

Year Abroad 2022/23 End of Year Report

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Introduction

Hello. My year abroad was at an institution in Lyon called the ENS de Lyon. Of course, I'll say more about the ENS, and Lyon more generally, later, but first, let me start by explaining a little about me, my education up to now and why I wanted to do a year abroad.

In school, I studied French at GCSE and A Level and really enjoyed it. Had I not chosen to do maths at university, I almost certainly would've done French (probably with History). So, I've wanted to do a year abroad since I applied for my maths degree, largely to make up for the fact I'm not doing French.

On the whole, I would say that my year abroad started pretty badly, got better slowly until it peaked from about January until April, and that May was a little rough (although this was largely because most of my friends, all international students, left around the end of April/start of May, but I stayed until 1st June to take an exam in the computer science department – more on this later).

Timeline & Getting a French visa

Looking back, the YA timeline goes something like:

Term 1, 2nd year: apply within the Warwick maths department

Term 3, 2nd year: application for host university (this was a little time-consuming, particularly given it was right in the middle of revision for exams, but it's also completely necessary if you're going to go, so I suppose I can't give you much advice besides don't worry if you don't take your time over this, I never ever got the impression that my host uni, the ENS, was

screening applicants particularly carefully, so you can probably prioritise your exams, as far as I could tell)

Summer, end of 2nd year: get ready to go, specifically, **get a visa**, secure some accommodation, and get packing!

As **getting the visa** was by far the hardest task of any of the above, I was going to try to give you a short guide. Instead, having googled the process (just as a reminder), I'll just recommend the two links below:

<https://www.uk.campusfrance.org/how-to-get-your-student-visa-for-france>

<https://www.uk.campusfrance.org/system/files/medias/documents/2022-06/How%20to%20get%20your%20student%20visa%202022.pdf>

They're both from an organisation called Campus France (as far as I know, basically just a website designed to help foreign students with getting to France to study). The first gives a very useful guide on everything you do to get the visa; in particular, have a look at the three-step breakdown which I'll simply summarise now as:

Step1. Register with [Etudes en France](#)

Step2. Submit your visa application on the [France-Visas](#) platform

Step3. Book your appointment at the TLS Center "to deposit your biometrics."

My secret 'Step0.' would definitely be take notice of the lines just after "your biometrics", particularly "This whole process can last for up to 6 weeks"; genuinely, this process has the potential to take a full two months, so if you don't start soon after the end of your second-year exams (in week 9 of T3 for some people), then at best, you may end up getting to France late, and at worst, you'll never get there at all!

Without this advice, I made two big mistakes in applying for my visa: the first was I **wrongly** assumed, as an Erasmus student, I didn't need to register with EEF so this is what I said on my France-Visas application and I booked my appointment at the TLS Center.

Had I not realised with time to spare before this appointment that as a UK student, I **did** need to register with EEF, then my Visa application almost certainly would have been rejected! Fortunately, smelling a rat, I found the above pages, did my registration the day before my appointment at the TLSC and submitted a Campus France webform pleading for urgent help with getting my registration processed prior to this appointment. Very fortunately, they got back to me that same day saying it had been processed!

Now, actually, I tried to submit my EEF registration a full 5 days before my appointment at the TLSC but I had an issue whereby there was no option to register my placement at the correct host university! If this happens for you, simply submit a first submission of the webform I mentioned above and they'll tell you to submit your registration using a fake placement (I used *Institut Catholique de Lyon - Site de Lyon* instead of ENS de Lyon, for example) and that they'll correct this misinformation as soon as they receive it!

