

# European Studies Placement Report

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**Placement:** Université Paris Descartes / Hôpital Necker-Enfants Malades

1. 1<sup>st</sup> Feb → 1<sup>st</sup> April: Paediatric immunology and haematology
2. 4<sup>th</sup> April → 20<sup>th</sup> May: Infectious Diseases

## Why did I choose the European Option?

I chose the European option (French) because I've always really wanted to become proficient in another language. I am from a French family, but English is my first language and I only had GCSE-level French before university. I applied for the European Option anyway, bought a grammar book a couple of weeks before the exam and went over the basics, managing to catch up during the classes. If you are keen to do languages, whatever your level I would definitely recommend trying out for the course as the experience you gain is definitely worth it. When I applied for the European Option, benefits included opportunities to independently organise student-selected components abroad during the summer months; exemption from the Preston base hospital allocation; acquisition of internationally recognised language qualifications (a diploma in medical French and the Diplôme Approfondi de Langue Française) and a four-month placement abroad in fifth year. Some of my best experiences at medical school are from my SSC placement in France. I took a four-week stage at the GP surgery in my home village in the Cévennes, St Germain de Calberte. It is a beautiful region in the South (near the Massif Central) and part of the national park in the Lozère. The GP was fantastic, had been practicing in the same region for 30 years and did a wide range of clinic activities, including a 20 mile round trip of the valley in an old range rover to visit elderly patients no longer able to travel to the surgery. If you are interested in organising a placement with him, his email address is below:

Dr Jean-Marc Marechal: [cabinetmedicalvf@hotmail.com](mailto:cabinetmedicalvf@hotmail.com)

Regarding the European Option course, during busy periods the additional workload and weekly evening classes can be stressful. However, I found medical school to be a fairly insular grind and it really helped having something else to keep things interesting. You also get to meet people from different base hospitals through the classes, which is really nice. In terms of immediate career usefulness, the European Option won't add any points your foundation program application (unless you get your name on a publication whilst on a placement abroad). However, I think the experience is CV enhancing in post foundation applications or for those considering a career outside of medicine. Finally, if there is particular university team abroad that you are interested in working with it can be a great means of networking and securing an internship.

## Living and working in Paris

Living and working in Paris was great for a number of reasons. Firstly, the cost of living was much lower than in the United Kingdom and the focus on work/ life balance was generally excellent. During my placement I lived on the left bank in the 14<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement and was able to walk to Necker (my base hospital) each day. I found my apartment on Air Bnb and organised a monthly rental contract privately with the owner. The apartment was a tiny studio with a single ring burner, shower and toilet for around £650 per calendar month. This arrangement is typical for single people living in Paris, as large houses are uncommon and so house shares are difficult to find inside of the périphérique. If you prefer company, a better option might be to find a two-bedroom flat with another Manchester student, which works out at roughly the same price in a central location. In terms of places to live, arrondissements 9, 10, 11 and 18 are cheaper, younger, more ethnically and culturally diverse and have the most varied night life. The left bank is quieter, more residential and probably slightly more expensive (excluding arrondissements 1, 2, 3 and 4 on the right).

Regarding lifestyle, Paris has a great mainstream arts scene plus cool and accessible seams of art and music subculture. Most of the national exhibitions are free for under 25s, so if you're on a budget you can still enjoy the main attractions. Food is more heavily subsidised than in the UK, so it's easy to eat well and public transport is also really cheap (around £1.40 for a single journey on the metro, £15 for a weekly pass for all transport methods or £54 for the month). Inside the périphérique the city is actually pretty small so it never takes more than half an hour to get anywhere and walking is easy. Professionally, conviviality is valued much more highly than in the UK. On both of my placements it wasn't uncommon for the team to break for an hour at 1pm to eat together, or to take a small breakfast after the morning ward round to catch up. It's easy to access health and dental services in France if you need them - remember to renew your European Health Insurance Card before you go. I had to see a dentist whilst I was there and it was actually cheaper and nicer than my NHS dentist at home (£48 versus £70 in the UK). Getting a job is also pretty straightforward. As a European Union citizen you can start working straight away - I worked as a child minder through an English-speaking agency and had my wages paid into my English bank account, you just need to get your IBAN and BIC/SWIFT codes from your bank statement. Tax is around 20% and is taken directly out of your wages, and your employer is legally required to offer to enter you into a social security program for healthcare if you so desire. Any job working with children requires a CRB as in the UK, but this only took a matter of days to arrive and can be requested online.

