Sponsored Student Perspectives
By Martha Staff, Assistant Director, International Student Services

I interviewed three sponsored graduate students regarding their academics and life at UHM and in Hawaii. Hao Nguyen from Vietnam is a doctoral student in Urban and Regional Planning who will graduate in summer 2012. Mojca Stubelj Ars is a doctoral student from Slovenia. She received a research grant for the 2011-12 academic year and is hosted by the UHM Environmental Center. Innocent Makgwakae from Botswana is a master’s degree student in Kinesiology and Rehabilitative Sciences who will graduate in May 2012.

Martha: You are here at UHM as a J-1 sponsored student. Please explain how you or your sponsor selected UHM for your program of study.

Hao: In 2002 was working at the Institute of Sociology in Hanoi in 2002, and applied for the Harvard Yen Ching scholarship. I did not expect to get it, but I was selected, with the condition that I could go anywhere in the world. My mentor in Hanoi recommended UHM and advised me to apply. Although it was past the normal application deadline, I contacted a professor in Urban & Regional Planning that my mentor knew, discovered matching interests...and got admitted.

Mojca: It was my long-term goal to obtain a Fulbright scholarship. I wanted to go where nature is exceptional and where there is an understanding of the need for nature conservation. In 2010 I was preparing to come to Honolulu for the 5th International Marine Debris Conference. Although I could not attend that conference, the research presented there opened the door for potential future collaboration. I received an invitation from UHM and Fulbright accepted me.

Innocent: The choice of which university I would attend was made by my sponsor, Fulbright, after reviewing the available options. UHM was the best choice because here there are two professors in my specialty area, one of which is the department chair. At other universities there is typically only one faculty in this specialty area.

Martha: What is your specific academic area of interest?

Hao: My background was in sociology; prior to coming here I was working on a Masters in Sociology in Vietnam. When I switched my field to Urban & Regional Planning (URP), I was without some of the theoretical background. But by the time I had completed my master’s degree, I had decided to focus on planning in developing countries...studying urbanization processes worldwide. I want to contribute to planning for changes that will result in more livable cities and communities. My dissertation research is focused on urbanization of water resources...specifically, the community-based institutional arrangements for drinking water in peri-urban areas of Hanoi.

Mojca: I am interested in working on implementation of sustainable development in protected areas. Therefore, environmental education and ecotourism are both strong areas of interest. I have skills in decision modeling as well as environmental science.

Innocent: In the Dept. of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Science, I am majoring in sports science. My special area of interest is adapted physical education (PE).
Martha: How has your department helped you focus on or achieve the special academic knowledge you desire?

Hao: I feel lucky to be in the URP program because although it is a small program, the faculty are well-known and all have academic backgrounds from prestigious universities. Also, I am fortunate to work with supportive student peers. For example, I am currently in a doctoral dissertation-writing group which is designed to combat the lonely process of academic writing. I find the entire department very supportive, including our excellent secretary.

Mojca: The Environmental Center and my faculty mentor there have been very helpful with respect to advising me on my doctoral research, as well as connecting me with people from the academic and external community who can be helpful as resources and collaborators.

Innocent: The chair of my department is my academic adviser, and she specializes in adapted PE. She has helped me throughout my program, guiding me in my research papers and in selection of courses. I took all of the classes she teaches. As my supervisor, she organized a series of practicum experiences including a motor clinic for kids with disabilities at the UH pool, volunteer work at Easter Seals and practice teaching children with severe disabilities at an elementary and a high school.

Martha: What overall reaction have you had to academic life at UHM?

Hao: UHM has a strong focus on research, which means there are advantages and disadvantages. In my department, currently resource issues are critical. For example, there is little funding to bring well-known international scholars in my field to visit here, as happens in some other universities. But UHM has great services, such as the Center for Teaching Excellence, the Manoa Career Center, and International Student Services, to name a few. UHM also has good opportunities for graduate students to get travel grant funds and to compete for other funds to help with research projects.

Mojca: Academic life here is vivid and vibrant. I admire the variety of research fields and research teams here. There are many more opportunities to get involved in community projects as a volunteer or contributor than in my home country. I believe my experiences here have opened my eyes with respect to exploring and expanding my talents both in academics and in leisure activities.

Innocent: Campus life is fast paced and can be tough. Each semester I found myself in a race against time. In my first semester, I had to acclimatize quickly to keep up in classes and do satisfactory work.

