

Erasmus 2015 - Paris Descartes University (Paris V)

European Placement Report

Why did you choose to study on the European programme?

The European programme was an appealing option since it provides the opportunity to go to France for student selected components (SSCs) and the year 5 European placement. The chance of living in Paris for 4 months while most people get only 2 months abroad for their STEP placement was very tempting. Luckily, I was allocated Paris which was one of the reasons why I wanted to study on the European programme. The 4-month placements allowed me to fully immerse in a different culture and experience the life of an Erasmus student in this beautiful city. I also wanted to continue learning and speaking French to further develop my skills. The classes were interesting and the tutor we had in 4th year organized various role-playing exercises that kept the students engaged. However, it was not always easy to attend French lessons once a week after a long day at the Hospital, particularly during exam periods. Fortunately, I carried on with the course because in the end it is worth it. I believe it is a once in a life time opportunity to be able to live in Paris for 4 months as a student. Moreover, graduating with European studies could give you an edge after foundation programme. It gives you something interesting to talk for future job interviews when it comes to specialty training.

Where did you live in Paris?

Finding somewhere to live in Paris can be daunting because it is not always easy to find an apartment for only 4 months at an affordable price. Fortunately, Paris Descartes University offered accommodation in halls of residence for a reasonable price. Universities have arrangement which allow them to reserve a limited number of rooms for students. I was allocated a 20 square metres studio that cost around 490 euros per month. You will need to have a guarantor for the accommodation. The residence was part of CROUS: <http://www.crous-paris.fr/>

Although the studio was furnished, there was no microwave oven, boiler or toaster. The lighting in the room was inadequate. I had to purchase a table lamp because one end of the room was in darkness. There was a refrigerator and two hobs which are sufficient to cook for one person. The downside of the residence was its location. It was not located in a very nice neighborhood and the building was not designed in a way that would promote interactions with other people. The hall was not very good for meeting people as in the UK. However, people usually greet each other in the residence. The amenities are quite old and occasionally the lifts were out of order.

I would recommend people to apply for accommodation at the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris. The flats are much nicer and you will meet many students since there are regular events organized for students. You will need to apply early because they receive many applications and the process takes a long time. The best thing is to apply months in advance to have a chance of being accepted. There is much paperwork that I was required to send before going abroad. It was stressful at times because of the preparation for exempting exams. You have to apply for the European Health Insurance Card before going on your placement. The university will organize a meeting to brief you on the documents that you need to send and what you need to sort out.

How did you travel around Paris?

I used the metro to travel as it was the most convenient means of transport from my studio to the Hospital. The Navigo pass which was about 5 euros was very useful. A monthly pass costs 70 euros. You can also travel by bus with it. Occasionally, I used the bus but it is quite slow in peak time. On weekend, the transport is free up to zone 5 with the Navigo pass. This means you can travel to some towns outside of Paris within zone 5. The Hospital covered half of my transport expenses so in the end it was worth buying the monthly pass as I used it every day. I found that walking is the best way to discover the parks, gardens and bridges Paris has to offer.

How did you spend your time?

Things to do

Paris is a city that caters for everyone. There are so many things to do that you will never be bored during your stay in Paris. Many of the attractions are free if you are under 26 years old. I visited musée du Louvres, Picasso museum and Les Invalides to name a few. If you want to have a panoramic view of the city, I would recommend the tower of Cathedral of Notre Dame or l'Arc de Triomphe. These attractions are equally free if you are under 26 years old. Although the queue might be long and there are many steps to climb, all the efforts are worth it once you reach the top where you can admire the breathtaking view. I also visited the parks and gardens in my free time. I really like the neighborhood of Montmartre which is in the Northern part of Paris. It is very different from the rest of the city as it feels as if time has stopped there. While you are visiting Montmartre, you can climb up the hill to Basilique du Sacré Coeur. On a sunny day, it's really nice to sit down and have a picnic on the bank of la Seine. It is one of the favourite hangouts of Parisians. I also explored some of the markets where locals buy their groceries or to grab some street food. Le marché des enfants rouges is worth going for the food and the lively atmosphere. You might have to wait a little because of the queues if you go for lunch.

Paris is a very cultural city that hosts a range of shows. If you are a fan of ballet, opera or classical music, a visit to the opera house (Palais Garnier) is a must. I went to see a ballet show there, it was a wonderful experience. Tickets can be bought on the same day or you can reserve them online. The number of theatres in the city is just incredible. Some of the plays are reduced for those under 26 years old, I went to a few plays. There are free activities that are usually advertised on: <http://www.paris-friendly.fr/> Some of the activities were interesting and original while others were less interesting.

