KU offers higher education in crisis zones: New perspectives for teachers and learners

Enabling local higher education for young people in poverty-stricken areas, social hotspots and crisis zones – that is the aim of the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (KU) in cooperation with Jesuit Worldwide Learning – Higher Education at the Margins (JWL). To do this worldwide, it uses innovative digital teaching and learning formats. “With our service we can reach countries and regions in which there is hardly any basis for training future teachers. Our students will themselves become multipliers of education in their environment, who in turn will be able to competently coach other people through their learning journeys,” says KU President Prof. Dr. Gabriele Gien.

Father Peter Balleis, who is the President of JWL says: “Educating critical, solution-oriented personalities is the key to achieving peace. It is no accident we go to the rims of society to do this.” The concept of the offer takes into account that digitalization has not only brought changes to the way we teach, but also to the way we learn.

While university access is a given in Germany, only a fraction of the population of other areas in the world has the chance to pursue studies. That is why the KU as a JWL partner offers three English-language certificate classes that include training to become a teacher or sports social worker and also educate its participants on digital teaching and learning methods. Participants live in countries such as Afghanistan, Kenia, India, Mynmar, Sri Lanka or Iraq. Responsible for these programs is the Faculty of Religious Education of the KU.

The six-months program is hybrid: Participants regularly meet in regional learning centers, where they have internet access and can talk to their fellow classmates and to coaches. A learning platform that was developed for JWL serves as a virtual classroom for contacting KU lecturers and talking to international classmates. “This way of learning together in an intercultural environment promotes an exchange of knowledge worldwide. It also changes perceptions and helps overcome ethnocentric and biased perspectives,” says Dr. Marina Tsoi, who coordinates the JWL programs located at the KU. On the other hand, the platform is designed in such a way as to enable students to keep working on the class material offline from the comfort of their homes. Sponsors provide the necessary technical equipment to JWL.

The example of one student shows how valuable this service is and what discomforts and dangers the participants are willing to go to. Dr. Tsoi was communicating virtually with the young woman from Afghanistan. She had started the advanced training course “Learning Facilitator”, when the taliban took over and forbade her to continue her education. “After some time she was able to overcome her fear and on the weekend she went to the market square where there was an internet hotspot. There she did her homework. I sometimes needed to explain an exercise to her, when she hadn’t understood the question. Then she braved the dangerous journey to the market square again to read my answer,” says Marina Tsoi. Last November she graduated with honors and is now working as an English teacher in her village.
The Learning Facilitator program not only teaches its participants the content of different school subjects, but also focuses on questions of accompanying students in their learning process, on how to plan teaching and learning and on the individual learning personalities. “This is the first time that I learn to think about my students and to develop learning units for them that will be useful to them in the future,” says a participant who has already worked as a teacher prior to enrolling in this program. Another participant said that in her community married women only rarely have a chance to get higher education and that she is very happy to be an exception to this rule. Often graduates work as teachers in their villages or in JWL learning centers, but that is not all they do. They effect change in their neighborhoods in other ways, for example by counseling adults on the issue of health and disease prevention. In the last summer semester alone, about 120 students have taken part in this KU course. The number of applicants was double that figure.

As a continuation of the program “Learning Facilitator”, the KU also offers an eight-week additional qualification “eEducation Tools” that teaches its participants useful skills to be applied in digital teaching and learning. In this program, the focus is on the application of the new skills and therefore on making learning more effective for students.

The certificate course “Youth Sports Facilitator” not only conveys competencies of how to use sports as a vehicle of social work and promoting community. The participants develop an idea for a project, which they will put into practice in their neighborhood taking into account the economic and social contexts. Top priority is to create services for adolescents at the margins of society that will support them in their everyday lives.

“Of course, it is very valuable to us to find out what the realities of education in other countries look like and to exchange views with these people,” says KU President Gien. This is why for a year now, KU students have had the opportunity to take an active role in JWL offers. After all, Service Learning - a combination of academic studies and non-profit work accompanied by guided reflections on students’ experiences - is a concern at the heart of the KU. That is why the KU has become part of the international Uniservitate network that promotes Service Learning at Catholic universities worldwide. As part of the seminar “Service Learning at the Margins”, KU students are given an opportunity to support teachers in crisis zones didactically and methodically. In this way, they can get to know other teaching and learning contexts, other cultures and mindsets and get to know international teaching experience. They take part in the seminar units of the JWL program, analyze the different necessary steps of digital teaching and learning, create their own learning units and create teaching material that will be provided to JWL students for future use.

“Aim of these partnerships is not to simply diffuse European know-how to underprivileged people and countries but to enable an honest exchange between persons and countries. Young people in regions stricken by crises and poverty are taken serious as students and teachers. We empower them to use and hone their talents and knowledge,” says President Gien. On the other hand, the German partners in this tandem become learners and listeners while at the same time getting a chance to see the world from different viewpoints and to rethink their own actions.

For further information on KU offers as part of JWL please see www.ku.de/rpf/studienangebot. Information on Jesuit Worldwide Learning can be found at www.jwl.org.

URL zur Pressemitteilung: http://www.ku.de/rpf/studienangebot
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Students on their way to a JWL Learning Center in the Afghani province of Daikundi.

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