

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Abraham Abera Gebre

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IPMB Alumni: 2004-2006

My experiences in Belgium as a student:

For me, experience in Belgium was like a journey which has a start and an end. From the beginning in a quiet little Adama town to a quiet different environment I'd never imagined where I'd end up. Thanks to VLIR-UOS, my graduate study did more than offering me a first-class education. VUB-KUL offered me the space to grow as an individual, to try new things and to meet new and interesting people. It's a place where you're never far from a new opportunity or experience. Firstly, there was opportunity to study French/Dutch from a different perspective as well as to sight see different historical places not only in Belgium but also those in the Schengen countries. Secondly, over the study periods, I have indeed had the opportunity to work with individuals from all over the world. As an international student from Ethiopia, I have valued the opportunity to study in such a rich and diverse environment. Thirdly, my previous experience as an undergraduate student had taught me that departments were often segregated and there wasn't much interaction between students from different disciplines, but this wasn't the case here at Flemish Universities. Hence, not only has this been a huge benefit academically, by being able to exchange ideas with students from different departments, it has also been a tremendous learning experience to interact with people from such a wide range of cultural backgrounds. In a nutshell, I believe that both the professional and personal relationships formed over the study years had a memory "beyond the campus life" and the shared collective experience is one that will not be easily forgotten.

Major Activities since graduation:

1. Trainer, Molecular and Bioinformatic Analysis of Biological Systems: Hands-on Training Course. Armauer Hansen Research Institute in collaboration with University of Calgary, Canada. July 12–20, 2010 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
2. Instructor, Molecular Biology and Bioinformatics: Hands-on Training Course. University of Gondar in collaboration with University of Calgary, Canada. 21 June to July 01, 2010, Gondar, Ethiopia.
3. Lecturer, University of Gondar, Department of Biotechnology, October 2008 to date, Gondar, Ethiopia.
4. Assistant Researcher, Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, October 2006 to October 2008, Nazareth, Ethiopia

How did IPMB change your life?

Thanks to my training at IPMB, I had sound theoretical knowledge in Molecular Biology and practical skills to work in the laboratory. To this effect, IPMB has brought tremendous change in my current life and future career. (i) I can write sound research proposal and successfully implement and disseminate information through scientific papers (ii) provide technical help for those planning and conducting a research project involving molecular biology both at University research unit and national & regional research institutes/centers. (iii) I have been able to share that handful information I gained at IPMB with both under-and post-graduate students in Biotechnology, Medical laboratory sciences at University of Gondar, Ethiopia. Moreover, I had also an opportunity to share the knowledge and skill in Molecular Biology with trainees from diverse fields that involve molecular & bioinformatic tools at national level.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Bui Thi Minh Dieu

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When did you study at IPMB: from 1999-2002

I was an IPMB student from 1999-2002. This was my first time to live far from home where everything was different. It was very difficult and stressful at the beginning especially having to study in foreign language. However, time became shorter after developing a warm relationship with other international students and teachers of the big family IPMB. Whenever we had any problem we would always go to Prof. Eddy and Rudi for help.

In our days we used to go to Rhode campus for study which was very far from Brussels, and to go for classes we would cross a forest. It was a quiet place and because of these would go together as a team like pupils. Still I have memory of that time, it was fun, and made us to be close to one another.

During two years, we study many subjects which were new to me. At that time, being stressed before exams, I would often wonder if all these knowledge will be of any use in my career. But I have realized their usefulness during my PhD project, and as a researcher and teacher in CTU. Every subject that I have learnt in IPMB program is of use to me now, and I foresee using them even in future.

I would like to say thanks to all the teachers, who gave me the foundation and knowledge that helped me to attain my current achievement.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: “Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology”

Name: Dr. Banshi Sharma

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IPMB Alumni: 1997 - 1999

After working as a field veterinarian in Nepal, I went to Belgium to study IPMB (1997 - 1999). Since I had immense interest in studying Molecular biology, I sponsored myself for the IPMB training. It was difficult moment in first semester. The socio-cultural issues were all different. Academically, I had weakness in biochemistry. After few months of effort, I progressed. Being on a self sponsorship, I had to do part-time job in VUB. It was a new experience for me.

While in Belgium, I worked as president of Forstis International Student Union wing for six months. For my thesis, I worked on 'Molecular characterization of NKR-P1 in peripheral blood of pigs' from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL). It was nice working with Prof. Goddeeris. However, the experiment and writing were not easy.

I was commuting, on a daily basis at 6am, by train from Etterbeek station via Noord to Leuven, Heverlee campus. At the peak of my research, I was the first to arrive in the laboratory and also leaving last. I still have very good memories of my old friends of IPMB.