My second big mistake was getting confused about the length of time you need to have left on your passport when applying for the visa. For a year in France, you'll almost certainly need a year-long student visa, for which (if nothing's changed since 2022) you're going to need to have at least **6 months** left on your passport, counting from the **end of your proposed year abroad!** I.e, if you're applying for your visa in **July** of year **m**, then your proposed end date will be **31 July**, year **m+1**, so the absolute earliest possible end date you can have on your passport is **31 January**, year **m+2** (1.5 years down the road from application day)! Now, I completely understand this was very silly on my part, but it meant I spent the first half of July waiting to pick up my new passport, so I could apply for my visa, therefore the moral of this story is pay attention to the details, or (like me) you'll end up arriving in France 8—10 days later than you're asked to! (Although, to be fair to the ENS, they were really nice about it and in my opinion, it didn't really affect my YA experience – as ever, more to come on this in a moment)

Finally for this section, please accept my apologies that it is as long as it is; since getting a visa is still pretty new for British students after Brexit, I never really got much advice so I'm hoping anyone who's read this report will have a slightly easier ride than I did. To be fair to them, there was a meeting hosted by Warwick's student mobility department in Term 3 probably explaining most of what I've just said; unfortunately, in my year, it was the day before my Intro to Number Theory exam, so I got the date muddled and missed it, and there was no recording.

September and my thoughts on the ENS

Once you've done the TLS biometrics appointment, you must go home, and the visa will come in the post shortly thereafter. The ENS will probably ask you to arrive sometime in a three-day window in August, in my year it was the 23rd—25th.

Owing to the mistake I made with my passport, I was only able to fly out on the 2nd September, thankfully well in time for the start of classes on the 12th. I have no real advice for travelling other than try and fly to Lyon airport, as it's naturally the only one that is really nearby.

Recently, the EU asked me for some feedback on my integration with life at the ENS, as well as the support I received from it. Here is what I wrote (*italics*), interspersed with some more info/commentary:

Integration: Firstly, admittedly, I arrived at ENS de Lyon 8 days later than I was supposed to (02/09 instead of 25/08). However, as I was living with a fellow British student who was there for those 8 days, from what he told me, I do not feel that I missed much.

As I remember it, what my flatmate told me was that after arriving on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday, not much happened over the weekend, but from Monday to Thursday the following week, they were given semi-intensive French classes which were sort of semi-useful.

Certainly, one of the challenges I faced throughout my year abroad was the level of my French; after doing A Level French in Sixth Form and LL209 French 5 in my first year, the only French course running in my second year, LL__? French for Business 2, didn't really appeal to me and so I ended up taking a year off learning French. This showed when I got to France; I had forgotten lots of words I used to know, and my speaking was very disjointed.

To the ENS's credit, they have an amazing language centre! It starts a bit painfully as, on the Monday morning of those four days of classes my flatmate told me of (I was allowed to do this on the following Monday, 5th September), you complete both a reading/writing/listening/grammar test on a computer and conversation assessment interview, to assess your language levels in these skills

(in fact, I did the interview on Monday but the computer wouldn't let me log on to take that test, so after days of back and forth, over email and in person, eventually, they gave me a paper test and when I registered for my language classes the next week, they used that to assign me to the right group). However, once you've completed these placement tests, they have a wicked range of courses to choose from and the quality of the teaching is second-to-none.

*I say that integration at the ENS was poor mainly because throughout the year, and especially during the first ten days before classes started on 12/09, the school made practically **no effort** to put on events where I could meet fellow international students or even French native students who were open to meeting and befriending foreign students who had (at the time) very bad French and were struggling to communicate.*

*I recall that there was supposed to be one event on, in the garden one evening, but it rained, and the event was called off. Therefore, it took me many weeks to meet and make friends with any international students, by which time it was far too late to change my course choices, the consequence of this being I spent the semester doing very difficult courses, taught in a foreign language with which I had had little practice in the preceding year and where often I was one of at most **two** international students taking the course.*

Ok, I'm sorry this one sounds a little dramatic, but let me go through it. The first half says it all really; my biggest criticism of the ENS this year has been that there was basically no help to make friends when you arrive. I got on well with my British flatmate and my 3 French flatmates, but I found it hard to meet anyone outside the flat who wasn't an existing friend of one of these flatmates. This seemed to get better over the course of my YA (2022/23) (basically, there is an "international students' association," called ASSET, whom you can find on Instagram, on campus, and I think a new student committee takes over management of this between the semesters, in January, and this improved things in my year) but my experience of the start of the year was either I was out of the loop, or there really wasn't much of a loop to be out of in the first place.