If you are like me and don't like working from home, there are a number of nice workspaces in Paris. Firstly there is the university library. The Centre Georges Pompidou also has a great library with public access, and lots of cafés provide tranquil spaces and good internet, including: L'Anticafé (79 Rue Quincampoix), La

Recyclerie (Porte de Clignancourt, great food but a bit noisier than others) and the Coutume Instituutti (La Sorbonne). On sunny days, Buttes Chaumont and le Bois de Vincennes are beautiful outdoor parks for work or relaxation.

If you want to practice your French in a non-clinical setting when you arrive, the Club Internationale de Jeunes à Paris does free weekly conversation workshops at the tearooms of the Paris Mosque. The workshops are either Anglo-French or a mix of French, Italian and German – the idea is that everyone speaks for an hour in English and then in their language of choice. The setting is beautiful and the mosque does amazing tea and food, which are worth the visit alone. It's also another nice way to meet international and French students from a variety of backgrounds. The Club also organises a number of social events including poetry and theatrical readings, day/weekend trips in France (e.g. to Mont St Michel in Normandy), dance classes etc.

Finally, in terms of nightlife Paris has a variety of clubs and music venues although some music genres are more difficult to find than others (e.g. afrobeat and dancehall). For urban gigs and club nights (hip hop, trap, RnB) La Bellevilloise in Belleville (Rue Boyer between the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> arrondissements) and Twenty One sound bar (Rue de La Forge, Bastille) are pretty good. I saw a number of UK and stateside grime, RnB and trap artists at La Bellevilloise including Stormzy, Wiley, Anderson Paak and Jazz Cartier. The venue has two nice bars and a roof terrace for drinking with a small club underneath. They also do a monthly mainstream RnB night. Twenty One sound bar is a safe bet for afrobeat and dancehall. For house and techno, Concrete (Porte de la Rapée), Alter Paname (Bobigny) and Le 6b (Quai de Seine, St-Denis) all do day/night parties and cater to a non-mainstream EDM crowd. A few nice bars include Nuba on the Quai d'Austerlitz, which has a great outdoor area. Other rooftop bars for sunny evenings include La Perchoir and Mama Shelter. Finally, Aux Folies in Belleville draws a lively crowd each weekend and has a great atmosphere. For a night out exploring, Pigalle is full of interesting small venues from a variety of music scenes.

Some useful websites include:

<https://www.doctolib.fr/> ← For booking GP or dental appointments

<http://www.speaking-agency.com/en/> ← The childcare agency I worked for

<http://www.club-international.org/> ← Conversation workshops

## Hospitals and practice, the medical training programme and contrasting medical culture

In France, each hospital service comprises medical students ('externs'), junior doctors ('interns'), registrars (chefs de Clinique) and consultants (chefs de service). Externs and interns, overseen by the chefs, carry out the daily ward work. French medical students are selected through a highly competitive concours, which takes only the top 10% of students after their first year of university. After this there are two pre-clinical years, followed by three clinical years during which students are referred to as 'externs'. In the final year of medical school, the externs sit a national ranking exam – the Examen Classant Nationale – a gruelling 6 hours worth of clinical papers. The students are then allocated straight into speciality 'intern' training in posts across the country according to their position in the national ranking. Newly qualified doctors are university students for a further 3 years, as every intern is required to become a Doctor of Medicine (M.D) and write a thesis.

