

INTERVIEW WITH ANNETTE SCHEUNPFLUG, PROFESSOR AT OTTO-FRIEDRICH UNIVERSITY OF BAMBERG, GERMANY

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “We use learning platforms and messaging services such as video platforms for digital teaching. This combination has proven to be particularly useful, as the messaging services are easily accessible in countries with poor internet coverage.”
- “[Digitalization] provides opportunities to connect people for learning that we would not have thought of before. In our teaching at the University of Bamberg, we are now able to integrate the perspectives from people from other countries. This is something we had not been able to do some years ago.”

You are a Professor at Otto-Friedrich-University of Bamberg in Germany. Could you briefly explain some of your responsibilities?

I am responsible for an International Master’s Program “Educational Quality in Developing Countries” which is run by the Otto-Friedrich-University of Bamberg, Germany, in cooperation with the Protestant University in Rwanda (PIASS) located in Huye, Rwanda.

This program is financed by means of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in Germany and Bread for the World, which is the German Protestant Development and Relief Agency. The target group for this Master’s program are multipliers and leaders in faith-based educational structures in Sub-Saharan Africa who work in teacher training or regional and national administration.

The Master’s Program aims to enhance their leadership capacity, to promote the understanding of educational quality, to offer adequate answers to educational change, and to enhance evidence-based decision making in education.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Annette Scheunpflug, Professor at the Otto-Friedrich-University of Bamberg, Germany, discusses some of his experiences with digitalization in education. The interview is part of a series on that topic.

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The program delivers 120 credit points and lasts four semesters. Currently, there are 45 students enrolled, half of them in their last semester and half at the beginning of their studies. These students are from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Zambia. The study program is organized in six blocks of four weeks in presence. During the periods of time between the blocks, intensive mentoring takes place and students draft written papers. During the pandemic, teaching in presence had to be changed into online teaching. A testimony from one of our students is provided as an annex to this interview.



Visual: IMPEQ Newsletter.

What has been your experience in using digital resources for education?

We use learning platforms and messaging services such as video platforms for digital teaching. This combination has proven to be particularly useful, as the messaging services are easily accessible in countries with poor internet coverage. Texts and smaller tasks can also be sent to participants using these media, and partner and group work can be conducted in many ways using this setting. When we started teaching online, many warned us that this would be difficult in cooperation with the Global South, but this was not the case. It is particularly encouraging that this form of teaching has also led to a new form of empowerment and participation. Some of our participants have started to participate in courses online worldwide. They would not have done that otherwise, without this experience.

What has been challenging?

We had several challenges to tackle. The biggest challenge was to provide every student with online access. Especially in crisis-ridden countries like South Sudan, this was a challenge in terms of transferring funds, and equipping them with solar energy and the corresponding internet units. This required funding too. Secondly, the content of online learning had to be brought into systems that on one hand ensured a high standard of security, but on the other hand also allowed downloading when internet access is slow. There were hardly any examples of previous experiences with technical conditions necessary for this to be the case. Furthermore, the students had to be familiarized with these tools online. This meant not only to teach the online tools but also for them to learn to be organized and disciplined for online classes, too.

What do you think more generally are the opportunities from digitalization?

It provides opportunities to connect people for learning that we would not have thought of before. In our teaching at the University of Bamberg, we are now able to integrate the perspectives from people from other countries. This is something we had not been able to do some years ago.

And what do you see as the main challenges?

Learning with electronic devices needs a high level of self-discipline as the internet provides manifold possibilities for distraction. The need to learn this self-discipline cannot be enough emphasized.

Do you know of other experiences that were innovative, and which may have inspired you?

The use of messenger services for online-learning is not yet as widespread as it could be, especially in countries with unstable internet connectivity.

Could you share with our readers a more personal anecdote about your passions, your interests?

I am also very active in GPENreformation, the global network of Protestant schools. As I mentioned it in an earlier interview for this series, my Christian belief is firmly linked to the joy of music. Singing, making music, or listening to music are an important part of my life. During my life, I have experienced very often how music brings people together and by playing my flute, I forget daily stresses. Moreover, it is an expression of our Christian faith and it creates motivation, joy, and easiness of life. I also enjoy reading and am a passionate scientist. Conducting research about schools and how to improve learning interests me very much and I have experienced this as very enriching.

**Interview with Edouard Ntakirutimana,
IMPEQ Graduate**

(Source: December 2021 IMPEQ newsletter)



Edouard Ntakirutimana from Rwanda has joined the Ph.D. community of IMPEQ graduates. After getting his Master of Arts in Educational Quality at the second cohort of IMPEQ, now he is working on his doctorate. Ntakirutimana was working at the Protestant Institute of Arts and Social Sciences (PIASS) in Rwanda before his joining IMPEQ. Now he still works at the Campus of PIASS located in Karongi District in Rwanda. Ntakirutimana answered the questions about his journey about IMPEQ and his Ph.D. which investigates the 'Preparation for research and research experiences of undergraduate students in Rwandan universities.'

How did you hear about the IMPEQ?

I heard about IMPEQ through my working place, IMPEQ is run by Uni-Bamberg but also by collaboration, some sessions are done at PIASS. During the first IMPEQ cohort, I heard about the program and decided to apply to the second one, if there would be a possibility. When it was announced that there will be a second group, I applied after consulting with my colleagues and friends at the university.

What were your working colleagues and family members' reactions to you when they learn that you were accepted to a master's degree program?

When I joined IMPEQ, my family and colleagues were happy, because they considered that it was an opportunity to raise my knowledge for improving my work activities. My family, colleagues and I knew that it wouldn't be an easy journey but we all were very happy about this offer and opportunity.

Were there any difficulties during the program?

The main difficulty in the program was finding enough time to work on Seminar papers while doing also my daily work activities. There were deadlines from my jobs which overlapped with the due dates of papers of the program. I had to set priorities and make the right choices accordingly. Time management was one of the most vital issues. I can say that I learned to make the best use of my time while doing my homework in between my workload. I am very happy that this skill I gained is one of the most important gains I have learned during IMPEQ.

What is the biggest difference in your life after IMPEQ?

There were different changes in my job activities. After joining IMPEQ I have gotten different skills that helped me to improve my work especially teaching quality, leadership skills, collaboration skills, and work organization. I have started to participate in in-service teacher training activities to develop quality in different primary and secondary schools in Rwanda. When I joined IMPEQ, I was an academic secretary of the Faculty, but at the end of the first year in IMPEQ, I was promoted to the Coordinator of one of PIASS's Campuses.

Are you still in contact with colleagues from IMPEQ?

I am connected to my colleagues of IMPEQ, some of them are together in the Ph.D. learning community, some others we work together at my institution. We also meet in national and international partnership projects. Meeting so many colleagues from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds is a big addition for me. Now I have more experience in multicultural and international education spaces which I think is a big plus for me and my university. I also meet friends from my cohort and other IMPEQ groups at the national level. Together, we made a forum to meet and plan some educational projects in the future.

How did the Ph.D. opportunity emerge?

The Ph.D. opportunity emerged when I worked on a proposal and then shaped it with the support of some IMPEQ colleagues in the Ph.D. learning community and then shared it with Prof. Dr. Annette Scheunpflug. As she accepted to supervise me, my Institution leadership in collaboration with her, agreed to support my studies through the project of Partnership of Uni-Bamberg and PIASS. My project topic is "Preparation for research and research experiences of undergraduate students in Rwandan universities". I started making interviews for data collection. These interviews will be interpreted for a better understanding of the Rwandan undergraduate students.