After my master's degree, I joined Central Veterinary Laboratory (CVL) in Nepal. I worked very hard in the disease investigation program which led to establishment of a Molecular diagnostic Laboratory. The laboratory is responsible for diagnosis of avian influenza using Reverse Transcriptase PCR, and Real Time PCR. At the beginning it was difficult to convince authority to procure conventional PCR machine. But with the global out-break of avian influenza, Real Time PCR was procured. With the equipment, I was able to diagnose Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), H5N1. Then from 2002-2004, I worked as chief of planning section in the Department of Livestock Services (DLS) where I focused on strengthening laboratories in Nepal. I was a focal person for WTO from DLS at that time. Later in the year 2009/2010 I got a scholarship to do short research in Netherlands which went until May, 2010. On return, I became the deputy project director Agriculture Commercialization and Trade (PACT) Project, financed by World Bank. I also got promoted in the free competition examination and posted as joint-secretary, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives in Nepal where I am promoting activities related to biotechnology in Nepal.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Shu Hu

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IPMB Alumni: 2002 – 2004

I am a Chinese. Ten years ago, when I came to Vrije universiteit Brussels (Campus Etterbeek), my first trouble was finding accommodation. The accommodation issue was settled by the intervention of Patrick who works at VUB International Relations and Mobility Office. I was secured Room 101 in Nieuwelaan 149, Brussels. One evening, a student caused fire in one of the public kitchen in Nieuwelaan; and it was where I first met Rudi. He, then a concierge at the student home, asked me of the incident. Since I was coughing badly as a result of the smoke inhaled while I put-off the fire, he gave me kind suggestions to relieve the cough. Half a year later, after I decided to change Human Ecology to Molecular Biology, I went to Campus Sint-Genesius-Rode to submit my application. It was surprising to meet Rudi there, again, working as the secretary of IPMB. Later, I joined IPMB in September, 2002.

My basic goal to study in Belgium was to obtain a doctorate degree. I had seen no such opportunity in Human Ecology unlike in IPMB. I knew that, after two years in IPMB, if I obtain a general mark of about 70% (distinction), I will be eligible to apply for a PhD position somewhere. With this in mind, in the first year, I used to read text books until 2 am (in the morning) everyday. Almost all the subjects taught were new to me and I had to start from scratch. In the second year, I worked on my master thesis in a lab in Leuven University; meanwhile, I was also taking seven courses in Etterbeek. I met the real trail when I began writing my thesis. I got to keep experiments going and I could only find time to write my thesis when I was not in the lab. Despite a two-hour sleep being inadequate for human, I endured this for two months in order to beat thesis deadline. In September 2004, when I got the Master of Science in Molecular Biology with distinction, I said to myself: yes, this is what I wanted.

Studying IPMB was a great experience to me. I discovered my strength and the fruit of hard work because immediately after IPMB, I started a PhD at the Laboratory of Neurogenetics, Leuven University. Experience from IPMB helped to overcome difficulties and guided me while I was doing my PhD. I, finally, got a Doctorate in Biomedical Science.

Now, I am an assistant professor at a university in China. I still believe IPMB is where my academic career began. I usually reminisce the eight years spent in Belgium as the most hectic time in my life. I am so grateful to all the people I met, especially the IPMB teaching staff such as Prof. Sonia, the humorous Prof. Eddy, and the elegant Prof. Cornelis; the list is endless. Surely, I cannot forget the secretaries of IPMB: Greta and my dear friend Rudi. I, do, appreciate what you did for me and wish you all well. I am still looking forward to hearing more successes from IPMB.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: “Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology”

Name: Evans Njeru Simon

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IPMB Alumni: 2008 - 2010

I received the invitation for VLIR-UOS scholarship in VUB, Belgium with both enthusiasm and anxiety in equal measure. I was enthusiastic because I had looked forward to studying Molecular Biology. Since my job was touching on this discipline, I felt deficient at work. On September 19, 2008 I received an e-mail from VLIR indicating that I was selected for Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology (IPMB). It dawned on me that my dream of becoming accomplished molecular biologist was nearly fulfilled. The anxious bit was language since Belgium is known to be a community of Dutch and French speakers. But on arrival I realized this was not entirely true of the language; the country and its people are quite inviting and welcoming. One day, while still naïve of Belgium, I set to go for registration in the commune, and within few meters from my residence (Nieuwelaan students' home), I got lost completely in the streets. I asked for directions from someone, unfortunately the person did not know English and we resorted to sign language. Finally, I found my way after several hours and for this, I missed Prof. Sonia Bechman's lecture. Still, the experiences in supermarkets (Aldi and Colruyt) and other social places were no different.

Basically, my social life in Belgium was adventurous, like capsizing during Kayak boat ride, straining my ankle at a football match in the sports complex. I, also, participated in Antwerp's DVV 10Miles Marathon. Besides, I enjoyed endless parties. The beauty with all this was that regardless of the tight IPMB academic schedule, I was able to create time and enjoy Belgium and a greater part of Western Europe. With IPMB being a dread course, my academic performance was not affected. I enjoyed the rigor of the courses since there were a lot of new and interesting subjects on the cutting edge techniques in molecular biology which I was not familiar with; and this stirred a curious mindset in me to know what lie ahead.

