International Fellowships - The Journey of a DAAD Doctoral Scholar

Amrita Kaur Slatch
DAAD Doctoral Scholar (2021-25)
RWTH Aachen University, Templergraben 55, 52062 Aachen, Germany
E-mail: amrita.slatch@rwth-aachen.de

"Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world."
NELSON MANDELA (2003)

The World Development Report (2018) documented the realities of the education system across several countries. It pointed out that the biggest conundrum in education is that "Learning" is equivalent to "Schooling". The report argued that true education primarily arises from experiences, moulding professional skills and leadership qualities. I want to share this idea through pages of my own stories.

I will begin by acknowledging how very fortunate I have been in my educational journey at the various institutions I was affiliated with. They have crafted my identity by shaping my thoughts, ideas and opinions. I was a student with average calibre, but what was integral to my personality even then was the curious nature of any child-like mind. In hindsight, I realise that during the primitive years of my schooling, teachers and educators encouraged this curiosity. As I progressed through middle school, high school and university, my skills developed through interactions with peers. This informal learning process instilled the confidence I still hold today. University opened a world where questioning norms and reading books were encouraged, honing my critical thinking. When I finished my post-graduation, it dawned on me that learning is a never-ending journey.

Studying in Germany was a decision influenced by extensive reading during my undergraduate years. Firstly, the absence of tuition fees was a game changer. Although, as a female child in India, my initial education was subsidised in the public schools, the idea of government-funded university education fascinated me. Moreover, the economic restructuring work following the German unification was another compelling factor.

A lot was also shaped by how I wanted my professional trajectory to grow. Unsatisfied with working in the industry, I yearned to transition into academia. Hence, the decision to pursue doctorate studies in Germany was taken. Given that my research would be independent and supervised in Germany, I had to secure external funding. It was during this quest that I discovered the esteemed DAAD scholarship.

The DAAD scholarship provided an unparalleled opportunity. It was not just financial support but also an organisation that eased international students into the German culture. This comprehensive scholarship structure guided me with my very first steps in Germany. It is said that you can't understand a culture without first learning the language. The scholarship provided a language course at the beginning of the program, helping me adapt to a foreign land and language. It is one of the best things the scholarship offers, as I observed many other international PhD students who did not come through DAAD struggled with learning the language in the initial months.

Another significant aspect of the DAAD scholarship is the various meetings and events organised by the Regional Freundeskreis (DAAD circle of friends), an independent initiative by DAAD alums. These gatherings allowed me to interact with peers and explore different avenues the scholarship could offer. During one such meeting, I learned about funding for research-related work, which enabled me to present my paper in Australia, combining DAAD and institute funding.

The scholarship also supports research visits to the home country if it is a part of the research methodology and approved by the supervisor. This aspect of the scholarship makes it worth acknowledging as it fosters partnerships between German and Indian research institutes, enhancing cross-cultural competency and awareness.

One of the only challenges that scholarship recipients have encountered is the high cost of living in certain German cities such as Munich and Frankfurt. Although DAAD offers rent subsidies in these cities, surviving on the limited stipend is difficult. But I hope this issue will be addressed in the future.

Through my two years as a DAAD Doctoral scholar, I have realised my potential to make a meaningful impact on society. This independent mindset has been shaped by the challenges of working in an international environment, fostering accountability and self-reflection. My journey has taught me that I don't need to choose a predefined career path; I can design my own. It stems from a solid learning foundation with teachers in my school nurturing my curiosity and university professors encouraging me to question the norm. Often, teachers limit understanding in schools to whatever is taught in classrooms. One needs to allow students to ask and think to build confidence in students. My experiences in school were constantly not just shaped by my teachers but also by constant engagement with peers who played an active role in enhancing my knowledge and skills.

Today, as India strives to elevate its education standards to a global level with the National Education Policy, I propose introducing international fellowships at a younger age, perhaps between 18-20. Such fellowships offer invaluable real-life experiences beyond the classroom, helping young individuals gain clarity about their future roles as global leaders. These international fellowships create a platform for scientific awareness through a robust professional network, benefiting individuals and contributing to the country's intellectual growth. In an era of evolving multilateralism, international fellowships become essential in empowering and shaping the “world order”.