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Research Application Summary

Building effective convening power for higher education in Africa

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Abstract

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) and its precursor the Forum for Agricultural Resource Husbandry (FORUM) have in the last two decades focused on mobilizing universities to secure quality graduate training and research. This has entailed, among others, activities purposively designed to build convening power among higher education actors in Africa. Initially, the convening events were organized to bring together graduate students and their supervisors to peer-review their projects and thesis faculty supervised research. Gradually, this arrangement has transformed into a much broader conference in terms of the diversity of stakeholders in attendance, the scope and nature of business conducted and networking connections that foster new opportunities. The convening is now institutionalized as the RUFORUM Biennial Conference and African Higher Education Week. It is no longer a platform for project coordinators and graduate students supervisors to speak to themselves about their research project but a week-long convening event of these research teams with relevant stakeholders. The convening has among others (a) contributed to strengthening and/ or building collaborative engagements for sustaining higher education in Africa; (b) enhanced scholarly publishing; (c) facilitated peer-review, joint-regional learning and design of research in higher agricultural education and other key sectors; (d) served as a spring-board for partnerships and resource mobilization in support of higher education; and, (f) facilitated building the evidence-base that has linked universities to continental and national policy agencies. This paper presents a discussion on these achievements and gives the value-add of the Biennial Conferences in light of the RUFORUM agenda.

Key words: African Universities, Biennial Conferences, collaborative engagements, Higher Education Week, RUFORUM

Résumé

Le Forum Régional des Universités pour le Renforcement des Capacités en Agriculture (RUFORUM) et son précurseur le Forum pour la Production des Ressources Agricoles (FORUM) se sont focalisés durant les deux dernières décennies sur la mobilisation des universités pour assurer une formation et recherche supérieures de qualité. Ceci a entraîné,

entre autres, des activités élaborées intentionnellement pour bâtir un pourvoir rassembleur des acteurs de l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique. Initialement, les évènements étaient organisés pour rassembler les étudiants de troisième cycle et leurs superviseurs afin d'examiner leurs projets et recherche de thèse supervisée par la faculté. Graduellement, cet arrangement s'est transformé en une conférence beaucoup plus grande en termes de diversité des parties prenantes participantes, le cadre et la nature des affaires menées et les interactions qui ont favorisé la création de nouvelles opportunités. La réunion est maintenant institutionnalisée comme étant la Conférence Biennale du RUFORUM et la Semaine de l'Enseignement Supérieur Africain. Ce n'est plus une plateforme de coordonnateurs de projet, étudiants et superviseurs pour s'entretenir sur leur projet de recherche mais plutôt un évènement d'une durée d'une semaine réunissant ces équipes de recherche et d'importantes parties prenantes. La réunion entre autres (a) contribué au renforcement et/ ou la création d'engagements collaboratifs pour soutenir l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique ; (b) améliorer les publications académiques ; (c) faciliter peer-review, formation régionale conjointe et l'élaboration de recherche au niveau de l'enseignement supérieur agricole et autres secteurs clés ; (d) servir de levier pour les partenariats et la mobilisation de ressources pour soutenir l'éducation supérieure ; et , (f) faciliter la démarche factuelle qui lie les universités aux agences stratégiques continentales et nationales. Le présent document présente une discussion sur les réalisations et donne la valeur ajoutée de la Conférence Biennale à la lumière du programme de RUFORUM.

Mots clés : Universités africaines, Conférence Biennale, engagements collaboratifs semaine de l'enseignement supérieur, RUFORUM

Introduction

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) is a network of 60 universities in 25 African countries (Fig. 1). The network is headquartered at Makerere University (0°20'14.12"N; 32°34'3.37"E) in Kampala, Uganda; and has its roots as a regional partnership of five agricultural faculties initiated in 1992 under the auspices of a Rockefeller Foundation supported project (Osiru *et al.*, 2016). In 2004, the Vice Chancellors of 10 universities from five African countries (Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda and Zimbabwe) transformed the FORUM into an umbrella organization of African universities focused at supporting enhanced relevance and excellence in Agricultural Higher Education in Africa. The new organization, RUFORUM, prioritized strengthening postgraduate training in its member universities, building on collaboration rather competition, to enhance mutual support and economies of scope and scale (Lynam *et al.*, 2013).

