



Our employees from around the world

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Topics: Organisation & Staff

We at Eawag are particularly proud of the international composition of our employees. Dübendorf and Kastanienbaum are home to researchers, technicians, administrators and apprentices from over 40 different nations.

The series with Erfan Haghighi, Fatima Alkhatib, Dimitris Antonakis, Stanley Sam und Xiao Shan Yap was created as part of a photojournalism course that Christian Dinkel is tanking at the MAZ in Lucerne.

Erfan Haghighi



Erfan Haghighi (Photo: Christian Dinkel)

Erfan Haghighi has experienced the effects of global politics first-hand. In 2016, US President Donald Trump introduced a “Muslim ban” which closed the borders to citizens from Muslim-majority countries, among them Iranians. A few months earlier, Erfan Haghighi, an Iranian by birth, had taken up his postdoc position at MIT, practically setting foot on American soil at the last minute.

His wife Maryam was not so lucky. At the time, she was pursuing her doctorate at the University of Bern and was denied a visa to the USA. Erfan Haghighi himself could not leave since he would not have been allowed to re-enter the country. “It was an incredibly upsetting time.” When the Democrats went to court against the travel ban, a short window of opportunity – lasting just a few weeks – opened for Muslims to travel to the USA. “My wife took a quick decision. She resigned from her PhD, got on the plane and was lucky to find a position at Harvard University.”

Before moving to the USA, Erfan Haghighi had studied mechanical engineering at the Sharif Technological University in Tehran (Iran) and graduated with a PhD from ETH Zurich. It was during this time that he came to know and love Switzerland, its nature and its weather – even the Swiss German language. Although Erfan and Maryam Haghighi enjoyed their life in Boston, they decided to move back to Switzerland in 2018 when Erfan Haghighi received an offer from Eawag and the University of Zurich to join the remote sensing group of the Water Resources + Drinking Water Department. Since the beginning of 2020, he has been working as Head of Research & Development at a start-up in Zurich. The company focuses on air quality improvement and temperature regulation in offices with the help of plants, sensors and big data. “This is much better for the environment than air conditioning,” says Erfan Haghighi.

One thing he misses from time to time is Iranian food. “I am originally from Lahijan which is known in Iran as the City of Food and Tea.” The city is located close to the Caspian Sea in the northern part of Iran where tea, rice, vegetables and fruit are grown. Whenever he really feels like Iranian food, Erfan Haghighi goes for a Persian kebab at his favourite restaurant. An avid football player, SuperKondi BodyAttack aficionado and runner – whether on a Sunday morning, on the SOLA Stafette run or even at a marathon – he is not worried about the calories.

Fatima Alkhatib



Fatima Alkhatib (Photo: Christian Dinkel)

«My dream job has always been to work as a chemical laboratory assistant,» says Fatima Alkhatib, who speaks German incredibly quickly and nearly flawlessly, even though she only came to Switzerland from Syria barely five years ago.

At that time, the civil war in Syria had already been going on for several years. When more and more men were called to the front, she fled with her entire family (her parents, two brothers and four sisters) to stay with an aunt who had lived in Switzerland for a long time.

Fatima Alkhatib is now 24 years old. In Syria, she graduated from high school and studied civil engineering at the University of Damascus. When a bomb hit right near the university during her third semester, she dropped out of school. Now at Eawag, she is starting all over again and instructs chemical laboratory technicians.

«It was hard to start from scratch just because my qualifications from Syria have no value here in Switzerland,» says Fatima. She does not like to look back on her first year here in Switzerland. It was not only hard hearing about family members and friends who were still in the war zone, but also having to learn a new language was not easy.

And yet she learned quickly. After her first year, she was able to communicate in German, which enabled her to do an internship as a chemical laboratory assistant at ZHAW. Finding an apprenticeship afterwards was not easy, however. «So it was all the better when I finally got accepted at Eawag,» says Fatima Alkhatib.

For Fatima Alkhatib, her way forward is clear: After completing her apprenticeship, she would like to go back to university: «preferably to study chemistry or chemical engineering.» Does she want to stay in Switzerland? «For the foreseeable future, yes», she says. In the meantime, she has settled into her new home and has learned to love nature and hiking.

Dimitris Antonakis



Dimitris Antonakis (P: Christian Dinkel)

Fusty is the last thing Dimitris Antonakis could be described as. On the contrary: the outdated librarian stereotype bears no relation to our Greek colleague who has worked in the Lib4RI since the beginning of 2019.

Dimitris Antonakis started his career as a librarian and information scientist when he was living in his native Greece, and it was his passion for his profession that prompted him to move to

another country with his family and to discover a different culture. Today, he says that what brought him to Switzerland was the fact that the job in the Lib4RI was a perfect fit, but he admits that it was the USA at the top of his shortlist of countries. The financial crisis and the economic situation in Greece was also a factor, of course. "Leaving one's home is a big step, but when our daughter was born, it was clear to us that we wanted to take on this challenge."

As a member of the E-Resources & IT Services team, Dimitris looks after procurement and management of electronic resources. "Over the last few years, Lib4RI has placed a heavy emphasis on transitioning from printed collections to online information services, which was actually a great help to us during the pandemic", he says, not without pride.