IPMB changed the course of my career. One of the courses called social and economic aspects of Biotechnology made me understand the facts, myths and controversies surrounding the world of Genetically Modified Organisms and their application in modern biotechnology. The course was thoroughly tackled to completion (thanks to the Professors involved), and it was from this moment that I had the real picture of where my country (Kenya) was in relation to embracing the GMO technology. Of great interest to me were the institutional & the regulatory framework on the biosafety aspects of GMOs. I realized that most GMOs research in our country was held hostage due to lack of a regulatory authority that would vet and technically review applications from scientists undertaking research in GMOs. After my thesis defense I returned to Kenya where I found the government was in the last stages of implementing the Biosafety Act 2009, which created the National Biosafety Authority that would exercise general supervision and control over the transfer, handling and use of genetically modified organisms. With the training attained from IPMB, I was eager to be part of this Authority so as to contribute towards the advancement of Biotechnology in Kenya more so in a way that is safe to human health and the environment. Fortunately, I was hired as a Bio-safety Officer with the regulator and to testify here, the knowledge attained from IPMB gave me a competitive advantage in the recruitment interview. I am today confidently & professionally discharging my duties at the Authority as a Biosafety Officer where I am in charge of analyzing & reviewing applications for GMO work and related activities and also monitor compliance with Biosafety law in the country. I take this chance to say VLIR – UOS and IPMB Secretariat at VUB and other partner Universities played a great role; together they are part of this career achievement, and I appreciate their spirit of sharing minds and changing lives. Long live VLIR, long live IPMB.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: “Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology”

Name: VO VAN SONG TOAN

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IPMB Alumni: 2005-2006 (01 year Master of Science in Mo. Biology & Biotech.)

First of all, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Eddy Van Driessche who gave me the opportunity to study at VUB. Secondly, I would like to thank professors (Prof. Sonia Beckman, Prof. Dr. Hernalsteens, Prof. Dr. D. Charlier, Prof. Dr De Baetselier, Prof. Dr. K. M. Volders, Prof. Dr. P. Cornelis, Prof. Dr. G Angenon, ...) who taught me Biotechnology and Molecular Biology while in VUB.

I was not an IPMB student but a graduate school student of advanced academic training course in molecular biology and Biotechnology. However, during my one year study at VUB, I had opportunity to follow some IPMB courses. Within this period of my study, I learnt a lot from my lecturers, friends, and Belgian citizens living in Brussels and Ghent. The good things I still remember of my Professors, then, since graduation are their whole-heartedness, strictness and clarity.

After a long time of studying and researching since 1999, on January 2010, I was appointed a lecturer on Protein and Enzymology at Biotechnology Research and development Institute (BiRDI), Can Tho University (CTU). Besides, I am a PhD student in Microbiology at BiRDI since October 2010. I hope to have another opportunity to take a short training course and in order to start a new co-operation with one of my former professors at VUB.

Finally, I wish the promoters of IPMB course good health, happiness, and successful lives. I also wish that more young and talented students all over the world get trained by IPMB in future.

Best wishes.

Vo Van Song Toan

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: “Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology”

Name: NGUYEN THI LOAN ANH

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IPMB Alumni: 2007-2009

Since I was an undergraduate majoring in biotechnology, I had always been dreaming to study abroad. I searched and compared different graduate program offers in this field of study over many countries; I had to choose IPMB because the program seems to suit my need the best. I still feel happy now when I reminisces my selection for the study in 2007-2009. That time, I knew this was a turning point in my life. Yes, my expectations were fulfilled and more so after coming to Belgium. Belgium, to me, is a peaceful country with a proper mixture of modern and distinct European culture. I was very impressed by the well-organized transportation system of the country, the mild weather (although many Belgians complain of their gray weather, I still love it), and many more.

While in Belgium, I learnt to be more independent, organized and efficient in my work; and how cope with busy schedules besides living enjoyable life. Of course, there were some culture shocks due to our differences in culture and behaviours, but the wonderful IPMB staff was always there to help and provide support which made us overcome and start appreciating the beauty of each other’s culture. However, the achievement which impressed me most after the two-year of study is the knowledge acquired from the education. IPMB was quite hectic but it is also the most interesting program I have ever known. The study equipped us with knowledge of a wide range of disciplines in Molecular Biology which are very necessary for our career. The courses have intensive and in-depth coverage which were interesting, perceivable and related to other scientific disciplines. Besides, we did a-great-deal of practical training from which we acquired not only practical skills but also efficient research management skills. Science is a tough career and it is even more difficult in developing countries where many more issues such as financial matters, facilities, human resources get involved. Therefore this kind of study/training is absolutely helpful. As the students from developing countries we had chance to acquire knowledge besides learning professional working ethics.

