

## **Administrative frontiers in a Regional Network Organisation**

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### **Abstract**

Administrative roles are fundamental components for the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations. These roles include file maintenance, communications, clerical duties, office logistics management, financial management, procurement, human resources management, cleanliness and hygiene, procurement and security. The administrative role for a pan-African network of 66 universities brings to the fore unique needs and challenges. These needs and challenges are associated with ensuring efficiency through robust methods of working and management of the central role of administration. In this paper the author shares her experience as an Administrative Assistant at the Secretariat of the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM), a coordinating unit for 66 universities in 26 African countries.

Key words: Administrative support, office management, RUFORUM

### **Résumé**

Les rôles administratifs sont fondamentaux pour qu'une organisation soit efficiente et efficace. Parmi ces rôles, il y a la maintenance des dossiers, les communications, les tâches de bureau, la gestion de la logistique, la gestion financière, l'approvisionnement des équipements, la gestion des ressources humaines, la propreté et l'hygiène et la sécurité. L'administration d'un réseau panafricain de 85 universités présente des besoins et des défis uniques. Ces besoins et défis sont associés à une efficacité par les méthodes robustes de travail et à la gestion du rôle central de l'administration. Dans ce document, l'auteur fait part de ses expériences dans sa fonction d'assistante administrative au Secrétariat du Forum Régional des Universités pour le renforcement des capacités en agriculture (RUFORUM), une unité de coordination de 85 universités dans 35 pays africains.

Mots-clés: Support administratif, gestion de bureau, RUFORUM

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### **Introduction**

In the 21st century, regionalization of engagements has become the norm and as such proper engagement is based on how well the administration and coordination functions are

handled at the coordinating center. The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) is a network and membership based organisation of 66 universities in 26 African countries. The network engagement is handled by a Secretariat with a lean staffing based in Kampala, Uganda. Over the last 12 years, the Secretariat has coordinated various activities and engagements but there has been no focused attention to share experiences of how its administration process supports the level of engagement of the various network actors. Therefore the purpose of this article is to highlight the roles of the administrative unit at RUFORUM Secretariat and some of the lessons learnt.

### **Literature survey**

Administration forms a central component for organizational success. Administrative decision making is assumed to be rational, by this we mean that administrators make decisions under certainty: they know their alternatives, they know their outcomes, they know their decision criteria, and they have the ability to make optimum choice and then implement it (Lunenburg, 2010). A fundamental assumption remains that if plans are well-conceived, clearly set out, and adequately communicated, then systems can be improved (Hoyle, 1982). In regional organisations particularly those that are network based, the demand for well-structured and coordinated processes in the Secretariat offices are often demanding and require high levels of organisation for timely, effective and strong engagement of actors (Branson, 2008).

Smaller organisations in particular can find it difficult to meet the increasingly rigorous requirements for written policies and good governance procedures. According to Branson (2008) organisation managers themselves frequently face limitations in having skilled Human Resources (HR) and finances particularly in relation to recruitment and contracting and having thin but efficient staffing. The cost of management support and training can be prohibitive for smaller, more isolated organisations. Electronic and IT based solutions and resources are not always accessible to smaller, less-developed organisations.

### **Experiences at the RUFORUM Secretariat**

The RUFORUM Administrative Unit is the backbone of both the Secretariat and the Network. This Administrative Unit comprises of a Manager, who oversees all the activities of the unit, and directly supervises the Human Resources and Procurement Program Officer. The Manager also represents the Administration Unit during the monthly management meetings.

The Program Officer Human Resources and Procurement oversees all the issues of Human resources and Procurement at the Secretariat. She supervises the Administrative Assistant and handles issues that are beyond the Administrative Assistant. The Administrative Assistant links both units and is responsible for the supervision of the 10 other support staff in the Unit. Below is the organogram of the Administrative unit at RUFORUM Secretariat.

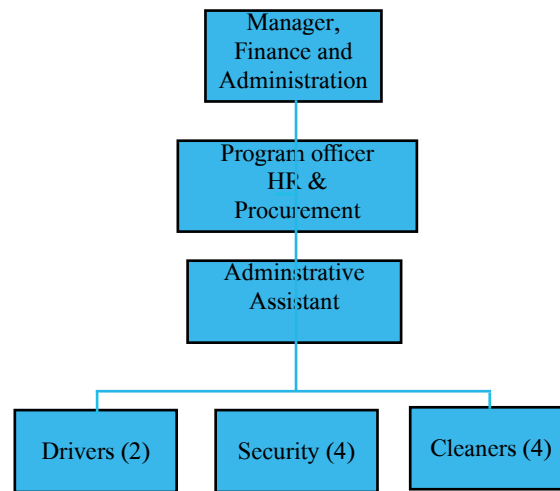


Figure 1. Administrative unit at RUFORUM Secretariat.

