With freshly signed cooperation agreements in his luggage, Professor Gerhard Bringmann has just come back from a trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo: The University of Würzburg (UNIWÜ) in Germany now has additional partnership contracts with six universities in Bukavu, Goma, and Butembo in the East, and in Kikwit und Mbanza-Ngungu in the Western part of the country. Partnership agreements have also been signed with three secondary schools. As a consequence, now as many as eleven Congolese partner institutions of the UNIWÜ participate in the Excellence Scholarship System BEBUC, which supports the up-and-coming young scientists in the Congo.

Those were two strenuous but stimulating weeks for G. Bringmann, chair of Organic Chemistry I at UNIWÜ and honorary member of the University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN), Professor Virima Mudogo, previous Vice-President of the UNIKIN and alumnus of the UNIWÜ, Dr. Karine Ndjoko Ioset from the University of Geneva, and the other, local members of the Selection Committee for the BEBUC Excellence scholarships:

They jointly examined far more than 100 pre-selected candidates out of eleven Congolese institutions. A total of 62 candidates eventually got the attractive scholarships, which shall permit excellent young Congolese to study in depth and in a reasonable time, to become professors in the Congo.

For the first time, five different sorts of scholarships were granted: for bachelor studies (in the Congo), for master studies (either at a good African university, or in the Congo, then with the experimental work in Europe or in the US), for the doctoral thesis abroad, and for the – difficult - re-entry of the young academics into the Congo, to attain a professorship. And, for the first time, scholarships were granted to outstanding highschool students.

Extension by Six Further Universities

"Besides our already well-established partners, the Université de Kinshasa (UNIKIN) and the Université Catholique du Graben (UCG) in Butembo, we now have included further potent universities into the scholarship system: the Université Catholique de Bukavu (UCB), the Université Officielle de Bukavu (UOB), the Université Libre des Pays des Grands Lacs (ULPG) in Goma, the Université Officielle de Ruwenzori (UOR) in Butembo, the Université de Kikwit (UNIKIK), and the Université Kongo (UK) in Mbanza-Ngungu", Bringmann explains. These places were attended by the Evaluation Committee, only the candidates from the West of the country were jointly selected in Kinshasa.
The new universities had pro-actively applied for affiliation to the BEBUC scholarship program, encouraged by a call by the Congolese Minister for Higher Education and Universities. In agreement with His Excellency, the Minister, it is planned to include, step by step, all highly efficient universities in the Congo into the system by the year 2018. For this purpose, four organizational regions have been defined: the West with Kinshasa as its center; furthermore the North (Kisangani), the East (Butembo, Goma, or Bukavu), and the South (Lubumbashi). This year the focus has been the structuring in the East and, in part, also already in the West of the country.

For the First Time Scholarships for High-School Pupils

„Our experience with the scholarship system BEBUC has shown how important it would be to likewise include high-school students: At school already, it is decided if someone – according to the gender and social origin – will ever have a chance to go to university“, says Bringmann. To make this vision come true, however, seems most difficult, since high schools are de-central and thus difficult to reach comprehensively. „And still, in a pilot project, we have, now already, involved three secondary schools into the evaluation program: The Groupe Scolaire du Mont Amba in Kinshasa, the Collège Alfajiri in Bukavu, and the Institut Kambali in Butembo“, he says. At these three schools eight scholars, aged between 14 and 16 years, have now been selected for the first time.

The early recognition and support of excellent high-school pupils is a promising approach to prevent children from poor families, in particular girls, from dropping out of study. „There are frequently dramatic deteriorations in the pupils’ results when their parents lose their jobs or even die“, says the professor. It is then mainly the girls who, in favor of the male family members, are taken from school. The scholarship system may help them to carry on.

How the Scholars are Elected

The students and pupils become aware of the scholarship system by public posters, by radio and TV, and by information through the universities and schools themselves. In information meetings they get advice of how to write a CV and to design an application.

The best candidates are pre-selected by the Local Evaluation Committee. The main evaluation is then done in a direct, oral procedure, starting with a 10-min talk at the blackboard, followed by an interview on the chosen subject, and on future plans and visions. The candidates will also be tested for their English knowledge.