After my graduation, I returned home and resumed my tutoring work in a higher education institute for a year. While at home I realized that pursuing further training in biomedical research, a field largely under developed, would be very helpful for my country. Thanks to the competitive foundation laid by IPMB, I successfully got a PhD fellowship in the prestigious VIB International PhD program. At present, I am conducting a research on the relationship between hosts’ immune system and their microbiota.

IPMB, definitely, opened for me opportunities to go far beyond what I had never dreamt of and it also reminds me of the expectations of the program’s organizers.

Belgium education, particularly Molecular Biology (IPMB program) is more recognized in Vietnam. In the last 2-3 years, students of different academic backgrounds through varied financial supports have chosen to pursue IPMB because they believe it is worth spending effort and investing in a course with a foreseen future gain.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Emmanuel Okello

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IPMB Alumni: 2008 - 2010

Taking a first step to go for studies in a foreign country is a big challenge, as you will be unaware of what to expect. However, from my first day in Belgium, I found the country was quite welcoming, save for the weather! I have a lot of good things to say about the staff of IPMB secretariat, the international office, VUB academic staff, members of Structural Biology laboratory, Vrije universiteit Brussel and former housemates. In general, they extended extraordinary support that made my stay in Belgium enjoyable.

The international environment and events at the university gave me opportunity to interact with people from various parts of the world, appreciate different cultures and cuisines. Academically, I learnt a lot from IPMB programme. The programme offers relevant courses that are taught by people who are experienced in the field. I conducted an interesting MSc thesis research in the laboratory of Structural Biology with mentorship of Prof. Henri De Greve.

After obtaining Msc in molecular biology I won a VLIR-UOS ICP-PhD scholarship award of 2010/2011. This is a sandwich programme between VUB, Belgium, and Makerere University, Uganda. The study is an extension of my thesis (MSc) work which was centered on monitoring and prevention of colibacillosis, a bacterial disease that affects newly weaned piglets, causing great losses to farmers. Since pig production, an emerging and fast growing industry in Uganda, is being threatened by colibacillosis; our study aims at developing recombinant antibodies administered as feed additive to provide passive immunity to the vulnerable piglets. I am, currently, in first year and the main activity is mapping the disease pattern in Uganda. Being a sandwich programme, I alternate between my home country where I do fieldwork, and Belgium where do laboratory work. I am very appreciative of Prof. Henri De Greve who is my Belgian promoter for the continued mentorship, IPMB secretariat for organizing such a wonderful programme, my very nice colleagues at Structural Biology laboratory, and to VLIR-UOS who sponsored my masters and, again, my PhD studies.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: “Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology”

Name: OBISHAKIN EMMANUEL TUMININU

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IPMB Alumni: 2007-2009

I was working as a veterinary research officer focusing on molecular diagnosis of livestock disease such as bird flu before I gained admission into IPMB. I just knew that I needed a deeper knowledge of molecular science in order to be able to do my job better, my quest was for a deeper knowledge of molecular studies on infectious diseases of animals, since this was difficult to acquire in my country, Nigeria. I was informed about IPMB by a friend and upon seeing the course content online; I got attracted to the programme, I just loved it! Even though I was not on the scholarship list, I insisted on doing the course at all costs, real costs.

Within three months of study, I was amazed by the amount of information we received in IPMB class. However, being my first time in Europe, the weather was strange but I adjusted better with time and at the end of two years of studies, I learnt quite a lot. IPMB gave us the privilege of visiting up to twenty laboratories and meeting great researchers all over Belgium. One thing that I really admired in all the universities we visited and where we had classes is the willingness of everyone to explain things to us in the classes and in the laboratories.

Because of my initial purpose for coming, I chose to do my master’s thesis in a prestigious Belgium national reference laboratory on avian flu and Newcastle disease. My thesis was on diagnosis and sequencing of Newcastle disease virus. At the end of my master’s thesis, I returned to Nigeria with a team of scientists from the laboratory who delivered five day training on avian flu diagnosis.

After my masters’ degree at IPMB, I got opportunity to study for a PhD at VUB with Professor Stefan Magez. I am currently studying the cellular and molecular immunology that occurs during Trypanosoma infections in animals. I also give practical lessons to masters’ students.

In general, IPMB has given me more than I thought I would get and within a short period of time. My views have broadened than before and I am better equipped in the field of science. With this I hope to make my contributions to my country Nigeria, to Africa and to the world at large.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: A.S.M. Lutful Ahasan

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IPMB Alumni: 2008 - 2010

I was selected for VLIR-UOS scholarship on Master of Science in molecular biology in the session of 2008-2010. My stay in Belgium was characterized with excitements and wonders of social and academic life

When I have arrived on campus, I have got warm reception from IPMB secretariat. From then, I felt at home. The facilities provided by the IPMB secretariat/university even made my life easier. One interesting thing was that I had never cooked myself and I was worried about the preparation of meal. But thank to VUB housing unit, there were easy to operate cooking facilities in my hostel and availability of diversified ready-made food in Belgium; these made life easier for me. Being from tropical region (Bangladesh), seeing snow in winter was exciting.

