AGNES: The African-German Network of Excellence in Science

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Very recently, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development published a "Marshall Plan with Africa" in [1]. The paper seeks a new approach between Europe, and in particular Germany, and Africa trying to overcome the common donor mentality of aid for Africa. Instead, a fair and stable partnership between Africa and Europe is being propagated. As stated in the paper, the starting points for the plan are insights such as Africa needs African solutions, jobs and opportunities for young people needs to be prioritised, sustainable growth demands for stable political systems, to name just a few. One of the pillars for cooperation mentioned in the paper is the education sector.

This is exactly where AGNES, the African-German Network of Excellence in Science, comes into play. AGNES1 was founded in 2011 by a number of scholars from Africa and Germany in order to foster the existing academic exchange between Germany and sub-Sahara Africa. AGNES started as a network within the prestigious German Humboldt Foundation.2

The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation funds international researchers to pursue a post-doc in Germany for up to two years. Recipients of a Humboldt Fellowship are affectionately known as "Humboldtians", and are eligible for further funding from the Foundation throughout their academic career. Similarly, German post-docs can be funded from the Foundation to pursue a post-doc abroad with a Humboldtian as research host. Academic excellence of the post-doc fellow is of paramount importance for selection; there are no quotas for countries or academic disciplines.

AGNES is supported by the Humboldt Foundation, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, and up to 2016 was also supported by The World Academy of Science. The goals of AGNES are, as formulated in [2]:

1) promote regional networking and professional exchange between excellent scholars within the region and Germany;
2) introduce young African researchers to Germany as a quality research destination via the Humboldt Foundation as sponsor of excellent individuals;
3) promote Africa as a research destination with many and unique research possibilities to highly qualified German scientists;
4) participate in ongoing discourse on expansion of scientific and academic capacities—also regarding the role of research and innovation for sustainable development in sub-Sahara Africa.

AGNES supports excellent African researchers through different measures. One measure is to promote and advertise fellowship programmes offered by the Humboldt Foundation. Since there are no quotas in the selection of Humboldt fellows, excellent African researchers stand a fair chance in being awarded a post-doc fellowship. However, the number of African Humboldt fellows is rather restricted. Here, the activities of AGNES are aimed at increasing the number of African Humboldtians by sensitising young African scholars to the notion of academic excellence at an early stage in their postgraduate training, and moreover, at the post-doc level.

The AGNES Intra-Africa Mobility Grant programme enables Masters and Doctoral students in sub-Sahara Africa to spend between 1 and 2 months at another sub-Sahara African country. Recently graduated, excellent doctoral scholars in sub-Sahara Africa may also be nominated for an AGNES Junior Researcher Grant that serves to provide mentorship and guidance towards successfully applying for a Humboldt post-doc fellowship.

In all of these efforts, AGNES is very supportive of researchers in sub-Sahara Africa. This is not due to divisive political reasons but simply an acknowledgment that the two regions of Africa have developed differently and require different interventions w.r.t. higher education needs. This is the reason to present AGNES at the DCRF 2017.

REFERENCES

Dr Heather G. Marco was born and educated in Cape Town, South Africa. She completed all her academic degrees at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and is an alumna of the Science Faculty and the Health Sciences Faculty. PhD in Zoology conferred December 2000. Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (AvH); postdoc at the Universitäts klinikum Hamburg-Eppendorf, Germany 2002-2003 (molecular biology, G protein-coupled receptor, neuropeptide hormone family). Academic staff member, UCT Science Faculty since 2001, teaches Animal Physiology and Cell Biology, research on Comparative Neuroendocrinology. Rated since 2005 by the National Research Foundation, over 55 peer-reviewed publications, including work in (Science, 2014, and nature Scientific Reports, 2017). Member of scientific societies (Zoological Society of South Africa, European Comparative Endocrinologists). ExCo member of (SAWISE: The Association of South African Women in Science and Engineering). Humboldt Ambassador Scientist in South Africa. Awarded the Humboldt Alumni Prize for innovative networking (conferred in 2013). Secretary of AHASA (AvH Association in southern Africa). Founder member of AGNES and first Elected Chair (President) of AGNES since 2014.

Dr Alexander Ferrein received his MSc in Computer Science (Dipl.-Inform.) and his PhD (Dr. rer. nat) from Aachen University in 2001 and 2007, resp. Between 2009-2011 he joined the Robotics and Agents Research Lab, University of Cape Town, as a postdoctoral research fellow with Feodor-Lynen scholarship granted by the Alexander-von-Humboldt Foundation. He then re-joined the Knowledge-Based Systems Group at Aachen University before he became a professor for Robotics and Computer Science at FH Aachen University of Applied Sciences. He is heading the Mobile Autonomous Systems & Cognitive Robotics Institute at Aachen Applied Science University. His research focusses on the field of Artificial Intelligence and Cognitive Robotics.