You will probably be joining the students in their fifth ('D3') or sixth ('D4') year. Externs are paid a symbolic wage (around 200 euros per month) and have a defined role within the clinical team: they are expected to look after their own patients from the first clinical year, examining them daily, chasing up investigation results, ordering new investigations as directed by their interne, presenting each patient on the ward round and recording everything in the notes. The interns review each patient on the ward round with a chef de Clinique, but will generally only see patients if the extern has a particular concern – thus, students have much more responsibility from the start of their clinical careers. They are also expected to do a quota of night and weekend shifts during each semester. At Paris Descartes, students spend the mornings from 9am to 2pm on the ward and the remainder of the afternoon in lectures at the 'fac' (Faculté de médecine). At Descartes, I think this is at Cochin for fifth and sixth years. There are also some lectures on Saturdays. During the first Erasmus placement, you will join the team halfway through the first trimester. Depending on how well organised your university is, this may mean that all of the clinical jobs and rotas will have been allocated and no one will know who you are (you may even be berated for turning up a month late). This can be a little daunting. However, my second placement – which coincided with the externs switching rotations – was a completely different experience. Clinical responsibilities, rotas, on calls and teaching were outlined/allocated on the first day and I was fully integrated into the team.

Medical training in France is completely different from the English system, in which clinical learning is opportunistic and students are often superfluous to the team. You will find that the French students take their role extremely seriously as they are effectively a paid, essential member of staff. Further to this, they have had an extremely rigorous clinical training with a focus on academic medicine, and are thinking about the Examen Classant Nationale pretty much from their first year at medical school. It can be hard not to feel

a bit intimidated in the clinical environment, but try to remember that a) these students have been subject to a much more difficult selection process and are essentially some of the cleverest people in the country b) have had a far more detailed and traditional training programme than Manchester University provides and c) that we are there to observe a different clinical system and to enjoy the experience. I found the adjustment pretty tough at first but got used to the additional clinical responsibility by the end. The style of medicine can be quite paternalistic, and traditional medical student/doctor tropes persist (e.g. academic posturing and peacocking from students and superiors alike). However, most people seemed to be essentially good-natured and found our relative 'incompetence' amusing – you'll find that there is less focus on practical skills training, so we are ahead in that respect at least! As a final note, the French medical students tend to be pretty stressed as a result of their large clinical and academic burden, so don't expect them to be too sociable - all of the friends I made whilst in Paris were from non-clinical settings.

### Linguistic development, inter-cultural understanding and ideas and future plans

It was quite hard to develop my language skills in the clinical environment. This was because it was usually busy, externs and interns were pressed and there wasn't too much opportunity for the sort of sociable chat that helps you to develop vocabulary and linguistic sensibilities. By the end of the placement I had lost my inhibitions and would talk freely, but often at the expense of appropriate grammar as I was usually trying to get a point across in a hurry. To help with more formal language learning, I enrolled in language classes at the university. This was pretty straightforward – I emailed the university language centre, which offers a range of classes at different levels at a cost of €50 for 12 hours (one hour per week). The classes have a maximum of ten students and cover one specific grammatical area each week, with a small amount of homework. The students come from all disciplines, so classes are another nice way to meet new people. The French language coordinator, Ophélie Sitbon, can be contacted at: [ophelie.sitbon@parisdescartes.fr](mailto:ophelie.sitbon@parisdescartes.fr). She's an extremely friendly and animated person who will definitely be part of my fond memories of Paris.

Regarding Parisian culture the city differs from UK major cities in a number of ways. Firstly, people live predominantly in small apartments, which contributes to a sociable 'café' culture as they spend less time in doors. However, there is a distinct lack of 24-hour services (particularly in the case of shops) and many places are closed on Sundays. Although a cosmopolitan city, some international cultures can be tricky to find in Paris. Two obvious examples are the relative lack of Caribbean and South Asian neighbourhoods, food and music in comparison with the UK. Finally, social assistance appears to be much more limited – one of the most shocking disparities between Paris and the UK is the level of visible homelessness. There are large numbers families on the streets from Roma and other communities including women, young children and babies in the centre of the city. You can't help but imagine the kind of exploitative rackets that are probably

operating in these circumstances, and these sorts of issues are perhaps evidence of what can feel like a pervasive lack of openness towards and tolerance of minority communities and cultures in Paris.

