

So you want to be an Erasmus Medical Student?

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INTRODUCTION

“I’m in Craigmavon for Paediatrics, where are you placed?” “Spain.” This unique response always raises eyebrows. Whilst the idea of taking medical electives across the world is engrained in every UK medical student’s mind, the concept of completing part of your medical degree on mainland Europe is often met with questions about your sanity. Whether it is the fear of assessment, the perceived difficulty of a language barrier or just the rarity of exchange programmes for medical students this international opportunity is often poorly understood and hence rarely sought by medical undergraduates.

WHAT IS ERASMUS?

ERASMUS or the *European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students* is a programme established by the European Union since 1987. Since its conception it has given 6 million students from across Europe the opportunity to spend part of their university career in another country whilst achieving credit for their degree at home. The ideals of the programme are to give students the chance to internationalise their degree, improve linguistic skills and form personal and professional networks across Europe. ERASMUS exchanges are usually considerably longer than medical electives (the shortest period being 3 months). Furthermore rather than paying your host institution (as with electives) you receive a generous grant from the E.U. to complete your ERASMUS exchange and live in your chosen country. These universal grants are organised by dedicated ERASMUS departments at your own university, making them incredibly more accessible than those available for electives.

WHAT ARE THE ERASMUS OPPORTUNITIES FOR A MEDICAL STUDENT?

With over 4000 institutions registered as ERASMUS hosts across Europe the opportunities are endless. However, your institution must have a formal agreement with the university you wish to visit. With medical courses this can be a tricky process and hence it is perhaps easier to work within the formal partnerships already set-up by your university.

Thankfully, medical schools who do have ERASMUS programmes seem to be expanding the range of options for their students; my own university, Queen’s University Belfast, has recently added two new locations.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Medicine is all about the art of communication. So what if your foreign linguistic skill does not expand beyond ordering a beverage? Fear not; as increasingly medical schools across Europe, particularly in Scandinavia, are conducting their full medical courses in English. This gives UK medical students the opportunity to participate in ERASMUS without a strong knowledge of the local language, though the benefits of even learning a basic level cannot be overemphasized.

If, like the author, you decide to blow the dust off the language textbooks the challenge is not as insurmountable as it may first appear. Firstly most universities offer night courses in main European languages, which can be useful preparation. Moreover it is truly remarkable when you are totally immersed in a language by working, socializing and just living in a foreign country how rapidly you can attain a level of fluency.

CHALLENGES OF AN ERASMUS PLACEMENT

As anyone who has ever worked in another country can confirm it can be a disorientating experience, not only are you dealing with a new system you are also dealing with very different cultural attitudes towards health and doctors. In Spain, for example, medical students have a very observational role whilst in Belgium students help run outpatient clinics. It takes a level of negotiation to ensure you get the clinical experience mandated by your university without going beyond your own limits and competencies. With varying techniques and clinical practice across the continent it can be difficult to know if what you are learning on your placement abroad completely corresponds to clinical practice in the UK. Furthermore returning home to sit exams and be compared to your peers who have received training in the UK can be a daunting and stressful experience.

BENEFITS OF AN ERASMUS PLACEMENT

The benefits of an ERASMUS placement can be split into three broad categories; cultural, professional and personal. Culturally there is always a benefit to living in a different country, it broadens your world view and ERASMUS in particular gives you the opportunity to build networks across the European continent. As technology makes our world smaller this ability to work with international partners is an increasingly needed skill. Professionally, like any opportunity to work in another healthcare system, the experience provides huge lessons to be learnt and brought home. From experiencing a paperless notes system in Germany to seeing a more insurance based health care system in the Netherlands it can give an insight into future opportunities and challenges for the NHS. Finally the experience drives personal development, allowing you to challenge yourself to become more independent, adaptable and confident.

CONCLUSION

An ERASMUS placement is a unique opportunity within medical school to internationalise your degree. Whilst there are many challenges they are very much outweighed by the benefits of the experience, including the newly made friends and memories. If you are a medical student, currently debating whether to seek out an ERASMUS opportunity, I personally couldn't recommend it enough. You won't regret it.