Martha: What personal or academic challenges have you faced since you came to Honolulu?

Hao: I mentioned it was very challenging to understand the core knowledge and theory of a new academic field, coming from another field. I have faced challenges with participating in international conferences because of visa issues. Our department also has limited opportunities to teach, because there is no undergraduate major in URP. Therefore, teaching lower-level courses has usually been assigned to new faculty and not to doctoral students. This semester, I am lucky to be co-teaching a course. Publishing is a major challenge. PhD students are expected/required to publish, and we have to be very proactive in this regard. Because I am a second language speaker, there are additional challenges to write in English. Personal challenges included family issues. My wife is also a student and we have two children. It is difficult to split the focus between family and academics. And of course Hawaii is expensive and it seems to be getting even more expensive the longer I stay.
Mojca: One of the biggest challenges has been bringing my family along on this adventure with me. The costs of living, especially housing and childcare, have exceeded my expectations, which were already high. However, I would not have come without my family, so this great challenge is also a great reward. With respect to my research, because there are so many opportunities, it was difficult to focus my research plans.

Innocent: Housing proved to be a difficult challenge. Before I came I was on the waiting list for on-campus housing. Fortunately, after I arrived, and with the help of International Student Services, I joined the East West Center Student Affiliate program which allows me to live in the dorm. Another difficulty in my first semester was an unexpected illness for which I was hospitalized for several days. Luckily this setback didn’t seriously impact my academic work. I also had a major challenge with an online course I took. I did not do well, although it was not a difficult course, primarily because the professor could not understand my accent. A major challenge is that living in Hawaii is expensive. Although I am a frugal person, it has been difficult getting by on the student stipend. I could not bring my family to Hawaii, and the separation has been tough.

Martha: How has the culture of Hawaii affected you as a person during your stay here? Comment not only on the campus culture you experience but the broader culture of our island and state.

Hao: I have come to treasure the aloha spirit here. Having been here a long time, I understand it well. I feel welcome here, and have experienced no discrimination with respect to cultural issues. I have been grateful that International students have such good support here, for example, the ISS organizes many activities for cultural exchange. I have learned so much from cultural exchange with others, and I consider this a privilege of living in Honolulu. My overall experience of culture in Hawaii is that it promotes the goodness in the human spirit, and facilitates engagement with diverse people.

Mojca: I have been happily surprised by the mixture of peoples and culture here. Local people generally live and work together happily, accepting each other. I have met many people who have touched my heart, intentionally or unintentionally, and their stories have given me so many lessons. I have to say that being in Hawaii has been beautiful each and every day.

Innocent: Campus has a cosmopolitan and mixed culture. Living at East West Center, I am surrounded by diversity, but primarily Asian-Pacific peoples. Native Hawaiian culture has not been as visible to me personally since I am not very involved. The local culture seems more similar to my home culture than the culture I briefly experienced in Miami, Florida, where I stopped for Fulbright orientation on my way to Hawaii. In Hawaii, people are accepting and welcoming, friendly, and interested in where I come from. An attribute of Hawaiian culture is a relaxed demeanor, and the ability to make others feel comfortable and respected. I also notice and appreciate the way people honor their cultural norms, histories, and ancestry in the many gatherings and celebrations. It is striking to me that there is little crime here, much less than what I expected and what I have experienced in Africa and on the mainland. I appreciate the cleanliness of Honolulu as well; respect for the environment is part of the culture.

Martha: What are your future career plans?

Hao: I want to teach and research, and possibly also consult for international organizations such as the UN or its agencies. I want to serve my community as an advocate, promoting social learning by working with and on behalf of my community. I am hoping to stay in the US for a time after I graduate, or go to
another English speaking country, to get western teaching experience, then return to Vietnam and find work within a university research center.

**Mojca:** My doctoral thesis addresses questions and problems that people deal with worldwide in terms of conservation and protection of natural resources. I think globally, so I don’t know where I will end up living and working. Right now it is sufficient to enjoy being a researcher and asking questions about the phenomena surrounding us in our everyday life. I know that I will focus on environmental education. A big goal is to someday work at the policy-making level for an organization like UNESCO.

