

European Option UAM Madrid Report

Why did I choose to study the European option?

The option to study a language alongside medicine was a key feature in what attracted me to study medicine at Manchester Medical School. I had always had a passion for Spanish, inspired by my high school Spanish teacher Mr Muirhead from Belfast high school.

I started studying Spanish in 2004, year 3 of high school when I was fourteen. I had already had two years of French (which was compulsory at my school to GCSE level) so I had a basis in language skills. I loved Spanish! I had been fortunate as a child that my parents had taken me on holiday to resorts like Salou and Málaga, I loved the warmer weather and the lazy siestas I had caught the Spanish bug.

It was also during the time period of the 90's when Latin music was having a surge in our Brit charts - I loved the Latin rhythms of Ricky Martin, Shakira and Enrique Iglesias. So throughout my later years at high school I was enthusiastic to get the best grades in my Spanish class and enjoyed some more trips abroad, including a school trip to Barcelona. I remember buying a beautifully illustrated hardback copy of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* there, which I still treasure to this day.

By the time I was choosing my A levels, my heart was set on pursuing a career in medicine and although I knew that the sciences and maths would be the best choices for my A levels, after some research into the asking requirements for entry to medical schools, I decided that I would keep Spanish in the place of physics so I could continue to fuel my passion for this culture so different from our British traditions (plus it would open opportunities for travel and work abroad!). I was sad to see Mr Muirhead retire during the first year of my A level course but was proud to be the first name on the Muirhead cup which he donated to my school as a prize for the best A level grade.

And so, during this time I had been researching which four medical schools I would apply to. Our deputy head mistress had a daughter who had gone to Manchester to study medicine and she too had continued her study of Spanish. I was really excited by the idea that Manchester offered a European option with a placement abroad in the final year and from the moment I looked at the prospectus I knew that if I got accepted to Manchester that I would apply for the Spanish European Option.

Although there has been some extra work and exams, I have thoroughly enjoyed the course content of the Spanish classes and this opportunity to live in Madrid for four months has been an invaluable and unforgettable experience. Plus I feel that my love for the Spanish language and culture makes me into a more rounded person - there is more to me than just medicine- which makes a great topic for conversation and an interesting ingredient to spice up my CV. I want to make sure I work to maintain my language skills long into my medical career, from foundation programme and beyond.

I think the development of languages ever since the dawn of man is a fascinating topic and makes me stop to reflect on how the human mind has evolved to form means of communication - from spoken sound to non verbal techniques. I hope that my study of language and this experience in practising medicine in a second language has helped me to hone my skills in picking up in non verbal cues and in reading people, as sometimes I have gaps in my vocabulary and have to piece together the parts of the puzzle that I recognise in order to grasp the gist of what the whole picture resembles (which is a bit like taking a history to come up with our differential diagnoses, a skill that Manchester has taught us well through PBL). At times, especially in the first month, it took the utmost concentration to focus on hearing and understanding all of what was being said, and a discussion within a team sometimes felt like watching a fast paced game of tennis doubles!

My experience of living and working in the placement hospital and its surrounding area

I have absolutely loved living in Spain. I was very uncertain during the first semester of fifth year as to where I was going to live and who I was going to live with. I spent a lot of time trawling through the internet researching into letting agency sites, Erasmus sites and sites about Madrid in general. As far as I could see there were pros and cons to the various options. I could try and live with a few other students from the Spanish class (safety in numbers) but on the other hand perhaps I needed to put myself out there and live with new people to make new friends and broaden my horizons. So if I lived with a new set of people, would I want to live with people who could speak English (perhaps after a hard day of concentrating in Spanish at the hospital I would appreciate being able to relax a bit at home?), or living with native Spanish speakers (getting the most valuable tutors and practise by completely immersing myself in Spanish culture) or a complete mixture of cultures (which would offer yet again another insightful experience into appreciating other cultures and beliefs).

I also had spent a long time trying to decide on what location I wanted to live in. I knew by this point that I had been allocated to Hospital Universitario Puerta de Hierro in Majadahonda, a town on the outskirts of Madrid and part of the teaching hospitals for Universidad Autonoma de Madrid (UAM). Majadahonda is a well to do town which has seen a lot of development in recent years after it suffered from a period of stagnation following the war of Spanish Independence. It is situated some twenty kilometres (or twelve and a half miles) from the centre of Madrid and it happens to appear in the afore-mentioned literary work Don Quixote, which I hold close to my heart. I had considered living in Majadahonda in order to be close to the hospital and avoid the thirty to forty-five minute commute, however I felt that I would rather be close to the centre of Madrid, near to friendly faces from our Manchester class and to all of the things Madrid has to offer – and she is very generous!