You will find that there are many great areas to go out. Bastille is well-known for its nightlife, the crowd is mixed but many students enjoy going there. The drinks are quite cheap in most of the bars in this area. If you want to go to rooftop bars, you will find a range of choice. I went to one called nuba which is along the seine, it's a bar/club where

people come to chill after work. Canal St Martin is another trendy area with affordable bars. The nightclub scene in Paris did not impress me. I preferred to go to bars with live music which were more entertaining.

It's very convenient to travel outside of Paris on weekend as the Navigo pass allows you to go up to zone 5 free of charge. I went to Versailles and Auvers sur Oise. Chateau de Versailles is huge. I spent half a day visiting only part of the chateau and the gardens. If you plan to visit the chateau, make sure you go on a sunny day so that you can make the most of the experience. There are many trips organized for Erasmus students on weekend which is great if you want to see other parts of France at an affordable price. I went to Mont Saint Michel and had a lovely time there. We visited different towns as part of the tour on the second day.

Eating

As you probably know, la gastronomie française is one of the finest. There are so many restaurants that it can be hard to choose where to go. I think the best thing to do is to try the restaurants away from the touristic areas where French usually go. You can try to eat escargots and cuisses de grenouille while you are there. If you have the chance, check out Café de l'industrie. It's ideal for brunch, the staff is friendly and the food was delicious. Eating out regularly in restaurants is expensive as one would expect in Paris. I found some restaurants that served good food at reasonable price. As a student, you can have lunch in the restaurants of the CROUS which are spread all over Paris. It's pretty good since a menu with desert and side costs only 3.20 euros. There is also the option of eating at the hospital canteen which is equally cheap. I cooked less than usual because the kitchenette in my studio was poorly designed. Moreover, I had only the basic kitchenware to make simple dishes like pasta. The baguettes sold at the boulangeries are amazing, nothing compared to the ones you get in England. Macarons and crepes are sold at almost every corner of streets in the center of Paris. Good wine can be purchased at ridiculously cheap price. In some bars, a glass of wine is cheaper than bottled water!

The University

The Erasmus coordinator of Paris Descartes University was quite good with the organisation of my placements. Her name is Mathilde (contact available below). She sorted out my registration and student card. However, when I turned up on the first day of my placement the chef de service wasn't expecting me. French students spend 3 months in the same placement and there were two other students who started before I arrive. He was not aware that I would join in the second month.

My hospital placements

Practical info:

As a medical student in France, you are expected to carry out different tasks by the doctors. These can vary from faxing letters, examining patients to writing in the patient's notes. Placements for medical students are usually in the morning and the rest of the day is meant to be for study. Most of the French students attend private lessons in the evening besides university lectures. It was a surprise to see how hard they worked compared to us in the UK. In their final year, they were all focused on their examination and seldom went out.

You get paid by the hospital as a medical student so make sure you give them your bank details on the first day. The hospital will also refund part of your transport expenses. You may be asked about medico-legal insurance to be able to start your placement, check with your defence union before you leave. It can be difficult to get your placement signed off because the French doctors may not be familiar with our medlea system, so make sure you tell your supervisor about it early on. I got each block signed off even though I spent 2 blocks on the same placement just to be on the safe side. The food in the hospital is subsidised for staff so you can try to eat in the hospital canteen if you are ever there the whole day.

Fun facts about Hôpital Necker:

It is historically the first paediatric hospital in the world.

The stethoscope was invented by a French physician, René Laennec, while working at Hôpital Necker.

Gastroenterology hepatology at Hôpital Necker Enfants Malades

I started my first placement in gastro-pediatric service where I got the opportunity to learn about many rare conditions I never thought I would see. It was interesting to see the patients with rare diseases that I only read in textbook. I learnt much about hepatology because I was put in their team for the whole 8 week placement. There were meetings that we were expected to attend every week. These included radiology, histology, multidisciplinary team and handover meetings. Some of them lasted three hours which meant that I had to stay longer for the afternoon. Once a week, there is a big ward round attended by the whole team which is usually lead by the chef de service. I had to be in every day from 8.30 and left by 13.00. On weekend, I was also on call a couple of times. It is a half-day shift called *astreinte* which can be interesting to do once but after a few it becomes tedious. I do not think that medical students are absolutely necessary for these out of hour's shifts particularly in the service where I was working.

On overall, it was a placement that was interesting because of the opportunities to see rare diseases since it was a very specialized. The junior doctors and medical students were also very friendly and helpful. However, I found that spending 8 weeks in this service was quite long. After a month, it became routine and my interest for the placement dropped. I would have preferred to explore other specialties in the second half of the placement.

