

## Reflection on my time in France

### Why did I choose to Study on the European Option Programme?:

I was very keen to study on the European Option Programme. In fact, it was one of the reasons that attracted me to Manchester Medical School in the first place and it was certainly a factor in deciding finally to choose Manchester University over other offers that I had received for university places. I think that there were four main reasons that I was so keen to study on the European Option Programme. Firstly, as I had done French A Level at school, I didn't want to stop after sixth form as I knew that I would gradually forget most of what I had spent the last seven years learning and it would all have amounted to a waste of time. I know that if you do not continually practise a language then it can be forgotten very quickly, and I was very keen to avoid this happening. Secondly, I have always hoped to work abroad in the future perhaps in international development or humanitarian relief for an agency such as MSF. I know that for this kind of work foreign languages, particularly French as it is widely spoken in North and parts of Eastern Africa, are seen very favourably, and are sometimes a necessary requirement. I know that it will be a big boost to my CV in the future if I am able to practise medicine in French as well as in English. Thirdly, I thought that continuing my French studies would be a nice break from Medicine and continue to provide a slightly more artistic outlet. I came into medicine via Pre Medical entry having studied all arts and humanities subjects at A Level in school, and I was very conscious that the transition to studying just Medicine would be a big one; I had hoped that continuing to study French would allow me to balance my interests better. Finally, I love to travel. I have already taken numerous gap years and spent every available summer holiday exploring the world. By choosing to take part in the European Option Programme, I knew I was increasing my chances to spend time abroad. Not only can one choose to do a mini STEP in final year on top of the four month fifth year placement in the country of your chosen language, it is also possible to spend up to seven weeks (four weeks in third year and a further three weeks in fourth year) of SSC placements abroad. These are opportunities that are just not possible if you choose to study the standard MBChB medical course.

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> To be entirely honest, I found the first four years of European Option difficult, often boring, and at times, annoying. It felt as if my time was already full with Medicine, societies and my social life. I found it difficult to find time to dedicate any work to French, often failing to do the set homework and frequently missing classes. This only increased when I started clinical years and classes were held in the evening. I would be tired and hungry after a day in hospital and my concentration in French classes was often very poor. I nearly stopped my participation in the European Option Programme twice; once voluntarily because I felt like I couldn't handle it any longer, and once because I was threatened with being kicked off the programme due to my attendance. Consequently I got very little out of these four years. My French did not only not improve, it got worse. On leaving school I could hold up a conversation quite fluidly in French. By the end of fourth year I could barely string a sentence together. This was made worse by two years of interrupting my studies, once for intercalating and once for a year in employment, where I failed to continue studying French. As a consequence of my rapidly decreasing language skills, I lacked enough confidence in my language abilities to do an SSC in France. I also felt that this was not very well supported by the medical school and was not only a massive hassle to organise (particularly as SSCs tend to be after exams when one is obviously busy revising rather than trying to organise placements, accommodation and transport) but also far too expensive for me as I was on a tight budget, despite having a part time job throughout my time at university.

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> In general, this failure to improve in French was my entirely my own fault. However I would say that in addition, two hours a week for 30 weeks a year is not sufficient to maintain a good level of proficiency, though I cannot see how anyone would have time for more. I also don't think there is

enough emphasis on oral skills in the European Option Programme. Practising speaking with other native English speakers did nothing to improve either my accent, grammar, vocabulary or listening skills. In hindsight I should have tried to find a language exchange partner whilst in my first four years so that I could practise French with a native speaker weekly. I think I lacked the confidence for this; I was always too embarrassed to speak French to anyone as I thought my level of French was too poor. I also hated the idea of meeting up with someone I didn't know just to chat for an hour; it seemed far too much like a blind date!

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> The long and the short of it is that I was due to arrive in France pretty much unable to speak French. I really didn't want to go. I was jealous of everyone going on a 'proper elective' and the thought of having to spend four months in a French hospital having no idea what was going on and with no friends, whilst the rest of the year was off having fun in exotic countries around the world was just not at all appealing. The one thing that made it vaguely ok was that, after much discussion and persuasion, I managed to swap my place in Paris for a place in Lyon. I don't know why Lyon appealed to me so much. Partly that I had heard it was the 'gastronomic capital' of Europe which is surely enough to attract anyone there, partly that it was close to the Alps and I love to ski, and partly because I did not want to go to Paris under any circumstances- it's too big and expensive, and on my visits there I always feel like Parisians have no time for foreigners trying to learn French, I often found people to be very impatient with me and my appalling language skills and would not respond to my feeble attempts at French conversation in English. I was obviously very upset when I found out that I originally had a placement in Paris and set about trying to transfer as soon as possible. I was incredibly relieved to finally get a place in Lyon and this was the one thing that made the thought of living in France for four months bearable.