**Innocent:** My future goal is to join the University of Botswana as a faculty member in the Dept. of Physical Education. Fulbright recognized and appreciated this desire. ..I am apparently the only Botswanan citizen who has pursued higher education in the field of adapted physical education. But in order to realize my dream, I will need to obtain a PhD. Currently I don’t have funding for that next step. I also dream of starting an NGO back in Botswana...an organization to help kids with disabilities, so that they can participate in sports safely and freely. Such an NGO would train teachers and coaches so they have basic knowledge regarding how to teach kids with disabilities. Botswana needs resources and special adaptive equipment for these kids. I have been researching the specific steps to develop an NGO constitution and pursue registration procedures. I hope to make good progress on these initial steps before I leave Hawaii.

**Martha:** Has your idea of America, or Americans, changed by your experience here in Hawaii?

**Hao:** Before I came here I had no idea about the US educational system. I learned about the US from movies...I had notions of a comfortable life, individualism, etc. After arriving, I found that Hawaii is unique in America because of location, weather, and the composition of peoples. As an Asian, I feel comfortable and welcome here. I believe in other parts of the US, I would not feel so much like I belong so I might be more self-conscious and cautious in my relationships. I believe that one’s political culture and lifestyle is dependent on where you are.

**Mojca:** Definitely! The US is much bigger than I imagined. I flew over the mainland as I traveled to Hawaii. Although I have much more to learn about America and Americans, I perceive that the rest of the US is very different than Hawaii. I do believe Americans in general are friendly, nice and helpful.

**Innocent:** Yes, my ideas have changed a lot. In Botswana, few people have been to the US, and we learn about Americans primarily from the movies. But many of these movies depict aggressive characters and violent situations, or people who have every material comfort, or much more than they need. I know now that the movies do not depict typical Americans. I now see Americans, Hawaiians, Botswanans as similar: good people, who work hard, who have to compete and struggle to make their way in life.

**Martha:** As you know, the J-1 exchange visa was developed to promote academic and technical exchange between the US and various countries, especially developing countries. What do you think you will be able to take back to your home country, in the spirit of the J-1 exchange visa?

**Hao:** I have a definite new set of knowledge and skills that I will share and contribute in my home country communities. I will utilize the network --academic and other...that I have built here, and I hope to strengthen it through continuing academic collaboration as a scholar, not a student. I plan to
Mojca: I will bring my new knowledge, and new ways of learning, with me when I leave. I can build on the research I have done here, but I also can share the richness of working in a multicultural and open-minded society. I hope to give back to both Hawaii and Slovenia. In addition I want to contribute wherever the outcomes of my PhD research are applicable. I believe there is potential to keep working with researchers and natural resource managers on ecotourism in Hawaii. I also hope some of my Hawaiian collaborators will visit Slovenia to work on scholarly projects with me there.

Innocent: I’ve made friends here, and will keep in touch. I will continue to seek advice and consultation from professors I’ve worked with here. I appreciate the Fulbright network, which provides many opportunities to share ideas and get support and advice on a truly global level. The knowledge I have gained here from my academic studies will be very useful for my home community and country. By profession, I am teacher, so the first to benefit from my higher level of competence will be my students. I can now share with my students the rich life situations I experienced in the US and Hawaii. I also expect that the US Embassy in Botswana will call on me to serve as a facilitator to international visitors.

Martha: What is the one most memorable thing about your experience in Hawaii that you think will stay with you forever?

Hao: Being affiliated with my department, with formal and informal groups on campus has made me part of a cherished international community. I treasure all of the blessings of my student lifestyle at UH Manoa. My most precious memory actually is doing ethnic dancing with others here on campus.

Mojca: I am amazed each day by looking mauka and seeing makai...witnessing great beauty in both directions. Here is a unique ecosystem, found nowhere else on the planet, where the air smells of flowers and happiness. The most memorable experience occurred when I was snorkeling on the west coast, in deep waters. First I heard and then saw a fleet of dolphins approaching. They passed me on the right and on the left, making chirping sounds. It was so exciting...I felt such respect for them as fellow beings. It is a joy that here in Hawaii you can swim with dolphins, hike in tropical forests, surf, all on the same day!

Innocent: The thing I appreciate most is Hawaii’s peaceful community. Before I came, I was fearful that I would find myself in a violent place. What I discovered instead is the aloha spirit. And although I have a nagging worry that there is a future threat here due to population pressures, I admire and will fondly recall the beauty and cleanliness of Oahu.