



Catherine Kanellopoulou (COST Action 15221 STSM Co-ordinator)
Biljana Šćepanović
Alison Farrell

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OVERVIEW

In this section we record the Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) activity which occurred as part of COST Action 15221 We ReLaTe and we examine researchers' STSM experience through the lens of the We ReLaTe 3Cs Framework of Character, Community and Context. In addition, we reflect on what we have learned as a result of the STSM process throughout the COST Action.

What is an STSM?

The COST Association describe an STSM as follows:

'Short-term scientific missions (STSM) are exchange visits between researchers involved in a COST Action, allowing scientists to visit an institution or laboratory in another COST Member state ... Their aim is to foster collaboration in excellent research infrastructures and share new techniques that may not be available in a participant's home institution or laboratory' (<https://www.cost.eu/cost-actions/cost-actions-networking-tools/>)

In practical terms an STSM is an opportunity for a researcher, with the written support of their home institution and a host institution, to travel to another country to complete a defined piece of research that aligns with the objectives of an Action. The duration of an STSM varies: it must last for at least five days but it could be for up to 6 months. When awarded an STSM the researcher receives financial support to help them to fulfil the research mission. This financial support is a contribution to travel costs, accommodation and other legitimate expenses associated with the STSM. Further information about STSMs is available on the COST website and in the COST Vademecum.

STSMs in COST Action 15221 – We ReLaTe

The infographic (Figure 1) captures the STSM activity of COST Action 15221 – We ReLaTe. COST Actions run for 4 years. The We ReLaTe Action began in October 2016 and had a completion date of October 2020 which was subsequently extended to April 2021. Over this timeframe 30 STSMs were completed with researchers from 17 different countries being hosted in 17 different countries. The vast majority of the STSMs were for between 5 and 15 days, and the Action's spend on STSMs during this timeframe was €56,282.00

STSMs viewed through the We ReLaTe 3Cs Framework – Character, Community and Context

A requirement of the STSM process is that each researcher produce a report based on their mission. Those reports can be accessed on the We ReLaTe website. In our Action we also asked colleagues to write a short reflection on what the Action meant to them. In this examination of the researchers' experience of completing an STSM through the We ReLaTe 3Cs Framework we draw from the researcher reflections.

Character

As part of our Action we found out about the purposes, processes, knowledge, skills and values of successful academics. As noted in the section in this FAD entitled '3Cs Professional Learning Framework – Character, Community and Context' we discovered that successful colleagues are hugely intrinsically motivated, that they have a passion for their discipline, they want to learn more, want to share their learning, have/require access to the relevant literature, see connections between their teaching and their research. We also discovered a great deal about the 'academic personality' and the particular shared characteristics that stellar colleagues possess. Those traits, and values, included: curiosity; optimism/positive attitude; freedom; sound values – respect, equality, fairness, integrity; imagination; determination; persistence; openness to new experiences; ability to problem solve; openness to collaboration.

From the data gathered from colleagues who completed an STSM we can see that participation in that programme facilitates the development of individual professional skills which echo those of successful colleagues. Colleagues reported expanding their knowledge within discipline spaces but also in terms of research methodologies. They welcomed advice that they received and the opportunity to learn new practices. The STSM gave them dedicated space and time to devote to their research projects. Some researchers noted that the STSM gave them a chance to re-purpose research skills and to apply them to different questions in different disciplines and settings – the chance to stretch themselves beyond what they knew. They found STSMs enjoyable, inspirational and motivational. In some instances early career researchers noted that the STSM helped them to imagine or visualise a potential future. Participants overwhelmingly recommended STSMs to other colleagues.

Community

In our Action we learned about the importance of community to academics. Connecting with others in a range of different ways for a variety of purposes was central to the life of successful colleagues. Melonashi (2020) notes in her report on the quantitative data gathered from colleagues that collaboration is a factor which cuts across writing, research, learning and teaching. Colleagues noted that the desire to share work was a motivational factor in terms of writing as was the wish to be recognised in their field, that mentoring and structured feedback were particularly beneficial supports for academic writing, that successful colleagues seek opportunities to share their research with others. The desire to progress their field and the opportunity to collaborate with others are important to these colleagues, as is connectedness and the sense of being part of a professional community. In terms of teaching, colleagues noted two social elements which were important for teaching development: feedback from students and colleagues, and sharing pedagogic practice with colleagues through informal professional conversations. They also noted that building rapport with students was very important. In terms of their learning opportunities, Melonashi notes that the top five learning opportunities for colleagues all involve connecting with others:

'Tables 114-130, show participants' answers as regards learning opportunities they consider most helpful. Top 5 items rated as most helpful by the majority of participants (rated as 4 or 5) include:

1. Support on engaging in EU/international projects (74%)
2. Conference attendance (73%)
3. Disciplinary related research support (72%)
4. Support on building collaborations and networks (67%)
5. Cross disciplinary research support (64%)

(Melonashi, 2020: 46)

Across the STSM researchers we see strong parallels with the stellar colleague data. All STSM participants remarked on collegiality and the different shapes that that took when they were away. They enjoyed meeting colleagues, talking with them, listening to and learning from them, sharing their own work, and working with them. Participants noted experiencing academic goodwill and the sense of being part of an academic community. They enjoyed meeting experts. They realised that community and networks really matters and recognised that the STSM offered the potential to build to more collaboration and greater networking. They were reminded of the importance of 'face-to-face' communication and realised the STSMs as a chance to 'strengthen' professional relationships and friendships.