I would imagine that the course (IPMB), I studied in Belgium, is the most up-to-date and exciting than any other course offered in Europe. I enjoyed lab attachment (practical) besides the theory taught in different courses. I was able to learn many new molecular biology techniques. Also, interuniversity nature of the study got me exposed to many intellectuals as well as different academic environments. I visited a number of historical places in Belgium, and shared experience with European and African people. So these experiences give me great opportunity to adapt to new working environment and to have good working relationships with individuals of different cultural backgrounds.

Currently I am back to work at Chittagong Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, Bangladesh. On return, I got engaged in teaching and research. I teach the following courses: Cell Biology and Veterinary Histology, Anatomy of immune system, Developmental Anatomy and Endocrine Anatomy to both graduate and besides undergraduate students. For research I am handling some ongoing research projects at my department.

Studying IPMB enriched my knowledge in the field of molecular biology, where I became interested in doing a PhD in Europe. I will be committed and devote part of my life to develop molecular biology based research in my country. The training attained will be used for developing of molecular biology, immunology, proteomics and genomics laboratories, and for provision of quality teaching to my DVM and master's students. Bangladesh, one of the least developed countries, has prioritized molecular biology and biotechnological development in her 2020 industrialization and modernization goal. Being situated in a university, I would like to build my career in the field of cell biology and stem cell related research. I look forward to conducting a collaborative research with developed countries specially Belgium for the benefit of my country. The achievements gained in IPMB course, has placed me in a better position to continue with advanced learning, research, and to perform innovative scientific work for my country.

Finally, I would like to give heartiest thanks to the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) for awarding me the scholarship to pursue the IPMB programme in Belgium. I am also grateful to IPMB coordinator (Professor Dr. Eddy Van Driessche), my promoter (Professor Dr. Bruno Maria Goddeeris and Professor Dr. Eric Cox) and all IPMB course Professors. I am also grateful to IPMB secretaries: Mr. Rudi Willems and Greta Verhasselt; and secretaries at Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven for their organization, advice and enthusiastically supporting me during my study.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: “Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology”

Name: Himal Luitel

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IPMB Alumni: 2006 - 2008

Just after completion of Bachelor in Veterinary Science and Animal Husbandry (B. V. Sc. & A. H.) from Institute of Agriculture and Animal Science (IAAS), Tribhuvan University (TU), Nepal; I was looking for opportunity to continue with further study in translational research to be competent in the field. Also, I was naive in molecular biology and wanted to upgrade my knowledge on the same. For these reasons, I looked for a course that could offer in-depth knowledge in molecular biology; a platform that bridges basic and clinical research.

Entirely, I enjoyed my stay in Belgium in spite of the very busy IPMB schedule. IPMB members, at the time, provided impressive academic as well as social environment.

The skill I acquired from IPMB program was a milestone which changed my career from a veterinary practitioner to a researcher. After IPMB, I started a Ph.D. under Molecular Biology and Medicine of the Lungs (MBML) program in Justus-Liebig University Giessen, Germany. This is where I am, currently, stationed. I work in the field of pulmonary hypertension with a special focus on right ventricular hypertrophy.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Wilber Sabiiti

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IPMB Alumni: 2006 – 2008

Having had opportunity to spend part of my post IPMB life on my doctoral studies in the UK and traveled to a number of countries including the US, I am very delighted to note that the VLIRUOS ICP scholarship programme is one of the excellently organized International scholarship programmes in the world. I vividly remember the time I walked into the Belgian embassy in Kampala, Uganda and immediately secured a visa because I was a VLIR scholar and VLIR-UOS had already communicated my scholarship award. Arrival in Belgium was hilarious! We were received at the airport with a cup of tea, and led us to VUB campus Etterbeek on arrangement by IPMB secretariat. Within day one in VUB, we registered with the University, opened bank accounts, and offered pocket money which was enough take us for a couple of weeks. What a productive day, great training and swiftness in the western world! The fantastic annual dinners organized by VLIR-UOS to bring together all ICP scholars were a great highlight of how supportive and committed the programme was to sharing minds and changing lives. Being part of the IPMB programme was even more exciting and intellectually fulfilling. What a pride to be taught by Professors with authority in their field, in all the IPMB courses! IPMB did not only provide academic knowledge but teaches hard work; time management; and integration of knowledge from different aspects of bioscience and socio-economic expectations to researchable concepts applicable to the needs of society.

