

# "When I discovered the French startup system, I was hooked!"



On 11 October, delegates from Station F spoke at Sciences Po to give students a glimpse of life inside the biggest start-up campus in the world – and the only one in Paris. Station F Director Roxanne Varza, an alumna of Sciences Po, discussed the richness of possibility for entrepreneurs starting out in one of the tech world's most underrated capital cities, as well as Station F's methods for reeling in the very best of them. We asked where her particular passion for the French entrepreneurial ecosystem came from and what role universities have to play in inspiring the founders of tomorrow's tech giants.

***You grew up in the Silicon Valley, what brought you to study at Sciences Po in the dual degree programme with LSE? How did your studies lead you to or impact your career choice?***

I got my undergraduate degree from UCLA in French literature. My family was so worried that I would never have a career. After all, what kind of job could I get? My dad thought I would be maybe a not-very-good French teacher, at best.

After UCLA I really wanted to work with France, so I got a job at Business France in San Francisco. Business France is the French Government's Economic Development Agency - I was to help Silicon Valley-based startups open offices in France. This job was very interesting but also incredibly difficult for someone in my situation. I was "selling" France as an American but with a very limited knowledge of the French market. I didn't feel particularly credible. When people would tell me "France is all strikes, nobody works, it's all 35-hour-work-weeks" I didn't really know if that was the reality or not.

And so I decided to do a Master's degree in France and see the reality for myself. I only applied to 1 programme - the dual degree at Sciences Po and LSE. I thought that if I wanted a career in international development, this was the best one to go with.

However, once I got to France and started the programme, I realized that I actually missed the startup ecosystem of Silicon Valley! And so I became heavily involved in the French startup ecosystem and I haven't stopped since.

***What made you come back to work in tech in France? What makes Paris exciting and/or particular as a global entrepreneurial hub?***

I always wanted to live and work in France - it has been a goal of mine for many years. However, I think when I discovered the French startup ecosystem, I was hooked. For me, the French ecosystem has always been so much more interesting than Silicon Valley.

In Silicon Valley, I felt the ecosystem was rather saturated and it is difficult to really make a mark. However, when I arrived in France, the ecosystem was so young and there was so much to build, I felt that I could have an impact - personally.

Also, I always found this ecosystem fascinating with the various challenges and somehow, I also found it more "sane" than the hardcore American work culture.

***What can universities specifically do to inspire students and help them develop their entrepreneurial ambitions?***

I think French universities have come a long way in the last 10 years (I moved to France in 2009). At the time, there weren't many

entrepreneurial programmes, only a few schools had incubators. Now all schools have incubators and entrepreneurship programmes. This is wonderful to see!

One thing that is very common in the US that is less common in France is for a student to work alongside his or her studies. When I was at Sciences Po and LSE I was the Editor of [TechCrunch France](#), I co-founded [StartHer](#) and I organized [Failcon France](#). It was the best time for me to get this experience because I could afford to take the risks and make mistakes while a student. I think this type of experience needs to be encouraged more.

***As a Sciences Po graduate and a woman at the head of the largest entrepreneurial hub in the world, what advice would you give to a female Sciences Po student who wants to start a career in tech?***

I give the same advice to men and women:

1 - Launch a project, ideally alongside your studies. I don't think everyone needs to launch a startup - but launching a project is a great way to gain experience and develop your network. When I was a student at Sciences Po, I launched my blog ([Techbaguette](#)), then an association (StartHer), then a conference (Failcon France), then a media (Tech.eu). I actually never launched a startup. But these experiences helped me to gain a lot of experience and exposure and made it much easier for me to find a job after my degree was over.

2 - Take advantage of your international experiences. I believe that moving to France provided opportunities for me that I would not have had in the US. My international network was very valuable in France and set me apart. I'm not encouraging everyone to move to a new country, but when you go abroad take the time to attend a conference, meet people, develop your network. It will help a lot.

3 - Learn a minimum of code. You don't have to become a full-blown developer. But it will help with all jobs - whether you work in tech or not.

***Is there anything you would like to add or share with the Sciences Po community?***

I'm hiring :) [jobs.stationf.co](https://jobs.stationf.co)

## More information

- [Sciences Po's own startup incubator](#)
- [Dual Degrees between Sciences Po and the London School of Economics \(LSE\)](#)
- [Discover Sciences Po's student associations](#)

Photo: Roxanne Varza  
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