For prolongation of the scholarships, the candidates are even examined in English, exclusively. Master und PhD candidates moreover have to present future-oriented plans, depicting in which Congo-relevant specialization subject they want to perform their studies and research, and how they imagine their return to the
Signature on the University contract with the Université Libre des Pays des Grands Lacs in Goma and inscription into the guest book of the ULPGL. From right: Rector Prof. L.K. Karafuli, G. Bringmann, and V. Mudogo. Photo: K. Ndjoko

Three cooperation agreements are being signed (from right): Rector B.S. Musila (Mont Amba), Prof. K. Kambu (Université Kongo), G. Bringmann, J.M. Kitadi (Université de Kikwit). Photo: D. Tshitenge

Roland Muhindo, pupil at the Institut Kambali in Butembo, qualifies for admission into the scholarship system. Photo: G. Bringmann

Lisbeth Mbiki Nzuzi, student of medicine at the Université de Kikwit, presents herself by a chalk talk at the blackboard. Photo: G. Bringmann

Solemn Ceremonies with Signatures on Joint Contracts

The donation of the scholarship and prolongation certificates was done in solemn ceremonies in Bukavu, Butembo, Goma, and Kinshasa, always with all involved institutions. “This is yet another objective of our Excellence Scholarship Program: to lead together the participating Universities and high schools and to encourage them to collaborate.

During the ceremonies, G. Bringmann, together with V. Mudogo and K. Ndjoko, presented the scholarship system, followed by talks from the rectors and thanking words by the elected speakers of the scholars – in English. Moreover, cooperation contracts, which had already been pre-signed by the President of the UNIWÜ, Prof. Alfred Forchel, were solemnly counter-signed by the representatives of the six new university partners and the three high schools. By this, the University of Würzburg is now institutionally linked with, altogether, eight universities and three secondary schools in the Congo.

Five BEBUC-Award Laureates Honored

During these ceremonies, the most best scholars were, additionally, honored by a novel prize: the BEBUC Award 2012. The five laureates are Tania Bishola (biology), Arindo Akweni (agronomy), Tobit Liyandja (biology), Héritier Beya (physics), and Félix Katele (chemistry). All of them have achieved excellent study results over several years, and have shown commitment for the community, have organized joint seminars or have given brilliant talks.

Each of the awardees obtained a prize certificate and a Swiss watch – as a symbol for future-oriented planning! The watches were generously donated by Dr. h.c. Michael Klett, Chairman of the University Council of the University of Würzburg.

Synergy Effects, Results, Structuring

„The Scholarship System BEBUC is unique in many respects: It combines excellence, interdisciplinarity, and internationality with private, personal sponsorships and an intense mentoring of the scholars throughout the ‘pipeline’, from high school to the professorship“, explains Bringmann. This shall help to break the vicious circle of over-aging, sinking quality, lack of young scientists, and hopelessness at Congolese universities.

And the concept proves to work: „Indeed, the scholars develop extraordinarily well in all respects: They achieve splendid results, study more rapidly and in a shorter time than their non-sponsored colleagues, and their English makes paramount progress“, says Bringmann. Even more important: The capability of the scholars to successfully compete with other good students in other countries increases, as evident by international awards and distinctions that BEBUC scholars have received more recently, like stipends from the...
Happy about the additional distinction: The nove BEBUC Award 2012 went to (from left) Arindo Akweni (agronomy), Tobit Liyandja (biology), Tania Bishola (biology), Félix Katele (chemistry), and Héritier Beya (physics). Photo: G. Bringmann

Present and planned sites for the Excellence Scholarship System BEBUC in the Congo. Graphic: R. Emmerich

Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIz) or from the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), or prizes at international symposia (e.g. at the NAPRECA Symposium last year).

This is also positive for the University of Würzburg, where some of the first scholars want to perform their masters or doctoral theses. From April 1st 2012 already, three students of chemistry and pharmacy of the UNIKIN will come to Würzburg, to do the experimental parts of their master thesis here.

Simultaneously the Congolese universities and high schools affiliated to BEBUC collaborate more intensely, with joint concepts, structures, and equipment and with a lot of synergy.

Close Collaboration with the Foundation Else-Kröner-Fresenius-Stiftung

The BEBUC Scholarship System collaborates with many organizations and institutions. Particularly intense is the interaction with the German foundation Else-Kröner-Fresenius-Stiftung, which, by several grants to the Förderverein Uni Kinshasa (NGO for the Support of the UNIKIN), strongly supports the project for the Re-Installment of Excellence in the Congo, as a model case also for other African countries. “We are most grateful to this wonderful and strong and reliable partner at our side”, says Bringmann. Likewise most important are the numerous personal relationships of the private sponsors to 'their' scholars.

Future Plans for the Congo

The extension of the Scholarship System is planned to proceed in large steps over the coming years. For 2013 and 2014, additional centers in the North (Kisangani and environment) and South (Lubumbashi and associated universities) are planned to be built up. This extension shall be completed by ca. 2018.

Of increasing importance for the Congo will also be South-South collaborations, e.g. with South-African universities. Gerhard Bringmann and his colleagues will build up and intensify such collaborations in the future.

In all phases of education – from high school to the re-entry into the Congo – there are now promising young scholars in the 'pipeline'. „We are convinced that we will soon have the first 'BEBUC professors': young, excellent university teachers and researchers, who will renew the academic staff in the Congo and increase the scientific level – and help us with our ambitious task”, says Bringmann.

Contact

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