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By Ben Upton

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EMBO's Short-Term Fellowships allow molecular biologists to gain vital experience in foreign labs. Ben Upton hears from four former fellows on how they handled their bids and made use of their time abroad.

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European molecular biology organisation EMBO's Short-Term Fellowships are open year-round and support research exchanges of up to three months in laboratories outside applicants' home countries. The fellowships contribute towards travel costs and subsistence of the fellow, with the subsistence rate depending on the country being visited.

One piece of advice to potential applicants comes through loud and clear from all four EMBO fellows we spoke to: you need to build up some sort of relationship, however remote, with your host lab before putting in a bid.

However, how you get to know—or in the first instance, know of—your host will vary. EMBO warns potential applicants that fellows seeking to work in the lab of an existing collaborator will get low priority in the scheme. Despite this, Laura Civiero has done two EMBO Short-Term Fellowships, both with collaborators of her home laboratory at the University of Padova where she is now an assistant professor.

The first, at KU Leuven in Belgium, came at the start of her postdoc in 2013 while the second, at the University of Laval in Canada, was in 2017. Civiero says that before the fellowships she had not been a co-author with colleagues in either lab and so did not view them as formal collaborators. Her success leaves her to assume that EMBO reviewers took a similar view.

**Seek and you shall find**

More often, hosts will be people whom fellows have met at conferences, or people whose names crop up repeatedly on papers of interest; but sometimes a web search is all it takes to find a candidate host.

Leena Thorat, who works at Savitribai Phule Pune University in India found her host lab, run by Hans-Joachim Pflüger at the Free University Berlin, Germany, via his lab website. "To be honest, I never read his publications before," she admits.

Nonetheless, she was immediately convinced there was a good fit in their research interests and initiated contact by sending a summary of a proposal by email.

During their exchanges, Pflüger introduced her to a collaborator at the Charité University of Medicine, also in Berlin. Ultimately, she divided her time between the two labs, something that EMBO were happy to accommodate, she says.

In 2017, Leonor Puchades, then a postdoc researcher at the Prince Felipe Research Centre in Valencia, Spain, was plotting a move into cancer metabolism after concentrating on metabolomics for her PhD.

That year, she went to Cambridge to do an EMBO short course, she says, and used the trip to arrange a face-to-face meeting with the head of a lab at the Institute for Cancer Research in London working in cancer metabolism.

The idea of applying for the fellowship came out that conversation and Puchades was ultimately successful. She says that the face-to-face conversation helped establish there was a genuine mutual interest in collaboration.

"It's important to make sure that it's a project that the lab you are going to is interested in, it makes things much easier," she says.

**Establish a firm connection**

Alexander Westermann was at the end of his postdoc on RNA functioning in disease at Julius-Maximilians University, Würzburg, Germany, when he applied to spend time in a leading lab at Imperial College London.

"Being at the point of transition from postdoc to a principal investigator I was really eager to get as much insight as possible into the way successful researchers managed their labs," says Westermann. "Before starting my own lab, I wanted to look into other world-class laboratories."

Westermann had met David Holden, the head of his host lab, at conferences before considering a fellowship. He says that Holden's attitude convinced him that he could learn a lot from time in Holden's lab.

"He was always very friendly and fascinated by sciences in general," Westermann remembers of his host, "not only by his own research but also by the very preliminary data of a second-year PhD student, for example".

The chance to establish or cement professional relationships can be a strong motivating factor in applying for a Short-Term Fellowship and that was the case for Westermann. "I went there just for six weeks, and of course that was not enough time to finish this project, but my intention was more to establish the connection," he says.

**Ask not what your lab can do for you**

While Short-Term Fellowships are primarily intended to benefit the fellow, both the host institution and EMBO itself necessarily take an interest in what will be given in return—a fact that all interviewees had their eye on and discussed with the heads of their host labs.

Westermann also mentioned this explicitly in his application: "I dedicated 75 per cent of the text explaining the benefits that I would gain from the fellowship and outlining the experiments that I was planning, but in the other 25 per cent I talked about what I could bring to the lab."

In common with the other fellows, Westermann sent a draft application to his host lab head and found the feedback very helpful.

**Make hay while the sun shines**

Westermann says that in his application he tried to show that he was intent on getting as much out of the six weeks as he could. "Rather than collecting real data for publication I was more interested in learning the techniques so I could do the actual experiments when I was back in my own lab," he says.

Indeed, this technique of using the fellowship specifically to acquire skills and doing as much research work as possible outside it—either before or after—seems to be a common one. For example, for both her fellowships, Civiero did preliminary work and sample processing at her home lab, ensuring she could dedicate her limited time away to mastering the scientific techniques she wanted to learn.

Thorat also decided to complete her research project after she had finished the fellowship: "I was confident enough that upon my return to India I could still complete the remaining part and hopefully produce a publication and a patent."

When plotting the fellowship bid, you have to be realistic in what can be achieved in the time allowed, she advises.

**Reap what you sow**

All the fellows said they picked up soft skills and new perspectives during their fellowships, and mentioned that this is something that applicants can mention in their bids to strengthen them. Thorat, for example, says she learned a lot from how well her host lab was managed and the efficiency with which lab heads handled an army of other postdocs and students.

While all the fellows say that the fellowships boosted their confidence and helped them grow as scientists, it is perhaps Puchades who has reaped the most immediate and tangible benefits; she is now working full-time at the Institute of Cancer Research on a project that directly follows on from her fellowship.

"We found that it was quite an interesting project," Puchades says understatedly, "That's why I went back."

**CV: Alexander Westermann**

**2018-current** Junior professor, Julius-Maximilians University, Würzburg, Germany

**2018** EMBO Short-Term Fellow, Imperial College London

**2015-2017** Postdoc, Julius-Maximilians University

**CV: Laura Civiero**

**2017-current** Assistant professor, University of Padua, Italy

**2017** EMBO Short-Term Fellow, University of Laval, Quebec, Canada

**2013** EMBO Short-Term Fellow, KU Leuven, Belgium

**CV: Leena Thorat**

**2017-current** Scientist, Biocare scheme, SP Pune University, India

**2017** EMBO Short-Term Fellow, Free University Berlin, Germany

**2016-2017** Postdoc, SP Pune University, India

**CV: Leonor Puchades**

**2018-current** Postdoctoral training fellow, the Institute of Cancer Research, London

**2018** EMBO Short-Term Fellow, Institute of Cancer Research, London

**2014-2018** Postdoc, Prince Felipe Research Centre, Valencia, Spain

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