

Graduate Schools in Aid of Global Change



Lars Gerold: “Especially in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, German higher education institutions have a vested interest in also conducting this debate with a partner in the southern hemisphere”

The United Nations has committed itself to the pursuit of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). A new DAAD programme promotes the establishment of seven SDG-focused Graduate Schools around the world. In no particular order, the newsletter “DAAD Aktuell” presents these promoted graduate schools funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), together with their German and international partners, kicking this series of articles off with an interview of Lars Gerold, head of the DAAD’s “Development Cooperation – Institution Building in Higher Education” section.

Mr Gerold, the DAAD promotes the establishment of seven Graduate Schools focused on the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDG\)](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs) [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs]. What are the objectives of the “Bilateral SDG Graduate Schools” programme?

Lars Gerold: In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Development Agenda “Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. This sets out 17 joint development challenges for industrial countries, emerging markets, and developing countries, such as combating hunger and poverty, environmental protection, or promoting peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Higher education institutions are to help achieve these SDG. Our new programme is intended to enable higher education institutions (HEI) in developing countries and their German partner HEI to focus in a targeted manner on aiding implementation of the SDG through these Graduate Schools. The DAAD promotes the establishment of these SDG Graduate Schools at seven higher education institutions in the southern hemisphere, four of them in Africa, two in South America, and one in Asia.

How does this bilateral partnership work?

Established German universities help their partners at local level in setting up lecturing and research structures at graduate level. They bring in know-how and scientific expertise, for example

by contributing ideas to the curricula or sending out professors to give lectures or conduct research. However, nothing from Germany is to be adopted one-on-one. The curricula, for example, are to be adapted to the local circumstances. Participants are supposed to enter into a scientific debate and hence the schools are predominantly oriented towards PhD students and postdocs. Depending on local requirements, however, Master's student courses are also developed. The specialists trained at the Graduate Schools are to later work towards solving development-related issues.

Which SDG are these seven institutions focused on?

For example, SDG 11, the Sustainable Development of Cities and Communities, is the focus of a Graduate School of the South African University of the Witwatersrand together with the Technische Universität Berlin: Here the researchers are working on urban development and land use planning. A Graduate School in Nigeria, run together with the University of Hildesheim, analyses the correlation between culture and political conflicts since Nigeria's cultural legacy is being threatened by the terrorism waged by Boko Haram. Culture, art, and music are supposed to build bridges and contribute to the peace process in the region of West Africa. A Graduate School in Peru, meanwhile, is focused on aspects of inequality in the societies of South America. Climate protection and food security are additional topics which other Graduate Schools are looking into. Overall we promote a very interesting variety of subjects.

How did the partners come together?

These higher education institutions have in some cases known each other for a number of years. These may have already conducted joint research projects or had an exchange of students and researchers. However, there are also partnerships which are still pretty much in their early days. In view of the high level of funding of up to €450,000 per annum and per project, the respective higher education institutions now have the opportunity to take their joint project to a new level and give it a solid institutional basis. This brings a new quality to their cooperative work.

How greatly were German higher education institutions interested in tendering for the Graduate Schools?

The response was very positive: almost 30 proposals were received. And the requirements for providing very detailed project concepts were set very high. The German higher education institutions particularly hope to drive forward their own internationalisation process and raise their respective research profile. Especially in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, German higher education institutions have a vested interest in also conducting this debate with a partner in the southern hemisphere. One should not only engage in the discussion of these goals in the northern hemisphere but must shape the debate as a scientific exchange between the North and the South.

Offering high-quality graduate schooling in developing countries according to German standards is no easy undertaking. How does the DAAD contribute towards making the cooperation a success?

A central element that we launched for the first time on such a large scale is the results-oriented monitoring. This planning and controlling tool enables the tenderers to draft a project plan by which they may monitor whether they are achieving their goals and how they are doing so. We also make this tool available so that we are in a better position to monitor and support these projects. This kind of documentation is of particular significance in the context of sustainably implementing the SDG. We also provide aid in the form of our know-how on how to implement projects abroad. In addition, we advise the higher education institutions on many project implementation issues, such as organising fair and transparent selection processes for the granting of scholarships.

Interview: Benjamin Haerdle 25 January 2017)