Below are some of the administrative functions of the entire unit

1. Financial Management involves all the financial activities at the Secretariat, i.e., payments, accountabilities, budgeting and financial reporting. This role is handled by the Finance team and is directly supervised by the Finance Manager. However, a number of requisitions are initiated by the Administrative Assistant. Details of the finance section are not described in this paper.
2. Human Resources Management involves the recruitment of staff and staff welfare. This function is led by the Program Officer Human Resources who is also responsible for harmonizing healthy working relationships and creating a comfortable working environment at the Secretariat.
3. Procurement Management involves all the purchases and disposal of items at the Secretariat. For any item to be purchased or disposed off, the Procurement Officer has to be notified of every step of the process for approval in line with the set procurement rules and procedures.
4. Front Office Management is done by the Administrative Assistant who handles all the incoming and outgoing documents, forwarding all incoming and outgoing phone calls and attending to all the guests at the reception and directing them to the respective staff as requested.
5. Office Transport Management is coordinated by the Administrative Assistant who works closely with the office drivers. The two drivers each have a car movement book that is signed by the driver and each staff intending to use the vehicle. The vehicle mileage and destinations are also recorded in this book including the fuel tracking.
6. Security Management involves four security guards who work in shifts. Two work during the day and the other two work at night to maintain security on a 24hr daily basis. Security log books are used where all the visitors are required to sign in before proceeding to any particular office.
7. Cleanliness and Hygiene is managed by the team of four composed of two Office

Assistants who do the in-house cleaning and two gardeners. This team is supervised by the Administrative Assistant.

8. Events Organizing/ Travel Arrangements and Logistics is mainly handled by the Administrative Assistant with the help from the particular units in charge of particular events. This function involves doing the hotel reservations, ticket bookings and confirmations, visa processing support and communication with event participants.

9. File Management and Archiving is handled by the Administrative Assistant. The RUFORUM Secretariat maintains both a physical and electronic filing system. A filing architecture was agreed on and it enables findability of documents. The RUFORUM Secretariat maintains a Documents Server on its Local Area Network and this is where key documents are kept for teams to access. The Documents Server is configured to provide specific access rights depending on the role and function of that person.

The administrative unit at the RUFORUM Secretariat slightly differs from other organisations in the following ways:

1. Size versus coverage - It is small compared to the size and reach of the RUFORUM Network which is made up of 66 universities in 26 countries across Africa bringing together thousands of agricultural scientists, professionals and diversity in culture and languages.
2. Dual role - It has a dual role, serving both the wider network and the Secretariat departments
3. Need for vibrant communication – This unit requires staff with excellent interpersonal, verbal, and written communication skills to effectively communicate in a variety of settings across the 26 countries covered by RUFORUM. This communication must also serve the high level Board Members, the Secretariat units and international community.
4. Fast paced multicultural environment – requiring the ability to handle many varied functions simultaneously in a demanding pan-African and international setting. This also requires staff that can communicate in English, French, Arabic and Portuguese.
5. Virtual methods of working – that include regular use of dynamic mailing lists, contacts databases and voluminous emails.

### **Lessons / Challenges**

There is need for well-groomed efficient staff because the administrative unit is the “face” of the network of RUFORUM given the fact that it is directly involved in organizing high level meetings between the Secretariat and its network. Electronic systems have helped ensure efficiency at the Secretariat– these include the email system, financial management system, telephone usage tracking system, network contacts database, and financial management system.

In any organization, it is important to develop internal procedures, policies and guidelines to direct the work of administration. In the case of RUFORUM these have included the Procurement Policy, Human Resources Policy, Mileage Log Books for drivers, Leave Application forms, among several others. Importantly, working in a busy regional organization like RUFORUM, there is need to have a call answering service for the

reception phone to respond to calls as and when needed. This is because of the time zone difference among the different member universities and partner organizations that we work with. It is also important to have a power back-up internet access considering that most of the communication is through emails. At the RUFORUM Secretariat we have a power back-up but we still need internet system back-up so as to maintain communication and access to automated systems such as financial management system.

### **Conclusion**

The traditional administrative functions of non-networked and networked organisations are similar. A networked organization such as RUFORUM demands robust systems and competent staff in order to ably respond to the diverse needs of a pan-African network of universities. The multi-cultural setting also requires proficiency in English, French, Portuguese and Arabic. The Information Technology tools and systems clearly add value to the improved financial management, communication and documents management. There is therefore need to regularly assess how well the RUFORUM Administrative Unit is serving the Secretariat departments and the wider RUFORUM network. Such a process would assist towards improving areas of weakness and contribute to the success of the network vision and mission.

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