

Eva Maria Knab: Augsburgener Allgemeine, 2015/09/15

Researchers from all around the world feel at home

Exchange The number of international researchers coming to Augsburg is increasing. Many of them have everyday problems that need to be solved quickly. A special service offered by the university provides help



Media-Psychologist Barbara Maleckar from Slovenia (left) and Susanne Graf from the Welcome Service

By Eva Maria Knab

Olasupo Owoeye is a researcher from Nigeria. The PhD jurist has been all around the world to do research; his last stop was at a university in Vietnam. Before coming to the University of Augsburg he was a bit worried though: would he, his wife and their baby daughter find accommodation quickly? Would there be any communication problems due to his lacking German skills? His worries were unnecessary. "When I arrived in July, I was picked up at the tram stop, was shown around campus and afterwards was brought to my new apartment in the "Univiertel" (the area around university)," he says.

Owoeye was helped by a special university service for international researchers: the "Welcome Service." The service have been offered for the past two years, founded due to the increasing number of international researchers. In 2013 there were around 150 international researchers and Phd students at the university, this year around 250, said Susanne Graf, head of the Welcome Service. There is a clear upward trend.

The researchers come from all around the world to Augsburg. At the moment, most of them come from Asia, many from the USA and also from Russia. Exchanges with African countries are increasing as well. A proportion of the guests come for conferences or to teach intensive courses that last several weeks. Other guest researchers stay long-term as employees of their respective departments. "International researchers are also increasingly being offered full professorship positions at the university", says Graf.

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It's not always easy for the guest researchers to figure out and get familiar with the German higher education system and the university itself. This also applies to researchers who have some experience abroad already. One example is Dr. Barbara Maleckar, a media-psychologist from Slovenia. Dr. Maleckar is doing research for a project with University of Augsburg Professor Helena Bilandzic about television series and social reality. Maleckar came to Augsburg two years ago, shortly before the Welcome Service was launched. While she was still at her former university in Winchester (England) she was able to find a room in a shared apartment on the internet. However, everything had to be done quickly and she had no help. "I arrived in the morning and got my house keys from my neighbors in order to put my suitcases away. After that I went to the university right away, because it was the last possible day to sign my work contract." Maleckar already knew some German at that point. However, she still needed a few weeks in order to get



Olasupo Owoeye from Nigeria

through a large pile of bureaucratic papers—beginning with opening a bank account to registering with a health insurance company to clarifying questions about taxes. "Sometimes I didn't really know what I was exactly signing," she said. If the Welcome Service would've been available, Maleckar would've been able to get an English translation and an explanation of important German documents.

The researchers' needs are quite varied, commented Susanne Graf. Some only have a few questions. Others need intensive support, especially if they come from a completely different cultural background. One of the most important issues is the apartment search. The Welcome Service provides tips and helps with the search. It has created a close network of commercial renters and private landlords. The university also has its own guest house with five suites and two apartments. "However, it is already almost booked out for this year," said Graf.

It is of utmost importance that the guest researchers are able to figure out their way around and get accustomed to the German higher education system. In order to make this possible, the Welcome Service's homepage offers extensive information in English. There is also great demand for contact initiatives with other international colleagues on campus, which the Welcome Service provides, in addition to many other networking and free time opportunities.

It was a nice surprise for Barbara Malecker to find out that there was a Welcome Service starting just a few weeks after she arrived. "Integration and networking with other international colleagues was very important for me," she said. She received a lot of support for that, too. She now feels very comfortable in Augsburg.

Olasupo Owoeye was also able to get settled in well with the help from the Welcome Service. He will be researching with Ulrich Gassner for six months with support from a Humboldt scholarship for guest researchers. He's already saying now: "I will come again."

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Welcome Service Information:

Organization: The Welcome Service is part of the International Office at the University of Augsburg. The Service also works together with the University of Applied Sciences in Augsburg.

Features: Since 2013, two part-time Welcome Service employees, together with the respective department chairs, have been providing support for international guest researchers and PhD students.

Information: All international guests can use the Welcome Service homepage, provided in English, to get access to important information: www.aaa.uni-augsburg.de.