

European Studies Report

Graduating year 2014



Erasmus Location: Lyon, France

Why Choose European Option?

Choosing the European option may appear a little mad at first. You will be frequently asked the same questions by friends, family members and colleagues; “Isn’t studying medicine hard enough?” “When are you going to use French?” and “Is that even a real degree?” At times, like me, you may even ask yourself the same questions. Especially when you have to drag yourself to a two-hour French lesson on a Wednesday night, in the pouring rain, after a long day in hospital. However, I feel that before embarking on this *lengthy* report, it is important for me to give you my whole-hearted assurances that the European option is the best choice I made at medical school.

I have often thought that medicine is a fairly insular degree. Whilst your friends are still sleeping in halls recovering from the night before, you will have already been up for hours studying, dissecting, or simply trying to navigate your way through Greater Manchester to get to your GP. Once you reach your clinical years, you are expected to take on the responsibilities of a near full-time job, whilst still making time to do PBL cases and revision. This is not say, in the least, that medicine isn’t rewarding, but there were often times during my degree where I envied the normal university life that was going on around me. Through studying French, I got to take a break from medicine by learning about something different. We covered a range of subjects including French history, culture, politics, and current affairs and of course the language itself. I also met some of the most interesting and entertaining medical students I have encountered in Manchester. I’m not sure whether this was just down to luck or whether it was because we were all mad enough to study French, but it meant that I never regretted the time I invested in the classes.

I chose to study French because I love to travel. The European Option provides certain opportunities that a normal medical degree can't offer. For instance, you get to take the DALF diploma, which certifies that your competence in French is sufficient to work there. This means that if you're short on cash in the summer and don't want to get a summer job in England, you can go to France instead. You can also do an SSC in France, which is an amazing opportunity and meant that I got to spend a month in Paris working in A&E during my fourth year. Also, through the Anglo-French Medical Society, the students in our class were given the opportunity to present case reports at an international conference in London and afterwards we were treated to a dinner at the House of Lords. But best of all, Manchester offers you the chance to do a mini elective (STEP) in your final year. Although, I chose not to do this because I had just done a Masters, through the French that I studied at medical school I was able to organize a 2-month elective in Rwanda during my summer holidays after second year.

Whilst these are all excellent reasons to choose the European option, the reason I would recommend the European Option is because it gives you an opportunity to do something that no other UK medical school can offer; an Erasmus. Throughout my degree I dreaded my Erasmus, thinking that I'd be missing out on a real adventure somewhere far more exotic than France. How wrong was I? I wish I'd known sooner how much I would love my time in Lyon, 4 months just isn't enough!

Living and working in Lyon

Part 1- a survival guide to French Bureaucracy

I had been warned that there would be a hefty pile of administrative tasks to greet me upon my arrival in Lyon, but I don't think I could have anticipated quite how much form filling and travelling it would entail. This was predominately because I had been assigned to Lyon Est; students assigned to the Lyon Sud have to deal with a fraction of the paperwork, but they also have to travel further for their placements. On day one, another medical student and I presented ourselves, bright and early, to the head office for Erasmus students at the charmingly named "Rockefeller" Building. Unfortunately for us, the man in charge at Lyon Est is notorious amongst both French and Erasmus students for being a lover of rules and regulations. Normally, in order to be accepted onto the medical Erasmus you must have proof of vaccinations and student-work insurance. At Lyon Sud it is sufficient to present a list of vaccinations from occupational health and MDU or MPS insurance for electives. In Lyon Est you must have your vaccinations confirmed by an occupational health doctor and you need to purchase French student-work insurance before starting. These were two seemingly simple tasks, which inevitably turned into a wild goose chase through the banlieus of Lyon. My first piece of advice is to not take any of it too seriously. If you can laugh at the ridiculousness of it all, you'll get through it.

