

Traveling abroad during your PhD

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This is a guest post from Radka Jersakova (@RadkaJersakova), who did her undergraduate degree in my lab and is now working on her PhD at the University of Leeds. Radka has previously written on this blog about [how to conduct online studies](#). Here she discusses the merits of travelling during your doctoral training.



I am writing this as I near the end of the second lab visit abroad of my PhD. While I know many students who like me have managed to acquire the 'visiting scholar' status on extended lab visits, the number is far smaller than I believe it should be. This is even though visiting other labs and collaborating with other researchers, having external input into the work you are doing and having an idea what others in your field are doing right now is invaluable. It doesn't matter if it is a visit of few weeks or few months; either way it is worth it and a lot easier to make happen than you would expect. Researchers are mostly very open to hosting and there is a lot of support and funding for such visits. It is a great learning experience and it makes academia seem smaller and friendlier. There are also the practical benefits such as having a travel grant on your CV, being able to show that you are capable of forging international collaborations and increasing the opportunity of knowing someone with post-doc funding.

The purpose of this post is to address the question of how one goes about organizing a visit of any length to another lab (ideally abroad although it doesn't have to be!). However, the motivation for writing anything on this topic at all is to encourage PhD students - especially at the beginning of their studies - to consider in what ways can they make the most of it and travelling is definitely one way to do that.

WHAT TO DO AND HOW LONG TO GO FOR

The obvious first step is deciding what would you like to get out of a visit to another lab. This can be as generic as 'networking' or as specific as learning a particular analysis method. Ideally a visit should involve a collaboration of some kind although whether the visit should be used to plan a project or to actually carry out the data collection and analysis is open to discussion. This will naturally determine how long the visit is. Ideally, you'd look for funding to finance the type of visit you have in mind but sometimes the funding sources available to you might shape - to an extent - how long a visit you undertake. Some of the funding opportunities outlined below are aimed at visits of 6 months or longer; others at 2-3 months and a few start at a couple of weeks. As such it is important to know from the start what options are available to you.

WHERE TO GO

Most commonly, students make use of their supervisor's network. This is by far the easiest way to organize a visit as it builds on collaborations that already exist. It is also the best way to identify a researcher with relevant experience to help you develop new ideas in the context of the topic of your thesis. As such, the first step is talking to your supervisor; they might already have someone in mind and can initiate the contact.

It is also possible there already is a researcher that you want to work with for an extended period. If you are going to a conference and they are going as well, try to talk to them there. You can contact them before the conference to suggest you meet to discuss your work with them. Having met them in person makes it much easier to talk to them about visiting their lab. If there isn't an opportunity to meet in person, it is also fine to email the researcher you are interested in working with and ask them whether this could be arranged.

FINDING FUNDING

There is more funding available for research visits than might seem at first. Below is a list of some useful starting places for researching funding options. Everyone's background is unique and the opportunities will vary accordingly.

- (i) Funding organizations: It is very likely the organization or research council funding your PhD also has funding for travel visits. What is more, they are probably very keen to fund such a visit. The Economic and Social Research council in the UK is a great example of this as they place great emphasis on international research links through their [Overseas Institutional Visits](#) scheme.
- (ii) Universities: There is a chance that the institution you want to visit has a 'visiting scholars' program that you can apply for to fund the visit. Similarly, your own institution might have 'travel abroad' schemes with funding for going abroad to an institution of your choice. Further, there are partnership networks between universities that also offer funding. An example is the [Worldwide Universities Network](#) which supports mobility for students and researchers between its partner institutions. It is best to ask your university or someone in the department whether you belong to one.
- (iii) National grants: Some countries have grants for their nationals to go on study visits - a great example is the [German Academic Exchange Service](#), which also offers a lot of support for international students to come to Germany. Similarly, France funds visits of 6-10 months to any of its institutions through the [Eiffel Excellence Scholarship](#). There are also bilateral agreements between countries to fund exchanges such as the [Fulbright Commission](#) which focuses on mobility between the US and

(according to their website) a list of more than 155 countries.

(iv) Societies: Lastly, there are travel grants that are subject specific. The **Experimental Psychology Society**, the **British Psychology Society** or the **European Association of Social Psychology** all offer study visit grants. However, sometimes there are membership conditions on these.

The key thing is to give yourself enough time to plan a visit. It is important to have an idea of what funding is available to you, when the funding deadlines are, what the application process is like, what documents you need, and what the interval is between submission and final decision.

Good luck!