

Erasmus Placement Report

Paris Descartes Jan-May 2018

Why I chose to study on the ES programme

I'd always really enjoyed languages at school and I found doing French at A-level was always a nice contrast to the science subjects, so when I found out European Studies was an option at Manchester I really wanted to apply. Undoubtedly it's a fantastic skill to be able to speak another language and I didn't want to lose all the skills I'd gained whilst at school. I did worry that ES would take up too much time and would negatively affect the medical side but aside from some stressful periods where exams were simultaneous with medicine, this generally wasn't the case at all and myself and most other students were able to pass all exams. With regards to the future, having the ability to speak another language could allow me to move country and practice medicine, or would be very helpful if I chose to work in humanitarian response or international organisations such as MSF.

Overview of the experience

Living and working in Paris for four months was an incredible opportunity. There is a huge amount to see and do, and despite trying to fit in as much as possible we couldn't do everything we wanted to. I felt it was just long enough to get to know the city, to see all the sights properly but also to learn about the side of Paris mainly known by locals. Speaking French

on a daily basis for four months, if only for a few hours a day, forced me to improve without me even trying. Generally, I went into placement in the morning and had the rest of the day to explore Paris, visit exhibitions and museums, go to free gigs, watch french theatre and films or sit in the park. If anything I would advise to really make the most of the exposure to the language, and force yourself to speak French wherever possible. In Paris the overwhelming majority of people will speak english, often fluently, so it can be easy to simply communicate in english. Students who went to other cities for their placement did not tend to find this, so were forced to speak french at all times.



My placements

I was assigned to Descartes hospital in Paris, based in central Paris in the Latin quarter. On the first day we arrived we went to the office of the Erasmus coordinator at Descartes Medical School who provided us with student cards and accounts for the online student system (however we never needed to use this). The student card was very useful for getting discounts all over Paris- there's almost always a cheaper ticket for students or those under 26. The medical school itself has a library, common room and canteen that is accessible to all students.

Differences between the medical systems

Generally, the French medical system is part state-funded and often partly made up by 'mutuelle', (insurance) that makes up the difference in cost. As a result, I believe it's clear to see that the funding is more abundant than in England. Wards are well-staffed and resources such as MRI scanning are more readily available, with scans often occurring the same day or next day for non-urgent cases. Also, patients are often admitted for minor conditions (cases I saw included uncomplicated costochondritis and an isolated, symptomless rise in CRP) or even simply for education with regards to a diagnosis. They are thoroughly investigated however sometimes I felt patients were over-investigated with an abundance of patients receiving CT scans as a precautionary measure.

French medical training is completely different to that of the UK, and this is clear from the first day of placement. French medical students are required to sit an exam at the end of their first year, after which only about the top 10% of students will progress to second year. They then have two further preclinical years, followed by three years of clinical training making their degree six years in total. At the end of this six years they must take a single exam, the results of which determine which specialty they will work in for the rest of their working lives. Hence, from my experience they can be very competitive and their level of knowledge with regards to rare and intricate disease processes is very high.

Roles of medical students from 4th-6th year is equivalent to that of an F1-F2 doctor in England. They are almost entirely responsible for the care of the patients, and are completely integral in the running of the ward. They will be assigned patients and are responsible for clerking, examining, undertaking investigations, writing up notes, completing referrals, handing over patients and arranging social care. Without the medical students the ward round is not able to start. They are responsible for conducting procedures such as lumbar punctures and sutures on a daily basis. Hence the students in France are valued and essential members of the team, rather than external observers as is often the case in the UK.

With regards to other staff members, interns (first year after medical school in France) will supervise and help the medical students. Consultants (chefs de service) are closely involved with the students and interns. Although hierarchy does exist I think it is generally to a much lesser extent in France; all consultants and doctors were friendly with the medical students and on a first-name basis. Consultants will enquire with medical students as to how their patients are

doing, and discuss the cases with students to a much greater extent than I have experienced in England. Where hierarchy does exist however is between different healthcare professionals and the distinction between nurses and doctors is unfortunately quite clear.

