

European Option Report

Lyon, France February – May 2014

Why choose European Option?

The European Option programme was a deciding factor for me when choosing between medical schools. I had debated between studying Medicine or Modern Languages at university, and this course seemed like the perfect compromise.

I initially found the level of French relatively easy, having studied French at A2 level. However, later, through lack of hard or consistent work, my competences steadily deteriorated and I found myself having to work quite hard to prepare for the DALF. This is definitely something to be aware of – you do not get into trouble for failing to complete any homework or not giving your all in classes, and consequently it's easy to push French lower down your list of priorities.

The one area that I found did significantly improve was my speaking. This was probably my weakest of the 4 leaving school so this may explain it to a degree. But the classes strongly encouraged oral participation, plus there are several opportunities to do placements in France. I did 2 SSCs abroad – Paediatric A&E (*Urgences*) in Paris with Professor Mercier and his team, and Paediatric Neurology in Marseille with Professor Chabrol's. These were both valuable experiences in terms of improving my French, working in a different healthcare system, discovering new cities and cultures. Also, it isn't easy to get the SSC (or now PEP) that you want in Manchester, with lots of students competing for similar ones. Whereas by doing it in France, I could organise placements (*stages*) in the specialties I wanted, in the cities that I wanted, and in the teams of leading experts in their fields.

StEP

I also took advantage of the chance to do a StEP during Block 1 of my Final year. I went to the Philippines to work with a NGO delivering maternal, reproductive and paediatric health services to slum communities. Here I was leading clinics, giving public health talks and delivering babies, amongst many other things! It is an experience that has definitely opened other doors and developed interests which I have been exploring since (particularly in reproductive health). Although it took me a little longer to settle in to Final year on my return, I don't believe that going away had any detrimental impact on preparing for Finals. The only problem I did have was trying to persuade my base hospital to let me attend the teaching sessions that I missed from the Christie block (sign-ups for skills, prescribing, specialty teaching etc). The lack of synergy between the EO and medical programmes meant

that neither side was very sympathetic to the other. I was repeatedly told that I “shouldn’t have gone away” which seemed grossly unfair when it is an opportunity presented by the medical school as part of a course they promote. Finally, I was able to attend most of what I asked to, but this is something to bear in mind and try to sort out beforehand.

Living in Lyon

I have no regrets about choosing Lyon for my Final year placement. It is a beautiful city with distinctly different areas: Vieux Lyon – the charming old town lined with narrow cobbled streets and full of typical French shops and cafes sitting at the foot of Fourvière and its basilica; Croix-Rousse – the old silk-making district with tall thin houses and steep steps which now houses the city’s bohemian residents (*les bobos*); the East bank contains the city’s commercial district as well as the majority of the universities and hospitals, and the lovely Parc de la Tête d’Or. The two rivers, the Rhone and the Saone, enclose the heart of the city – the Presqu’île, and flow south until meeting at Confluence, an area that used to be made up of factories and dockland but is now being developed to something comparable to Salford Quays.

Transport

It is much smaller than Paris making it much easier and quicker to get around. Once the very cold weather had passed, I walked almost everywhere – especially as most journeys involved walking along the beautiful and buzzy river bank. Other transport options include the metro, buses, trams, Uber and Vélo’v (like Boris Bikes or Vélib). It’s worth investing in the monthly travel passes (student ones are €28.80), at least for the colder months. You have to go to one of the desks in a metro station to get one initially – armed with a passport photo and student card – but from thenceforth you can top them up at any machine. This is a top tip as the queues are usually very long!

Getting to and from Lyon I found at times to be more difficult. Easyjet offers very reasonable flights to London Gatwick and Luton. However, there are few direct flights to Manchester, with the alternative being a very expensive connection through Brussels. Getting to other seemingly straightforward cities could also be a pain, such as Berlin, Rome, Lisbon (these were some places I had planned to visit!). Trains can also be shockingly expensive – most notably to Paris, where a direct 2-hour train costs around €200 if it isn’t booked 3 months in advance. A way round this is to use the site ouigo.fr which offers cheaper tickets to more inconvenient stations outside of the city centres, or to take a bus which can be very cheap and taken overnight. IDBUS and Eurolines are two of such companies. Places which are very

accessible on a lower budget, via bus or train, are Barcelona, Marseille, Geneva, Montpellier, Strasbourg and Bordeaux, Milan and Turin amongst others. It's worth shopping around to find the best deal.