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> Well I shouldn't have worried at all. I honestly had a wonderful time. I wish I could have stayed longer. I have made some amazing friends, gained about a stone from all the wonderful French food, learned to slack line, learned to rock climb, saw more of France than I ever had imagined, skied more than I thought would have been possible, became a connoisseur in Cotes du Rhone, got on first name terms with the baker at my local boulangerie, got an awesome sun tan. And on top of all that, learnt a bit of French.

#### An overview of my Experience of living and Working in France:

Once settled, Lyon is a very easy place to live. However, it is the settling in that can be slightly more stressful. The French love beurocracy. There is no getting around it. Learn this before you go, repeat it several times to yourself, and try to prepare yourself to not tear your hair out when you get asked for a form that you have already sent in three times, once by email, once via post (which incidentally, is not cheap) and once by blooming carrier pigeon. (That last one is a joke, although it would not surprise me....) The French also love to stamp things. This became more hilarious than annoying, but it is worth bearing in mind that you should always take the original and a paper copy of every document you could possibly need everywhere you go as someone, somewhere will want to stamp it.

Before we arrived, none of us had been given much information on what to expect. Only after sending a few emails did I get told where I needed to go on the first day and when. I didn't find out what hospital or specialty I would be at for my placements until just a few days before arriving in Lyon. Normally this wouldn't bother me too much, but Finals is a funny time and weird things happen to your brain so that tiny things become enormously stressful. Arranging to move to France

became one of these things. I basically put it off until the last possible minute and then had a meltdown. I would advise against this. However, I would advise to NOT ARRANGE YOUR ACCOMMODATION UNTIL YOU ARRIVE IN LYON. The internet is a wonderful thing, but it also hides scammers. Hundreds of them. A number of people I know fell foul of such scammers and lost deposits on what looked like beautiful city centre apartments that later turned out not to exist. Others turned up to find that what in the photos was a clean, recently renovated flat was in fact dark, dingy and full of mould. Of course, some people like to have some sort of certainty about what they are going to do. But I would strongly advise getting yourself a place on airbnb for the first week or two and then finding somewhere to live after you have arrived. This way you can really suss out the area, meet your potential landlord and housemates, and most importantly, verify that the house actually exists! There are plenty of websites that I would recommend: Leboncoin ([www.leboncoin.fr](http://www.leboncoin.fr)), Appartager ([www.appartager.com](http://www.appartager.com)) and Carte des Colocs ([www.lacartedescolocs.fr](http://www.lacartedescolocs.fr)). There are also many Facebook groups that you can search for where potential house shares are advertised. It is also worth joining the Lyon Erasmus Facebook group as many Erasmus students leave at the end of the first semester and are looking for another person to replace them - perfect for us!

I had imagined that starting the stage itself would be simple, everything would have been already set up by the Erasmus Coordinator and we would just arrive on the first day, be pointed in the right direction and then welcomed with open arms into our new French medical teams, oui? Non. Big non. It turns out there was a big long list of paperwork we were meant to have with us on the first day before we could start our stage. Yes, this is ON TOP of all of the paperwork that we had already sent in. Various bits of ID, photographs, evidence of this and that, and some mystery insurance from the SMERRA office that cost 30 euros and I still to this day have no idea what it was for, although combined with the Erasmus insurance, the University of Manchester Insurance and my own private Travel Insurance probably made me one of the most well insured people in all of France. It took a few days to accumulate all these different bits of information and evidence. Made worse by the fact that in France offices seem to close for lunch for anything between half an hour and three hours, and will sometimes also be sporadically closed on a Monday. Or a [Wednesday afternoon](#). Or in fact on any day they feel like it. Most also seem to lack websites, or if they do these do not include details of the 'fermee exceptionnelle'. When these documents were finally all in hand it turned out that actually we also had to arrange our stages ourselves- we were given the relevant email addresses, which wasn't all that useful as French secretaries are not all that keen on replying to poorly phrased requests from Medical students and so I found myself on my first day of my stage timidly wandering around the maze of Hopital Edouard Herriot trying to find the right place when no one could understand my poor pronunciation of 'Ophtalmologie.' When I finally located the right place, no one was expecting me. No one had a clue what I was meant to be doing or how long I was meant to be there for, or what hours I was meant to work or who I was meant to shadow, which was less than helpful as I was equally clueless. This was a recurring problem throughout the stages although does have the benefit (when you are a bit more settled and capable of speaking French) of allowing you to create your own stage around your own interests and time constraints.