The second paragraph really requires some context; previous exchange students from the WMI have talked in their reports of how the ENS is a "grande école", meaning the students take two (or three) years of undergraduate prep classes and a rigorous series of entrance exams to get in. Indeed, the ENS de Lyon is probably France's second—most prestigious maths department, beaten only by the original ENS of Rue d'Ulm, Paris. It's also worth

noting that all the maths they do at the ENS is very pure and the cohort size is much smaller, say about 50 students, with the same number attending Ulm. What I didn't realise before going to Lyon is that consequently, you're amongst 50 of probably the top 100—150 pure mathematicians of your year group in all of France, and so the classes are *hard*, mainly because of the amount of content you cover and how much there is to remember.

What's important here is that the British boy I was living with is a French student, so was in the history department at the ENS, and so the lack of opportunities to meet other international students before the start of classes meant that I only met another international student in the maths department in about the third week of classes! And when we did meet, coincidentally in a lecture of the undergraduate Complex Analysis course which we both ended up withdrawing from because it was too hard, I found out that whilst **my** other two maths courses were both also undergraduate courses, **his** other two maths courses were both **Master's** level courses. Hopefully, it is needless to say that there is great value in knowing other people in your classes, as then you'll have someone to sit, as well as work on weekly problems and assignments, with. And to add insult to injury, it turned out that the Master's courses at the ENS are arguably easier for an international student (than the undergrad ones), as they are taught in English and are nowhere near as intense as the undergraduate courses (yes, they rely on the undergraduate material but as it happens, you will have covered most of what you need to know for them in Warwick second year).

Integration with everyday life in the institution and particularly local students was only slightly better. As I said, there were certainly no events to facilitate this, although fortunately I got on well with my 3 French flatmates and, after a few weeks, I started to make some acquaintances in class.

Fortunately, there isn't much to add here, apart from I wanted to give a shoutout in this report to the Fanfare of the ENS, a sort of American-style brass marching band that the ENS has on campus. Just for context, I am a saxophone player and knew I would miss the Warwick Music Centre on my year abroad, so it was really nice to discover a big and friendly band, rehearsing on Thursday evenings. They lent me a saxophone as I never took my own with me and it was an amazing opportunity to get to rehearse with a Francophone band for the first time in my life. Being more American-style, it was also a slightly new style of music for me. If you too are a keen sax/brass/drums musician considering a year abroad in France, I saw different 'Fanfares' all over the place while I was there so I wouldn't worry about finding a band to join after you arrive, regardless of which host university you choose in whatever city.

Support from receiving institution: *Administrative support was often **disorganised and slow**. All the forms required printing and I had to complete lots of the same information multiple times over. Academic mentoring was satisfactory in a class context, but the courses were all very difficult and I would have appreciated more advice over **how to study, good resources to learn from**. (In some courses, this existed but wasn't written down so was very difficult to make use of as a foreign language speaker getting back up to speed during my first semester of study). I found that there was little support from student initiatives/organisations and/or help with personal needs and problems.*

Finally, again, there isn't much to add here. Without a doubt, if you're considering a YA in France, you will have heard about the often-frustrating inefficiencies in administration over there (a big thank you is due here to Kate Waller, Marco Schlichting and the WMI's UG Office, who were always understanding, speedy and helpful in signing the numerous documents etc. required by the ENS).

Once again, I'm sorry that this section has gone on a bit, and I'm sorry if I'm complaining quite a lot about the problems I encountered while abroad. I had good reasons for choosing the ENS for my YA: I liked the sound of studying at a GE, I thought it would be a good thing to be joining the institution at the same time as the native French students, I liked the sound of a small school, etc. And some of these things are advantages, but probably only to some people. So being completely honest, I probably wish I'd been studying at a different institution, probably one of France's many respected *universités*, but in no way should anyone take away from this report that I didn't enjoy my YA overall, because I did. I just wish I'd known to take a couple of Master's courses (in particular, Advanced Algebra and Advanced Geometry) in my first semester, and that the ENS was slightly better with admin!

