LIYSF: An unforgettable Experience

Sabiha Wadee's Report

This July, I spent two weeks (19th of July 2026- 1st August 2026) in London representing South Africa at the London International Youth Science Forum (LIYSF). This was a surreal, unique, and deeply inspiring opportunity that I will forever be grateful for.





For the duration of the programme, I had the honour of participating alongside 500 students from 90 countries.

From the moment I stepped off the aeroplane in London on July 19th, 2026, I was filled with such a vibrant excitement; not only for the potential possibilities of exploring the beautiful, historic city of London or meeting, and building friendships with participants from all over the world, but for the scientific lectures, study days, discussions, visits I was about to experience.

When we first arrived at registration, I was informed that I had been randomly selected to be a flag bearer during the iconic and highly memorable flag-bearing event which preludes the opening ceremony. At first, I was nervous; standing in front of a room full of strangers created a pit in my stomach. Looking back, however, that experience was one of the most valuable opportunities I was offered. Although I was not able to bear the flag of South Africa, I enthusiastically raised the flag of another African nation, the Democratic Republic of Congo. This was an incredible opportunity, and I am honoured that I got to represent another African nation on the celebrated global stage of LIYSF. As a flag bearer, I was able to connect and meet people from all over the globe, and I gained a new sense of confidence.

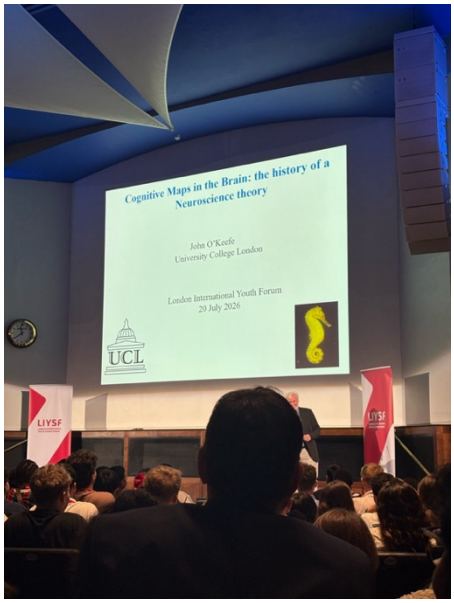
LIYSF curated a vibrant and diverse showcase of both primary lectures and specialist lectures which I was fortunate to attend. It was through their dedication to providing participants with unique, and engaging lectures within several scientific fields that I had the opportunity to attend lectures such as:

Professor John O'Keefe's (the 2014 Nobel Laureate in Physiology) keynote address on cognitive maps in the brain:

This was the first address I attended during the two weeks, and it really set the tone for the calibre of information and knowledge we were to receive. Professor O'Keefe first walked us through his research and discovery of 'place cells' — which are neurons in the brain which only fire at a specific geographical location. What I found most inspiring about his address was his emphasis on the Unknowns of science. I recently read Stuart Firestein's novel 'Ignorance— How It Drives Science'. In the opening chapters, Firestein uses the analogy of black cats in dark rooms to describe scientific discovery. He compares scientific research and discovery to looking for a black cat in a dark room; you don't know where the cat is, how big or small it is, or if it is even in the room. It requires a bumping, probing, and considering every possibility to find the cat. Firestein's message was exactly what Professor O'Keefe emphasised to us in that lecture theatre: Science, any science at all takes time. When you embark on any research, expect to fail, expect to fumble and make mistakes, and expect it to take time. Professor O'Keefe's lecture not only provided me greater insight into our very own 'GPS' system within, but it left me inspired: no matter how long, or difficult any challenge may seem, it is important to never give up; you never know what you may discover.

Professor Brian Bigger's primary lecture on Gene Therapy on the Brain with a particular focus on childhood dementia (Hunter Syndrome) was also incredibly touching and thought-provoking. Hunter Syndrome, also known as Mucopolysaccharidosis type II, is a rare genetic disorder which prevents the body from producing a significant enzyme which plays a role in breaking down complex sugar molecules. This life expectancy for individuals with this condition is typically 10-20 years. However, with Professor Bigger's contribution to a curative approach (through gene therapy), there has been a noticeable increase in the well-being of these individuals, sparking hope that over time, that expectancy will rise. As a medical student, I found myself enraptured by Professor Bigger's lecture. Gene Therapy is something we have only begun to explore in disease prevention and reduction. With the saturation of new research and discoveries in that field (i.e CRISPR gene editing) there is a hope that when I begin my clinical years, hereditary conditions may be preventable.

However, my favourite address was **Professor Farhat Khanim's specialist lecture 'Taking the MYC out of Lymphoma'** in which she passionately presented on Burkitts Lymphoma, and her and her teams research into zinc supplementation as a potential treatment option for this aggressive cancer in LMIC (Low-Middle Income Countries). Within a university module this year, I have studied public health in South Africa, which has shown me first hand how inaccessible healthcare and treatment can be for many South Africans. Hence, learning about how this affordable, accessible treatment option, which can revolutionise how we treat this rare cancer, gives me hope for the future of public health and disease prevention in South Africa.





Scientific Establishment visits to the University of Oxford's History of Science Museum and the National Space Centre were also a highlight and gave me insight into fields of science I have yet to explore, from the history of scientific instrumentation (such as an astrolabe: a scientific instrument previously used to determine time) to space exploration. Oxford in particular was a highlight: walking through one of the UK's most historic university cities added a rich cultural dimension to the scientific programme.





However, the LIYSF programme brought me more than just an influx of knowledge, curiosity, ambition and awareness; LIYSF brought me the most amazing opportunity to connect with like-minded peers from around the world, and form friendships grounded in common interest. Throughout the two weeks, we attended a variety of social events. From science-inspired sports games at the LIYSF olympics to exciting performances at the International Showcase and Cabaret, Through these events I was able to learn about the diverse cultures present at LIYSF, and learn more about myself.





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The friendship and memories I made during LIYSF will stay with me for a lifetime. I had the most amazing time exploring and running around London with my new LIYSF people. Together, we explored South Kensington, biked around London, spent afternoons strolling around Hyde Park, visited Buckingham Palace and Big Ben, and attempted to navigate the bustling streets of Notting Hill and Oxford Circus. I could not have asked for a better group of people to spend those two weeks with.This experience of living and learning in London is one I will never forget.







I am so incredibly grateful to the National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF); the Department of Science,Technology, and Innovation and all the responsible sponsors for allowing me to experience this life-changing programme. LIYSF was more than a STEM summer camp to me, it was a programme that has allowed to to gain a better understanding of who I am, What Doctor I want to be, and How I want to help my country.

With Thanks

Sabiha Wadee

Email; sabihawadee27@gmail.com

LinkedIn: Sabiha Wadee