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Excellence in Africa: 100 PhDs for Africa Programme: The first call for applications is successful

854 African candidates submitted their applications to the first call for proposals of the programme, which closed on 20 April 2021. The diversity of the research topics, the variety of the applicants’ nationalities and the quality of the applications illustrate the relevance of the Excellence in Africa (EXAF) initiative.

The map below shows the number of received applications according to the countries where the host universities are located. Thirty-seven (37) different countries are represented, which is extremely encouraging and demonstrates a strong interest in the programme across Africa.

"This call has been a great success" claims Jérôme Chenal, Co-director of the programme at the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL). "The number of submitted applications increases with each EXAF call for proposals. This demonstrates that our efforts to promote the initiative are successful".
Among the five most represented countries, three are English-speaking countries (Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya) and two are French-speaking countries (Morocco and Benin). Other French-speaking countries with many applications can be found in West Africa. Indeed, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Senegal have also around 40 applications.

The large number of applications received from East Africa countries must also be highlighted, with dozens of applications from Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania. Southern Africa is also well represented, with a lot of proposals received from countries such as Mozambique and Zambia, as well as South Africa. There are also a few applicants from universities in Madagascar. Finally, in North Africa, applications come mainly from Morocco, the third most represented country with 70 applications from all over the Kingdom. There are also many applications from institutions located in Tunisia, Algeria or Egypt.

As emphasized by Hicham El Habti, President of Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P) and Co-director of the EXAF programme: "The large number of applications reflects the ambition of our African youth to meet the challenges for the development of our continent. Our commitment at UM6P is to put our skills and resources at the service of these young people to support the development of research and innovation in Africa"
The 100 PhDs for Africa programme provides financial and scientific support for doctoral theses in Africa. This programme is part of the Excellence in Africa initiative, jointly launched by UM6P and EPFL. All engineering sciences are concerned by this programme.

The PhD students will benefit from the co-supervision of a professor from EPFL and from various events organised by UM6P, such as summer schools. The PhD students will be invited for short periods of time in the laboratories of their co-supervisor at EPFL and on the UM6P campus, but they will receive their doctoral degree and conduct most of their research at their institution in Africa.

The objective of the 100 PhDs for Africa programme is to enable the completion of very high-quality theses and also, in the longer term, to build a strong network of young researchers who can have a tangible economic and societal impact in Africa.

In this respect, the project team appreciates another statistic: the proportion of female applicants, which has reached almost on third of the applicants (29%). The objective would be to achieve parity, but this proportion is already a very good result. In addition, it must be highlighted that most of the female applicants have submitted outstanding proposals.

![Figure 2. Applications by gender](image)
The first call for applications is now closed and the EXAF team started the evaluation of the applications. "The selection will be based on the quality of the proposals and the scientific excellence of the candidates", says Frédéric Meylan, project manager at EPFL and head of the programme. The selected applications will be submitted to EPFL professors, who can interview the most promising candidates. In conclusion: "the evaluation of such a large number of applications will be challenging, but we are not complaining because this will allow us to select the best applications and guarantee PhD theses of outstanding quality for EXAF."

Contacts

Yann Kerloch, Communication Manager for Excellence in Africa, EPFL
+41 21 693 64 01, yann.kerloch@epfl.ch

Khalid Baddou, Communication Manager, UM6P
+212 525 07 31 21, khalid.baddou@um6p.ma