What I enjoyed!

I'm very conscious at this point that this report has gone on plentifully long enough, but as the majority so far has been negatives, I'll try to conclude now with a brief section on everything I enjoyed about my YA, just to prove that hopefully, despite all the challenges you will almost inevitably face with going abroad, you should still have a great time.

1. My French now is wicked (for a maths student)!

Naturally, you get loads of opportunities, on a YA in Lyon, France, to speak French. I spoke it at home with my 3 French flatmates, all the classes I took---that's 1 maths, 2 CS, 3 French and 2 German for beginners that I validated, plus 50+ hours of maths lectures and problem classes I never took the exams for, and a French class I wasn't allowed to validate---were conducted entirely in French, I joined a band, La Fanfare, that is entirely Francophone, and I visited loads of places (lots of museums) where there was no English in sight 😊

2. I visited some amazing places!

Firstly, Lyon is awesome; I particularly liked la Basilique de Fourvière, Vieux Lyon, le Parc de la Tête d'Or, the Lugdunum Museum of Roman Life, Fourvière, le Mur des Canuts, le Musée des Confluences (free entry and only a 5min walk from the ENS!), la Place des Terreaux, la Cathédrale Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Lyon, le Centre d'Histoire de la Résistance et de la Déportation, le Musée d'Histoire de Lyon, le Grand Parc Miribel Jonage, and le Memorial National de la Prison de Montluc.

What's more, outside of Lyon, I visited the town of Vienne (south of Lyon), the medieval village of Pérouges, le Musée de l'Automobile d'Henri Malartre, the Alpine Lake town of Annecy (twice), I went on ski week with the Association Sportive to the Alps, Paris, Dijon,

Clermont-Ferrand (where I even climbed the very dormant volcano Puy de Dôme!), and Vichy.

3. Academically, I tried and learned loads that I never would have had I not done a YA!

For this, I'll just say let's look again at the courses I validated:

3 in French: 2 of these were the semester-long B2-level general courses, one was a B2/C1-level 'workshop' course, called 'Civilisation'. The general courses were taught by PhD students from the school's literature department, who were great, as were their materials and the way the courses mixed speaking, listening, reading, writing and grammar. Civilisation, in contrast, was taught by the lead French *enseignante*, Madame Deslauriers, herself a graduate of literature of the ENS, covered a wide range of aspects of French history and culture in its content, and still required all my speaking, listening, reading, and writing, skills.

2 in German: these were semester-long beginners A1-level classes. To learn a second foreign language in French was such a unique opportunity for me! It takes a couple of weeks to get used to seeing vocab lists where both columns are foreign languages, and the assessments even became quite complicated in the second semester, but these kinds of courses are completely do-able! Had I never left Warwick, I would never have learned any German at all, let alone developed my foundational French while doing it!

2 in CS: this was a huge opportunity for me! I would have loved to take CS2?? Algorithms in my second year but I didn't have the CATS. So, I was delighted to be able to take *INFO3101 Algorithmique 1* in my first semester at the ENS. As you'd expect, the course covered the different paradigms of (polynomial-time) algorithm design: divide and conquer, greedy algorithms, dynamic programming, etc., as well as how to analyse algorithms using big-O notation and some miscellaneous topics eg Union-Find and amortized analysis. We also went on to cover P vs NP and some simple NP problems, as well as some simple polynomial NP-approximation algorithms, which hopefully gives an idea of the amount of content in each of the ENS's 6 ECTS maths/CS courses.

The other CS course I took was really a maths course in disguise: INFO32?? Introduction to Logic. This was my favourite course of all the courses I tried at the ENS. Similarly to *Algorithmique*, it took me from knowing nothing at all about symbolic logic, through propositional logic, first-order predicate logic and natural deduction, to the compactness theorems, and both Gödel's *completeness*, and incompleteness theorems! We also covered some elementary logical set theory and an introduction to model theory, and I got a 19.5/20 on the homework!

Thanks for reading! If you have any more questions, I will be available for at least the next year on matthew.holden.1@warwick.ac.uk.