The Network envisions 'a vibrant agricultural sector linked to African universities that can produce high-performing graduates and high-quality research, responsive to the demands of Africa's farmers for innovations, and able to generate sustainable livelihoods and national economic development'. The operation of the Network was guided initially by a 10-year Strategic Plan, 2005 - 2015 (Table 1). A comprehensive Strategic Business Plan presents RUFORUM's focus for the period 2016 – 2020 (RUFORUM, 2016). To drive work and build connections between and among its diverse membership with other relevant stakeholders,

Expansion has been in Scope, Countries and within Countries

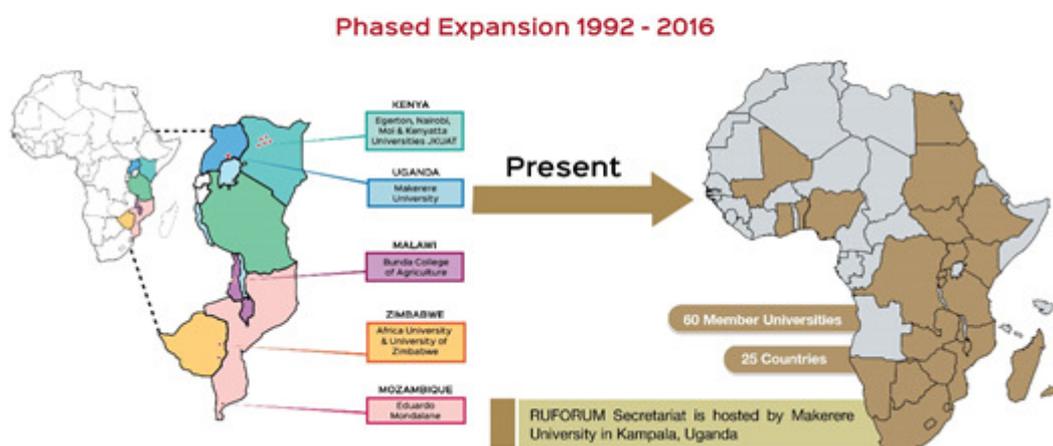


Figure 1. Evolution of the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture – membership coverage in African countries

Table 1. Strategic goals that guided operations of the RUFORUM Network for the period 2005 - 2015

No.	Strategic goal
1	Masters and doctoral programmes responsive to stakeholder needs and national/regional development goals
2	Shared research and education/training facilities and capacities rationalized for enhanced economies of scope and scale
3	Innovative education/training, research and outreach activities supported by adaptive management structures in universities contributing to policy and development practice
4	Operational capacity and approaches for innovative, quality and impact-oriented agricultural R4D mainstreamed in universities
5	Increased participation and voice of women in education/training, research and production and marketing of knowledge
6	Increased use of technology to support effective decentralized learning and sharing of knowledge
7	A dynamic regional platform for policy advocacy, coordination and resource mobilization for improved education/training, research and outreach by universities

the RUFORUM Network has over the years established a convening platform. The African Higher Education Week & RUFORUM Biennial Conference has even with new technologies and applications, remained the paramount way to convene people, facilitate collaboration between partners, break down silos; and foster a community with a diversity of stakeholders engaged to tackle issues and commit to action in the higher education sector.

The African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) organizes the African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference (Biennial Conference) to 1) collaboratively with stakeholders review African agricultural university performance and obtain feedback including from policy makers; 2) provide a platform for sharing of best practices and reforms within the higher education sector, from across the globe, but also within RUFORUM member universities; 3) build professional ‘communities of practice’ that engage postgraduates students, universities staff, and stakeholders to improve value chains and higher education contribution to farm incomes; and 4) provide a platform for students to share their research work and also identify mentors and other opportunities for their transitions out of school, into employment or entrepreneurship. The Biennial Conference is RUFORUM’s most comprehensive meeting for the diversity of stakeholders in agriculture. It is especially dedicated to graduate students and their supervisors, grantees in RUFORUM member universities and alumni. It is a platform for peer review, quality control, mentorship, networking and shared learning.