Another noticeable difference between the healthcare systems is the way in which the doctors interact with their patients; they are much more abrupt and direct. Consent is 'implied' in France, meaning that doctors can generally inform patients of what is going to occur rather than asking. I found this quite uncomfortable at times. For example, doctors I observed would sometimes make no effort to maintain dignity. Further, no chaperones are required for intimate examinations, even as a medical student.

Placement 1: Diabetology at Cochin Hospital

My first placement was on 'Diabetes therapeutic education' at Cochin Hospital in the 15th arrondissement. I was required to attend each morning, however on some occasions we would be sent home by the staff if there wasn't much to do. There were eight students on the ward and one intern. An alien concept in the U.K.; patients with newly diagnosed or uncontrolled diabetes will be admitted for five days for 'therapeutic education' whereby they see a specialist and have lessons and workshops throughout the week. Their glucose and diet will be closely monitored and advice and targets provided to help them control their blood glucose. Hence none of the patients are actually acutely unwell.

I was required to clerk patients thoroughly at the beginning of the week (they are stipulous-taking details such as the address of their gynaecologist) and present these patients on the ward round the following day. Throughout the rest of the week I would help the other students to undertake any clinical examinations and make any necessary follow-up appointments, or I would sit in the education sessions with the patients. In hindsight, this placement probably wasn't the most useful for medicine as it was very specific to diabetes and there wasn't much opportunity to observe other conditions or to undertake many examinations that weren't diabetes-related. That said, it was helpful for language skills as sitting in the education sessions meant I was exposed to lots of french, and also I would spend a whole morning with one patient so I was able to practice.

Cochin Hospital is one of the best in Paris and patients tend to speak very highly of the care received there. I'd heard from other students that generally the Hospital is very strict on its students, however this isn't something that I experienced myself and I assume this is placement dependent, as in Manchester. The Hospital itself is in the 14th

arrondissement; I didn't spend much time in that area as there didn't seem to be too much going on. However it's only a 5 minute walk to the Luxembourg Gardens (stumbled across on my



second day) and a 20-30 minute walk to the Notre Dame and the Seine which in the heart of Paris.

Placement 2: General medicine at Georges-Pompidou

The second placement I completed was at the George Pompidou Hôpital Européen in internal medicine. Internal medicine is basically General medicine, so the majority of patients have multi-system diseases or unclear diagnoses. Hence many patients have rheumatological conditions, and another very common reason for admission was sickle cell anaemia. That said, diagnoses could range from pneumonia to lymphoma to osteoarthritis to delirium. As it was so varied, it was a very good placement as a student as I was able to see an array of conditions, testing my knowledge and learning a lot.



During this placement, I was required to clerk patients when they were admitted on the ward, discuss the case with the interns and then see my patients on a daily basis for a review. Reviews would include examining their blood results, undertaking any necessary procedures such as ECGs and ABGs (medical students are not expected to do cannulas or bloods), examining and assessing them as a foundation year would do in England. I would be expected to make any calls, imaging requests, referrals or emails to other departments. This can be incredibly daunting, however there were always French medical students willing to help if I was struggling to understand. Ward rounds happened twice weekly on Tuesday and Friday; during which I would be expected to present each of my patients to the consultant and be up to date with all aspects of their care. This was really helpful in the view of starting as an F1 very soon. I would also be expected to attend weekly radiology meetings, weekly teaching and weekly case presentations where all students were quizzed by the consultants running the sessions. Although the content of these sessions was often difficult to follow due to the language, and the fact that the french training is much more scientific-based rather than clinical, it was very helpful to help me improve my listening skills and I was able to pick up some knowledge along the way. As the consultants would randomly quiz us we were required to

Although this placement was challenging and demanding in comparison to the first placement that I completed, it was definitely very helpful for my learning and I felt like a valued part of the team. Georges-Pompidou Hospital is in the 15th arrondissement, next to Parc-Andre Citroen (great park in the summer). It's in the most south-west part of Paris, almost outside of the centre, but there's a great view of the Eiffel Tower from the 8th floor and it's still only 20 minutes or so from the centre.