With such great training for which I was always eager to put in practice, in the summer of 2008 while waiting for my graduation at IPMB, I undertook a two months Internship opportunity at TIBOTEC, Belgium where I worked on developing inducible cell-lines for testing anti-hepatitis C drugs. This was followed with a one year stint as visiting researcher at the University of Antwerp to evaluate molecular diagnostics for accurate detection of the widely hospital acquired bug, Methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA). At present, I am working on my doctoral thesis focusing on understanding the infection mechanism of cryptococcal meningitis with the aim of identifying new therapeutic targets. HIV/AIDS associated cryptococcal meningitis globally claims more than half a million lives every year and 80% of these deaths occur in Sub-Saharan Africa. The potentially effective antifungal agents available are toxic and expensive to administer in resource poor settings, this is the reason why identifying new and economically affordable anti-cryptococcal drugs will be timely for the developing world. I am confident to thus note that with excellent IPMB training at Vrije Universiteit Brussel - University of Antwerp coupled with doctoral studies at the University of Birmingham, UK; I am ready and look forward to making a difference in research and leadership in Africa and the world at large.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Pham Thi Khanh Van

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IPMB: September, 2008- September 2010

I was a junior researcher in Department of Microbiology of Cantho University, Vietnam when I received VLIR-UOS scholarship of Interuniversity Programme of Molecular Biology (IPMB). I knew this scholarship would be a very good opportunity to pursue my career in scientific research especially on molecular Bacteriology, and teaching. I think studying at IPMB was a hard time for me, but it was a great experience of mastering many extensive subjects and especially one-full-year thesis. Absolutely, the knowledge that I got from IPMB is not enough yet, however, it will strongly support me in my academic career and research. After my graduation from IPMB, I got a PhD position in the Associative Interaction group, Centre of Microbial and Plant Genetics, K. U. Leuven, Belgium, under the mentoring of Prof. Jos Vanderleyden. I am really excited to work on the associative mechanism of one beneficial bacterium *Pseudomonas stutzeri* A15 with rice plants. I believe that with this topic, I will get more knowledge on the molecular biology of bacteria as well as contribute to the relevant development of my native country that has many many fields of rice.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Dina Danso-Abeam

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IPMB Alumni: 2007 - 2009

It was such a great opportunity for me to have been selected to study IPMB and as a VLIR scholar. It was a dream come-true because I wanted to acquire more skills that would enable me become a researcher. Being one of the first batches of graduates to ever hold BSc Molecular Biology and Biotechnology from the University of Cape Coast, I have been enlightened on the availability of advanced research tools required for conducting efficient research. I, thus, aspired to continue with further studies in Europe, and with VLIR and IPMB, this dream became a reality.

IPMB was a bi-directional training with detailed advanced teaching and a whole one year research work. The first year was rather tedious with lots of lectures but it was very good because all lectures were given by professors who have been very successful in their various fields of research and could transfer their knowledge amicably. Although the course structure is designed to project molecular biology skills and training, it was not restricted to a specific field so students have the opportunity to specialize after the masters. An unforgettable aspect of IPMB is the lab visitations which allowed us to visit labs with state-of-the-art facilities. I could not stop admiring the beauty of advanced technology in research. After familiarizing myself with a number of research work being carried out at VUB campus, and as an interuniversity programme molecular biology student, I got the opportunity to carry out my research work in one of the VIB labs outside my campus which was fully equipped and all experiment could be carried out to completion without interruption of machine break down or run out of reagents.

Living on VUB campus enhanced my success during my master studies. The student home was just 'a stone throw' from the faculty. The library was always open and availing students with a lot of online journal publications, not forgetting the IPMB library which was always stuffed with the latest editions of the recommended books from our lecturers. The VUB restaurant made my life easier with the sumptuous varieties of meals every time. Everyone on the campus was so helpful and very nice, right from the international office, the administration, the housing service, the clinic, IPMB staff, ICT staff, to the Crazy copy center.

I used to wonder why we were taking a whole lot of courses in IPMB and I could count a number of them I was wishing would be taken out. After I completed, I realized each of them was so important and makes the master training complete. Now, I cannot pick any of them to be taken out because they form the foundation to my doctoral studies. Thanks to all those courses and training, I could qualify for research in the lab of Autoimmune Genetics. Finally, *kudos* to the founding fathers, staff, and sponsors of the IPMB.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Steven Odongo

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IPMB Alumni: 2008 – 2010

On attaining a Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine (BVM) at Makerere University, I embarked on searching for opportunity for further study in a western country for a difference. By sheer luck I encountered VLIR-UOS call. Having preference for cellular and molecular work, I applied for Molecular Biology and within few months the award result was out. I was awarded a scholarship to study in Belgium! The admission letter I had, read 'your admission to study Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology (IPMB) jointly offered by Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and Universiteit Antwerpen. All I did then was to hold my breath and flash a broad smile.