Although I really enjoyed my time in Paris, I don't have any ambitions to work as doctor in France. Firstly, securing an intern post would involve taking the national ranking exam, which the British/Manchester University medical education is not really geared towards as the papers are free text, dense examinations of theoretical knowledge. Further, I found the working environment too formal – much of the medical hierarchical stereotypes that seem to have been abandoned in British medical culture persist in France, which I found quite frustrating at times. Finally, I found certain aspects of French culture (particularly regarding multicultural sensitivities and inclusiveness) uncomfortable and as such, it would not be my living place of choice.

### Practical issues

The administration at Paris Descartes is fairly disorganised. As mentioned earlier, we arrive mid way through the first trimester, so there are no welcoming or orientation activities when you arrive. As soon as you get your placement information, email the international placement coordinator and ask for your supervisor's email addresses – contact them directly to let them know of your arrival, as my experience is that the medical school are not very good at doing this. When you get to Paris, you can register straight away for your student card. This will give you access to the medical school web app, which includes your year group timetable (should you wish to attend lectures) and will enable you to subscribe to the medical school examinations if you want to take them. To register, you need to the following items:

- A copy of your European Health Insurance Card
- A passport photo
- A copy of your passport

The best thing to do is to drop off your documents with the International placement coordinator at the Rue de l'École de Médecine (the nearest metro stop is Odéon on line 4). You will also need to fill out an application form once you are there. The office is on the first floor of the medical school, left at the top of the stairs, straight ahead into the common room and right. It takes around two weeks to get your student card, which you can use to access the library opposite the medical school on the Rue de l'École de Médecine (be warned, you are not allowed to take books out of the library).

It is also useful to have a booklet of passport photos to get a Navigo, which is the Parisian version of an Oyster Card. A monthly pass costs €70. You have to top up on the first day of each month to get the most out of it, as any remaining credit is annulled at the end of the month. You can then use the Navigo for metro, bus, RER and velib – the French version of Boris Bikes.

Regarding Necker hospital, the nearest metro stop is Duroc on line 13. Students don't usually arrive till 9am. On your first day, pick up your ID badge (which will be ready for you) at the office to the left of the courtyard at the entrance gate on the Rue des Sèvres. Then, go through the metallic archway on the opposite (right side) of the courtyard and take the first door of the building on your right. This is the office for lab coats ('blouses'). You'll need to fill out a form and pay a €35 deposit. Once your form has been stamped, walk across the road to the Jean Hamburger building. Walk down to the entrance at the other end of the building and carry on across the road to a prefabricated hut on the left – this is the laundry, where you need to get your ID badge activated to collect a weekly lab coat. Once your ID badge is activated, you can pick up a clean lab coat each week in the basement of the Jean Hamburger building at the D.A.V. room. At the end of your placement, go back to the Laundry where you can get a receipt to claim back your lab coat deposit.

Finally, if you join the Descartes Erasmix Facebook page you can get updates on all sorts of international activities and sports events taking place at the university:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1642319729339889/>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would rate the European Option and the unique experiences I have had through it highly. If you manage to stay on top of the extra work, the course is a sound means of improving your language skills. One of the most valuable aspects of the course is the opportunity to make great friends, which are a constant through the changing pre-clinical and clinical years. Studying abroad in another language is also totally refreshing after five years of medical school in the UK. Whilst I don't plan on returning to clinical work in France for the foreseeable future, it was really valuable to see a different style of medical education to reflect on our own positive achievements (good clinical skills teaching) and areas for improvement (sound theoretical knowledge foundations, early clinical experience and student involvement in the clinical team). I will definitely try to incorporate some of these elements in my own clinical work to increase student inclusivity. Finally, the EO provides a singular opportunity to live and work in a major European city, which is priceless for a young person.

3430 words