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Another note on French bureaucracy is the CAF also known as the APL. This is basically housing benefits, which as students in France we are entitled to. However, only if you have a proper contract with a landlord or are in student accommodation (for example, you cannot get it if you spend the entire placement staying in an airbnb). It is quite a hefty sum of money and if you can be bothered with EVEN MORE paperwork than it can be worth it. However, of the three of us who applied for it in Lyon, only one has so far seen any money. I live in hope that mine will come through in the next few months. My advice would be to start as soon as you arrive in Lyon and clarify any questions with

your landlord the first time round to avoid a lot of toing and froing, and waiting in queues to have documents stamped.

## **The Stages**

### **Ophthalmologie, Hopital Edouard Herriot**

This was the least successful of all my placements during my time France. I was a bit nervous and shy (and as already described, rubbish at French) so it was basically impossible for me to use any initiative. The secretary on this placement was incredibly unhelpful and told me to spend all day every day watching the interns in the Urgencies (Ophthalmology A&E). This was not very exciting as watching someone else use a slit lamp is really pretty boring, unless you were the lucky student that got to be in the room with a camera attached to the slit lamp and then you could at least have a more interesting view than the back of an internes head. After a while I plucked up the courage to venture off into the depths of the ophthalmology department where I was able to see some pretty interesting surgeries and clinics with more senior members of staff. By week 3 I had found myself a friendly interne (who could also speak English - WIN!) who would actually explain things to me, showed me how to use the slit lamp and encouraged me to take histories from patients, which was far better than the other internes who rarely even acknowledged my presence. I did try not to take this personally as it seemed to be the same for the French medical students too.

### **Emergency Surgery, Hopital Edouard Herriot**

This placement was totally different to my first placement in France. Obviously my confidence and ability in French has improved since I first arrived, which helped enormously, but the placement itself was run very differently. The French medical students had to do two 'gardes' (on call) one of 12 hours and one of 24 hours, every ten days, including over the weekend. I was incredibly relieved when the Consultant said he didn't expect me to do the same! Instead I started at 7.30 each day and stayed until 4, or later if there was something interesting happening.

I find the system of gardes for medical students quite strange as often they spent the majority of time doing some work in the staff room or playing table football in the doctors mess. I much prefer the English system of shorter, yet far more productive days in hospital. Although I did become amazing at babyfoot.

The nature of an 'urgences' (A&E) placement in surgery means that often an entire day would pass with nothing to watch, whilst other days there would be multiple surgeries that I could scrub into.

Students on this placement were included much more in the team than in the first placement I did in France, and I was also included which gave me the confidence to ask questions and to volunteer to do things. I was able to get my suturing UPSA signed off, and as I took a number of histories and performed examinations on patients, I was also able to get a U-CEX signed off.

As many important research papers are not translated into French, it is very beneficial for French doctors to be able to speak English, a view that my consultant held very strongly. He therefore asked me to present a case in English to the department at one of the weekly meetings so that everyone could practise their English. This was quite daunting, but also made a nice change to be the one who could communicate fluently. I think it gave the other doctors and medical students a bit more insight

to how frustrating it is to not be able to communicate your thoughts as you'd wish, they were a lot more patient with me after that! Following this, one of the other consultants in the department asked me to translate a case report she is hoping to get published into English, I was very happy to oblige and consequently she has included me in the list of authors so I am hoping she will be successful in her publication.

### Infectious Diseases, Hopital de la Croix Rousse

This was by far my favourite placement since being in France. The facts that my language skills have improved, I have better understanding of the French health system and what is expected of the medical students here, and that I am interested in Infectious Diseases anyway, all combined to make this an interesting and rewarding placement.

I have spent some time in hospitals in Kenya and Tanzania, and have also done an infectious diseases placement in Egypt, however this is the first time that I have been able to see the treatment and care of infectious diseases in a western setting.

There were many aspects to the placement that I enjoyed. The variety of patients on the ward meant that ward rounds were always interesting and varied. Patients stayed long enough in the ward to be able to build up a good rapport, but not long enough to feel like you weren't achieving anything. Many patients, particularly those with TB, Hepatitis or HIV are then followed up in clinics for many years to come meaning the doctors often have long relationships with their patients which is an aspect I really like.

The response in patients was often very dramatic; I saw a number of patients admitted in a critical condition, who over the course of a few days or weeks returned to an amazing level of health. I found it inspiring to be able to see so clearly the positive impact you can have on someone's health.

There was also the added bonus that the hospital was less than five minutes' walk from my house, which made a massive change from the enormous trek across town to Hopital Edouard Herriot!