Well, the scholarship secured, I began looking for strategies to fit-in and gain knowledge in the 'new environment' with a multicultural setting. Joining a group of free and like-minded people (my Professors and classmates) in a 'Vrije zone' (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), my expectations (academic and social) were met. To mention a few, presence of adequate training facilities combined with excellent course materials delivered by most experienced and committed Professors motivated me to climb the next academic ladder i.e. a PhD (as it was listed in my statement of motivation to VLIR-UOS). I would like to testify that support from my good Professors and 'academic discipline' earned me a PhD position in Bioscience engineering at Vrije Universiteit Brussels. For my PhD study, we are developing a Nanobody®-based diagnostic and treatment option for a protozoal disease of livestock called nagana which is one of the serious causes of economic loss and food insecurity in sub Saharan Africa. To stress, further, the relevance of IPMB to my current research, I am employing most of the techniques previously learnt (in IPMB) to navigate through. To digress from academic gain, while interacting with a classmate in the IPMB days, I had to re-draw a world map (in my mind) after re-discovering a location of a country I had been imagining, wrongly, to share a border with the United State of America. With these, I then realized that willing to learn and learning itself opens door for more learning (and yet I'm still learning more....). Briefly, IPMB changed my life; it is from here where my research career was launched; it is from here where I understood the hot topic of bio-technology (and related disciplines); it is from here where I acquired global friends and it is from here, entirely, where I re-oriented my global perception.

I am very grateful to Belgian government for meeting all my training costs with her resources. To the scholarship team (VLIR-UOS and International Relation offices), I must admit that you were excellent at maintain our financial well being. I was also inspired by our dedicated Professors who would travel long distances in cold winter, yet, arriving on-time to deliver wonderful lectures. The training you offered was not in vain, instead, it will be used to uplift mankind. With the quality of training received, I am foreseeing IPMB graduates taking the mantle of research in developing countries.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: “Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology”

Name: Dr. Atunga Nyachieo, Ph.D

Email: anyachieo@yahoo.com

IPMB Alumni: 2002-2004

It was wonderful experience studying in Belgium. The course (IPMB) I pursued introduced me to high-throughput technology. Besides, I learnt very useful molecular techniques that have been very important in my scientific career. While studying in Belgium, I also had a chance to interact with high profile scientists.

After completion of IPMB, because of my excellent performance, I was granted a PhD scholarship by IRO to pursue a study in Biomedical Sciences (Mechanisms of human diseases) at KULeuven. The study was successfully completed in March, 2010. Currently, I am a **Senior Research Scientist/Fellow** (Institute of Primate Research, Karen, Nairobi, Kenya) as well as a **Lecturer** (Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Karen campus). Besides, I am a WHO Trainer on effective project planning, evaluation and implementation: Planning skills using Microsoft project software.

I am also a member in the following organizations: the Cochrane systematic review, the Kenya society for immunologist, and the institution scientific and ethical review committee.

With IPMB, avenue to study PhD was opened. Experience at IPMB sharpened my thinking ability in formulation of research ideas, grant making and student training. The course also made me capable to offer theoretical and practical training to both undergraduate and graduate students.

Achievements attained in scientific research, attributable to my former training, are: publications of seventeen (17) scientific papers in peer reviewed journals, attending up to fifteen (15) international scientific/seminar, and winning three (3) scientific awards. Now, I am able to write competitive grant proposals. For example, I have attracted funding for carrying research on Rotavirus/enteric virus a project funded by Merck Inc, USA where I am a **Principal Investigator**; also a **Co-investigator** on Enteric (Rotavirus) project funded by ISID, USA; and a **Co-investigator** on Assisted reproduction project funded by Serono International USA and by KULeuven Interfaculty council for development co-operation university Council (IRO, Leuven, Belgium) collaborative project with Institute of Primate Research (IPR), Nairobi

The community is benefiting from my training because the knowledge and skills acquired during the training are being employed in training and mentoring university students which is an integral part of capacity building; and to conduct biomedical research (health research focused on child health – rotavirus) and maternal health (assisted reproduction research) which are both important for improving community health. My current research on enteric virus (rotavirus) titled ‘Molecular epidemiology of rotavirus in Kenya’ aims at characterizing rotavirus strains and estimating the disease burden in children aged below 5 years. Data obtained will aid policy makers to make decision on introducing rotavirus vaccines.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Dr. Sylvester Elikana Anami

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IPMB Alumni: 2002-2004

My experience in Belgium as a student has taught me to "dare to think" and to realize that science is not just about me but to use the 'know-how' gained to contribute towards solving a myriad of problems facing mankind in sub-Saharan Africa through basic innovative research. It enabled me to develop a clear vision of who I want to become. I learnt important skills such as facilitation, team building, feedback and negotiation, which has been of great asset to me at the Mombasa Polytechnic University College (MPUC). I also realized the importance of networking which has been key in establishing collaborative research with other scientists within Kenya and abroad. Being in Belgium, I have participated in broad subject areas and had access to genomic resources including working within the proximity of biotech companies at Ghent University. These stimulated new scientific ideas within me that I have brought back to the MPUC.

Currently, I am a lecture at the MPUC teaching courses in Biotechnology, Microbiology and Plant Physiology since 2009. I also completed my PhD and a postdoctoral study is due for completion on 11th September 2011.

Through funds obtained from the National Council of Science and Technology, I am establishing a Tissue Culture laboratory as material means to enable me carry out research. I am also a director of Marketing and corporate communication at the MPUC.

