

So you want to be a medical student in the UK (and you come from mainland Europe)?

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INTRODUCTION

So you're from mainland Europe and decided to become a doctor? Why not study at one of the UK universities? With centuries-long traditions and worldwide recognition, no encouragement should be necessary, however, coming from Poland, I was the only European student at QUB medical school in my year. Whether it is the legendary British weather or rising fees that drive foreign students away - either way, I hope this article gives a fair account of the differences between being a medical student in mainland Europe and in the UK.

GETTING IN

The process of getting into your dream degree course in Poland and in the UK certainly varies. There is no UCAS system and you need to apply for all universities separately. In the UK the major surprise to me was the importance of extra-curricular activities – were you an athlete at school? Were you involved in a volunteering project in Africa? In Poland no one would even think of being asked that. That is not to say students back there have no additional achievements, it is simply that those do not matter while applying for a medical school and you are judged exclusively on the basis of your educational achievements and, sometimes, entry exams. Another surprise for me was the interviews – Polish potential students are not subjected to the torture of sitting in front of a panel and being asked all sorts of questions - from the standard “so, why did you choose to become a doctor?” to being asked to interpret medical data.

FEES

Unlike many European countries, UK does not offer free higher education. That made me nervous for a bit, however I was quickly reassured – it was such a relief to find out I was entitled to not only tuition fee loan, but also maintenance loan. The amount of grants and scholarships available to students was also a positive surprise – very few of those are offered to Polish medical students.

COURSE STRUCTURE

While five years of medicine at Queen's weren't exactly a

breeze, I was really pleased with the course structure – the healthy mix of lectures, practicals, tutorials and seminars followed by the clinical phase. But you can forget about years of anatomy and biochemistry, where you are taught names of every single bone in the human body, or chemical formulas so lengthy that you can start writing in on one wall of the room and finish on another (true story, told by my dad who studied medicine at one of Polish universities many years ago). There is obviously still plenty of knowledge to be conveyed (to the contrary of what my Polish friends believe – frequently asking “is it true that medical courses in the UK are far easier?”) but rather doing it in a haphazard manner, different systems are covered in turns.

Two words that you will hear repeatedly throughout your time in a UK medical school are “communication” and “dignity”, words which I believe have nowhere near as much meaning in the European schools. The importance of communication skills is emphasised right from day one in the UK and the amount of communication skills workshops offered ensures that even if you're not a “people's person” you will be able to behave appropriately in all sorts of clinical scenarios. As for dignity – while doing my elective in one of the hospitals in my home country, I was surprised by how little attention was paid to one's privacy - exposing patients for a long time in front of others (since there were no curtains around beds). without consideration for their psychological comfort was a standard and something that you will be taught never to do in the UK.

STUDENT LIFE

But it is not just hard work, sweat and tears. While medical students around the world are well known to be a fun bunch, I was surprised by how rich and well organised student life is in the UK. In Poland there are certain clubs and societies within the university and medical school itself and once in a while there is a night out organised. Here however, there is a whole society dedicated to ensuring that medical students get their breaks from hard work.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

One thing you can be sure of here, is that in hard times you will not be left alone. I have heard my friends in Poland complain of having to chase their lecturers, or join the queue to the dean's secretary's office...here you will be assigned a personal tutor that you will meet regularly and that you can confide in or expect advice from. There is also a free counselling service available to all students .

CONCLUSION

So, from the account I gave above it seems that UK universities simply “do it better”. Of course, nothing is perfect and while there are a few things that could be tweaked here and there overall I am very happy with the experience of being a medical student in the UK. I feel well prepared for the job I am now doing and there was always a healthy balance of work to fun student life that I know for a fact is not as commonly experienced across other European countries – and isn't that the most important thing of all for a potential student?