

# “Building bridges of tolerance and spreading seeds of hope”

## DAAD-Prize 2023 for Saleem Haddad

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 international students studying at HNEE. The prize is awarded annually during the festive enrolment ceremony. In the fall of 2023, BIOM student Saleem Haddad from Jordan was honored for his excellent academic performance as well as for his remarkable dedication at HNEE and beyond -

### **Congratulations, Saleem. How do you feel receiving this prize?**

Thank you, I can see this recognition from two sides; first It's nice to recognize the efforts of the international students and the good communication among the student community. On the other side, there's a little “othering” for the international students. I understand the extra pressure on International students, and it is great to see this prize dedicated to that, but I wish also to see another prize based on the pure achievements of the students and to see international students winning it along with German students.

### **Do you think it is easy for an international student to get involved at HNEE ?**

At our university, I see there is a lot of effort to make it easier for the students that speak only little German. During my two years at HNEE, I found a good community that accepted me and made it easier with the language barrier. I know many other students, from other universities across Germany, who faced some extra issues due to the language barrier. Also, the fact that our university is close to Berlin gives kind of a run-away option. The international office, the student committees and the professors also play the role of a buffer zone to make it easier in the beginning. However, I think the university could make more official efforts to integrate international students into the city of Eberswalde.

### **Can you give us some examples?**

I remember just after I arrived in Germany, I had my first appointment at the Ausländerbehörde (foreign office). I felt pretty uncomfortable because the appointment was only in German —noting no german required for my study and I just arrived- I was glad to have my buddy with me. For me as a new student, such appointments and some other places around the city gave me the feeling of disability -or even stupidity- as a non-German speaking person. Many of the international students are studying here fully in English that's something the German System has to work on especially in the beginning of their journey in Germany. Also, when I saw the results of the last election, it made me worried about how life will be in the city for the international students. Many BIPOC students faced a few racist events in the city. I had some people yelling at me because I speak English, some students told me “it is difficult to in the public transportation



because there are always those looks that come from some people”. It's important to mention that this is not the norm but it happens. What can the university do about that? Recently there was an “anti-racism week” at our university - it would be great to see some similar activities from the university towards the city, discussing the communication between international students and the local community. Saying all of that, I love living in Eberswalde and during the last months I was abroad in my internship, I even felt homesick for the place, and I wish to see Eberswalde always getting better and better.

### **Talking about home, can you tell us about your way from Palestine, over Jordan and South Africa to Eberswalde?**

My roots are from Palestine and I have lived most of my life in Jordan, where I grew up and studied engineering, inspired by my father. I didn't like the hierarchy in the construction sites and the motive to merge sustainability with engineering shaped my decision to shift my career towards the environmental and development side. I had the opportunity to join a Biosphere Reserve in South Africa. It was a challenging time as I just shifted my carrier, but they believed in me and I made use of the chance. It was a life changing step, I learned about sustainability, development, environment but also got closer to different cultures and different pains—pains of inequality. The biosphere reserve led me towards Eberswalde to continue my studies in the “Biosphere Reserves Management” (BIOM) programme. And the connection with South Africa continued, next month the team will be visiting HNEE for a potential collaboration.

### **You are well known to be quite a political person. Among all those crises we are facing, what calls you the most?**

As a Palestinian rooted who grew up in Jordan, I have been introduced to politics since the beginning; it is the reality of life and the only way to understand the surrounding, adding to that I started my academic life during the so called “Arab Spring”, where politics became part of the daily life and every corner of the city. When I wrote my motivational letter for the BIOM study programme, I remember that, I focused on the environmental issues - which are really urgent in Jordan, noting that we are the second poorest country when it comes to water and I wondered why we didn't see it in our daily life, but then I remembered that many other issues were more pressing. Every country is facing different issues, especially the so called “developing countries” - I call them post-colonial countries - are facing problems often more severe and harder on the individuals from development side and social side. Even though we are on the edge of the planet's capacity and an environmental collapse, I believe the most urgent things to fight for are the civil rights and equity, such as the freedom of speech as well as social equity between the people and between the countries, along with finding sustainable solutions without forcing perspectives or conditioning the support. I strongly believe we need solutions coming from the community voices. As academics, we need to go out there and talk to the people because it's their lives, traditions, and lands. So this is my focus now.

### **You are such a positive and cheerful person. How do you keep your head up facing all those problems?**

That's always the shell, you know, the outside (laughs). No! I guess that's the only way. We only have the hope! I want to put the seeds of hope in every community and in every project that I'm participating in. And to give it a try, even if some people say this will not succeed. It is good for our inner peace. At the end of the day, when we put our heads on the pillow, we know

at least we did our part and that's how we continue.

### **Can you tell us your biggest cultural shock with regard to German mentality?**

That's a tough one, but coming from the Middle East I would say it is about our mentality of “giving more than taking”. In our tradition, if someone knocks on your door, you need to welcome them inside for three days without asking them any questions. It is still reflected in our daily life and communication. In Germany, there often seems to be a trade-off, like “I give you that and now you give me something for it”, which is not bad but it was a different feeling to see friends discuss over a euro or two. The second cultural shock was the freedom on the individual level. Here, you can really speak-out your feelings without social limitation - though unfortunately not always applicable for political points - but talking about freedom on the social level. However, It is important to understand the different cultures and build harmony between them without erasing the individual cultures. For example a colleague showed non-acceptance attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community; my reaction was to understand why he felt this way and I realized that he had never been introduced to the community. So, we went to a public LGBTQ+ event where he interacted and spoke with many people and realized that there is no issue with different life choices as long as we don't force it on the others. Openness and discreteness are crucial. The key is to stay open-minded, to accept the differences from other cultures without erasing them, and to open the doors for some common grounds for building strong bridges of tolerance.

### **You are graduating from HNEE soon. What's your plan and will you stay connected with Eberswalde?**

In my career, what motivated me to study BIOM was to work on development sites and speak for the local communities. During my studies here I visited seven countries! So I guess this is where I'm heading: into the world. That could be in collaboration with any German institute and possibly with HNEE. The university here gave me lot and changed my life in a good way. I was even thinking about getting a tattoo representing this changing point. A painting by Caspar David Friedrich, that we have been talking about in class. So HNEE will even remain attached to my body. Noting my concerns over this question that might be asked for internationals with different intentions.

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