

How to survive (and thrive in) your research stay abroad

 LILIANA FONSECA · TUESDAY, 20 MARCH 2018

Author: [Liliana Fonseca](#)

Reviewed by: [Maria Theresa Norn](#)

During the course of your academic research you will most likely spend some time working in institutions other than the one where you are enrolled. Varying from two weeks up to a year in length, research stays or secondments are an opportunity to immerse yourself in a different academic and/or professional environment, whilst benefitting from resources, data and personal connections that are difficult or costly to access from your home institution. Even though they bring many advantages, research stays can put a lot of pressure in what already is a time-constrained project. So, how to make the most of it?

Know why you're going

Before anything, you need to know the reason why a research stay is important to your research project in the first place. This is important in order to make the stay effective and worthwhile. Some objectives of a secondment can be access to data or fieldwork, engaging with a local network of academics, mentoring from 1-2 key people, quiet time to work on your data/writing, and many more. Either way, know exactly what you hope to gain first, and then...

Plan before-hand and schedule everything

A secondment is carried out with a purpose. You might be going to collect data on another case study or utilise particular facilities absent at your home institution. Whatever that goal is, make sure you plan your stay thoroughly before you go. This means booking meetings, rooms and/or interviews in advance, to make sure that you hit the ground running. As my research focuses on interview data, I found emailing everyone I wanted to meet at least two weeks before I arrived helped me make a quick progress on my case study.

Take advantage of the resources

There will be a panoply of resources available that you can benefit from at your host institution or near it. This can be something like a laboratory facility, conferences and seminars, and short-term courses in methods, languages or a particular useful subject to your research. It can also be a relevant academic you have been eager to meet. Whatever the case, make sure you look for these opportunities in preparation for your visit.

Engage with the locals

Closely related, you will have the opportunity to become a part of a new community. As with every new job, inserting yourself in a 'click' can be daunting, and no two research groups are, socially, the same. But the exciting prospect in this endeavour is exactly that. You will be able to meet people with different research subjects and methodological approaches which, for the commonly isolated PhD student, is greatly beneficial. Engaging will allow you to not just extend your personal and professional network, but also find collaboration opportunities. Moreover, getting to know a new place through the eyes of the 'locals' is one of the great goals of travelling, so make time not only to engage in professional networking but also social meet-ups and outings, cultural activities and the like. In the end, that's what makes a research stay an integral life experience.

Get advice, often

Wandering physically far should not be an excuse to elude your supervisor (or, note to supervisors, your PhD student!). It is important to keep the flow of communication with your main institution supervisor so that neither of you feels lost or left out. This means scheduling periodical calls and frequent emails. Meanwhile, make sure to find and/or communicate to an advisor or champion at the host institution of your research stay. It is important to have someone to greet and support you, give you feedback and help plan your stay, and to help open local doors (to people, activities, etc.) that you may not even know about.

Find your rhythm again

Lastly, a new (work)place implies adaptation. You will face a different environment, people, schedules, tasks and expectations. It is especially difficult considering the limited timeframe of a secondment, and trust me, time goes by really fast. So, schedule what you can. But don't stress over the unknown variables. Ultimately, a secondment or a research stay is a manner of exploration. If you find something didn't go quite as planned, just adapt and find your rhythm again.

And what do you think can make a research stay more productive and enjoyable? Please share your experiences and thoughts to continue the discussion!

Liliana Fonseca is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Early Stage Researcher in the project RUNIN (The Role of Universities in Innovation and Regional Development). She is a PhD student in Public Policy at the Universidade de Aveiro (Portugal), where she is conducting her research on the role of universities in innovation policy and practice. As part of her project, Liliana will be doing secondments at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain) and Universiteit Twente (The Netherlands).