

Opportunity

For Students to go to Germany

Foster diversity to counter discrimination

Supporting students from developing countries to complete a master's in Germany

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This proposal aims to resolve one aspect of a multi layered problem. The first problem is the occurrence of obvious discrimination in the handling of visa applications in the US. The second problem is the fact that the education system in developing countries, here Sri Lanka as an example, is not competitive beyond the bachelor level. The third problem are the practical obstacles for students from developing countries to access master's programs in Germany. We will present the first two problems as background information and then proceed to propose a first step towards a solution for the obstacles these students encounter in Germany.

Problem Description

Recently it has come to our attention, through personal contacts, that there have been a number of cases where students from developing countries have received offers for PhD or master's programs at US universities, but then had their visa applications rejected without justification. To our best knowledge, none of these students had criminal records of any kind.

The cases we are currently aware of concern about 20 students from Sri Lanka alone, many of them married women, who have been denied US visas despite being given full scholarships to study in the US. At this point it is unclear how widespread this discrimination is for students across the developing world, whether this is a recent problem, or whether the discrimination is systematic.

A begging question at this stage is – [why do these students not apply to Europe](#) instead, in particularly Germany? On face value, Germany seems an ideal alternative for these young and talented students, given the emphasis Germany places on merit-based scholarship and education. However, it turns out that this is not the case. That is not because the universities in Germany lack quality, or because the economic opportunities after a successful completion of the degree would be unattractive. It is for systemic reasons alone.

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In Germany, the MSc is considered a part of the usual university education system. Hence, there is little specific funding to pursue an MSc¹. Indeed, for local students, there is no need for a funding scheme since they are supported by wider structures of the state (BAföG). Despite the fact that there are no university fees, which is a tremendous boon to the system, international students are required to demonstrate that they can afford about 9,000 € prior to being accepted into a German university. In total, they require about 18000 € which is supposed to cover the living expenses during the two years it takes to complete an MSc in Germany.

Given there are many different funding schemes to pursue PhDs in Germany, for which an MSc is necessary, it is reasonable to ask why these students do not pursue an MSc in their home country? Although it might be possible for these students to do an MSc in their respective countries, this would put them at a severe disadvantage. Although a BSc degree would be comparable to a degree done in Germany, an MSc will likely not. This is due to the fact that many developing countries do not have, and more seriously, cannot afford to foster high caliber research. While BSc educators can learn the material they teach and communicate it, MSc supervision is more involved and requires the supervisor to be actively involved in research. Furthermore, it was brought to our attention that for technology intensive studies a lack of high quality research infrastructure and equipment seriously affects the quality of a Master's education in developing countries.

The quality of the MSc is not the only issue. Taking Sri Lanka as an example, there seems to be little interaction and participation between academics from there and the rest of the world. After the completion of an MSc, students coming out of this environment would likely require reference letters in order to obtain PhD positions in Germany. It is a serious disadvantage for these students as the reference letters they would receive from these unknown academics will carry little weight.

Motivation

It is our primary goal to alleviate the discrimination these young and talented students from developing nations experience. We consider it a shame that their obvious talents do not receive the opportunity to develop to their full potential due to discrimination which we believe potentially involves racism. We consider diversity an important asset for the scientific community and we think that it is important for these students to have access to the top university education for which they are obviously qualified.

The present proposal is to be considered a fact finding mission to determine the actual scale on which this discrimination takes place. By offering a small targeted opportunity to those students we solicit the affected students to come forward. This is likely the most efficient path to collect data that allows us to address the problem in the long run, while simultaneously alleviating the negative effects of discrimination in the short term.

¹ The funding schemes available for foreign students (that we are aware of) mostly focus on particular programs that are aimed at economic development, with a clear intention for the students to return home after the degree. There exist little or no funding schemes that are either generic or focused on fundamental science.

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Germany with its high quality universities, low or absent tuition fees and moderate living costs is an ideal target country for this fact finding mission, as this setting is both attractive to students and it makes the proposed stipend scheme relatively cheap.

Bridging the Gap: “Opportunity Stipends”

To bridge the gap for these students we propose a stipend scheme which will enable them to pursue a master’s degree in Germany and hence will open the door for them, to apply for PhD positions in places where a high quality master’s degree is required for applications, such as Germany itself.

Eligibility criteria

- 1) Completed BSc
- 2) Successful application to a fully funded PhD program in the US
- 3) Denied visa application to the place intended for their PhD studies
- 4) Acceptance to a German university for a Master’s program

As this is supposed to be a first trial, the criteria are designed to keep the administrative effort as low as possible, while catching most of the students affected by the problem described. More refined criteria can be established once we have an idea of the effective scale of the problem.

