

INTERCONTINENTAL CULTURE CLASH

A move from Germany to Mexico was a crash course in acclimatizing to a new research environment. **By Deb Raj Aryal**

In 2010, after obtaining my master's degree in Germany, I moved to Mexico to pursue my PhD in ecology and sustainable development. In both places, far away from my home country of Nepal, I worked with scientists and other colleagues from different cultures. This experience greatly improved my interpersonal skills and broadened my view of the world of research.

After I completed my PhD programme in 2015, I started a research fellowship at Chiapas Autonomous University in Mexico. My work focused on the environmental impact of agriculture and livestock production in the tropics and subtropics. It was part of a programme set up by the Mexican National Science and Technology Council (CONACYT) to attract foreign researchers and to encourage Mexican scientists based abroad to return to the country. The programme ran from June 2014 to December 2018 and attracted more than 1,300 early-career researchers.

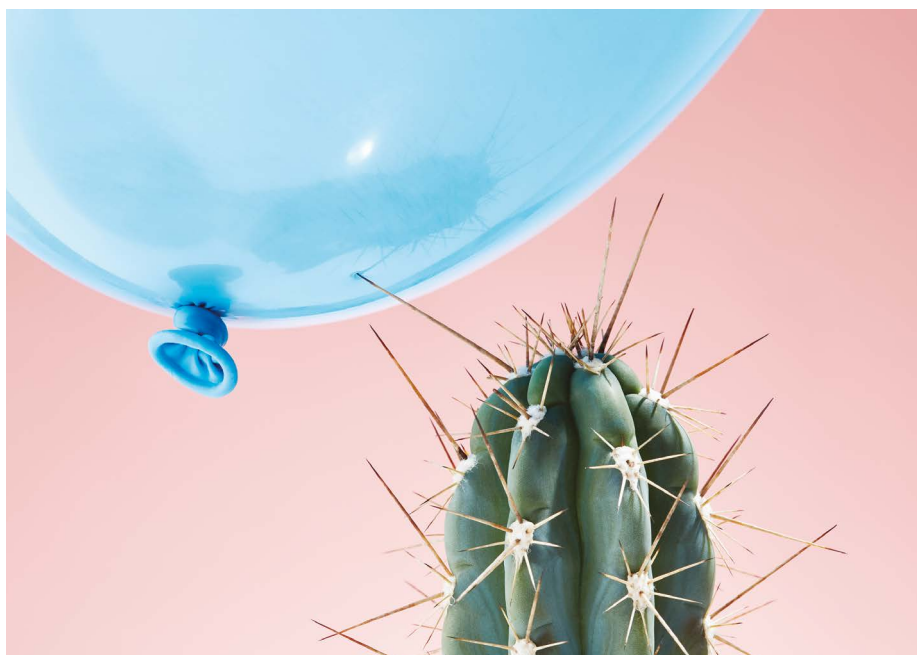
I was conscious that the arrival of so many scientists over four years in a country with limited research funding might make for an uncomfortable situation for the established scientists already working there. CONACYT research fellows would be absorbed as staff scientists or faculty members into their host institutes within ten years, although this was not obligatory. As someone who was part of this large cohort of researchers, I have some advice on how to adapt to a new working environment to the benefit of both yourself and your colleagues.

Be humble

It is an advantage to be an early-career scientist with a lot of energy and enthusiasm for carrying out cutting-edge research with the latest tools and methods – but it's important to not come across as arrogant. An over-confident or pompous attitude can result in colleagues not wanting to cooperate or collaborate with you. At the beginning of their careers, researchers are most successful when they are humble and value the work of others, in my view.

Respect differences

Differences in work styles or cultures can feel more significant if you come from a different continent. Generally, new postdocs



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or principal investigators at an institute should not aim to change the work culture of colleagues who have been at that place for years. Unless there is unfair treatment or harmful behaviour, try instead to adapt to the new culture. There could be moments in which you feel uncomfortable with the existing dynamics and working styles, but

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it's important to accept that everyone has their own way of working. Constant and open communication regarding your worries and anxieties can help to create a shared sense of well-being in cross-cultural research labs.

Handle questions calmly

Scientists with many years of experience in your field might know more than you do. If you are asked a question that you feel is hostile, don't take it as a personal attack on the integrity of your work. Instead, thank the researcher who asked it, but be honest and say that you're still learning. As an

early-career researcher, you are not expected to know everything. If you find yourself being compared with others, don't try to prove that you are better. Your research should speak for itself. Sometimes, one group of researchers might disagree with another on how to tackle a project or share lab equipment, for example. Taking the side of the one group by criticizing the other won't help scientists who have just started a job at the institute.

Believe in yourself

Have faith in your capability to adjust, to work well with others and to deliver on the research responsibilities you are assigned. It's okay that you don't know the local norms and regulations at first. Use common sense and think about how you might want to be treated. If a question comes up that you don't know the answer to, ask someone; many people are willing to help newcomers. It is important to have a strong and lasting motivation for your career in science. It's fine if your first attempt at your research project doesn't succeed – but you must persevere when you fail.

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