

Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) Reflections

'Celebrating collaboration' - COST Action 15221 – We ReLaTe

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STSM Title

A thematic analysis of focus group data in order to understand and map excellence in teaching, learning, research and writing at higher education.

The goal of my STSM ... The aim of this Short-Term Scientific Mission was to determine and communicate what comprises success and excellence at higher level education through a qualitative analysis of focus group data.

This STSM provided a latent thematic analysis of 6 focus group transcripts that involved the discussion of academic success and excellence in the related areas of teaching, learning, research and writing. The aim of this STSM was to derive qualitative data from these transcripts and supply this research data to the next phase of the Action. The primary scientific outcome of this STSM was to create a comprehensive analysis which, when combined with interpretations of the quantitative data, will yield fresh insights towards the achievement of the Action's objectives. The primary objective was to provide a latent thematic analysis of the data, examining the assumptions and contexts behind the data as well analysing the variety of ways the data intersects.

The most significant thing that I learned from my STSM ... I am a scholar of literature so working with sociological data and methodologies was somewhat new to me. However, I was able to apply the critical approaches I already possessed to this field. In examining the focus group data I decided to reveal the unspoken contexts in which the data was grounded. It was interesting to learn how unselfconscious academics could be and how their views on education sometimes ignored many barriers to entry, particularly obstacles to achieving "success" and "excellence" that deny cohorts of the population an opportunity to participate in higher education, particularly in regards to employment and positions of leadership. It appears to me that academics, as a sociological group, are frequently more occupied with problems in their particular field than they are with the issues that occur in their work environment. Despite an explicit and universal academic ethos of justice and fairness, the focus groups often revealed the arbitrary nature of academic "success" and "excellence" that is grounded in an individual's socio-economic background, the good will of colleagues and the ability to accept conditions of loneliness, stress and a lack of recognition.

I very much enjoyed ... working with my colleagues in Malta and Ireland and the support they both provided. I also enjoyed travelling to Malta and exploring the country. I very much enjoyed the research, especially as I began to interpret the data and its latent and contextual contents. I found it fascinating to analyse academia as a social setting and its relationship with wider social, cultural and psychological issues.

My advice to colleagues considering an STSM is ... assess how long you are willing to survive on your own. While you may be able to socialise with colleagues in your host institution, they will most likely be too busy with their own work and domestic lives to entertain you. How often can you dine alone in restaurants? How many evenings can you spend in isolation? I was lucky that my parents came to stay for the second week of my STSM and I was delighted when they arrived. Maybe two weeks alone would not bother some people, but I think if you can go somewhere where you have friends or relatives or have someone come and stay with you for a portion of STSM it will make it much easier and more enjoyable.

And finally, ... it's not just for scientists.

Many of the Actions advertised on the COST website are couched in dense jargon and it is not particularly easy to search and discover the right one for you, but I would recommend connecting with Actions that appeal to you as they can really open you up to whole new communities and avenues of research that you may never have thought of. I would especially recommend those with an Arts background to get involved as there are many interesting projects that you could make important contributions to: go for it!