For a first trial the criteria 2 and 4 should be sufficient to guarantee the quality of the applicants, while criterion 3 limits the scope of the proposal to students potentially affected by discrimination (effectively eliminating all students from developed countries).

Amounts paid

The Opportunity Stipend comes at 9.000 € / year satisfying the minimum financial requirements for foreign students in Germany. Plus travel expenses to move to Germany (~1.000 €). The stipend is limited to two years. Exceptional circumstances can allow for a one year extension.

For a *first trial* it should be sufficient to offer 50 slots, on a first come first served basis. This will limit the administrative overhead and allow to gauge the dimension of the issue. At 20.000 € per student, the costs for the trial would amount to approximately 1 Mio € total. An evaluation should happen after the first application round and then yearly. The trial ends after 4 years or when the 50 stipends have been taken up.

A suitable *long-term solution* should be found within due time. Possibly with a larger scope. (i.e. resolving the discriminatory US visa process, or establishing a permanent stipend scheme for a broader class of students from developing countries, that satisfy the academic criteria to pursue a master’s course in Europe.)

Potential Beneficiaries

Bhagya Kolombage

Date of birth: 10.07.1992

I am currently doing my master's at George August Universität Göttingen, Germany. Back in Sri Lanka, I have worked as a lecturer assistant (UoK), visiting lecturer (American College of Higher Education) and as a secondary school teacher (Gateway College) during the gap between bachelor's graduation to PhD acceptance. But I could not start my PhD studies right after the university acceptance due to a US visa denial. Then in 2019, I received masters admission to numerous universities in Germany and I started my studies in April 2019 at University of Göttingen.



Degree

Bachelor of Science Special Degree in Mathematics, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

Extra curricular activities

- Teaching (free teaching mathematics / science for students with necessities)
- Astronomy

Career goals

- A researching professor in mathematics

Sri Lanka needs many improvements in science / mathematics education in schools / universities and resource persons who can do it. Students need more opportunities and a better exposure to the international science world! So my long term desire is to contribute with what I learn and to support to the education here. I have this dream to start an international level research institute someday in Sri Lanka that will create opportunities for young minds to learn, research and to connect with the scientists / mathematicians around the world. Personally, I like to learn more mathematics because that is what I enjoy. I simply love to research!

Applications

- Phd scholarship at Texas Tech University, USA (status: accepted on 26.02.2018)
- MSc program: admitted to University of Gottingen (accepted on 04.01.2019), Hamburg University, TU Kaiserslautern, Saarland University, TU Chemnitz, University of Würzburg

Visa

- 5 years Student Visa USA (status: declined 12.06.2018, reason: not provided)
- 2 years Student Visa Germany (status: initially obtained a 3 month visa and extended it until July 2020. The period of extension depends on the money in the blocked account.)

I was financially supported by Dr. Lashi Bandara with his own pocket to cover the minimum required amount in my blocked account in order to obtain initial visa and the extension for 1 year.

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B Nuwangi Pramuditha Cooray

Date of birth: 18.11.1990

I am a bachelor's graduate student. I have worked as a teaching assistant at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, a research scientist at Industrial Technology Institute, Sri Lanka and a project coordinator at VCODE Technologies after graduation until acceptance to a PhD in a US university with a full scholarship. But I could not start my PhD due to USA visa denial. Hence I applied to few other universities in Switzerland, New Zealand and Australia. I was selected to follow PhD in physics at the University of Wollongong, Australia and started my PhD journey on August 11th 2019.



Degree

Bachelor of Science Special Degree in Physics, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

Extra curricular activities

- Teaching (science / mathematics), hockey (university colors winner)
- AIESEC

Career goals

- A career in nano physics research

Sri Lanka is a country in need of enhancements in science research and education field not only in universities but also in school level. It is notable that there is a scarcity of resource personnel and technology to provide opportunities for students who are interested in science. Over the years I have witnessed how this can affect the choices one can make for the future. My long term desire is to try to build the opportunities I could not have once for students in Sri Lanka. Providing expertise and opportunities to students and supporting them to connect with scientists / physicists to share knowledge could help improve the level of education immensely. Personally, I love learning physics and exploring possibilities in different directions to build novel material.

Applications

- PhD scholarship at Florida International University, USA (status: accepted on 27.03.2018)
- PhD in physics at the University of Wollongong, Australia (status: accepted on 22.06.2019)

Visa

- 5 years Student Visa USA (status: declined 18.07.2018, reason: not provided)
- 4 years Student Visa Australia (status: granted)