People and Culture

Thanks to the huge student population, there are plenty of other young people around and always lots of different things going on. People tend to be very approachable and friendly, and often they will come and start speaking to you (not in a weird creepy way!). The Erasmus community is very active – it is a good idea to join the Facebook group where people are constantly posting events, as well as other useful information.

You can buy a Pass Culture for €16 which is definitely worth it if you fancy sampling some of Lyon's cultural scene. One pass gives you 4 tickets which you can use to attend shows from a long list of institutions, including the opera house, several theatres, the Maison de la Danse. It also gives you a discount for a Nuits Sonores ticket – a music festival in May which is a series of Day and Night parties hosted by reputable DJs (this year's hosts were Ben Klock, John Talabot, Jamie XX and Marcel Dettman). You need a cheque to buy the Pass, which can be a real bore – I asked my landlady for one in exchange for cash.

Eating and Drinking

Lyon is famous for its food and the best way to sample the local cuisine is by going to a *bouchon*. These are traditional restaurants which have met certain criteria and offer regional delicacies. These are often very meat-heavy dishes, often involving brains or intestines, and so may not appeal to some! They are usually not cheap, especially the more famous ones. You can normally find helpful information on which ones are recommended online.

If you don't feel like French food for the whole 4 months, there are some great Italian restaurants: La Lambretta, Loloquoi and Comptoir à Mozzarella were three of my favourites. Burgers are a recent craze here too, and there are also lots of organic, healthy cafes.

As well as the standard French cafes on every street, the city has a number of good bars. These can be a bit pricey but have a cool vibe and delicious cocktails. These include L'Antiquaire, Le Monkey Club, Le Soda Bar, and Black Forest Society. My favourite place in Lyon is a wine bar in the 3rd, Mademoiselle Reve, which serves excellent wine and *planches* or cheese and meat. It is very reasonable and always packed – reserving in advance, even for a Tuesday night – is obligatory. It is inconveniently closed on weekends, and also on any Bank Holiday weekend (there are many in May).

Cost

Lyon is an expensive city; although cheaper than Paris, buying food never feels like a steal and they don't have any reduced sections or deals – something I have come to appreciate about the UK! Eating out is good value if you go at weekday lunchtimes or if you go for a *Menu*, but good value often means you are still paying around €20.

The Erasmus bursary is great, although disappears very quickly! And you can apply for money from the French government with the CAF. I did not do this as I was subletting, and also didn't want to open a French bank account. It is a predictably laborious process involving many forms and certificates – but if you can be bothered I have no doubt it is helpful to have that extra cash.

Working in Lyon

Admin pre and on arrival

We were sent seemingly endless administrative forms, starting a whole year before the elective. They are all quite lengthy, in French, and quite repetitive. They are, however, all required by Claude Bernard University and it is best to deal with each one as it comes in – most had imminent deadlines, and also to avoid forgetting any. We received a number of emails during the Finals period, some of which inevitably weren't dealt with. As a result, four out of the five of us arrived at the medical faculty on the first day without any of the relevant paper work. The list is long and includes several photocopies of ID, proof of health insurance, student-work insurance (for which you need to go to a SMERRA office and pay €16), amongst other things. Collecting these various items meant there was a delay in starting our first placements.

When it comes to choosing placements, the process isn't very clear and we all interpreted it differently. Consequently, most of us were dissatisfied with at least one of our placements and had to use much persuasion to swap to another once we were in Lyon. Despite what the forms say, you are able to pick any specialties you want – even if they do not appear to be listed. And therefore it is a valuable opportunity to gain experience in either a specialty you are considering as a future career, which you may or may not have had to chance to do in Manchester, or to try a completely new specialty that you may never do again.

Stage 1: Dermatology (Pr Faure, HEH)

My first placement in Dermatology was clinic-based, led by *internes* and overseen by one of the two Consultants (*Chefs du service*). There were lots of medical students (*externes*) which was great for practising French and meeting people, and also meant there was lots of teaching. Professeur Faure is a very keen teacher, constantly testing students during clinics

and also leading a presentation-based teaching session on Thursday mornings. If ever there were patients with very typical presentations, or rare skin pathologies, he would get all the medical students in, usually to the patient's amusement. He also is a passionate anglophile and has an impressive knowledge of the history of the English language. I was embarrassingly shown up at times for not knowing the history of certain words!

The placement could be rather repetitive, but the very manageable hours of 9am – 12pm and 2pm – 4pm, plus Thursday and Friday afternoons off, helped me ease my way back into work mode following Finals. It also gave opportunities to get as much or as little involved as one liked in participating in a consultation, whilst always maintaining a level of learning through being there and listening.

