



There is nothing quite as inspiring as spending an extended period of time learning from colleagues at institutions outside our own. It can teach us to think differently, explore alternative approaches to common issues and inspire us to implement new ideas. Yet, accessing such opportunities can seem challenging.

This article looks at how planning can help make the most of these collaborative opportunities, from both the visitor and host perspectives. The authors draw upon their experiences visiting institutions in North America and the UK and from hosting visitors to Australia. Both roles provide rewarding opportunities for collaboration. To ensure visits are successful, planning is key!

PLANNING

Visitor Perspective

Questions to ask yourself: What is it you hope to achieve? Which institutions can best help you achieve it? What kind of support is available to you (financial, professional) and how can you secure it? Planning is essential, and laying the groundwork will help you get there.

How do you define your project? Write down and develop some key questions you hope to answer. You may have a specific project you want to undertake, or you may be more interested in broadly exploring new ideas. Either way, you will need to be able to articulate what you want to achieve either in an external application for financial support, to garner support from your institution, or both. Discuss your ideas with your supervisor and ensure you have their support. Think about the benefits your project will bring to your institution and how you will share what you learn with colleagues in your workplace and in the wider research administration profession.

What will your host need to know about you? Your host may or may not be aware that you will be contacting them. Regardless, they will not know very much about you, or why you have chosen to visit them. Preparing and sending a two to three page CV, including a photo and a summary of what you hope to get out of your visit will assist them to understand what meetings will help you get the best out of your visit and recognise you when you arrive.

How can you promote your institution and exchange information?

It is a good idea to think about what your hosts might like to know about you and your institution. You will get a lot out of the visit, so be prepared to reciprocate and answer questions they may have. Consider meeting with colleagues who work in areas you are not so familiar with before you leave. Put together a presentation on your institution and the broader national research environment, including challenges.

Say thank you. Before you go, you might like to purchase some small gifts to give your hosts, particularly to those who have coordinated your visit. It is likely they have spent a significant amount of time trying to ensure that you will get the best out of your stay. A small gift from home goes a long way.

Host Perspective

Does your institution have a policy on external visitors? Remember to check if there are institutional protocols that you need to be mindful of.

Does your institution have an International Office? Seek their guidance on preparing for a visitor. Do they have information packs?

Has your visitor provided a profile on who they are and why they are visiting your institution? A profile is helpful when preparing an itinerary and making introductions on behalf of your visitor.

When is the best time for the visitor to visit? Give thought to the project your visitor is undertaking, and the availability of the people that they are meeting.

What information can you provide to help the visitor with planning? Information on living/working in your city can be incredibly helpful. Include information like institutional strategy and structure, accommodation suggestions (any institutional rates), visa requirements, currency, transport options and useful websites. Consider including recommendations for weekend exploration.

Where should your visitor be based? Will you have a desk for them in your office? Should they spend time in a single College? Could they spend time in each?

Will you create an itinerary for your visitor? We recommend offering to help prepare a meeting itinerary for your visitor and to make e-introductions. It can be difficult for a visitor to know who to contact.

What to include in an itinerary? Allow time for orientation of the university and local area, workstation setup and access. *Desk time* each day is important. Remember that visitors from another time zone will need time to adjust to their surroundings, including the culture and the accents. Try to hold meetings where the person is located at the institution to provide the visitor with an in-situ experience. Avoid information overload!

MAKING THE MOST OF THE VISIT

Visitor Perspective

Being in a new place can be overwhelming. It is a bit like starting a new job in which you meet all your new colleagues and try to understand everything that each of them does in a series of continuous meetings. People are generous with their time and prepared to share and exchange experiences, but it can be challenging and intense.

Your hosts will likely have allowed you some time between meetings to gather your thoughts. This is important, as you will be learning a lot, and will need to document it while it is still fresh in your mind. You may also have one eye on work at home. Be kind to yourself. Take time out in each day and appreciate the opportunity to look around your host city.

The experience should be a shared learning experience for both the visitor and the host institution.

Host Perspective

The first day should be welcoming and focus on orientating your visitor to their temporary home. Talk through the itinerary, giving a brief overview of who they are meeting. Check in on how the itinerary is going every few days. Be prepared to help refine the itinerary as your visitor begins to understand your institution and how it relates to the scope and aims of their visit.

Remember, we all use local jargon. Be aware that your visitor may not be familiar with the terms you use commonly every day (if possible provide them with a glossary of terms).

The experience should be a shared learning experience for both the visitor and the host institution. In the itinerary, allow for time to hear from them, what they are working on, as well as the strategy and structure of their institution. It is a great way for colleagues at your institution to develop a global relationship without the travel.

SHARING OUTCOMES

Visitor Perspective

If you are lucky enough to receive funding to undertake your exchange, you may be asked to write a report to your sponsors, to write for professional publications (like this one!), and to share your experiences more widely with colleagues at your institution and in your home city or state.

Host Perspective

As a host institution, it can be useful to ask for feedback from the visitor about the experience.

If the visitor prepares a report on their visit, encourage them to share it. They may also share useful documents about their institution. Maximising the experience involves ongoing sharing of information.

Why not look at whether your workplace supports visits to other institutions? ■

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