

AFRICA: Centres of excellence develop future leaders

Munyaradzi Makoni

13 February 2011

Issue: 0071



Five Centres of Excellence in Africa established more than two years ago by the German Academic Exchange Service could be part of the answer to the continent's brain drain. There is demand for higher training by students and the centres feel they are yet to reach their full potential. This was the consensus among African and German cooperation partners at their annual networking meeting, held at the University of the Western Cape in January.

The Germany Academic Exchange Service, DAAD, was instrumental in setting up the **training hubs** across the continent, with the intention of nurturing future African leaders with the ability to tackle problems with an African agenda.

DAAD director for the southern hemisphere, Dr Helmut Blumbach, said although the challenge they faced in setting up the centres was getting suitable projects for Africa and finding institutional frameworks that would embrace those projects, it has been surpassed by the ambition to produce tangible expertise by the African partners.

"The idea behind the centres was to extend the broad range of educational opportunities available to African universities in line with international standards," Blumbach told *University World News*. "With the strong focus on training future leaders, the projects have been attractive to students; the centres are failing to absorb all students."

The aim remains to achieve significant development of Africa through higher education, Blumbach added. "The bottom line is we need to train more experts for Africa," he added.

Apart from the meeting host - the Centre for Criminal Justice at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), which is partnered with Humboldt University in Berlin - another centre is the Ghanaian-German Centre for Development Studies and Health Research at the University of Ghana, Legon, in Accra.

Said Dr Felix Asante from the University of Ghana: "We cannot answer the question of how the Centres of African Excellence in Africa can contribute to the development of Africa without reference to the purposes of this project. In the past our postgraduate training took place in America or other European countries; it did not produce anything in terms of change in Africa, as experts tended to stay there. Their relevance was minimal."

The Congolese-German Centre for Microfinance, opened last month, will offer the first masters course in microfinance in Sub-Saharan Africa. It sees the Université Protestante au Congo (Protestant University of Congo) and the Frankfurt School of Finance and Management working together.

"What we have now are the tools needed for granting and handling the administration of microloans, which could help many of our people out of poverty," said Patrick Bakengela Shamba, human resource management professor at the Protestant University of Congo.

The Namibian-German Centre for Logistics (NGCL) represents cooperation between the Polytechnic of Namibia and the Flensburg University of Applied Sciences. The institutions joined hands in 2009 to advance the logistics sector, offering a postgraduate programme for future leaders in logistics, advanced training for professionals, consulting and technology transfer.

NGCL Director Albin Jacobs said that as logistics is the fifth largest component of Namibia's economy, it was imperative that training in this area be provided and relevant policies put in place. "We are looking for students with the ability to excel at a certain level - potential multipliers - who can be the leaders in the sector from Africa," said Jacobs.

The Tanzanian-German Centre for Postgraduate Studies in Law is in the law faculty at the University of Dar es Salaam. It collaborates with Bayreuth University in Germany.

All the centres have masters and PhD programmes and run scholarships that are funded by DAAD (EUR500,000 annually for each centre) and supported by the host universities.

Professor Lovell Fernandez, director of the Western Cape centre, which opened its doors to 16 students in 2009, said their courses have the added advantage of including topics like economic crime, money laundering and corruption, which are not legal matters and not taught at most universities around the world but are highly relevant to their students.

Among other courses the centre teaches international criminal law, human rights and transitional justice for countries emerging out of autocracies. It has among its graduates and students, two prosecutors from Uganda and Malawi, two judges from Ethiopia and anti-corruption officials from both Rwanda and

Indonesia.

From the centre's inception, Fernandez told *University World News*, they have always tried to select students on academic merit - those who show potential to influence policy at the highest levels.

"We would want to attract even more students but the more the Rand [the South African currency] depreciates in value, the fewer students we can take."

Fernandez applauded the quality of internet connectivity for students at the centre, saying they can easily access law databases. And video conferencing linked up to their partner university has made it easier for experts to reach out to students.

But the same could not be said for the Centre for Microfinance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Obviously, communication challenges faced by people in DRC cannot be compared to other centres, Dr Dorothee Weyler, DAAD project director for the centres of excellence in Africa, told *University World News*.

South Africa's Minister of Science and Technology Naledi Pandor said she hoped the German programme would help tackle the brain drain, with African scientists leaving the continent for opportunities and African postgraduate students not returning. She said she was keen for international higher education cooperation to expand, directed at building human capital and focusing innovative, quality research on Africa's development challenges.

Last month Pandor launched the **African Doctoral Academy**. Its mission - to support and advance doctoral training and scholarship in African - is closely linked to the goals of the DAAD-funded network of centres of excellence, the minister said.

An estimated 30% of doctoral students in South African universities and science councils are from abroad, with the majority coming from other African countries.

South Africa has had a privileged position in Africa in being able to provide conflict resolution and peacekeeping assistance to various countries. But Pandor said there are plans to do more, especially in the field of science and technology.

'Excellence' seemed a hard concept and ideal to define for the representatives of the five centres and donors at January's Cape Town meeting. But the general consensus was the centres are on the road to excellence. The quality of education at the centres was said to be better than in the rest of the universities.

Pandor applauded the fact that "excelling is becoming part of our common jargon. We do not promote excellence by talking about it; institutionally adopt it," she added.