Later, I will talk about the logistics of moving to Madrid and finding accommodation but for now our story continues with me settling into my little corner of Madrid, my home from home. In the end, I managed to get a room in a shared 4 bedroom flat on the sixth floor in an area of Madrid called Arguelles. My street was only one block away from the entrance to the Arguelles Metro and only a five minute walk to the metro station/intercambiador bus station of Moncloa, where I would catch either the 653 or 655 bus to Hospital Puerta de Hierro (HPH). The 655 is a slightly quicker route usually taking about thirty minutes which leaves Moncloa at quarter past and quarter to the hour, whereas the 653 takes closer to forty-five minutes and passes by the train station in Majadahonda. (Majadahonda train station is in the north east of the town whereas the hospital is in the south on the other side of the motorway, so it is not particularly helpful for the commute for where I lived. The trains connect to Principe Pio rail station and others in central Madrid.)

In my flat there were three other girls, all American: two students from Maryland in the states (studying international relations and psychology) who had just turned twenty one and a girl closer to my age (twenty six) who was a qualified primary school teacher, struggling to find work in New York who was helping teach English at a primary school near El Escorial (a beautiful monastery in north east Madrid – definitely worth a visit!) as part of a government initiative to help Spain promote learning English as a second language from a young age. We got on really well and I had no problems getting to know them or sharing the flat with them. There was a supermercado really close to our flat and I found this and the local fruit shop to be much cheaper for groceries than the likes of el Corte Ingles or even chinos (corner shops).

During the first couple of days here there is a lot of admin that you need to sort out. First of all, it's worthwhile getting a monthly travelcard. You can make an appointment in the station or online at several of the main metro stops and also some tabaccos shops can offer the service of printing your card for you as well – which we found to be a little easier as there was less of a queue and you didn't need an appointment. They ask for your address and you need to bring a passport to photocopy. For Majadahonda it was in area B2 which was around seventy two euros per month but if you are in a central university then it costs less for the central A zone. You can use this travelcard for all metros, buses and cercanias trains. Also, if you go on an excursion outside of the travelzone for your card you can use it to get a small discount towards the total cost of the journey. The travelcard is a must! I feel while you are in Madrid, it is super useful for getting around town and seeing the sights.

The other thing that you need to do once you arrive is to sort of some forms with your university. Firstly, there is the part one of the Erasmus placement forms for your arrival to the university. I was with UAM so we had to fill out some forms and take them to the campus in Alcobendas, which is easily accessible by train. The office for foreign students is near the café by the Plaza mayor (go straight down from the train station, past a grassy area and over towards the right. If you come to a car park you have come too far to the right!) Try and get a photocopy of your passport and insurance documents, because although it is cheap to do this at the campus there was always a big queue for students printing!

I found being a student with UAM quite difficult. There is an online enrolment process which you need to be aware of as there is a deadline for registering (which I think is similar to ours so there is a September/October deadline for semester one and a January/February deadline for semester two). Also try to get your log in for the university email account sorted and upload your photo so they can print you a UAM student card. This takes 4 weeks so try and do this from Manchester if you want to get your card, as the Alcobendas UAM campus is quite out of the way. To be honest, I didn't really have any need for this card as all it offers is access to the campus PCs and library. After signing these forms (and receiving your free UAM Erasmus welcome T-shirt), you need to make your way to La Paz hospital to the Faculty of Medicine to fill out some more forms.

The induction to the hospital at Majadahonda was a little lacking compared to the kind of inductions we are used to in Manchester. There is a reception for the undergraduate team (Docencia) but often she is away and the door is locked, which was very frustrating as we needed to print the arrival letters explaining who the jefe de servicio (head of department) was for our firm and we were not given great directions. We were able to share a locker but had to pay to get copies of the key. The timetable here is that there is teaching for the medical students at 8am to 9am, or you may be able to attend the doctors' sesiones (like case based discussions or other meetings which most of the firms here will have in mornings several days of the week). There is always a weekly Thursday lunch time lecture which you can attend with guest speakers.

I found it quite odd the system for picking our specialities and this confused the docencia team a little as we were not really allocated to particular student groups as their semester dates differed from our for the placements. This was not really an issue but I did find that I was able to get more out of the placement when there was teaching going on for the 4th or 5th years (6th years seem to have placements similar to ours). In general I would say pick what you are interested in as long as the hospital offers it, as the doctors are welcoming to have us on board.