The Biennial Conference is an evolution of a meeting of grantees and students that was scheduled once every two years for purposes of presentation and discussion of research findings. The grantee students meetings were held for a period between 1994 – 2006 (Patel and Woomer, 2000; Lynam *et al.*, 2013). From 2007, a more structured convening was initiated and this in addition to grantees and students, entailed participation of several other stakeholders in higher education with a focus on a broader theme.

The Conference has since evolved to provide a platform for sharing experiences and lessons among Higher Agricultural Education stakeholders towards strengthening Higher Agricultural Education in Africa. The focus of the Biennial Conference remains postgraduate training and research with a significant engagement of postgraduate students, Vice Chancellors, Principals, Deans, and partner institutions representing research, extension and the private sector. The Biennial Conference program features plenary keynote presentations and discussions, with opportunity for key respondents, panel discussions, plenary discussions, parallel thematic sessions, poster displays, exhibitions as well as side events on issues of interest to scientists, developmental partners, policy makers and private sector of relevance to higher agricultural education. Awards are presented to best poster and oral presentations, as well as to higher education achievers in Africa. The Biennial and indeed other RUFORUM convening events have presented opportunity for identifying and recognizing excellence.

Achievements of previous Biennial Conference events

Using the Biennial Conferences, RUFORUM has effectively illuminated topical issues in higher agricultural education. This effort has, among others, contributed to (a) strengthening and/ or building collaborative engagements for sustaining higher education in Africa; (b) enhanced scholarly publishing and opportunity to celebrate success as well as catalyze contribution to food security in Africa; (c) building a community of practice through facilitated peer-review, joint-regional learning and design of research in higher agricultural education

and other key sectors; (d) served as a spring-board for partnerships and resource mobilization in support of higher education; and, (f) facilitated building the evidence-base that has linked universities to continental and national policy agencies. Examples drawing from these achievements are highlighted below, and Figure 2 presents some of the key outcomes.

1. Publications. As indicated in Corpoas *et al.* (2008) good science above all else defines a good meeting. The RUFORUM Biennial has through the themes and sub-themes provided a wide range of areas for stakeholders in higher education including key development partners and stakeholders including Vice Chancellors from agricultural universities, university staff and students, private sector and civil society representatives, policy makers and professional associations to share their research outs and efforts. We have observed that the greater the number of topics covered the more inclusive in terms of broader participation. The conference themes and sub-themes have endeavored to address emerging areas such as climate change, biotechnology, and these have attracted great interest. For every Biennial Conference all participants are requested to prepare an “Extended Abstract” which is subjected to peer-review and submissions that merit publication are produced is a serialized RUFORUM Working Document Series (ISSN 1607-9345) and uploaded onto the RUFORUM Repository as open access resource materials. An “Extended Abstract” differs from the traditional abstract in scholarly works because it bears features of an article presented with brevity. In the last three Biennial Conferences (2010, 2012 and 2014), 774 Extended Abstracts covering 35 sub-thematic areas have been generated and published (Table 2).

The Extended Abstracts bear all features of a scholarly manuscript and are peer-reviewed and subjected to standard rigour of scholarly articles (March, 2005; Panda and Gupta, 2014). Many young scholars benefit from the peer review process as indicated from the feedback below:

- (i) *Thank you for your precious time and effort accorded to handling my manuscript in this peer-review process.*
- (ii) *I would like to express my deep appreciation to you and the reviewers for giving constructive suggestions that helped me improve the quality of my paper*

