

RUFORUM Case Studies

Lessons learnt from being a RUFORUM student

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During my experience as a RUFORUM student, I gained many valuable skills including critical thinking, ability to take criticism with grace and appreciation, capability to make timely deliveries, and both oral and written communication skills. Acquiring these skills has been very rewarding during my working experience and now as a graduate student in a US university. My key message to African students is to develop a good reading culture because “the person who doesn’t read is no better off than the person who can’t read.”



I am happy to introduce myself as an alumnus of RUFORUM. FORUM, which later became RUFORUM, funded my Masters’ program in integrated pest management under the supervision of Prof. Samuel Kyamanywa and Prof. Ogenga-Latigo. I completed the MSc study in 2001. It is difficult to separate what I learnt being a RUFORUM student from my entire experience during my M.Sc. training so I will give the credit to RUFORUM after all if they had not provided me with the funding, I probably would not have had this experience. I learnt a lot from this experience including critical thinking, ability to take criticism with grace and appreciation, and capability to make timely deliveries. I don’t know if it still applies these days but those days PIs were rewarded for timely completion of the program by their students, so you had to successfully complete your Masters’ program in two years, and along the way you always had to submit timely progress and financial reports. Acquiring this skill has been very awarding both during my working experience and now as a graduate student in a US university. Other skills I greatly attribute to my experience as a RUFORUM student are the communication skills. During those days, RUFORUM students had the most opportunities to attend regional and international conferences. Thanks to Prof. Adipala’s critical evaluation of our presentations, prior to conferences, RUFORUM students from Makerere University always shined and we still do!

My first regional experience was the Biannual RUFORUM conference held in Lilongwe, Malawi in July 2000. During that conference we interacted with a number of RUFORUM alumni and friends, one of whom changed my career path. Unfortunately I do not recall the name of the person but the words she said stuck in my brain. She said that one of the things she regretted was pursuing her PhD studies without first laying a foundation for her social life. This was a lesson I found worth learning from, and interesting enough on our return flight from Lilongwe Prof. Adipala asked me “Barbara, when are you starting your PhD program?” and I smilingly replied “after I get married”. With that decision made, after I completed my Masters’ program I gained working experience as a local government agricultural officer, as a research assistant in the flower industry, and Program for Biosafety System under the International Food Policy Research Institute. During my work experience, I realized that I needed to identify a research field that I am really interested and pursue my PhD in that field.

PhD training is a long-duration and very demanding life experience thus it helps if you are doing something you enjoy.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important skills I acquired from being a RUFORUM student were communication skills, both oral and written. These skills played a big role in my professional advancement. Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) is a USAID funded project that facilitates government regulatory agencies to strengthen capacity to effectively enforce regulations for modern biotechnology. Working with PBS allowed me to interact with various US partners including a team from Michigan State University (MSU). The team was impressed by my working skills and they invited me to MSU to collaborate with them to develop a web-based resource for African biosafety regulators, which is hosted by the African Biosafety Network of Experts (ABNE), a NEPAD initiative. During this work experience at MSU, which lasted nine months, I employed all the positive skills I had acquired as a RUFORUM student to further impress upon the team. This was because after working at MSU for about a month I made a decision that this was the environment under which I wanted to pursue my PhD training. MSU is one of the best universities in the US for agricultural training, and it provides an opportunity to network with a diverse group of people because of its strong international students’ program. I have always been advised that **networking and identifying potential partners** is a critical task to carry out

at any career level most especially during your PhD training. This helps to expand your “circle of influence” and develop relationships that may positively impact your career and social life forever.

Earlier I mentioned that you have to pursue your PhD training in something you are interested in. Well, during my work experience I realized that one of the major hindrances to agricultural advancement in Uganda was failure to promote and avail relevant technologies, as well as the introduction of unsustainable practices or technologies to farmers. I developed interest in agricultural regulations with a focus on regulation of agricultural biotechnologies. This is the research field that I am studying under the PhD program. I am very grateful to the ABNE



Group photo taken at a RUFORUM meeting in Entebbe, September 1999.
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team at MSU for having recognized my potential, which resulted in Prof. Jim Hancock securing a graduate assistantship for me under his breeding program and Prof. Rebecca Grumet accepting to be my major professor. Prior to admission in the PhD program, the major challenge I faced was preparing for the graduate record examinations (GRE) general test. During my Masters’ program I watched people struggling with preparing for this test and I made a decision that I will not bother trying my luck for PhD training in a US or Canadian university. Now, here I was... The critical thinking and writing skills acquired as a RUFORUM student really helped me to overcome this challenge. I wish to encourage students that you should not allow fear for the GRE test to discourage you from trying out your luck for graduate studies in US universities, instead if that is your wish then **start preparing for the GRE and English tests as early as two years in advance**. Many will agree me that in the past Chinese were not very good in the English language but excellent in mathematics, yet many have obtained their graduate awards in US universities while they still struggle with speaking English. You know why! This is because these people **make long-term plans**. In the first year of their undergraduate programs, Chinese are encouraged to plan their career paths. If you decide that pursuing graduate studies in a US university is part of your plan, then you start preparing for the GRE and English tests. This enables them prepare for the tests for about three years, which results in excellent scores in English, sometimes marks better than those received by the US citizens, thus winning scholarships both nationally and internationally. Let’s borrow a leaf from them.

The challenges I faced with preparing for the GRE test, and after starting PhD program in 2009, were mainly a result of the poor reading culture that many African have. I encourage you to develop a good reading culture. According to Stephen Covey, the author of “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”, mental strength is developed by reading good literature “starting with a goal of reading a book a month, then a book every two weeks, then a book a week”. He emphasized that “the person who doesn’t read is no better off than the person who can’t read.” I am working on my reading culture and I know I will get there.

The skill of accepting criticism with grace and appreciation, which I acquired as a RUFORUM student has been a gift that has carried me through my experience in a US university where peer review is very thorough and sometimes overwhelmingly blunt. Lack of fear to be criticized allows you a chance to learn a lot from others and to develop relationships that may positively guide you through life.

My academic and research success at MSU has won me an honor with the Phi Beta Delta Honor Society (2010), and three Award fellowships include two Miriam J. Kelley African Scholarship Grants (2011-2012) and The Norman E. Borlaug Leadership Enhancement in Agriculture Program (LEAP) fellowship (Fall 2011).

Currently, I am in my third year of the training and it is a challenging journey. Combining being a wife, a mother of four children and pursuing PhD training is a blessing but also an uphill journey, however employing the skills acquired as a RUFORUM student and having continuous support of all the positive relationships has made it bearable. For that, I am very grateful!



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