I did four rotations each of four weeks in cardiology, internal medicine, obstetrics & gynaecology and paediatrics. All the staff that I worked with were quite friendly and were really helpful, especially when I was asking them questions whether it was about the medical aspects of a case or about my language skills i.e. vocabulary or grammar. There were very patient with my Spanish and I was always pleased when at the end of each placement the doctors would comment on the improvement they saw in my speaking abilities! Most of the timetable would be to arrive here for 8 or 9 am depending on whether there was a session. The doctors here have a small breakfast after or will go to consultas externas (outpatients) or la pasa la planta (ward round). Depending on how busy the day is we might take a break for a coffee at 11am or 12pm, but usually the doctors work straight through until their shift ends at 3pm and lunch time is usually around 2pm or 3pm in the canteen (there are offers for desayuno from 8am to 12:30m!). Usually they would let us keep to our British tradition of going for lunch at around 12pm or 1pm. After this a lot of the students go home or got to classes. You can also take the opportunity of doing guardia (on call) in the later afternoon or evening.

Generally I brought a packed lunch but the canteen is good and there is a nearby shopping complex with a large Carrefour if you want to buy lunch instead. Buses on the way home are also very frequent until about 5pm or 6pm and then less infrequent until around 11pm to 12am when the last bus runs. The route to the hospital is quite pretty as you can see the mountains which had snow on them even until well into April as Madrid is the capital in Europe with the highest elevation!

What I have learnt on the placement with regard to any differences to UK hospitals and practice, the medical training programme, the contrasting medical cultures.

In general I have found that most of the medicine is very similar, if not the same. Medicines used here are slightly different and I found it difficult at times if I did not recognise the translation at first or the brand name. In general, the doses are the same although I found it odd that when I bought ibuprofen over the counter it came as tablets of 600mg to take every 6-8 hours up to three times a day and there are different dosages of paracetamol available from 500mg tablets, 1g tablets and even an odd 650mg tablet dose.

The general structure of the doctors' timetable and tasks are very similar to the UK with a ward round in the morning, then typing up the notes and ordering tests. It seems odd to me that they finish quite early, but if you have guardia then you can be on call from 3pm until 6am the next day, which is a very long shift indeed! I have noticed that the doctors don't tend to do as much of the clinical skills as the nurses, for example nurses take all bloods (and other samples) and insert catheters. This made it a little more difficult for me to get my remaining UPSAs signed off (which was difficult with the doctors as well, as it was an unusual request as their medical students don't have to have these skills signed off. As far as I am aware they do some training and theory for these, but they don't really start to get much practice until they are residents).

In Spain there is a similar system that after high school you go to university to get your medical degree which can take five or usually six years. After they graduate in June, they spend the next ten months revising and attending courses to prepare for the MIR exam. This is a multiple choice test based on scientific and clinical knowledge and the result of this test will rank every student in Spain into a list for deciding on where they will continue their medical training. Medical trainees will start a residency programme and from the beginning they will know their future career, so the MIR is critical in achieving the career that you are interested in and you have to make this decision quite early in your career. Most residencies take about five years from beginning as an R1 to becoming an R5 at which point I believe you can apply for posts as a registrar or consultant (adjunto). Depending on your speciality you either have very focused placements in that speciality, for example in the case of gynaecology, or you do two years of more general placements and then more specialised training if you have a medical speciality.

The general attitudes of the doctors and the doctor-patient relationship are a little bit different here from how we are taught in the UK. There is a lot of respect on both sides of the relationship, as noted by the fact that the formal "you" (usted) is used when conversing between doctor and patient. However, I feel there is a much more paternalistic view on decision making and that the patients, while their views are considered, are not made the focus of the decision making process. Also, when examining patients, it seems that we Brits are much more conservative and more careful about ensuring that there are blinds closed, doors shut, chaperones present etc. I supposed perhaps this is because there could be less of a compensation or litigation culture, or that perhaps the Spanish grow up expecting to be examined in this way. Often there is little explanation or informed consent for examinations (for example, we would tend to explain when and what we are going to palpate whereas the Spanish will just do it, although they are mindful and polite when they ask about pain etc.). Also, at times there will be many doctors (i.e. three and upwards!) all auscultating a chest at the same time, which becomes an unusual (and rather amusing) game of moving stethoscopes in turn to try and listen to all areas!

Another difference is that the doctors here wear white coats – so remember to bring your lab coat to avoid buying a new one! I actually really like that I wear a white coat and I am going to miss it as it has several large pockets, which is great as usually (as a female) I don't have many pockets and we aren't supposed to carry bags with notepads etc with us in the hospitals. Also, I feel that the white coat can protect the doctors from bringing home infectious pathogens, although I am not read up on the topic so I wouldn't feel confident to argue against our policies of infection control. However, the white coats do still seem to be more of a status symbol of authority than anything else. I often get

asked in the corridor for directions and without a white coat or scrubs the staff canteen are wary of serving you. The dress code seems slightly less formal, jeans are acceptable to wear, but you still have to make sure not to wear shorts or revealing clothing. Also, their jewellery policies seem to be a little more lax as well.