This implies that not all submissions are published but only those that merit based on quality standards. As indicated in Table 2, the trend in number of Extended Abstracts published declined with 331 published in 2010, 285 in 2012 and 169 in 2014. In keeping with peer-review rigour more submissions have been dropped and we thus attribute the decline in number of published abstracts to the following observations:

- a) Most abstracts are prepared at the last minute.** Authors tackle the challenge of writing a conference abstract in a totally different way to a paper. Full papers are rarely submitted with a deadline to work to, and yet most people spend weeks or even months developing their manuscript, honing and refining, editing and finessing, before finally submitting. Abstracts for conferences are always submitted to a deadline and most people

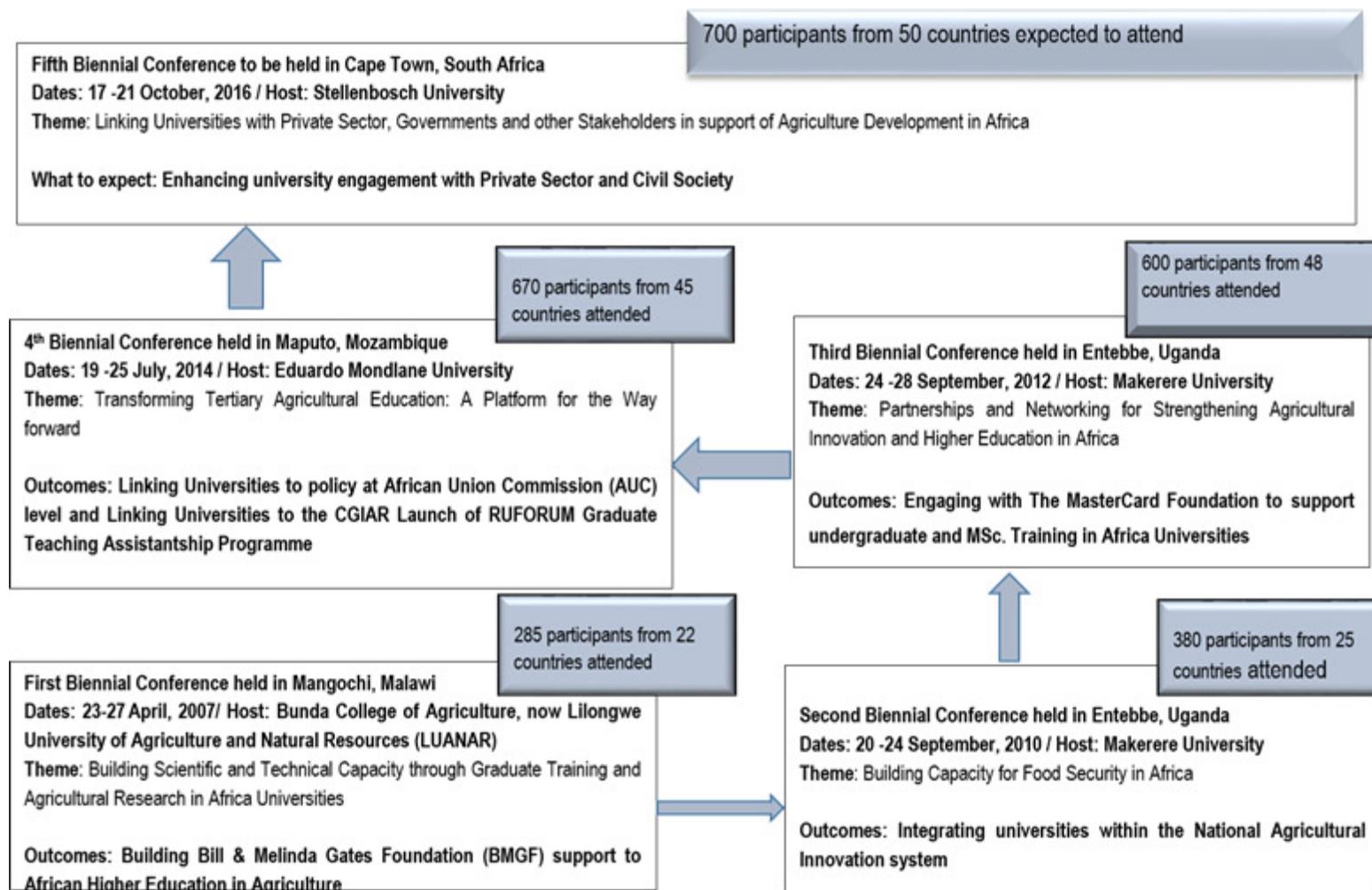


Figure 2. The journey in the process of building effective convening power for stakeholders in Higher Education in Africa