On day 2 we set off in search of the occupational health building, with the directions from the "man in charge" in hand. Unbeknownst to us, there is actually an occupational health department in the Rockefeller building itself. Some how they failed to mention this to us, so my second piece of advice would be to go in search of that department before setting off to the outskirts of Lyon. Unfortunately, we had been given the wrong directions for the occupational health centre. This meant that we ended up taking a bus across Lyon and then a second bus another 40 minutes outside of Lyon. Thankfully, we were saved by Google maps, and after a second bus back into town, and hours walk, we managed to find the location of the elusive

occupational health building. However, of course it was lunchtime in France, which meant that we had to wait a further hour or so before anyone was available. When we finally met the occupational health doctor she was fairly bemused to see us, particularly because all our documents were in English, but she happily signed us off and sent us back to Rockefeller.

On day 3 we headed to get our student-work insurance and although we failed to obtain the insurance itself, we learnt a useful new phrase, particularly enamored by French administration staff; “fermé exceptionnellement le x de x”, which means that the office or business is closed on a specific date. However, given the amount of times you will see this sign in France you may begin to wonder if the office/business is ever open. On day 4 we successfully managed to obtain student-work insurance. It was a fairly simple procedure and cost approximately 16 euros. Next up was the purple form. Don't be disheartened if you don't understand what most of the boxes mean, we only managed to fill in about 20% of the form ourselves and then needed the other 80% explained to us. The form is similar to the one we have to fill in for student finance England, so the majority of the form doesn't actually apply to Erasmus students. Due to processing time we didn't get our student cards until the following week, but we were all set up and ready for stage the following day. Four days is a reasonable time to get everything sorted in but be prepared that it may take up to a week, particularly if you have to sort out student accommodation.

Part 2- Les stages



Stage 1- Pneumologie (EFR), Hôpital Croix Rousse, working hours: 9h to 16h

This stage was misnamed “pneumologie” (respiratory medicine). It's actually called “le service d'explorations fonctionnelles respiratoires”. However I failed to see the subtle distinction between the two departments before starting. This meant that I managed to end up working in the wrong department for the first four days before anyone even realised I wasn't meant to be there! The EFR placement was,

comparatively, my least favourite placement during the Erasmus. This was because it was neither useful nor particularly interesting clinically. However, it happened to be very well placed in my stay because my French was pretty rusty and there wasn't much to do in the department except to talk to patients and students, which meant that it was a good opportunity to gain confidence in French.

The department is used as a sort-of outpatients lung function assessment laboratory for patients with respiratory disorders and those awaiting transplants. The lab technicians carry out the majority of the workload and therefore the role of externs is fairly limited. My role was to take ABGs, perform 6 minute walking tests and to note down O2 sats and blood pressure results for patients training in the cardio rehab room. Thankfully, I had a really nice group of French medical students working with me so I got a lot of time to practice my conversational French. Otherwise I suspect I would have been bored witless by the placement. I think the only reason the medical school in Lyon can get away with offering a placement with such little clinical benefit is because French students, unlike English students, are paid to do their placements. This means that in the EFR department they get treated like employees rather than students and therefore are obliged to carry out endless menial tasks. The team is, however, very welcoming. They ate together daily in the cafeteria and regularly made special three course lunches for the whole team. As part of the placement you are expected to give a 20-minute presentation. I gave mine on sarcoidosis as it's a fairly interesting condition from a lung function perspective because the patient's can present with both restrictive and obstructive lung disease, as well as a reduced diffusing capacity. Overall, I would probably not recommend this placement unless you really want to spend 6 weeks doing ABG training....

Stage 2- Hepato-gastroentérologie, Hôpital Edouard Herriot (HEH), 8h30 -16h30

I really enjoyed my hepato-gastro placement and thoroughly recommend it to anyone with an interest in the specialty. HEH is the biggest hospital in Lyon; it's sub-divided into several different specialist hospitals. The hepato-gastro department specialises in genetic and onco-genetic digestive medicine and is a clinical research centre for endoscopic interventions. There was only one other medical student working on my ward, which meant that we had lots to do, but learnt a lot. By the end of the placement, it felt like we'd become a useful part of the team. Each morning we would carry out a ward round with the two interns to check on the patient's progress and to determine which patients were ready to go home. Several of our patients required ascitic taps or drains, so the internes trained us how to do them and we carried them out on an almost daily basis. I'd never carried out an ascitic drain before so this was a really useful practical experience that I hadn't been expecting. In addition to the ward rounds, there was a weekly teaching session given by Pr. Chayvialle. During these sessions the externs would present cases from the previous week and the professor would shape the lesson around the case. Do not be surprised if he asks you to present more than one case or asks you to translate complicated medical terms into English. I think he just has a bit of a soft spot for Manchester students.

