

European Option Report

Placement in Lyon, France February to May 2014

Why I chose to study on the European Studies programme

My childhood summer holidays were spent playing on a beach or campsite with friends and family in the south of France so from young age I became interested in French language, France as a country and also French food – I would happily volunteer to do the morning croissant run and could eat French baguettes all day. When looking for a university I tried to find one that would incorporate some kind of French experience into medicine and when I found the European studies programme at Manchester it was exactly the kind of thing I was looking for. It was hard to find UK universities that let medical students do 6m / 12m Erasmus placements and I thought that the medical French lessons that come as part of the European studies programme sounded like a good idea (usually with Erasmus placements and medicine language provision is somewhere between limited and non-existent). I was so keen to carry on my French at university that I put Manchester number one on my UCAS form despite having vowed that I would steer well clear of PBL-heavy courses!

After success in my A levels and interview for medical school I spent the first few months of my gap year in Nantes, NW France as an au-pair. I managed to find an amazing family and spent 4 months improving my French and learning more about the French culture and nurturing the idea that someday I would like to live in France.

Throughout medical school and the European Option programme I took every available experience to spend time in France completing two SSCs abroad in 3rd and 4th year and spending time working as an au pair in 2 summers. I can't emphasise enough how useful SSCs and other time spent in France are to prepare for the 5th year placement. I learnt huge amounts of medical French that I hadn't learnt in lessons like how to take a history and present your findings to doctors. I also discovered the world of commercial drug names which for some reason the French still insist on using. Other benefits of SSCs abroad are being able to pick your topic (I did paediatrics and infectious diseases – both placements which are highly popular in Manchester) and get out of Manchester for a bit of a holiday... There is more sun in Montpellier in June/July and you definitely can't ski in Manchester in April however there is plenty of snow in the mountains around Grenoble.

Living in Lyon

Lyon is now my favourite place in France! Lyon's location was what made me choose it originally... it's in the south of France so the weather is generally a lot better than in the UK and it's also not too far from the Alps and I am a massive fan of skiing. Not wanting to sound like a travel agent but Lyon is within easy reach of lots of ski resorts, Italy, Geneva, Marseille and the cote d'Azur, Paris (2-3 hours by train) and lots of other great cities in the south east of France (Grenoble, Annecy etc).

Lyon itself is a great city. It's big but not too big or daunting to get to know in 4 months, there are lots of students and young people, people are friendly, there are lots of parks and green spaces so that sometimes you forget you are in the middle of a big city and there are also 2 rivers running through the centre. The quays run along the side of the river Rhone and there are bars, restaurants, clubs, and when the sun is out they are full of people running, cycling, skateboarding, roller skating, having picnics or just simply enjoying the day. The weather while I was in Lyon was great too, when I arrived in February it was cold (as expected) but it hardly ever rains and there is far more often sun than grey skies. The last couple of weeks I was there the weather

beautiful. Lyon is also a great city if you are into outdoors activities – close proximity to the mountains for snow sports in winter and walking, mountain biking, climbing etc in spring/summer, you can run for miles along the river in Lyon, there is an amazing climbing wall which used to be the biggest in Europe but has now been outdone by a wall in Germany. The French are very much into outdoor activities and there are so many things to do. For skiing, try companies like skimania (or type journee ski Lyon into Google for others) that organise cheap day, weekend and 3-4 day trips to the mountains.

Another great thing about Lyon is the transport system; 4 metro lines, 5 tram lines and an extensive bus system that is reliable and smart which means that it never takes you very long to get from a to b. There are also thousands 'boris bikes' that you pick up and drop off at your will around and across the city – a year's subscription is only 25€ (+ even cheaper if you have a monthly bus/tam/metro pass!). I lived in the Lyon 3eme which was a really good place to be – central and convenient to get almost anywhere. And the bus to hospital was a 1 min walk from my door.

Finding somewhere to live

Finding somewhere (good) to live is one of the hardest and most stressful things about the year 5 placement, especially when you leave so soon after finals and don't have much time to look. I wanted to avoid university accommodation for a number of reasons; it is often full of international students (unlike halls in the UK) so therefore limited chance to meet other French students; it is often v small and v basic and you have to provide your own cooking utensils (pots, pans, plates, cutlery etc) which ends up being expensive. I love to cook so this was a big issue for me. I really wanted the experience of living with other students which I had done for my two previous SSCs in France. Finding a place to live for 4 months is a bit tricky considering lots of places want someone for the year or at least 6 months but there are however lots of options. In my opinion the best site to use is 'leboncoin' because it's free and you can get in touch with people directly. The downside is that a lot of people put their ads up last minute so it's hard to arrange far in advance and it's usually sublets i.e. potentially it could all fall through last minute... (but this has never happened to me so don't be put off). Important things to ask about when trying to find somewhere to live is whether you need a French guarantor and how you are going to pay rent / deposit (cash is by far the easiest as you can only write cheques / do free bank transfers if you have a French bank account). In terms of rent – in Lyon the average is between 350-450€ a month – unless you find something really, really nice then maybe a bit more. There is also the option for students to get money towards their rent from the CAF which takes a long time and a lot of fuss (for example opening a French bank account) but worth it as you can get up to 100€ a month. You can only get CAF money if you have an official rent contract, so it doesn't work for sub lets. Other good places to look for accommodation are appartager.com (you have to pay to be able to contact people directly but it's not very much so probably worth it, this is the website I used to find SSC accommodation), also it's worth joining the Lyon Erasmus group on facebook as lots of people advertise their rooms on there or you can post an ad. There are also other specific groups on facebook for students looking for accommodation – type in collocation Lyon into the search bar and it will come up with a few groups.

