

# Get out of your comfort zone

DAAD-Prize 2020

**The DAAD Prize, which is financed by the Federal Foreign Office and includes a prize money of 1,000 €, is granted for outstanding achievements of foreign students studying at German universities. At the HNEE the prize is awarded annually during the festive matriculation ceremony. This year Mayarí Chua Soto (from Mexico) will be honored for her outstanding academic achievements and remarkable commitment. In the interview, she tells why commitment is important to her.**

## **How did you get the idea of studying here in Germany and especially “Global Change Management” at our university?**

My previous studies are on environmental engineering and I had a great intercultural experience at a university in my state. I was working there as a teacher, building some connections between people of the rural communities and the university. I liked it a lot and figured out that interculturality was my thing. I loved to work with the rural communities. Therefore, I found GCM perfect because it is about connections, interculturality and about listening to other perceptions in comparison to your own.

## **And what do you want to do after you finished studying?**

I am a businessperson, I have to admit. I really would like to develop my own business related to sustainable products and sustainable food production. That is kind of my topic since I am working with a company called “Weinrich Schokolade” for already one year by now. They are located in Herford and are partners of our master programme. I started a very nice project about sustainable cocoa production and organic chocolate with them since I am interested in organic and sustainable agriculture and food security. Now I am writing my thesis about how to evaluate and monitor such a process in rural communities.

## **Can you tell me a bit about the commitment you have had here so far?**

I just started participating in the language café and was deeply involved in the “Team Building” of my study programme. We also had a Team Building when I started studying at the HNEE and it was well done by two Germans. [But] Someone who comes from a foreign country knows better what it is like to be a foreign student here. A foreign student can understand what you feel like during the first months after you arrived here and what you need to talk about. I wanted to be that international student who knows what it feels like to be a foreign student here and I wanted to support others with this knowledge and tell them that they are not alone and if they need help they can come to me and talk openly about their problems and don't feel afraid or something like



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that because it is quite an intercultural shock when you come here. Sometimes people at home think, that you must be doing so great because you are living your dream in Germany but it is not just a dream. You really suffer sometimes from being away from your family and you have many concerns too. I really wanted that people can hear that. That other students who feel the same and that they are not alone. It is okay, not to feel good all the time and to recognize that sometimes it is hard. They should know that they have someone who is also dealing with this situation.

## **What kind of obstacles does international students have to face, when they come to Germany and especially Eberswalde?**

International students face many difficulties here. One experiences different forms of racism every day. Unfortunately, Eberswalde is sometimes not so friendly to foreigners. Another thing is the economic aspect. International students who do not have a scholarship must look for work, which is not easy if you do not speak any German. It is also complicated to find a balance between studies and work hours.

## **Have you had any commitment in a social or cultural way before you arrived in Germany?**

Yes, but Mexico is very different to Germany. You don't have so much free time since you have to work a lot. I am economically independent for a very long time now, so I was always working in my free time. I am actually a soap maker. I

gave a lot of free workshops on how to make soap to people who need it. For example, women who have a poor educational background and are looking for alternatives to make a living. I went many times to the communities, gave workshops, and showed them how to make soap and how they could set up a small business out of it. I also did this when I went to Africa with the programme “Greening Africa Together”. There, I showed it to a group of women who could not understand any word of what I said because they did not speak English. Still they were very happy about it. In Mexico I was further more pretty involved with NGOs. Especially one that supported the native bee protection.

## **Why do you think it is important to have this commitment or that maybe more people should have it?**

Because we are very privileged people. I am within the one percent of women from Mexico who have the chance to do this and broaden my mind. Probably 0,1 percent of the women population in my age from Mexico have the privilege and possibility to attend studies abroad. Many women my age in Mexico have kids and are married to a man who does not allow them to grow professionally and they have to work in any lousy job because they need the money. They cannot do anything for themselves and they cannot take care of themselves. I can take this chance, wherefore I will and I can give something back to others, especially to other women, who

cannot live this life. I feel very happy that I can do actually something and can learn something here, not to show it only to anyone in Mexico but everywhere. I just want other persons to see that, and motivate especially younger women, who are still on their way to choose what kind of live they want to live and not just to follow the typical women roll that exists in their country. Mexico is a very macho country and that has to change, but for that we need more women who are doing something different.

## **What does it mean to you to receive the DAAD-Prize?**

It feels so good because I put so much effort to be here and worked a lot. These last two years were a big workload in a professional way, but also regarding my mind, thinking and my studies. I finished my bachelor almost ten years ago, so coming back to school in this master was very difficult and challenging. Working in a language which is not your mother tongue and having to achieve a very high level was very challenging and having commitment next to it was a lot of working time. So it feels very good to be rewarded for the effort I did because it shows me that it is good what I did and that it deserves acknowledgement and the prize for this hard work.

## **What would you recommend other international students at our university or what would you like to tell them from your own experience?**

Get involved as much as you can in anything you can. I am always looking for more and for example I did so many extra courses I did not need to do just to broaden my mind and knowledge. Like that I met many interesting people I could learn from. I never imagined that one day I would go to Africa helping disadvantaged people there, and now it was possible just because I always tried to push myself further and it actually changed my whole perspective of the world. I am also on the programme “Grenzenlos”, which was very challenging since it is in German. It is challenging, but it is how it is; sometimes you have to get out of your comfort zone. It does not matter if it is hard. Yes, maybe you will make lots of mistakes, maybe it will feel like a walk of shame at first but in the end you can grow and learn from it, as well as others can learn from you. (FS)

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