At lunchtime we would all eat together, which is a French ritual that I wish I could bring back to England with me. It's so refreshing to take a break with your colleagues. Even if it meant that we had to stay later, when we got back to work I always felt I had lot more energy than I'd had in the morning. In the afternoons our responsibility as medical students was to clerk in the new patients. This was quite a daunting task for me at first because it involved carrying out a full history and examination and then writing up my findings in the patients' notes. Thankfully, the team was understanding and only gave me one or two patients to clerk in each day.

They would also always help me out with my language and would work through my errors with me after I'd written my notes. Equally, I was very lucky that the patient's were so lovely with me. Although some of them did find it a little odd that they were only getting to see a foreign medical student. A word of caution, as far faux pas' go, I would advise you to learn the pronunciation difference between "cou", which means neck, and "cul", which means arse hole, before you go...

It's difficult to say whether someone else would have the same good experiences as I did on this placement. My team was a lot of fun, but the interns and externs change all the time. From a purely learning perspective, I think this stage is great for both medicine and French. Also, good or bad, you never get bored because there's so much to do!

Stage 3- Chirurgie générale et digestive et de la transplation hépatique et intestinale, Hôpital Croix Rousse, working hours 7h15 to 16h30-17h

General surgery at the Croix Rousse has the potential to be a really excellent placement. I loved this stage, but I think that experiences will vary considerably depending on which team of interns you get and how many other medical students you're with. Luckily, I started my placement near the end of the first semester for the interns. This meant that they were all comfortable with each other and the department and therefore were really welcoming. There was also only one other medical student and she happened to be one of my closest friends from the Erasmus group, so I had a really funny time on this placement. I think it helped that my French had improved a lot by this stage, because I found surgery one of the hardest specialties to do as a foreigner. The surgeons speak really quickly whilst wearing surgical masks and they often use very specific French surgical vocabulary mixed in with a lot of slang ("argot"). If you were to pick this placement I would try to select it as the last placement, because otherwise I think it's quite easy to feel lost.

My experience of surgery in France was comically stereotypical of the macho, old-school surgery that you're warned about in medical school. This was amplified by the fact that the only women working in the department were the nurses and the two foreign medical students, but I would not have been surprised if the interns had taken a leaf out of "the Todd's" playbook before starting their internship. Nevertheless, it's a fantastic opportunity to see a whole range of really interesting surgical procedures. During my time there, I scrubbed in almost everyday and got to assist in all sorts of different "-ectomys," including right hemi-colectomys, sigmoidectomys, hepatectomys, total gastrectomys, cystectomys, adrenalectomys and bilateral oophorectomys. I also got trained to do the job of a scrub nurse, which meant that I learnt all the names for the surgical instruments and could play a useful role in theatre. Every Tuesday morning one of the retired professors comes in to give some teaching on anatomy and pathophysiology. These sessions were really well done and not to be missed, although they could be a little hilarious at times. For instance, one day in order to demonstrate the location of inguinal hernias the professor decided the best way to teach would be by using himself as an example. I'd never done general surgery before, and considering that it's going to be my first F1 job, the placement was a really valuable experience in preparation for starting work.