Living

Location

Paris is a relatively small capital, and we found that you could get pretty much anywhere from anywhere in maximum an hour by public transport (that said, we tried to walk around whenever possible to sight-see and get to know the city as much as possible). Paris itself is divided into multiple arrondissements, with each area being very distinctive and unique. We spent our four months in the north of the city, in the 9th arrondissement in Pigalle. I can't recommend this location enough for bars, restaurants and nightlife, it is without doubt the best place to be in Paris. You've also got Montmartre on your doorstep which is full of cafés, museums, theatres, independent cinemas and amazing bakeries and pâtisseries. That said, because it's such a fun place it's really expensive. Other areas in the centre that are fantastic places to live include Le Marais, Bastille and the Latin Quarter. However due to their central locations they are all likely to be expensive.

Living outside the 'ring' of central Paris that marks the outer border of all arrondissements will undoubtedly be cheaper than living in the centre. As I mentioned, Paris is a lot smaller than other capital cities so as long as the transport links are good, it may still be possible to very easily access the city whilst paying considerably less for rent. Most of the hospitals are in the south of the city, so areas such as Porte St Cloud could prove cheaper and still accessible to hospitals and the centre.



Accommodation

Myself and another Erasmus student from Manchester decided not to live in halls but instead to find a private let for the two of us. We found this exceedingly difficult to find, looking for months before arriving before eventually finding a let for the first month. Once we'd arrived, we spent the first two weeks trying to find another place for the remaining time. However in France there is so much administration when trying to rent, and they often need a French guarantor. Contracts were for a minimum of 6 months, also requiring huge deposits. There are many Facebook groups that offer short-term lets and sub-lets, however these were usually for only one bedroom. We eventually did find a flat through AirBnB. We emailed the owner and asked if she'd be willing to reduce the rent if we stayed for 3 months, to which she obliged. The flat was in a fantastic location, with two bedrooms (one bed, one sofa bed) and a view of the Sacre-Coeur. We really loved it there, because we had space for friends to stay and the location was brilliant, however it was very expensive, as you might expect in central Paris.

We really struggled to find an apartment for two people, however when we were searching there was a lot of available rooms in shared houses with students or professionals. So, if you don't

mind living with others (it would probably really help with learning the language too) then I'd recommend staying with French housemates in a shared house. Paris is so accessible so you'd still be able to meet up with friends from Manchester on a regular basis. Also, some of the group stayed in halls which were admittedly a bit further out but were often a lot cheaper than private lets.

What I've gained from this experience

Language

My conversational French level has definitely improved, particularly my listening skills. During the first few weeks at placement, I found it incredibly difficult to have conversations with other medical students and staff as they would speak very quickly in groups. However after the first few weeks this improved and I was able to keep up with conversations and ward rounds. I tried to attend all additional meetings and teaching where possible, as I found this particularly helpful for improving comprehension. We went to see French films, watched theatre in French and watched a French TV series whilst we were there. This was all really helpful and meant we felt a part of the culture, however in hindsight I wish I'd done more of this before heading out so that my level was a bit higher in the first place. As the majority of people in Paris speak English, often people would reply in English automatically, so I found that just by speaking in French regardless was necessary and eventually people would understand that I wanted to speak French- this was even true on the wards. There are many 'meet-up' groups in Paris where people get together and speak French, although I didn't attend these I have heard from others that these are a good way to practice and also get to know people.

