

## Research visit at IEA Hamburg

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In April 2020, during my second year as a PhD candidate and amid a global lockdown, I applied for the World Education Research Association (WERA) Visiting Researcher Award. In my letter of request, I selected Hamburg as my preferred destination for a visit to both the Research and Analysis (RandA) Unit at IEA, and the Diversity in Education Research Lab (DivER) at the University of Hamburg. I knew that this would be a perfect match. I had been working with different International Large-scale Assessments for a long time, and I considered it necessary to improve my knowledge of the techniques required to properly work with them. Moreover, the impact of migration on students' education is a research topic of great interest to me, and I intend to take it into account in my PhD thesis.

A few months later, I was given the incredible news that I had been selected for the award. I was very enthusiastic about the research skills, knowledge, and networking opportunities with other researchers during my visit. I am very grateful to WERA and to the people in charge of the selection process. Besides its academic and professional aspects, this opportunity was also something exciting to look forward to, something that was much needed during the difficult times we were and still are living in.

The research topic of my PhD, and the focus of my research visit, is the Relative Age Effect—the consequences of age differences between students in the same classroom. Those born right before the cut-off date are the youngest ones in their group, and thus tend to have lower levels of development. This gap is most clear during the first years of primary school. International evidence shows that it may significantly impact students' performance and progress through education, as well as their socioemotional development. The goal of my visit to IEA was to research this phenomenon with the data from IEA studies, starting with TIMSS but eventually also using PIRLS, ICCS, and ICILS.

### **Planning a research visit in times of COVID-19**

The planning of my research visit was not without problems due to the pandemic, and the initial September 2020 date had to be pushed to at least March 2021. I want to stress how much I appreciate the support I received during this time from Julia Behr and Prof. Ingrid Gogolin from the University of Hamburg, and Nadine Twele and Aysel Gojayeva from IEA. After the second wave of

COVID-19 hit both Spain and Germany during winter, the visit had to be postponed once again to the final starting date in June 2021. Unfortunately, due to the restrictions on visiting students at the University of Hamburg, my stay at the DivER group had to be cancelled. I did, however, meet Prof. Ingrid Gogolin during my time in Hamburg, and a colloquium was scheduled for October 2021 for me to get to know the research group and introduce my investigation.

In the weeks before my visit to IEA, I was assisted by Aysel Gojayeva from RandA in finding accommodation and obtaining general knowledge about the city of Hamburg. She also introduced me to my colleagues on the day of my arrival and made sure that everything was in perfect order at my working station. On the same day, I met Diego Cortes, my host at IEA who guided me with my project, and Rolf Strietholt, the co-head of the RandA Unit, who also became a huge support and source of knowledge during my stay. As my first activity, I introduced my research topic in an online RandA colloquium where I received a lot of support, feedback, and interesting ideas.

I felt very welcome at IEA, and I met a wonderful group of researchers. Besides Aysel, Diego, and Rolf, I want to thank Sabine Meinck, Yuan-Ling "Linda" Liaw, Mojca Rozman, Nayeli Urdiales, and Opeyemi Ayanwale, among others, for their support and friendliness. I greatly enjoyed getting to know these researchers over lunch and cherish my memories from this time. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 regulations, many colleagues were still working from home, and I could only meet them through the colloquiums organized by the unit.

I particularly want to thank my host, Diego Cortes, who gave me very useful insights about how IEA works and about how to analyze data from International Large-scale Assessments. Even though my knowledge on the topic was limited, he patiently explained everything and prepared snippets of R code that I needed for my research. It was with Diego and Rolf that I laid out the structure of my project. We had fruitful debates and conversations about every step of the research process. They often brought me down to earth when I was getting lost in loose, nonspecific ideas, or when I was being too ambitious. I am very thankful for their support and for helping me mature as a researcher. Our collaboration is still ongoing after my visit, with the goal of publishing our findings.

Even though the circumstances of doing a research visit during the global pandemic were not ideal, I still had a tremendously enriching experience in Hamburg. I am very grateful that the visit could take place through the joint effort of all the parties involved. I will fondly remember this stay, and I am delighted that it has led to a collaboration with Diego and Rolf from IEA, as well as to the colloquium with the University of Hamburg's DivER group.

Again, I want to thank IEA, the University of Hamburg, and WERA for making this research visit happen. I will carry the knowledge and the experience I obtained in Hamburg throughout my future career, and I hope I will stay in touch with all the wonderful researchers I have met.

Sincerely,

Alejandro Pérez Pita

### About the Author

Alejandro obtained a bachelor's degree in Psychology (2016) at the University of Santiago de Compostela and holds a master's degree in Educational Psychology (2017) from the same university. He then moved to the University of Maastricht for a master's degree in Developmental Psychology (2018), and then started his PhD at the Complutense University of Madrid, focusing on the field of Education. His research focuses on the assessment of educational policies, especially those involving inclusion and diversity. He is currently investigating the achievement gap found between students who are younger or older than their classmates due to the usage of cut-off dates to conform the groups, a phenomenon known as the Relative Age Effect

