Unlocking Success: How the TWAS-CSIR Fellowship Shaped My Professional Journey

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My journey as a professor of Food and Industrial Microbiology has significantly been influenced by the transformative opportunities I received through the TWAS-CSIR fellowship in 2009. This fellowship proved to be a pivotal moment in my professional development, providing me with valuable experiences that shaped my success story.

I commenced my PhD at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. After gaining approval for my proposal, I initiated my bench work. However, I encountered limitations in conducting crucial segments due to insufficient funds and equipment. My home institute supervisor, Prof. Abiodun Sanni, suggested proactively seeking opportunities to overcome these challenges.

On a fateful day, as I navigated the vast expanse of the internet in search of opportunities, destiny intervened and led me to the TWAS-CSIR PhD Fellowship—a beacon of hope for ambitious researchers from developing nations. With every click, I discovered a program that held the promise of realising the dreams of budding scientists. The program's resolute mission to bolster young minds' aspirations in pursuing doctoral studies abroad spoke directly to the fervour within me.

With bated breath, I delved into the details, absorbing the essence of the fellowship's purpose. It was an endeavour dedicated to fostering the growth of inquisitive minds, guiding them toward the vast realms of knowledge that lay beyond their borders. Fuelled by excitement and an unwavering determination, I steeled my resolve and took the monumental decision to apply. Little did I know that this single act would chart the course of my life in ways beyond imagination.

The day the acceptance letter from TWAS materialised in my inbox marked a turning point—an unforgettable moment etched into the fabric of my existence. The weight of its implications was monumental; it signified an opportunity that transcended geographical confines. With the fellowship's endorsement, I found myself holding not just a letter but a key to a realm of possibilities.

The ensuing days were a whirlwind of preparations. Visa processes, documentation, and logistical arrangements—each step was a testament to my commitment and desire to seize this chance. As the final puzzle pieces slid into place, I stood at the precipice of an unfamiliar chapter. It was a moment of poignant farewells as I bid adieu to the embrace of family and the familiarity of my homeland.

Stepping onto foreign soil, I embarked on an odyssey of research and personal growth. The CSIR-Indian Institute of Chemical Biology (IICB), where the fellowship was to take root, welcomed me with open arms. The warmth of my reception surpassed mere politeness; a genuine embrace set the tone for my journey ahead. In an extraordinary display of hospitality, two laboratory members I was destined to join ventured to the airport in the institute's car, extending a gesture of welcome that transcended customary norms.

My host, a pillar of support and guidance, had meticulously arranged my accommodation, ensuring my transition was seamless. This thoughtful preparation was a testament to the institute's commitment to nurturing a conducive environment for exploration and innovation. As I settled into my new surroundings, the promise of discovery hung in the air—an intangible force that fuelled my determination to delve into the uncharted territories of knowledge.

In retrospect, my encounter with the TWAS-CSIR PhD Fellowship was more than a stroke of luck; it was a convergence of aspirations, an alignment of stars that illuminated a path previously obscured. This narrative of mine is one among many, each weaving a tapestry of ambition, dedication, and transformation. The pages that follow in this chronicle will recount the challenges, triumphs, and epiphanies that have become the cornerstone of my academic pursuit—one that continues to unfold against the backdrop of collaboration, cultural exchange, and the relentless pursuit of knowledge.

During my time at the CSIR-IICB, I had the privilege of being mentored by Prof. Snehasikta Swarnakar, who was then the Head of the Department of Physiology, Drug Development Diagnostics, and Biotechnology Division. Her guidance, valuable insights, and support were instrumental in refining my research ideas, experimental design, and data analysis. The mentorship from Prof. Swarnakar nurtured my critical thinking and problem-solving skills, contributing significantly to my professional growth.

The initial days were overwhelming—new culture, new people, and the daunting challenge of pushing my boundaries academically. The path was not without obstacles. There were moments of self-doubt, experiments went awry, and long nights grappling with research questions. Yet, amid these challenges, I had the unwavering support of my fellow scholars at the institute and my mentor. They were my pillars of strength during my stay at the CSIR-IICB.

The TWAS-CSIR PhD fellowship opened doors to cutting-edge research projects and methodologies, allowing me to work alongside experienced researchers and engage in innovative research. This exposure enhanced my research skills and expanded my knowledge base, exposing me to advanced techniques, data analysis methods, and experimental design.