Getting to Lyon

I got the coach from London Victoria with eurolines which was 80€ return and having already been on university ski trips the thought of 15 hours on a coach didn't faze me that much. The reason I got the coach was because it was a lot easier to take more stuff with me and a lot cheaper – I arrived in winter and left in spring / summer and so needed quite a variety of clothes, and took out all my ski stuff which took up quite a lot of space.

If you are ever travelling between Lyon and the airport there is the 'Rhône express' which is a rip off so look for 'GoAirport', a company which runs minibus shuttles to and from the airport for half the price or apparently you can get there on the local buses which are even cheaper.

Life as a medical student in Lyon (and France in general)

If you haven't been to France for SSCs before then you will quickly see that there is a big difference between medical school in France and the UK. One of the first questions you will be asked is if there is a 'concours' at the end of the 1st year of medicine in England (the answer is no...) In France, everyone that wants to can start medicine after passing the relevant bachelaurat (bac). This means that there are masses of students in the 1st year of medicine, sometimes as many as 1500+. At the end of the first year, the student all sit an exam and the students who get the highest marks are allowed to carry on into 2nd year – depending on the number of places available which varies from around 200-400 like in the UK. So it's highly competitive and not at all uncommon for people to do 1st year 2 or even 3 times. Everyone loves talking about the concours at the end of the 1st year and how tough it is so be prepared to explain how the system in the UK works and discuss the pros and cons of each system.

Another big difference is that medical school in France is 6 years and at the end students choose a speciality then do an 'internat' which is like foundation training but focused towards the speciality which lasts between 3-5 years. The internes do 6 month posts (a post is called a semester) and in my experience have a lot more responsibility and work at a more senior level than F1s in the UK. For example they can discharge patients, make a lot more decisions regarding treatment and care and do a lot more of the day to day ward work. On cardiology wards in Lyon the F1s even do heart echos on the wards!

There is also a national concours (national finals exams) at the end of the 6th year of medical school which determines what you do and where you end up for your internat. There are about 8000 medical students graduating each year in France and the highest placed students get their first pick and then they work down the list. Things like cardiology, A&E, anaesthetics etc are very popular so you need a good score. Also be prepared to describe how foundation training works, and the system for allocating students to their F1/2 jobs in the UK including the SJT and FPAS ranking etc. I found the SJT quite hard to describe at first but after about the 4th time had got quite a good explanation covered – almost every French medical student and doctor who you meet will ask you about this, it gets a bit tedious after about the 10th time!

Another massive difference between medical students in France and England is the role of students on placement. In France, students are paid and have to work shifts e.g. evenings, weekends and nights, sometimes they are even 'on-call' for 24 hours. Because of the fact they are paid and the way hospitals work in France, medical students (or externes) are primarily there to work and do certain jobs, rather than to learn. Most of the students see their learning as work they do outside of hospital in their free time (which they don't have much of). Also, French medical student placements are rarely linked to their curriculum which means that they could end up on paediatrics having never been taught anything about paediatrics. This makes it hard to link up knowledge with clinical experience. For these 2 reasons, I think our training at Manchester is far better. There are however advantages to the way the French system works though; for example, medical student have a lot more responsibility and are expected (rather than encouraged) to do a lot more whilst on placement. If you are placed somewhere like A&E, MAU or SAU then it is the medicals students who clerk in every patient that arrives (as long as it's not a resus case). This means that as a student you take the history, examine the patient, decide on any imaging that needs to be done, decide on initial investigations and depending on the scenario even start the management such as administering O₂, nebulisers, cleaning and stitching cuts etc. It is often then the internes who you present your histories, examinations and management plans to. It is then internes (F1s!) who decide where the patient needs to go, if they need to be hospitalised,

discharged or need to see a more senior doctor. In this way, medical students get a lot of hands on experience but not much supervision and often not much feedback. If there are things you are unsure about (examination, skills, need for imaging etc) the culture for medical students is a lot more 'it's my job so i'll have to try' rather than 'i'm not sure about this so i'll go and ask for help'.