One thing to note is that HPH does have a library, it is well stocked for journals and has a few useful books such as Rang & Dale, but to be honest most of the books are quite outdated. There is no system for the students here to access PCs in the library or a library card to officially sign out books to take home, although if you leave contact details they are happy for you to borrow books. Also, I was never given a hospital ID card or username to access the patient records, which the native UAM students do usually have.

How you have gained from this experience in terms of i) linguistic development, ii) inter-cultural understanding, and iii) in terms of your ideas and future plans.

In my opinion, it is a gift to be able to converse in a language different from your mother tongue. I feel that through studying European option it has made me all the more aware of how ungrateful we native speakers of English are in a world which is being standardised to speaking English. I am in awe of those who are multilingual, who can easily flit between two or more languages and speak them fluently. When I first came to Madrid in February my Spanish was very rusty after a few months without Spanish classes. You have to do a language test online for the Erasmus programme which will be repeated at the end to compare your progress. For the first test I didn't do so well, only achieving B1 level language (rather than C1 which I had achieved in the Cámara exam last year!).

As I previously mentioned, I found that the first few weeks were quite tough! I had to really concentrate to keep up with the fast paced conversations and would end the day with a slight headache. However, I found my progress to be exponential in those first few weeks here. I have definitely improved my linguistic skills and although I may not always understand every word I can get most of what is being said. I find this much easier in a medical context, as our course has mostly focused on these scenarios and that in general day to day conversations I struggle a little more to recognise all the words. To address this I have tried to converse and make friends with native Spanish speakers, I bought some Harry Potter books to read and have watched and listened to Spanish TV and radio. I feel that reading is still probably my strongest skill, writing perhaps my worst, and that my speaking abilities are better both in terms of my pronunciation and grammar. I found at first I would struggle to form sentences for conversation just from the top of my head, muddling my verb endings but now at the end of the placement I feel it comes much more naturally.

I have also definitely improved my inter-cultural understanding from living here. There is so much to see and do in Madrid with regard to culture from going for tapas and trying the local cuisine, to seeing the sights and architecture, to flamenco shows, to salsa dancing and art galleries and museums. I have tried to make the most of my stay here to experience all aspects of Spanish culture (although I didn't quite work up the courage to go to a corrida (or bull fight)). There is some great night life which goes on from 12am to 6am in the morning on Friday and Saturday nights and also we have been able to take part in semana santa (easter) celebrations. Recently we also had San Isidro celebration for the patron saint of Madrid, with lots of events, concerts and fireworks in Parque de Buen Retiro. Another must-see are the towns of Segovia and Toledo which are within easy reach for day trips and are full of churches and other historical sites.

Looking ahead, I want to try and take part in local Meetup groups back in Manchester, or language interchanges to keep up my language skills. I don't think I will ever be satisfied until I am almost fluent (which will probably take a long time...!). I want to continue to read Spanish literature, listen to Spanish music and watch Spanish films to continue my language development. I hope I have made some lasting friends which I can keep in touch with. I am so grateful that I have been able to embark on this journey and I hope that although I am returning to the UK for now, I hope that in the future the journey will continue and take me to other distant shores, whether back here in Spain as 'just visiting'

or even to South America to volunteer my medical skills to work with humanitarian aid teams such as MSF (Medicos Sin Fronteras). I would also be very interested in researching about career prospects for doctors in Spain and also possibly in America, and to look into what entry requirement they have. I have enjoyed the warmer climate and the people have been just fantastic!

Any practical issues that future students on this placement should know about.

I found that the most awkward issue was sorting out accommodation. I spent so much time on websites looking for a shared flat and it was exhausting!

Be careful not to give any deposit until you are sure that you have a proper contract with the landlord if possible.

Whilst I booked through spotahome.com before coming to Madrid, other members of our group stayed in an Air BnB apartment for the first couple of weeks which then allowed them to view properties before signing. This has pros and cons as they seemed so stressed in the first few weeks, frantically trying to see as many viewings as possible after a day at the hospital to find accommodation.

Definitely don't count on the Erasmus grant for income as it is just a contribution, we have been waiting for the second instalment right up to the last week of our placement (it gets paid in 70% at the beginning, then 20% near the end and a 10% instalment after we submit our reports).

There is a three euro supplement for the airport (arriving to and leaving from) when using the metro, so be aware if you have any visitors!

Make sure that you get to know the layout of the hospital early and that you find out your supervisor the in advance of your next placement as sometimes they can be hard to track down.

Get in touch with UAM to sort out your university email near the beginning of the placement.

Look up how to get to all the different areas of campus and get to know how the metro and rail networks connect.

Any addresses, phone numbers and contacts that might be useful for future students.

www.spotahome.com

<http://www.crtm.es/>

<https://www.tarjetatransportepublico.es/CRTM-ABONOS/entrada.aspx>