

How to get the most out of your IIE-SRF fellowship: A five-dimension plan

By Abdulghani Muthanna

Dr. Muthanna is an associate professor of comparative and international education and an IIE-SRF scholar. He is undertaking his IIE-SRF fellowship in Norway at the Oslo Metropolitan University Department of International Studies and Interpreting.

Spending a few academic years as an IIE-SRF fellow could be a very positive and enriching experience for scholars. To ensure a positive experience, it is crucial for IIE-SRF fellows to adapt to their host institution environment. To make a smooth transition, it is important that IIE-SRF fellows strategically plan their academic experience while on fellowship. This strategic planning will ensure that scholars' experiences on fellowship are beneficial for their careers, for their host institutions, and for society in general. This brief article aims to inspire both current and prospective IIE-SRF fellows and motivate them to make their fellowship experience as successful as possible.

There are many things that fellows need to consider and reflect upon while moving into the new higher education setting. In the beginning, fellows need to carefully organize their time. This time management will help fellows successfully undertake many tasks and duties while minimizing pressure and stress. For example, it is important that IIE-SRF fellows set time aside for learning a new language; for building new academic networks; for conducting academic research; for participating in conferences, seminars, or workshops; for teaching courses or giving guest lectures; for providing critical reviews; etc. The following five-dimension plan for a beneficial academic experience on fellowship is simple, strategic, and effective.

First, IIE-SRF fellows need to communicate and build good relationships with their mentors (both their department supervisors and their IIE-SRF Partnerships for Scholar Advancement [PSA] advisors, if they have one). It goes without saying that building good relationships with all colleagues is important and should be something fellows are always working on. Having established a good relationship with a mentor, IIE-SRF fellows will be able to inquire about many issues that might arise during their stay at the host institution. Mentors will be able to offer important information about the policies of the host department and/or institution, the tasks that need to be accomplished, and the ways to get them accomplished. Mentors might also offer support by assigning some courses to co-instruct and/or guest lectures to teach. They might also collaborate with fellows on conducting some research; guide fellows on participating in potential conferences relevant to their research interests, and help with CVs, cover letters, teaching statements, etc.

Second, IIE-SRF fellows need to learn the language of their host nation, a process that they should start as soon as possible. Fellows must be able to communicate with their colleagues and become active members of the academic and local communities that they live in. I personally feel happy when people communicate with me using my mother tongue, and this could be the case for many others. Most importantly, learning the language of the host country could give fellows priority in obtaining a permanent position there, especially when recruiters are looking for international scholars who can also instruct in the local language.

Third, joining and participating in research groups at the host institution is an instrumental step for fellows, as they get the opportunity to collaborate with different colleagues from their own or other departments. The opportunity for fellows to listen to their colleagues' views and to share their own thoughts and expertise with other participants in the research group is indeed invaluable and helps with fellows' overall professional development. Further, collaborating with colleagues on reviewing one another's academic works increases fellows' knowledge on the topics discussed, strengthens their personal communication skills, and enhances their reviewing skills as well. Additionally, the research groups might collaborate on conducting some research collectively, which is a great chance for strengthening teamwork skills and publishing collaborative, academic works. Further, the research groups might also invite professional speakers and/or lecturers to give presentations for the research group's members, which would be beneficial for fellows' further professional development.

Fourth, it is worth attending as many seminars, workshops, and conferences as possible at the host institution, at other institutions in the host nation, and abroad. It goes without mentioning that such attendance increases fellows' knowledge and open doors for new research ideas. Participation in these events will also help fellows to make new academic connections that might lead to academic, professional, and/or research collaborations. Frankly speaking, such networking might also help fellows to get a permanent job. In today's world, it is very important to create strong professional networks, as it is mostly through connections that people get jobs in general and also in academia. Recruiters prefer to employ those who they personally know. Attending and participating in such events directly increases fellows' academic contacts and helps them build a strong network.

Fifth, allocating enough time for conducting academic research projects and preparing them for publication is invaluable and necessary. Fellows should keep in mind that research projects demand time, funding, and effort. Furthermore, when a research project is ready for publication, it is important to target academic journals that are the right fit for fellows' specific research topics. As journals are categorized differently in different countries, IIE-SRF fellows need to learn about the different categories in the host nation. For example, academic journals in Norway are categorized in two groups: a) level 2 journals, which are the top journals, and b) level 1 journals, which are the second tier journals. (See the following Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers website for more information: <https://dbh.nsd.uib.no/publiseringskanaler/Forside>). Learning about this categorization is critical as fellows will want to target the top-tier journals for their research and at all cost avoid predatory journals and publishers. Predatory journals are not considered academic because they lack a professional peer-review system, as the main purpose is to make money. Publishing in such journals not only prevents scholars from getting recognition in the field but also puts them down in the eyes of their colleagues. Further, employment is highly competitive, and recruiters would always prefer to recruit researchers with academic (not predatory) publications. (For more information on predatory journals and publishers, see the list at this website, which utilizes information from an earlier list published by Jeffrey Beall: <https://predatoryjournals.com/publishers/>.)

To conclude, it is crucial for IIE-SRF fellows to carefully plan their time to enable them to accomplish assignments; build networks; attend conferences, seminars and workshops; and conduct research projects. Building a good rapport with mentors and colleagues and learning the local language are other very important steps towards adapting to a new academic setting.

Joining research groups is another important step that would lead to many academic benefits. Finally, selecting appropriate journals for disseminating academic works is an important step that will impact fellows in the short and long term.