Financial support from the TWAS-CSIR fellowship relieved me of financial burdens, enabling me to focus wholeheartedly on my research pursuits. Additionally, the fellowship provided me with opportunities to attend fully sponsored conferences, workshops, and training events, which otherwise would have been challenging. These conference experiences allowed me to interact with experts, researchers, and peers in my field, presenting my research findings and establishing professional connections. Being a TWAS-CSIR PhD fellow brought me recognition and prestige within the scientific community.

One of the most enriching aspects of my fellowship was the collaboration with Prof. Ratan Gacchui (who was introduced to me by Prof. Swarnakar) of the Department of Life Science and Biotechnology, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Through this collaboration, we published several journal articles, expanding my horizons and introducing me to new methodologies and innovative solutions to complex research problems. The research network I built during this time has been enduring and valuable throughout my career.

Upon concluding my research endeavours, I returned to my native land, seamlessly reintegrating myself into the folds of my home institute. With determination and diligence, I successfully defended my meticulously prepared thesis, a monumental feat that bestowed upon me the esteemed title of Doctor of Philosophy. Armed with an arsenal of advanced knowledge and refined skills acquired during my international academic journey, I embarked on a transformative path.

In the present day, I stand proudly as a revered professor in my specialised field, a position that would have remained an elusive dream were it not for the invaluable support of the TWAS-CSIR fellowship. Notably, my compatriots and colleagues who tread the hallowed halls of my home institute have also reaped the rewards of TWAS and kindred fellowship initiatives. This collective success story is a testament to the unparalleled benefits these fellowships bestow.

In academia, as in life, progress is the lifeblood that sustains growth. With this undeniable truth in mind, I passionately advocate for the unwavering investment in the TWAS fellowship program and its counterparts. Continued investment in fellowship programs is vital for sustaining and strengthening

scientific collaborations. By supporting fellowship programs, policymakers can nurture scientific talent, foster international cooperation, and address global challenges, ultimately driving societal and economic progress.

Furthermore, promoting greater participation and inclusivity in international science fellowships is crucial for fostering diversity, collaboration, and innovation in the scientific community. Below are some potential strategies to achieve this goal:

- Targeted outreach campaigns to raise awareness about international science fellowships among underrepresented communities, including women, ethnic minorities, individuals from developing countries, and individuals with disabilities, can be developed. Various communication channels, such as social media, websites, and collaborations with local organisations, can be utilised to reach a wider audience.
- Establish mentoring programs to offer guidance and support for potential fellowship applicants. Experienced researchers can mentor and assist applicants in preparing applications, identifying suitable fellowship opportunities, and navigating the international scientific community.
- Foster collaborations between international science fellowship organisations and local research institutions, universities, and non-profit organisations. These partnerships can help identify talented researchers from diverse backgrounds, create networking opportunities, and provide access to research facilities and resources.
- Review and modify eligibility criteria for international science fellowships to ensure inclusivity. Additionally, consider allowing flexible career stages to accommodate early-career researchers, mid-career and established scientists.
- Provide cultural competency training for fellowship organisers, selection committees, and host institutions. This training can promote a more inclusive and welcoming environment for international fellows by enhancing understanding and addressing cultural differences and biases.
- Set up feedback mechanisms to collect input from former fellows about their experiences and improvement ideas. Regularly assess fellowship programs to detect and address biases and obstacles. Conduct systematic evaluations to uncover best practices and refine strategies over time.
- Highlight success stories and accomplishments of diverse international fellowship recipients. This can inspire and motivate aspiring researchers while showcasing the value of diversity and inclusion in scientific pursuits.

In summation, my journey from completing my academic odyssey to the distinguished professorship I now hold has been illuminated by the guiding light of the TWAS-CSIR PhD fellowship. I am a living testament to the program's efficacy and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with my colleagues as we herald the virtues of such fellowships. I beseech decision-makers to recognise the indomitable value of sustained investment in fellowship programs. By doing so, we ensure the continuity of scientific triumphs, the reinforcement of collaborative bridges, and the emergence of a brighter, more prosperous global future.



Some of my undergraduate research students



Some of my postgraduate research students