Table 2. Themes, sub-themes and number of extended abstracts published as an output of three consecutive RUFORUM Biennial Conferences

	2010	2012	2014	
Theme	Building capacity for food security in Africa (Adipala <i>et al.</i> , 2010)	Partnerships and networking for strengthening agricultural innovation and higher education in Africa (Tusiime <i>et al.</i> , 2012)	Transforming Tertiary Agricultural Education- a Platform for the Way Forward (Nampala <i>et al.</i> , 2014)	
Sub-themes	Capacity building	02 Strengthening S&T Capacity in Africa	26	
	Climate change	31 Risk and vulnerability in agriculture: Responding to climate and variability	16	Building resilience to address vulnerability to risks associated with climate changes and variability in agricultural Systems 20
	Agronomy	40 Value chains and Innovation platform	11	Strengthening community engagements & innovation platforms 23
	Pests and diseases	23 Coordinated Action for Agricultural Innovation	7	
	Plant breeding	47 Crop Improvement	38	
	Natural resource management	39 Enhancing Natural Resource Management	43	
	Strengthening quality of higher education	13 Cross Cutting	22	Promoting Innovations in Higher Education 20
	Crop protection	05 Integrated Crop Management within smallholder crop value chains	58	Innovations for sustainable cropping production systems 59

Table 1. Contd.

2010	2012	2014	
Animal and Veterinary sciences	30	Animal Health Management	8
Aquaculture and Fisheries	21	Harnessing Aquaculture and Fisheries Resources	14
Soil and Water Management	20	Enhancing Livestock Productivity	16
Food science	04	Food Science and Value Addition	13
Socio-Economics	38	Agricultural Marketing, Trade and Policy	05
Information systems	18	Agricultural Information, Communication and Knowledge Management	08
Total	331		285

Innovations for sustainable fisheries and livestock production systems 09

Strengthening fisheries and crop-livestock value chains through improved postharvest handling and agro-processing 21

Agricultural Marketing, Trade and Policy 9

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will write them within a few days of the deadline and spend no time at all on honing, refining, finessing, etc. Little time is invested and yet the abstract report of research is actually the most difficult thing to pull off well.

- b) Majority of participants at the RUFORUM Biennial Conferences are graduate students and this is often a young scientist's first publication.** The Masters and/or PhD student's first exposure to publication is often their supervisor telling them that there is a good conference they should attend and that the abstract deadline is tomorrow. Some supervisors will then give good guidance on how to produce an abstract, but many do not. Students and young researchers are then left to work out all of the tricks of how to write a robust abstract on their own and as a consequence some of the abstracts that are submitted are rejected for publication.
- c) Some of the students have just initiated their research work and unlike for the previous Biennial Conferences, we are increasingly not processing submissions based on proposed studies and/or preliminary data with no conclusive evidence to support the thesis of the paper are not accepted for publication in the serialized RUFORUM Working Document Series (ISSN 1607-9345).
- d) Some submissions with robust data that merit publication in journals are selected and authors advised to fast track and get these published as journal manuscripts. In some situations, the authors have through their own volition considered the review comments and opted to submit their manuscript for consideration in journals instead of publishing in the Conference proceedings (a serialized RUFORUM Working Document Series (ISSN 1607-9345).

"I recall that we responded to all the queries you had, hence the paper was invited for an oral presentation. However, we only prepared a poster, that you also gave comments to, but we did not submit a final paper. After the conference, we used comments to improve and managed to get it published with a South African Journal, see attached for your information."