The family were certainly plunged in at the deep end when they arrived in Switzerland. Dimitris Antonakis, his wife and their two-and-a-half year old daughter plus dog only landed in the country a couple of days before Dimitris' first day at work in Dübendorf. As Dimitris recalls now, settling in wasn't that easy to begin with. A strange country, unfamiliar surroundings and, of course, the new job, and all of that within just a few days; but the fascination of moving to another country and of getting to know another culture and feeling at home in it all outweighed the challenging aspects, and continues to do so for him now. "We are super-happy here – the Swiss mentality really resonates with us. The way people are with each other here is just different – it's respectful and more considerate." His wife feels the same, although she is unable to work as a police officer here, which was her profession in Greece. She currently works in an office, and she and the whole family now feel very much at home here. "We're well settled in. My daughter goes to the Eawag/Empa kindergarten and so she's growing up fully integrated."

When Dimitris Antonakis is not swimming in e-resources in the Lib4RI, he's playing sport. Beach volleyball, to be precise. In the meantime, even without the volleyball, there's no chance of boredom for Dimitri Antonakis as he's now on a challenging quest that requires genuine stamina: learning German.

Stanley Sam



Stanley Sam (Photo: Christian Dinkel)

Two years ago, Stanley Sam got off to a rough start in Switzerland. First off, his son was born just one month after he left Ghana for Eawag. «That was certainly bad timing,» he says. He went to visit his young family three months later, and last year his son and wife visited him for a month.

Next, he found himself surprised by the typical, somewhat closed Swiss mentality. After his bachelor's degree in Ghana, he completed his master's degree in environmental biotechnology in Istanbul. «Naively, I thought I knew European culture after this experience,» he says with a laugh. «But now I realize that Istanbul is very different from Switzerland.»

Nevertheless: «In spite of everything, it was easy for me to settle in at Eawag. This is where people from many countries meet and interact very openly with each other,» says Stanley Sam, whose full name is Stanley Bortse Kweku Sam. «Stanley» is his so called Christian name, «Bortse» is his Ghanaian name and «Kweku» means Wednesday. This is the day of the week when Stanley Sam was born and, like all Ghanaians, the day he was born is part of his name.

Outside the «Eawag bubble,» he has up to now found it difficult to get to know people in Switzerland. To counteract this cultural barrier, Stanley is now hard at work learning German. He also joined the Empa-Eawag football team to continue playing his favourite hobby sport.

Before joining Eawag, Stanley Sam worked as an engineer at a waste-water treatment plant for a gold mine in northern Ghana. Because he's always up for a challenge and dislikes

routine, he looked around for something completely new after four years. He found what he was looking for after receiving a placement offer from Eawag, which included a doctoral thesis in the Sandec department. Stanley Sam is now conducting basic research to develop technologies that will enable the dewatering of faecal sludge.

As far as his home country is concerned, Stanley Sam misses not only his family but also sometimes the Ghanaian national dish: Fufu. This dish is similar to mashed potatoes. But instead of potatoes, it is made of manioc, yams and plantains. However, family and food are not the only reasons that Stanley wants to return to Africa after completing his PhD: «I believe that I can make a big difference in Africa with my knowledge,» he says. «There is still a lot to improve in the management of waste water and faecal sludge in large parts of the continent.»

Xiao Shan Yap



Xiao-Shan Yap (Photo: Christian Dinkel)

Xiao-Shan Yap from Malaysia always knew she was going to be a global scholar. And also today she knows what lies ahead:

Already at the age of 22, Xiao-Shan Yap and four friends founded their own start-up for mobile scientific exhibitions. After three years, the friends had to give up, but not without learning from the experience of failure. "It made me independent, curious and awakened me to have a career change. She started a PhD in her home country Malaysia focusing on industrial growth in developing countries.

During her PhD she was already travelling around the world. She attended many international conferences to network. There she met a PhD student from Eawag. "When I finished my PhD, I knew I wanted to leave Malaysia and explore new opportunities". She contacted the PhD student because she saw synergies between their research interests. "Bernhard Truffer, head of the department Environmental Social Sciences at Eawag, suggested me to apply for a Swiss Government Excellence Scholarship grant". And it was successful.

That is how Xiao-Shan Yap ended up in Switzerland. From 2015 to 2017, she was a postdoctoral fellow at Eawag, conducting research on sustainability in developing country context. During this time, she went to China to understand their membrane bioreactor industry for wastewater treatments. She then applied for a Marie-Skłodowska Curie Individual Fellowship grant from the European Commission, received it and moved on to Utrecht. In the following two years she was researching on the solar photovoltaic industry dynamics in Germany, China, and Malaysia.

Since May 2019 Xiao Shan Yap has been back at Eawag on a scientist position. She merged her previous research fields: sustainability transitions and industrial growth in developing countries. "My research focuses now on how developing countries can achieve economic growth and sustainability transitions at the same time.". Her project at Eawag looks at the water related businesses and innovations in India and South Africa as they combat their water crisis. At the same time she continued her affiliation with Utrecht University as a guest assistant professor. "It's very good to complement the resources we have here at Eawag and at Utrecht University".

Cover picture: Eawag, Christian Dinkel

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