Contrasting medical cultures (Frogs legs vs. Roast beef)

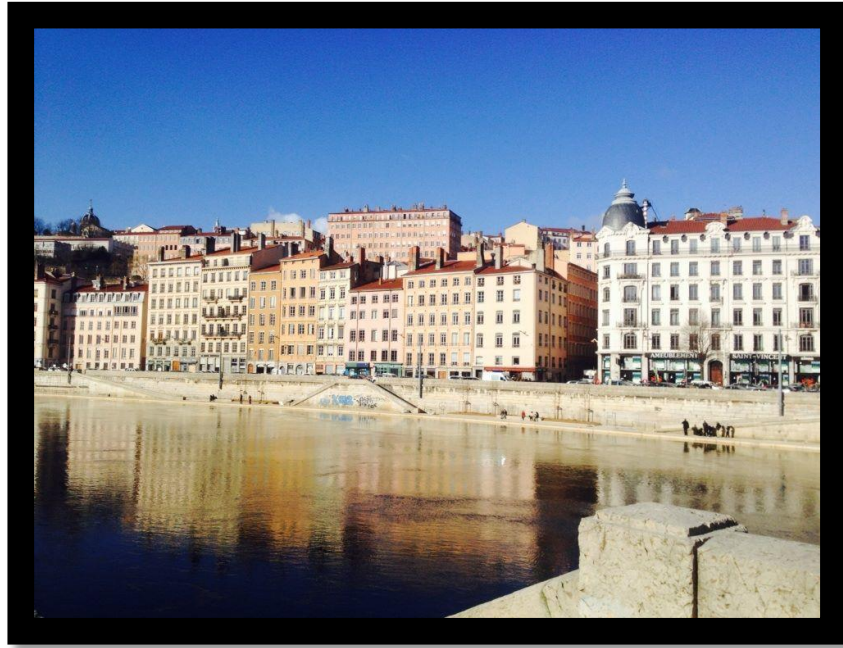
From a patient's perspective I see very little difference in the standard of clinical care provided in France and England. We have access to the same examinations, procedures and medications and there appears to be an equal amount of successes

and down failings in both systems. In the French system, I noticed certain differences that may be related to differences in culture. For instance, the French doctors often order a full bill of health, “un bilan de santé”, when investigating a patient with a newly diagnosed disease. These are quite expensive exams because they involve multiple imaging techniques and invasive procedures such as bronchoscopy. I wasn't entirely sure that they were always necessary but the patient's seemed pleased to be receiving a full host of examinations. Equally, I noticed that the French are much more comfortable about discussing sensitive subjects, such as bowel movements and sexual histories, than the English. They also appear less concerned about undressing in front of a doctor. Perhaps this says something about English sensibilities rather than anything about the French, or perhaps simply different societies expect different things from their medical practitioners. For instance, lab coats are unheard of in England, whereas you would look absolutely absurd wearing a suit in a hospital in France.

Although I love France and loved being a medical student in France, I have no real desire to be a doctor in France. I think the system is fine if you're French, but in comparison to England they have a lot harder time and far fewer choices. For instance, all of the medical students in France sit one national exam in sixth year called the “Concours”. The score from this exam is then used to create a national ranking system that decides the specialties and cities you can apply for. The students can only sit the exam once, which means that their entire career is based on a single exam. If you do poorly in the exam then the only position you can obtain is a GP post in the rural countryside, whereas if you do really well you can become a surgeon in Paris. Throughout the 4 to 6 year internship, the interns are paid approximately minimum wage. It seems slightly depressing to me that even after 10 years of training, the French interns earn only slightly more than a Macdonald's salary. I think the system works well in France because it is fair. Everyone has the same chances and career choices are based on an individual's academic merits rather than their ability to perform well in an interview. I don't think the system would work for me because I am not entirely decided about what specialty I want to do. This may be because I have been trained in an English system, perhaps if I'd have only ever known a French one I'd have been perfectly happy in it

Part 3- Why choose Lyon?

