experience. Learn as much as you can and don’t take breaks on weekdays just for the sake of travelling. Establish a good professional image of yourself as a dedicated researcher. With eight weekends available, you can explore the country at a leisure pace.

I would recommend the Summer Research Program at Tel Aviv University to other students. It is an excellent programme and Israel is a beautiful country. Besides Tel Aviv University, students majoring in Science can also consider Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. If you are looking for a non-traditional destination for i-RAP, try Israel!