Two other interesting comments were: that the STSM helped researchers to recognise and value what they themselves know: 'being respected for the kind of learning I could contribute to this institution and given the opportunity to share knowledge coming from my own context'; that in addition to working with colleagues who shared the researchers' home disciplines, STSM researchers noted that the STSM gave them ways into other communities and other research spaces.

In addition, according to the successful colleagues and STSM participants mobility is an important part of academic professional development and indeed academic careers.

Context

Our successful colleague data tells us that there is a good deal of variety in terms of support for writing, research, learning and teaching, despite the fact that there is a great deal of similarity around what academics both require and value in terms of professional development. One of the things that we were reminded of throughout the Action was that context matters. None of our work is devoid of context, either as individuals or as communities. We are influenced by national and European/ international policies, by national and institutional financial and other resource parameters, by institutional ethos and mission, by institutional and departmental strategies and goals.

STSM participants noted that stepping out of their familiar context into an unknown one provided them with specific insights. The importance of viewing things from 'different perspectives and "with different eyes"' became clear to them. They remarked on 'How different understandings ... [are] across countries and scientific disciplines and traditions, and how complex these understandings are'. They saw value in the way being in a different context broadens your way of seeing and understanding, and expands your knowledge from an institutional/national perspective to an international one. And at the same time, it reminds you of the influence and importance of 'local features and spirit'. As observed in the Action data, STSM participants realised 'that despite all the differences, teachers from our countries have much in common, which makes us closer to each other'. STSM participants also remarked on one essential factor that the research missions

provided them with, and that our successful colleagues also cherish – time: time away from home institution gives you breathing space and time to think.

Reflections on the STSMs

STSMs are an invaluable tool for COST Actions. They represent COST core values and philosophy with respect to European researchers' communication and mobility, which is so difficult to come across nowadays. STSM participants invested their time and effort to produce reports that will be incorporated into the Action's findings and thus contribute to its goals.

Upon reflection, participants primarily valued coming in contact with colleagues abroad:

Meeting such a diverse range of people was very enjoyable.

What I enjoyed most about my STSM was the chance to do a research project with other people – collaboration!

I very much enjoyed ... meeting happy colleagues, who came from various countries and continents, and who work gladly in cross-cultural environment.

They also appreciated being given the luxury of devoting all their time to their research uninterrupted by other daily responsibilities in their home institutions:

What I enjoyed most about my STSM was a possibility to have a full focus on one research task

(An STSM gives you) the opportunity to work hard on your project or mission.

STSM participants viewed their experience as an opportunity for self-development:

Great opportunities don't come every day, so do not miss a great opportunity to enhance your research expertise in the context of your professional self-development. (My STSM) has enhanced my knowledge on the topic and my research expertise.

It can be a wonderful experience and hugely beneficial in terms of continuing professional development.

Furthermore, they enjoyed discovering similarities among colleagues and institutions that they had not suspected:

It is amazing how much in common have teaching staff of two rather different universities, from two rather different countries (Montenegro-Spain), when it comes to seemingly plain, but still crucial problematic issues of their everyday job – plenty of same worries and concerns bother us.

In a nutshell:

When carrying out an STSM, you are given the chance to research on your main interests, to get to know scholars with the same motivations as yours, to expand your relationships by networking, to explore other possibilities in terms of teaching methodology, assessment, ways of thinking, etc. Having positive discussions in the field of knowledge of your choice leads to progress in the subject matter and doing so in a foreign culture where you experience new food, other landscapes, rich cultural possibilities....it is a luxury.

Concluding remarks

Short Term Scientific Missions have been very successful among our MCs and other researchers. It has been a pleasure to provide colleagues and young researchers with the opportunity to self-develop and progress within their field of expertise. Despite colleagues' initial hesitations, STSMs met with a lot of enthusiasm and produced great reports for our Action's development. Along with the reports, stronger ties developed among our MCs and the prospect of fruitful collaboration which we envisage will continue after the end of our action, on multiple levels. Perhaps the most important gain, relevant to our Action's main focus, is that of trust and solidarity which has settled in among all of us who participated in CA15221. Admittedly, any kind of development requires interaction among people; this is what our STSMs have successfully achieved, mainly through the lens of scientific collaboration and collegiality.

References

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