

venture kick

"We offer a helping hand to the top performers of tomorrow"

"Aiducation International" has become the first non-profit organization to win a "venture kick" grant. Founded at ETH Zurich, the organization grants scholarships to talented young Kenyans. We spoke to CEO Florian Kowalke about the pressure for selection, the potential risks and ambitious young people in Kenya.



In January 2009, some employees from "Aiducation International" traveled to Timboni, Kenya. They visited a number of schools and interviewed potential scholarship holders. (Photo: Carsten Danzer)

Florian Kowalke, where did the idea to raise scholarships for talented Kenyan school children come from?

When they leave elementary school – which is free – about half of young Kenyans are unable to go to a secondary school because their families cannot afford the school fees, which are roughly the equivalent of an average annual Kenyan salary. Our present partners in Kenya realized that a lot of human potential is being lost on account of the high fees.

How did ETH Zurich come to be involved?

Kristin Kapitza and I traveled to Kenya at the end of 2006, where we met our current partners. They had already founded a similar organization at that stage. Taken with the project, we established the Swiss branch with friends from ETH Zurich. We all want to help realize the potential of as many young people in Kenya as possible. What's more, research is also being conducted in the field at ETH Zurich: experts from the post-graduate study program in developing countries (NADEL) have provided us with some valuable input.

In which countries is "Aiducation International" active?

We draw a distinction between "scholarship raising", where we

collect money, and “talent raising”, where we grant the scholarships. Currently, we have scholarship raising chapters in Switzerland, Germany, Great Britain and Singapore. Four more countries are due to be added soon. Kenya is presently the only country where we have scholars, although we’re also looking to expand our talent raising in the near future.

How does the collaboration with Kenya work?

Our most important partner on the ground is Jeremy Kiponda Kambi, who co-founded the organization in Kenya. 19 years ago, he was a “high potential” candidate himself, whose family could not afford to send him to secondary school. He was lucky enough to obtain grants from a service club and is now a doctor. Two years ago, he decided to pass on some of his good fortune, as the gap in the school system that almost cost him a promising future back then still exists to this day. Hence, he founded “Aiducation International” with some friends and, one year later, Kristin Kapitza and I joined him and his team. Jeremy is an excellent managing director and manager – the paragon of what we are looking to achieve with our grants.

How can you be sure that the grants only go to families who really need them?

Firstly, the parents’ jobs and the number of siblings are decisive factors. We also ask for written references from teachers. In case of doubt, we then conduct telephone interviews and, in rare cases, actually visit the families at home. We check whether they live in a mud hut, whether the roof is made of palm leaves or metal, how many electrical appliances they have, and whether they even have electricity at all.

How much money goes into administration?

We guarantee that at least 90 percent of the donations go into the grants. At the moment, we can even invest 100 percent of the donations in school fees because we can currently cover the administrative costs with prize money. Sponsors and foundations also make certain contributions. Our goal is to acquire sufficient infrastructural sponsors to be able to keep investing 100 percent of the money from private donors in grants.

What makes "Aiducation International" different from other charities?

Firstly, the donations go exclusively towards education. After all, we believe that education is the biggest asset you can have in a developing country. Secondly, all the scholarship holders get together at annual "mentorship academies" to build up a network and plan strategies in workshops as to how every individual can use his or her unique abilities to further the development of Kenya. Thirdly, the donors, or "AiduMakers" as we call them, can choose who they would like to award a scholarship to, based on the written applications and motivation videos. The applicants are all pre-selected in that they are excellent pupils, come from poor backgrounds and have a great life vision. We don't just hand the money out left, right and center to anyone who asks for it; we give it specifically to the schools so that the potential top performers of tomorrow have access to school and thereby to their own potential.

This approach gives the organization an air of elitism at first glance.

The classic charities in particular want to treat everyone equally. However, we don't believe that this is an effective use of the money. Not that everyone doesn't deserve the aid – it would be great if we could help everyone in need equally. But if you have limited funds, somehow you have to be selective. The performance-based approach is supposed to encourage young people, and we want to spread the word that they can all realize their dream if they perform accordingly. By passing on the news of our service by word of mouth, it can spread like wild fire. We currently have about 100 scholarship holders and are constantly receiving more applications. We would like to support those who are willing to give something back to society with their future profession and ideally, like Jeremy, multiply the effects even further.

You won 130,000 francs from "venture kick". Is money the only thing your organization needs?

Anyone who is seriously looking to develop an organization like ours further primarily needs time and money. We are on the look-out for more, dedicated people who want to help us to realize further potential.

“Aiducation International” is the first non-profit organization to clear all three hurdles at “venture kick”. What is the secret to your success?

Without a sound business model you won't get very far. We're not one of the classic high-tech start-ups ETH Zurich normally produces, but rather a “high-concept start-up”. We have achieved most of our goals and even exceeded them, which impressed both us and the jury. Others might merely see the prize money of 130,000 as the icing on the cake, but for us it was a massive boost.

130,000 francs in three stages

“venture kick” promotes young companies in a three-stage procedure. The budding entrepreneurs have to structure their business idea in stage 1, develop the business case in stage 2 and stretch their wings on the market in stage 3. Every stage ends with a presentation in front of a jury. If the latter gives it the thumbs up, the company receives a financial incentive and professional support to help it to master the next stage. The grants are 10,000, 20,000 and finally 100,000 francs.

The “Aiducation International” team

Florian Kowalke has a degree in life sciences from Harvard University and a doctorate from ETH Zurich. He spent twelve months in the Ivory Coast, has co-founded several start-ups and is the CEO of Aiducation International. Many of his experiences (education, start-ups and extracurricular activities) were made possible thanks to grants and awards. Since January 2009, he has been working fulltime for “Aiducation International”.

The founding team also includes Kristin Kapitza, a doctoral student at ETH Zurich's Institute of Cell Biology, Eva Köberl, an economist and doctoral student at ETH Zurich's Institute for Business Cycle Research, Lukas Oertle, who has a degree in computer science from ETH Zurich, and Jeremiah “Jeremy” Kiponda Kambi, who is a practicing doctor in Kenya. In addition, the core team in Switzerland currently comprises Lola Kappeler, Karin Aue, Matthias Meier, Georgina Balint and Jeanette Blings.

Event announcement

The "Aiducation Forum" will be held in Zurich on Wednesday, November 25. Apart from a talk on the role of education in development aid, the program also includes a film about the work of "Aiducation International". The forum begins at 19:00h and places are limited. To sign up or obtain further information, contact matthias.meier@aiducation.org.

Reader comments:

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