



MY PHD JOURNEY IN GERMANY A story of determination

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I came to Germany in 2006, as an Au Pair. I was a very enthusiastic 23-year-old with a degree in tow. I had graduated as a secondary school teacher for German and Geography from the prestigious Makerere University Kampala (Uganda). I had also worked for about a year and a half after my degree. I came to Germany by choice. I knew that one day wanted to work here either as a teacher or at the university as a lecturer or even as a professor. My decision to come as an Au pair gave me the chance that I needed to get away from books, get to experience the German culture that I had heard and learned so much about in school and at Makerere. I would make up my mind during my Au Pair year about where my road into academia would lead. And certainly, I felt that it was better to live in a foreign country under the protection of a host family than to come on one's own.

Au Pair

During my time as an Au Pair, it dawned on me that I still had so much to learn about the German culture and language! How to parse vowels with Umlauts, how to roll the 'r' at the back of my tongue, and which bread and cheese to buy. But all in all I can say that I had a supportive family which helped me in my endeavors to kick start my life a student after my gap year as an Au Pair.

The German university system

The German university system proved to be quite rigid from the get-go. I learned very quickly that despite having introduced the Bachelor/Master system in many German universities in 2004, it was really a Goliath task to get my Bachelor from Makerere completely approved. And then I found out that my university of choice no longer offered Geography. I had to think clearly about which path I wanted my academic journey to take. The German system leaves little wiggle space for you to opt in and out of different undergraduate courses. I settled for English and German (Anglistik and Germanistik) since I loved languages. I studied both courses at the B.A and Master of Education level.

Deciding to do a PhD

It became clear that I wanted to do a PhD four semesters into my B.A studies at the University of Wuppertal. In the same semester I attended two courses on Black British literature where we read novels about slavery and about 21st century multicultural Britain. The experiences of the characters in these novels resonated so well with my experiences as a young Black woman in Germany - I was sold! I wanted to research more about novels, films, poetry, art, documentaries by and about Black people in Europe.

Having studied at Makerere and knowing what it takes to achieve a PhD, I got in touch with the professor that I felt would be the best fit for what I planned to research about. I informed him about my plans to do a PhD while I was still a B.A student, this was about 10 years ago. During that time, I had heard that most of PhD students in my department had been recommended to pursue a PhD by their prospective professors.

After my completing my Masters' degree, I wrote an exposé (proposal) which granted me a spot as a PhD student at the department of English and American Studies. One thing that I had not thought much about before this had been how to secure funding for my PhD. I spent most of my first year as a PhD student apply for a fellowship. I submitted the exposé to one of the top ten scholarship foundations of excellence in Germany, which also had funded my Masters'. I got the scholarship! This by far has been one of the best experiences of my PhD journey. I had to go through so many steps of drafting and re-drafting the exposé and doing two interviews with different members of the scholarship foundation before I could get the scholarship. Getting a fully funded scholarship was truly an achievement.

Being a Black (African) female academic in Germany:

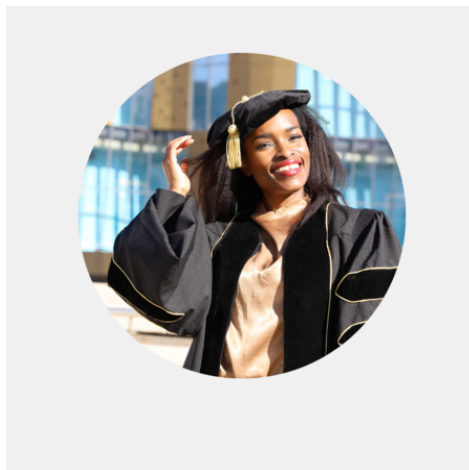
In total, I spent six years doing my PhD. There were ups and downs. One thing that I had to come to terms with was realizing that I was one of the few Black people doing a PhD in my field in Germany. I had been used to being in a room full of White people as a student, but this even became more noticeable while I was doing a PhD. As a scientist, or an independent scholar, you are faced with the task of presenting your work to a wider audience. During much of my time as a PhD student this audience was made up of White people especially at conferences in Germany and other European countries. It can get lonely when you want to find people that can relate to your unique experiences on both an individual and institutional level as a Black African woman.

Completing my PhD:

I once read a saying that the most difficult thing about doing a PhD is finishing a PhD. It is so true! Even in Germany, many begin the journey but only few make it to the end. Throughout the six years I learned that determination, perseverance, endurance and the will to complete my PhD were the motor that I needed to help me push forward. Most of all, I learned to never underestimate the power of a strong and healthy social circle. My social circle gave me the guidance and desire to push forward through their support spiritually, morally, mentally and academically. My social circle is diverse and is made up of people who are high-achieving professors, PhD students, postdocs but also people that have nothing to do with academia. If there is one valuable thing that I have learnt while doing my PhD - it is networking. Surrounding myself with supportive people but also removing or distancing myself from people who are not serving me or my God-given purpose in life.

You need a solid circle of people around you that you can trust because a PhD can get lonely. Long hours writing, doing research and drafting papers and also having to work on the side. The journey to PhD completion is long and can make you second-guess yourself. You might even catch yourself listening to the cynical voices (sometimes from African communities) who will ask whether your aim in life is to become an 'ever-student' (der/die ewige Student*in). I heard quite a few harsh and hurtful comments on my journey up the PhD ladder. But I think I knew that it was not my duty to convince anyone who was hell-bent on not understanding that this was my journey not theirs.

Striving for a healthy work-life-balance also helped me on my journey to completing my doctorate. The PhD has opened doors for me in spaces that I would have otherwise never have had access to. I am yet to see what the coming years have in store. I feel like this is just the beginning.



Written by Mariam Muwanga

Mariam Muwanga is a postdoc scholar. She blogs about her experiences as a Black woman in German academia. Follow her on the following social media platforms:

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Wow this is great to read congratulations very motivating

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Congratulations sis.. continue winning.

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**Esther Samson Ukaria**

A good read I enjoyed every word.
Wishing you all the best in your future endeavours.

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**Esther Prempeh Aboagye**

First of all congratulations. But I had the opportunity to meet her most on Wuppertal Uni. Most of the time she is alone. I admired her from a distance for some strange reason. Now I understand why. You have made us proud. Greater strides for you in the future.

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**Fer Ner**

I enjoyed reading your experience and im happy you got through and finished it.

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