My placements in Lyon

1. ENT surgery with Prof. Disant at Hopital Eduard Herriot

My first placement in France was in ENT surgery and my supervisor was a plastic surgeon who spent a lot of his time doing nose jobs, reconstructive surgery (children with ear malformations) and removing BCCs. I started at 8 on surgery days, then left when the list was finished (2-3pm) and spent the other mornings in clinics. There are a wide range of clinics to go to – ENT, plastic surgery, head and neck cancer, throat clinic etc. You can also follow the internes round the wards (which I didn't get around to). For me it was an interesting placement, not too time consuming apart from the early starts and everyone was really friendly. There were 5 other students also attached to ENT who I saw a bit and lots of students doing a BSc in audiology and hearing aids and implants (a degree that only exists alone in France). The language was difficult for me as it was quite technical and my knowledge of ENT in English is somewhat lacking, let alone in French. It's pretty tricky to understand the technicalities of ear surgery when you are not scrubbed up, the surgeon is looking the other way, talking through a mask and using words you have never heard before! I bought a French ENT revision guide for medical students which was really helpful.

2. Paediatric A&E at Hopital Femme Mere Enfant

I really enjoyed this placement but it was hard work. I had to do 10 hour days (but only 35 hours a week) so I spent a lot of time in the hospital at the start then had some days off to go skiing and spend with friends. There are different parts of the A&E department:

- Walk in clinic for people who can't get an appointment with their GP / paediatrician: lots of coughs, colds, diarrhoea and vomiting, ear infections etc
- Surgical admissions: sprains, fractures, cuts (chance to do stitching), babies/toddlers who have fallen on their heads, suspected appendicitis etc
- Medical admissions: asthma, bronchiolitis, suspected meningitis, DKA etc
- Soins continus: in between A&E and the wards for children that need closer monitoring but aren't ill enough for HDU
- UHCD: like soins continus but the children are less unwell

If you are in the walk-in clinic or medical or surgical admissions you spend the entire day clerking in the children which is fantastic clinical experience. The medical students and doctors change on almost a daily basis as they work in shifts on a rota but there were a few people that I ended up with for a few days at different points during the 6 weeks so I got to know them a bit. Great for getting UCExs signed off!

3. Cardiology – Unite 60 at Hopital Louis Pradel

This was my most enjoyable placement mainly due to the other doctors and students who were working there who were great. In contrast to the paediatrics I spent every day with the same students and internes so got to know them better. I worked 9 – 6pm every day (+ one afternoon a week off) and the ward was only open during the week and was for patients with known heart problems coming in for planned investigations e.g. elderly patients with aortic stenosis coming in for a pre-TAVI workup or patients with IHD for coronary

angiograms +/- stenting. It was also the regional centre for infective endocarditis so there were lots of patients who had just been diagnosed or were coming in for investigations at the end of their treatment. During the day we clerked in the admissions, did ECGs (lots of practice to get good at ECGs), spent time requesting investigations, following up blood results (not very interesting) but also spent time watching TAVIs, transoesophageal and transthoracic echos, and coronary angiograms. There were times when there wasn't a lot to do and times when we were doing boring admin stuff but on the whole it was a very enjoyable placement.

What I got out of my 5th year placement

Language

My French was quite good before I went to France but I feel like I definitely improved and I am now a lot more comfortable using medical language in a hospital setting. I didn't do French lessons but feel like this would have probably been a good idea to improve my grammar as I intercalated after 4th year therefore it had been almost 2 years since I had done any French lessons. I also made lots of effort to not spend time with other English people and try and make friends with French people (or when I was with other international students to try and speak French). This was hard at times as when people know you are English they all want to practice their English but if you reply in French they will soon get the hint! My flatmates were French and at the end most of my friends were French (or French speaking Italians).

Inter-cultural understanding

During my time in France I definitely got a better understanding of the health care system in France and what it is like to work as a medical student and doctor in France. Despite having previously done SSCs in France they were too short to really appreciate the differences and spending 4 months on placement was therefore a lot more informative. This was the longest time I had ever spent in France and I was also able to better appreciate French culture and day to day life in Lyon.

Ideas and future plans

I have always been interested in the idea of maybe, at some point in the future, possibly going to live and work in France as a doctor (but wasn't 100% sure). When I set off on my final European option placement I thought that it would either make or break this idea... and having spent an amazing 4 months in Lyon I definitely want to go back there to work, at least for a few months to see what it's like and how it compares to working in the UK. I haven't found out how easy it will be or how well it works with foundation or ST training (I'm planning to do obs and gynae). I'd ideally like to spend 6 months working in Lyon after F2 and then decide if I want to stay. I'm working in Severn for F1 and F2 and there is the possibility to do F2 abroad so this is also an option too although I think I would prefer to go to France after completing my F2 training.