### Differences between French and English Systems

Although there are obviously many wonderful things about the French healthcare system, there are a number of events that have stood out in my mind since being here. The thing that they all have in common is that they are so contradictory to how I have learnt to do things in Manchester that I was shocked when I saw them happening.

The first is drinking wine at lunchtime. Obviously this is a French stereotype, however I could not believe my eyes when I walked into the doctors office at lunch time whilst on my surgical placement to find all the senior surgeons sitting down to a birthday lunch accompanied by many bottles of wine. In the UK 'A colleague drinking' was a regular practise SJT question. I know the protocols for if I suspect someone is drinking on the job; however we were never told what to do if the entire department is at it! It was by no means a regular sight, but it is something I have never come across at home. No one else batted an eyelid and so I did nothing to challenge it, but it made me grateful for the open system we have in England where anyone from any level should feel empowered to challenge poor practise.

Another event that shocked me whilst in France was when reading a referral letter written by a GP. It had all the usual information about the patients presenting complaint and medical history however, it then went on to also include a full medical history of the patients' wife, who was not being referred to the service and who had absolutely no significance to the patient's case. I was shocked to see all of this information present and would have been interested to know what the wife would have thought of all of her details being included in the referral letter. It is not the only time in France that I have witnessed a complete disregard for confidentiality. It is valued so highly in the UK, and rightly so. Patients entrust all sorts of private information to the doctors, on the unspoken condition that it will not be shared any further. I wonder if there is less of a culture of confidentiality that patients would find it harder to trust their doctors and would consequently avoid revealing facts that may be vital to provide good medical care.

Finally, the main thing that I found incredibly uncomfortable about being in a French hospital, and part of the reason I would never want to work here as doctor, is the total absence of communication skills. It was rare to see a doctor take the time to explain condition or a treatment to a patient. It was also rare that the doctors would be comforting or understanding, I saw a number of patients shouted at by their doctor. There are no communications skills teaching in France and no OCSE style examinations which are probably responsible for this.

French medical students have certain jobs that they are expected to get done each day (generally quite boring, menial tasks such as performing ECGs, arranging patient notes and calling the lab etc.) but it was quite nice having a purpose and feeling useful. Though I avoided using the telephone wherever possible for obvious reasons. However, despite having this role, it was quite difficult to adapt to being in a French hospital where there is less direct teaching. In fact sometimes there was no direct teaching. Medical students on my Ophthalmology placement sit in the corner in silence and watch, questions were not welcomed. In both other placements there was a one hour teaching session a week from the consultant. Outside of this, it very much depended upon the individual doctor. This is because the structure of their course is entirely different to ours, whilst from third year on we are supposedly entirely clinical, the French students spend six weeks having lectures and then six weeks on a clinical placement so there is not as much of a need for teaching during the actual placement.

### **What have I gained from this placement?**

#### **Linguistic Development**

I have certainly improved in French. Not as much as I had originally hoped, although this is mostly due to me choosing to socialise with other English students and other Erasmus students who were happier to speak English than French. Although my grammar and vocabulary haven't improved massively, and I am by no means at the stage of thinking in French. My confidence has soared and my listening skills have improved dramatically. On arriving in France I realised I had only ever really spoken French to other English people and it took a while to be able to keep up with native French speakers, however I have vastly improved at this now.

#### **Intercultural Understanding**

I love the French culture. I hadn't realised how different it was until I arrived in France, but even the tiny things such as buying my food in the market each week, going to the boulangerie for my

breakfast each morning and being outside all the time, were so pleasant and made my entire stay feel like a holiday. The other great thing about Erasmus is that I met people from all over Europe so it wasn't just French culture I was able to experience.

### Future Plans

I don't think this placement has dramatically changed any of my future plans except to confirm that I will not be coming to France to work as a Doctor. However I would be very keen to return to France, even to Lyon regularly and perhaps even for a long period of time to continue to improve my language skills as I know that I still have a long way to go and I don't want to lose all the progress I have made!

### Useful Contacts

Nadine Pitaud, the Erasmus Coordinator [pitaud.nadine@univ-lyon1.fr](mailto:pitaud.nadine@univ-lyon1.fr)

She is in the Rockefeller Building near Grange Blanche metro stop. Ground floor. Ask for directions at reception - this building is a maze.

Also ask her about the weekly French lessons for Erasmus medical students; it's a great way to make friends.

She also has the contact details if you want to join any sports teams whilst in Lyon.

[TCL.fr](http://TCL.fr) - this is like tfl but for Lyon. Very useful for planning on how to get around the city. Also definitely recommend buying a student TCL card - you can get unlimited travel in the city for just 27 euros a month (half the normal price)