Stage 2: Haematology (Pr Salles, Lyon-Sud)

This second placement was based at Lyon-Sud, an enormous hospital site located South of the city. The commute on public transport requires taking a metro to the end of the line, followed by a bus. Compared to my previous 15-minute commute, this was much less convenient. However, it was very straightforward and manageable, and there was normally a bus waiting to leave the metro station in the morning. The commute home sometimes required more of a wait for the bus, but as I was never in a huge hurry, this was never a problem. One enjoyable aspect was that I read lots of books! They are planning on extending the metro line all the way to the hospital, however this probably won't be in place for a few years.

Lyon-Sud itself is a maze – leave plenty of time on the first day of a placement as locating the right building, and then the department within the building, can take up to an hour.

I didn't particularly enjoy my placement in Haematology. The ward I was based on was mostly for Lymphomas or occasionally Myelomas, meaning it was very specialist. The patients were all receiving chemotherapy and/or stem cell transplantation. Most were known to the department and coming in for treatment of a relapse. Therefore, aside from the initial screening tests and administering the chemotherapy, there wasn't much interesting stuff to do. I spent most of the day trying desperately to fill my time usefully (or un-usefully) and was relieved when the placement came to an end. Medical students were treated like FY1s but only doing very uninteresting administrative jobs for the sole interne.

A very positive aspect of it was that externes were on a rota, working one week in two. These entire weeks off gave me time to travel – I went to Barcelona and Annecy – and also meant I could go home for a week over Easter.

Stage 3: Obstetrics & Gynaecology (Pr Golfier, Lyon-Sud)

This was my favourite placement. There were 40 of us externes yet the department was huge and provided ample opportunities for learning and carrying out practical skills. The department is superbly managed by Pr Golfier's secretary, who provided me with a stack of documents on my first day detailing my timetable, giving various contact details, teaching sessions, and a booklet with skills to get signed off. I was assigned a supervisor who I met with a few times during the placement to discuss my progress and who signed me off at the end.

I spent a week in 6 different parts of the department, e.g. Maternité, Pathologie de la Grossesse, Service de gynéco conventionnelle, Bloc opératoire, plus a week in each of Obstetric clinics and Gynae clinics. I also did a 24-hour on-call (*la garde*) – quite an experience! This was the opportunity to watch and help with deliveries, and definitely worthwhile whilst being completely exhausting.

I highly recommend this placement. Everyone was lovely and keen to teach and get students involved, including the midwives!

Educational Supervisor Assessment Forms

Getting these signed could be a bit of a nightmare. They aren't designed for the European Option placements and consequently lead to a lot of confusion for the French supervisors. I never even met my Supervisor on one placement, making the form a bit of a farce. I also got one signed on my iPad but then struggled to get the supervisor to validate it on Medlea. It's best to speak to their secretary, especially if you don't get much contact time with the Chef during your placement. They are often much more successful at reaching the Chefs. An alternative is to get one of the internes or the middle-grade doctors fill out the form and ask the secretary to sign it off on the Chef's behalf.

France vs UK

I noticed a number of differences between the French and British medical systems, including the role of medical students. In contrast to the UK, where clinical experience is to enhance a student's learning and therefore effort is made to engage and interest students. Where this isn't possible, students are generally told to leave and study/go home. In France, medical students act almost as FY1s – they take on numerous jobs, many menial such as arranging tests and appointments, writing out prescriptions (to be signed by an interne), sorting patient notes (*dossiers*) etc. This does vary a little with placements – some offer more teaching than

others. Some also require students to stay until the end of the day, even if all the jobs are done, whereas on others you can leave once everything is sorted.

The doctor-patient relationship is much more paternalistic in France. I get the impression this is slowly evolving to become more like the patient-led approach in the UK, although it is still far off. I have noticed some benefits to the French approach, for example, it is much more efficient both time-wise and in terms of minimising investigations. However, I have witnessed instances where doctors have spoken very insensitively to patients and I have found these very uncomfortable.

Confidentiality is also regarded quite differently – it isn't really regarded at all! I have read GP referral letters discussing details of a patient's spouse totally unrelated to the reason for referral. Patient details are never hidden for case presentations or other teaching purposes, and I have seen several students and doctors go home still carrying the daily list of patients on the ward.

Conclusion

I have immensely enjoyed my time in Lyon. It has been an interesting and fun experience with regard to both working and living in a different country. I frequently appreciated the fact that I was away, not quite on holiday but nearly! – rather than continuing in Manchester. My French definitely has improved, and although I didn't find my placements particularly helpful regarding preparing for FY1, I imagine they have been more so than being on a StEP elsewhere would!