I am involved in the following projects:

1. Changing Concepts of nature and Conservations Regarding Eastern Mau Forest: A Case Study of the Mariashoni Oqiek...a collaborative research between Ghent University Department of African languages culture and MPUC Department of Pure and Applied Sciences.
2. Improving drought stress tolerance in tropical maize through silencing of PARP2-MAIZE gene in collaboration with Kenyatta University.
3. Transformation of sweet potato using CBF1 and CKX1 genes to enhance drought tolerance in collaboration with Kenyatta University.

PUBLICATIONS

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TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Magaly

Email:

When did you study at IPMB: 1990 – 1992

Coming from a poor neighborhood in Panama, thinking of studying abroad was almost utopia.

After finishing our bachelor studies, my husband and I had the opportunity to work as Professors assistants in the University of Panama, where the pieces of the puzzle started to take place.

By 1988 my husband was awarded a scholarship by the government of Belgium. After his first year of studies, my oldest son and I joined him in Gent. It was a trip to be remembered. In 1989, exactly the same day we were supposed to travel to Belgium, Panama was invaded by the United States. We were forced to wait for almost 2 weeks. We had to travel to Nicaragua, and then to Cuba where we took a flight to Belgium. As we landed on the cold continent, the first impression was the cloudy and cold weather. Coming from a tropical weather, that was a big change, ha ha. My husband was waiting for us, so we took a train from the airport to Gent for the very first time in our life; what a beautiful city!!

Soon, I started applying for Master programs in the different universities in Belgium. One day I received my admission letter to join the Molecular Biology Master programme at the Vrije Universiteit van Brussel. Having a background in biology mainly in zoology, I was so happy to join the program. I thought myself, Molecular Biology, wao!

I should say that studying the program despite challenges was worthwhile. All that I learnt in the programme, has been so useful in my professional life that I am so glad to have had the opportunity to be part of it. To me, the programme is so complete and well organized. All the lectures are offered by distinguished professors; any student that successfully completes the program has strong theoretical and practical background to perform well in any institution. After I completed the master program in 1992, I returned to my country. Almost immediately, I joined the Department of Genetics and Molecular Biology of the University of Panama where I was promoted to a Professor, teaching genetics, and microbial genetics to bachelor students. For the first time ever, my students were able to isolate DNA and received updated knowledge of molecular biology.

In 1999, I applied for a scholarship from the Panamanian government to continue my doctoral studies. I received the scholarship and returned to Belgium, but this time with a second son, ha ha. I worked in the laboratory of the Professor Pierre Cornelis of Microbial Interactions. I am so grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to work in his laboratory where I learnt so much more.

Today, I have been promoted and I give lectures to undergraduate students as well as graduate students. Also, I have been honored as member of the National Commission of Biosciences to create the National Strategic Plan to develop biosciences in Panama. Moreover, I am the Director of the Department of Genetics and Molecular Biology. Besides, we are doing a small-scale research in metagenomics. Our research results were presented at the ISME (international society of microbial ecology) 2010 congress.

Studying in Belgium was a blessing to me. Besides all the academic opportunities, which helped me to grow as a professional, it also gave me the joy to encounter so many good people from different countries and different cultures. Belgium was our second home, land of the best chocolates and frites I have ever tasted, ha ha ha. But, most importantly gave me the opportunity to make friendship, which I will forever miss. Every day I thank God for the amazing experience I had when I was living in Belgium.

TESTIMONIAL VUB ALUMNI: "Interuniversity Programme Molecular Biology"

Name: Toya Nath Baral

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IPMB Alumni: 1999 - 2001

I got the opportunity to be a student of the IPMB program in 1999 to 2001. Before joining the program I was working as a veterinary practitioner in the government's veterinary hospital in Nepal. This program was the window which opened the door for me to the world of advanced science and in particular molecular biology. I am sure; it has done the same for all IPMB graduates. I always remember what our course co-ordinator Prof. Eddy Van Driessche told us at the beginning of the program. He said that 'we were not only going to learn the science, which we would do anyway, we were also going to learn a different lifestyle, different society of the developed world'. Indeed, that experience opened several avenues in my scientific career as well as my personal life. Our program director 'Prof. Patrick De Baetselier once told me that the Master thesis that is part of the IPMB programme was meant to make students to realize the real science'. Indeed, just by studying books we cannot imagine how the theories are derived from experimental data. This program gave me the opportunity to realize facts of the scientific world.

After I graduated from this program, I was accepted by Prof. De Baetselier as a PhD student. I finished my PhD in 2006. After PhD, I got a post doctoral first and then a research associate position in National research Council of Canada (NRC). Currently I am working with NRC where our focus is on development of therapeutic antibody.

I would end my story once again saying indeed, it was the IPMB program that gave me the opportunity to be familiar with the cutting edge research and also gave the confident that I could be a part of such research. Therefore, I am grateful to the program, the professors as well as supporting staff of the program.

Toya Nath Baral, PhD

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