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Country trends



An international start to a high-flying academic career

JUDITH KAMALSKI

One piece of advice regularly given to young researchers trying to move up the career ladder is to spend time doing research abroad, either within their graduate training or as a post-doc. However, in 2007, only 2.2% of US-born new science doctoral recipients “had definite plans to go abroad for work or study” (1). Apparently, research abroad is not popular with young American researchers.

My own experience in the Netherlands confirms this observation: many people stayed at the same university throughout their career, receiving their undergraduate and postgraduate training, and hoping to get tenure, without leaving town.

Broaden and improve your mind

One reason to work in a lab or team abroad is to learn different approaches to conducting research (1). Admittedly, this can be achieved by simply working at a different university within the same country but moving abroad is a further step, taking this experience to a whole new level. A different hierarchy, new language, alternative methodologies, unusual habits, strange working hours, particular writing styles, to mention but a few, all take some getting used to, and it is exactly this kind of flexibility that adds value to your CV.

HR representatives actively seek candidates with international experience, and the cross-cultural communication ability, analytical skills, appreciation of cultural contexts, adaptability to new circumstances and differences, developed worldview, independence and self-confidence this brings (2).

Moving abroad could also benefit your academic work. Scientific research has shown that the experience of living outside your home country and adapting to a new culture can enhance creative thinking (3). William Maddux says: “Knowing that experiences abroad are critical for creative output makes study abroad programs and job assignments in other countries that much more important, especially for people and companies that put a premium on creativity and innovation to stay competitive.” (4)

Meeting collaborative partners

Another reason to take part in research projects abroad is to promote international collaboration. The Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) says: “Science is a champion’s

league. [...] Holding the lead requires working together and searching out the competition.” (5) Contacts made during international research placements can lead to collaborations and co-publications in future studies (6).

Just like in many other professional careers, international experience can help make you more visible among other candidates and can present opportunities for collaboration that may never have occurred at your home university.

It is, however, vital to maintain communications and contact with colleagues in your target network, at the university where you would like to end up eventually. It is not only what you know but also who you know, so the most important thing you can do is to build and maintain your networks, at home and abroad.

Watch your profile

For researchers who do take the leap into new territories, it is worth keeping in mind that publishing under different affiliations could give you different author profiles in databases, which could affect future evaluations performed by others. This can be maintained in Scopus, for instance, by using the feedback button on the Author Details page.

Useful links:

Considering Reasons To Study Abroad for Dummies

References

- (1) Laursen, L. (2009) “The Ups and Downs of Doing a Postdoc in Europe”, *Science Career Magazine*.
- (2) Considering Reasons To Study Abroad for Dummies
- (3) Maddux, W.M. & Galinsky, D. (2009) “Cultural Borders and Mental Barriers: The Relationship Between Living Abroad and Creativity”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 96, No. 5.
- (4) Maddux, W.M. (2009) Living Outside the Box: New Evidence Shows Going Abroad Linked to Creativity, American Psychological Association (APA) Press Release.
- (5) Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), NWO seeks strong alliances worldwide.
- (6) Melin, G (2004) “Postdoc abroad: inherited scientific contacts or establishment of new networks?”, *Research Evaluation*, volume 13, number 2, pp. 95-102.