Ophthalmology at Hôpital Necker Enfants Malades

I stayed at Hôpital Necker for my second placement which also lasted 8 weeks. This was an excellent placement for many reasons. I started the placement at the same time as the French medical students on that placement so we were all new in the team. Fortunately, there was no *astreinte* for medical students in this service. However, you could choose to do 'garde' at Hotel Dieu which is a shift for which you get paid. They were very friendly and we all got along. Although, I had to get up earlier as we had to be in at 8.00, it was not as hard as I thought it would be. We had teachings organized in

the mornings and on Wednesday we attended the surgical meeting. At the meeting, we had to prepare and present cases scheduled for surgery the following week. I learnt a lot at the meeting just by listening to the discussion among doctors. As medical students, we are also required to make a PowerPoint presentation of a clinical case and sit an examination during the course of the placement. However, you may not have to sit the exam as your placement is shorter than the French medical students. Each medical student is paired with an interne (specialist registrar) for a month. I was with an intern in her final year of specialization who gave me informal teachings throughout clinics which are always busy. I got the opportunity to go to theatre and see a range of surgeries on children (strabismus, cataract and glaucoma). Adult patients had their operations at Cochin Hospital, so the internes had to assist surgery there on some days. Like in the last placement, I also saw rare conditions that were fascinating to learn about. Some of which I did not know existed. It was one of the placements I chose and am happy to have been allocated ophthalmology at Necker hospital. The new chef de service is really keen on teaching and was pleased to have an Erasmus student in her team. I would recommend this placement if you want some exposure of ophthalmology because you will learn a lot about paediatric ophthalmology. You will also interact with patients and examine them in clinics which will help improve language and clinical skills. In ophthalmology, the slit lamp and the indirect ophthalmoscopy are essential tools for the examination of a patient. It takes time before one can easily visualize the optic nerve and macula using them but with practice it eventually becomes easier.

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

The hierarchy in the French health service is completely different to that found in the UK. Each service consists of a chef de service, the head of the department who is responsible for the running of the service and the quality of care provided. Under the chef, there are praticiens hospitalier who are fully qualified specialist doctors. Before securing a job as a praticien hospitalier, one have to work in a clinical post for 2 years after specialisation. There is no distinction between the junior doctors and registrars in

France as there is no foundation programme as in the UK. In the final year of medical school, students sit a national examination that will determine what specialty they are eligible to enter. They are all ranked according to their performance and the top candidates have a better chance of getting a specialty of their choice. The competition is therefore fierce such that most medical students attend private lessons twice a week during the evening. Specialist training is slightly shorter in France than in the UK but the medical course takes 6 years. The French medical students are required to learn significantly more in depth than what is expected from us. They have written examinations that seem to take place twice a trimester. It was interesting to learn that OSCE or practical examination was not common in France. The lack of communication training in the French medical training was quite obvious on placement. Doctors are quite paternalistic in their approach and will tell patients what they should do. This difference was quite surprising because of the training we have received to always take in consideration the patient's ideas, concerns and expectations in order to help the patient to make a decision. I have also noticed that doctors will discuss the disease of a patient to medical students in front of the patient as if the latter was not in the room. This did not seem to bother patients at all. I believe that they are accustomed to this practice. You will be glad to know that the dress code for medical students is casual unlike in the UK. Even doctors wear casual clothes in the Hospital. However, a white coat is compulsory for both medical students and doctors.

One of the things that amazed me was the nurses' ability to take blood in France. They routinely did all venipunctures for blood test without ever asking doctors for help. The doctor simply has to order a test and the nurse would take the sample.

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?

The European exchange programme is by far the richest experience I had as a student. It is also a great preparation for foundation programme because I fully integrated the medical team while on both placements and had well defined role. This is not always possible as a medical student in the UK because the duration of placements tends to be shorter and we do not have any duties to carry in the medical team. Before the

placement, I did not have difficulty speaking French since I learnt it from an early age. However, I rarely spoke the language so it was a nice change to switch to French. Being on placement for 4 months in France further developed my medical French owing to the constant exposure in teachings and meetings.

The privilege to live in a beautiful city with its culture for 4 months as a medical student is a chance that not many students in the UK will have. It is an experience that will stay for the rest of my life. I strongly believe that learning medicine in a different system has developed my thoughts on health service outside of the NHS as well as appreciating the differences between the UK and France. The methods of practicing medicine may be different for various reasons (culture, society and tradition) but it does not mean that there is a right or wrong way. Each approach comes with its pros and cons. Graduating with European studies may not give any advantage for foundation programme but for specialist programme, the panel may question you on the subject for your interview. It will help you stand out from other candidates because of the uniqueness of this programme and the experience you have acquired. Moreover, being able to speak another language is an advantage if you are interested to work in global organisations such as WHO. Having spent 4 months in Paris, I have to say that it is tempting to return at some point in the future, possibly for fellowship training.

Useful contacts at Paris Descartes University

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