Inter-cultural understanding

French culture is considerably different from British culture. I found that generally French people are much more direct than the British in all contexts, however this should not be mistaken for being rude even if it can often seem that way. For example, in hospital doctors would often say seemingly cut-throat comments to one another however they would not be angry or hostile, it is just the way they get things done. I actually found this method of stating exactly what they feel in a direct manner to be often more efficient. Outside of the hospital environment, French customer service is very different and in restaurants staff can often seem irritated. Generally people do not tip in bars and restaurants, so there is a feeling that the staff are not working towards this. There's a misconception about Parisians being rude and unfriendly- I really don't think this is the case and overall people are generally really friendly.

Future plans

Overall I really enjoyed working in French hospitals. I liked the calm and relaxed atmosphere, the fact that the students, interns and consultants are all very much integrated and the fact everyone works in a friendly team together. It is well structured and organised, and there is less

of the red tape with regards to forms and administration that we often find in the NHS. I would definitely consider working in France at some point in the future now, however it is quite difficult to switch between the British and French medical systems due to the nature of the training programmes.

Practical issues

Payment by the hospital

All French medical students are paid by the hospital; this varies depending on your year of study and which hospital you are based at. I was paid about 350 euros a month, plus 35 euros for the Navigo card. Although this is not a huge sum, it definitely helped with expenses whilst in Paris due to the very high cost of living. In order to set up these payments, it's necessary to set up a French bank account. We set one up with 'Societe Generale' as (at the time) they will give you 120 euros just for opening an account. This procedure took a very long time and required numerous documents, including proof of address (you can use an 'attestation' if you have French housemates or from your landlord, whereby they will countersign to verify you are at that address). I would advise sorting this in the first week as it took about 3-4 weeks to get this sorted and the card to be sent out. Once you've opened the account, you can go to the 'Bureau personnel de medicine (BPM)' office, which every hospital will have, and they will sort out the payment for you.

Transport

Transport links in Paris are brilliant, with the metros, buses and overground trains it is simple and quick to get anywhere. Purchase a 'Navigo' card as soon as you can; it will cost 5 euros for the card. You then top the card up monthly on the 1st of the month for 75 euros, and travel will last the entirety of the month. If you top the card up on the 15th for example, it will be the same cost for the rest of the month so try and top up as near to the beginning of the month as possible. Keep the receipts when you do this, as if you provide them to the hospital they will reimburse you 50% of the cost. As a result, travel in Paris is really cheap compared to most cities, and should only cost about 30 euros a month. The Navigo will give you access to all public transport in the city, including to Disneyland and the airport, which are usually 20 euros return. That said, I still tried to walk and get buses wherever possible so that I could get to know my way around and see the sights.

Expense

Paris is an incredibly expensive city and I was really surprised at the extent of the cost. This was particularly because the exchange rate for the euro was so poor. We received the 350 euros payment per month from the hospital, and about 900 euros from Erasmus funding whilst we were there. We also received the NHS bursary as we would have done if we were in the UK and student loans (if eligible) however we still struggled. If you are planning on going to Paris, try and make a budget plan in advance. That said, the majority of state-owned museums and

monuments are free to visit for those who are under-26 and from the EU, which meant we could generally go to many exhibitions and sights each week without having to pay, which I definitely wouldn't have been able to afford otherwise. Make sure to google ahead and check which places are free as some are privately owned and will charge, however often they will have a much lower rate for under-26s from the EU.

Useful contacts

Erichetta Mazerat- Head of erasmus at Descartes- erichetta.mazerat@parisdescartes.fr

Acommodation- www.appartager.fr

www.airbnb.com

www.leboncoin.fr

AVOID www.erasmusu.com (friend had bad experience with this)

Facebook groups- type 'souslocation Paris'

Activities in Paris- www.sortiraparis.fr (whats on this week in Paris, good deals or free things)

www.lylo.fr (free and paid gigs in paris each day, really good free gigs)

www.lebonbon.fr (cool and fun things to do in Paris, what's free this week

also)

Apps- Meet-up app (meet-up groups to speak French, also exists in Manchester and UK)

Le Bon Bon app (shows you the best bars and restaurants in Paris- eg can search by 'rooftop')