- e) We accept caveats on submissions to be considered for presentation only but not to be published either because the data has already been published but the authors want to use the RUFORUM platform to enhance dissemination of their work. There are also Intellectual Property Rights issues cited and in cases where authors intend to file for a patent or publish elsewhere then they are allowed to give oral presentations but their submissions are not processed for publication.

"Apologies - I should have sent this through long time. Please receive an abstract of one of the innovations I am currently working and please note that we are still working on IP issues so I prefer to keep-it to a 1-pager."

- f) Over the years (taking the 3 years in Table 1) there has been a shift from disciplinary-type themes to systems-wide thematic areas that require more comprehensive practice-

type submissions capturing processes and how these contribute to the whole together in the higher education and agricultural sectors. Thus, the sub-thematic areas have tended to attract papers that are addressing issues related to system wide-approaches.

2. Linking universities to policymakers and other key stakeholders in higher education. The Biennial Conference generates a Communique which now serves as a key policy briefing highlighting key recommendation to stakeholders on strengthening higher agricultural education in Africa. In this respect, the Conference has become a mechanism for strengthening partnerships and collaboration between universities, private sector institutions and policy makers. Apart from participants from the member universities, several higher education stakeholders make time to attend the meeting. This observation has to a large extent guided the format and implementation of the Biennial Conferences. The 2016 Biennial Conference will focus on “*Linking Agricultural Universities with Civil Society, the Private Sector, Governments and other Stakeholders in support of Agricultural Development in Africa*”. This as reflected in Table 1 represents broad thematic areas that have in the past served to include rather than exclude different stakeholder categories.

3. Opportunity to celebrate success as well as catalyse contribution to food security in Africa. Many change agents in Africa and particular in the agriculture and higher education sectors are personally driven to create change, and often face enormous challenges. As Martin and Osberg (2015) explained in their book, social entrepreneurs and change agents don’t just aim to make things better. They “imagine the world as it should be and say ‘why not?’” This unwavering ambition and unrelenting commitment means that many of them achieve success at a very personal cost. Awards and recognitions made at the Biennial Conference have over the years built a culture of celebrating success and inspired particularly the graduate student to contribute to the public good.

Formal recognition of excellence can improve and catalyze quality of contributions from researchers and farmers in transforming Africa. Unfortunately, there are few arrangements that provide for appropriate recognition of achievements of champions along the various components of the agricultural and higher education sectors. This lack of substantive recognition of excellence in important sectors in the economies of African countries does a great disservice to the professionals. The profile of tangible and intangible awards by the RUFORUM Network to deserving university-based researchers and farmers are aimed at covering this gap. As part of the Biennial arrangements and indeed other equally important convening events, the Impact Research and Science in Sub-Saharan Africa (IMPRESSA) Awards initiated in 2009 have been institutionalized and are presented to celebrate excellence.

4. Building a community of practice. Bringing people together in an environment that encourages and facilitates idea exchange is one of the most powerful communications strategies for driving change. The Biennial Conference and associated events provide an opportunity to build a supportive community. The RUFORUM design the program to present opportunities for joint engagements between and among faculty, students, private sector working on a focused issue and/ or value chain. Several sessions encourage delegates to explore their personal balance, the toll their work may be taking on their spiritual and physical

selves, and how they might be more effective in their varying leadership roles from work to family. Face-to-face convening provide an emotional and intellectual safe space that allow delegates to recognize what may be holding them back—or what may help accelerate their effectiveness. This is particularly helpful to graduate students in formative stages of shaping their respective career paths. The conference provides graduate students with a platform to engage with practitioners to strengthen communities of practice. As indicated by Gu and Bourne (2007) it is important for graduate students to seek opportunities from senior scholars with a shared scientific interest but also to think ahead and develop their professional career early enough. Below are responses from selected graduate students that had opportunity to attend RUFORUM Biennial Conference:

- a) “I used to almost completely refrain from going to conferences, as I did not feel like they would have an immediate impact on my work. To me, conferences were venues for established scholars and researchers to flaunt their ideas. It was only after the 2012 RUFORUM Biennial Conference that I realized how vital it is to attend conferences and associated events.”
- b) “Conferences present opportunity to meet peers and like-minded people who share your passion and interest. Many graduate students tend to spend their time at the library and the lab – alone, but at conferences you get to see who else is researching in your field, you can network and even make new friends.”
- c) “Attending a conference means that you can meet more advanced researchers, as well as established senior professionals and scholars. Listening to talks and presentations can open up new ways of thinking about a specific topic or even give you a new idea, one that you had previously not thought about. Also, as most post-conference events are usually informal, you can get the chance to speak to the presenters in person, ask for their opinion and even get their advice or contact information for further discussions.”
- d) “Most presentations are followed by question and answer sessions, which give opportunity to ask all the questions and seek clarification on otherwise unclear issues.”
- e) “The RUFORUM conferences attracts many academics and researchers and they offer a good opportunity to ‘test’ ideas, put them out there for the audience, in order to receive critical responses. I had opportunity to hear groundbreaking ideas, discoveries and theories on my thesis topic, which I would never have found in an existing publication and/or from seminars at my university.”

Key challenges in building the RUFORUM Convening power

Scientific meetings occur in various formats from one-day focused workshops of 1 – 20 people to large multiple-day meetings of over 1000 or more delegates, including keynotes, session, posters, social events and many others. The Biennial Conference has evolved to attract now over 700 participants and it is a challenge to design a program that will meet all stakeholder interests. For all the conferences, we have made sure that the RUFORUM Biennial is a place where people who might not otherwise have a chance to meet can convene and share their work with key stakeholders. Bringing diverse people and voices together in our fast-moving world is not without its challenges (Land *et al.*, 2009). To find fresh perspectives and voices from around the world, we face logistical barriers in securing

visas, managing travel, and navigating global health and national security scares. Some of the keynote speakers of choice are very busy executives that face the burden of leaving their work, families, and other personal obligations behind to attend a multi-day event that is, for many, a long plane ride away. When we secure commitments from high-level government officials, corporate leaders, and other leading global thinkers, we want to get value from their ideas and experiences, but also make sure that they aren't simply jumping from the stage to a plane. We expect them to participate in smaller, more intimate meetings, where they might provide input and provide opportunity for foresight engagements, get advice from practitioners on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, or explore the introduction of new ways to measure impact of training and research in the development context.

At every Biennial Conference, we generate a pool of papers published in the RUFORUM Working Document Series and these present a rich resource capturing trends in research, new approaches, and lessons learned as well as best practices and/or successful intervention that are available for moving from scale to landscapes. Despite this, a lot of important outcomes from the Biennial Conference remain largely invisible to the public. There is need to silhouette to stakeholders the impact of the Biennial to the Network as whole, the individual member universities, the RUFORUM Secretariat as well as to the individual faculty and graduate students.

Conclusion

Through the African Higher Education Week and Biennial Conference, we have seen the incredible opportunities, enthusiasm, and ideas that can come to fruition only by bringing people together and providing a safe space for exploration and innovation. The convening has also given us the opportunity to effectively engage all members (the universities) as well as individuals (Deans, Principals, Vice Chancellors, etc) that drive processes within the setting of the respective universities. In mounting the Biennial Conferences the RUFORUM Network has effectively created a platform for ideas where they can be both the host and a stakeholder. This has set in motion a process of self-reflection of our own approaches and new ideas to drive innovations for effective teaching, learning, research and outreach at African universities. Despite all the technological advances, face-to-face meetings remain a valuable avenue to build and maintain productive relationships. Face-to-face communications may become more important in our increasingly digital world, as people seek out connections that go beyond a Twitter chat or a blog post. Over the past decade, we have seen the unique power of gathering to help people communicate, learn, grow—and, ultimately, drive the kind of change they want to see in the world.

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