I chose Lyon on a whim. Like pretty much everyone else I spoke to, I knew absolutely nothing about it. I wasn't even really sure where it was in France, somewhere in the middle? My theory is that the Lyonnais intend for Lyon to be kept that way; a hidden jewel in the heart of France. There is a firmly held rivalry between Parisians and the Lyonnais as to which is the greatest city in France. Whilst I have always found Paris rather showy and a little snooty, Lyon, to me, is like everything I dreamed Paris would be but wasn't. The city is unquestionably beautiful and yet manages to have all the charm of Paris without being so self-aware. As you can see, it only took 4 months in Lyon for me to take the rivalry onboard myself! My born and bred lyonnaise landlady and coloc often tells stories of the secret societies that exist in Lyon. For instance, in the area I lived in, La Croix Rousse, which is the historical centre of Lyon, there are hundreds of secret walkways, “les traboules”, that wind clandestine escape routes down the hill to the banks of the Saone. These walkways were originally used by the silk-weavers of Lyon's busy silk industry, who fought a bloody revolution for a fair silk trade around the time of the French Revolution. They were later used in the Second World War as secret getaway routes for the resistance during the Nazi occupation.



The city is loosely divided into three major territories; the main working hub of the city, where you will find the wonderful Parc de la tête d'Or, *presqu'île*, which features an excellent shopping district and a great selection of bars and restaurants, and *vieux Lyon*, which is a UNESCO heritage site and is famous for its winding alleyways and layers of pastel coloured buildings. Two rivers course through the city, the Rhone and the Saone, meeting at the south of the city in the confluence. To the northwest of the city there are two hills, the rust-coloured hill (la Croix Rousse) and the white hill, which is where the stunning, cake-decoration-like Basilique of Fourvière can be found. I would need an entire second report to write about my experiences in Lyon so instead I'm going to give a run down of my top things to do.

- **Have picnics in the park....** my favourite trip was to take the metro down to the Confluence, pick up a picnic at Carrefour, rent a VeloV (a Boris bike) and cycle with my friends down the banks of the Rhone to enjoy a picnic in the sunshine at Parc de la tête d'Or. Whilst you're there don't forget to cycle through the free zoo to say hello to the Giraffes
- **Eat out...** After all, Lyon is the gastronomic centre of France, it'd be rude not to. My top pick would be **L'épicerie** (2 Rue de la Monnaie, 69002), a diner-come-café that does traditional, home-style, 1950s French cooking. It's inexpensive and always bustling. Try the toasted three cheese tartines, and their delicious selection of home-made tarts (blueberry was my favourite)
- **Have lots of nights out....** *Les Berthom* (2 Place Ennemond Fousseret, 69005) has a great selection of IPA and fruit beers and is situated right on the banks of the Saone, *Les Valseuses* (1 Rue Chappet, 69001) is great for live music, dancing and has a good selection of Rums, *Johnny Walsh's* (56 Rue Saint-Georges, 69005) is also good for live music and dancing, and its weekly open-mic night is a good mid-week night out, *Bec de Jazz* (19 Rue Burdeau, 69001), stays open till 6am without an entrance fee, the music is a bit like Revolver in Manchester and the décor is like a boho 1960s French apartment.
- **Take the Erasmus French classes...** just to meet other Erasmus students, they were the best friends we made in Lyon
- **Spend a lazy afternoon** on the banks of the Saone or the Rhone with friends (playing jungle speed is optional, but strongly advised)

- **Make the climb up la Croix Rousse** on a sunday morning for the food market, you won't regret it.
- **Go skiing in the Alps...** there are lots of student package deals in February and March for cheap week-end trips; search on Facebook for Lyon student ski groups
- **Keep an eye out for SNCF train deals**, paired up with an **airbnb rental** you can have a fantastic weekend at the seaside for as little as 80 euros.

Lyon was one of the best trips I've ever had. The Erasmus is an incredible opportunity; you get to learn a language to a proficiency where you actually begin to think in the foreign language, you meet new friends from all over the world, you become a local in a foreign city and you get to celebrate the end of medical school, for four months, in style. The Erasmus has made me hungry for more travel. I don't want to stop at French, and with my Erasmus friends dotted all over Europe I don't have to. To my surprise, this experience has also nurtured a newfound interest in general surgery and so for the first time in medical school I have some idea of what I might like to do. I would recommend a European Option to anyone with a passion for languages, travel and a sense of adventure. Like me, you might just find that the benefits of the EO are so much more than you'd ever expected.

