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Research Application Summary

**My experience as a publication assistant during formatting, editing and publishing  
RUFORUM Working Document Series: Biennial 2016 Conference papers**

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**Abstract**

This paper shares the author's perspective and experience during the formatting and editing of manuscripts for the Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference held 17-21 October 2016 in Cape Town, South Africa. These manuscripts were prepared by students, university researchers and others for presentation at the Conference and for publication in RUFORUM Working Document Series. The papers had to be reviewed, formatted, edited, and those meeting publication quality and guidelines published online with open access for global sharing. There were challenges throughout this process as elucidated in the paper, especially from authors in following guidelines, improper citation of references and poor grammar. Most papers had to go through three to six rounds of editing and formatting. The papers provide useful information to inform researchers, implementers, policy makers and others.

Key words: Authors, editorial workflow, manuscripts, repository, RUFORUM

**Résumé**

Cet article documente les perspectives et expériences de l'auteur dans le processus de formatage et d'édition des manuscrits soumis pour la cinquième semaine de l'Enseignement Supérieur en Afrique et la Conférence Bisannuelle de RUFORUM tenue du 17 au 21 octobre 2016 au Cap en Afrique du Sud. Les manuscrits ont été préparés par des étudiants, des chercheurs universitaires et d'autres personnes pour être présentés à la conférence et pour être publiés dans la série de documents de travail de RUFORUM. Les articles ont dû être révisés, formatés, édités, et ceux qui présentent une qualité pour une publication et suivent les lignes directrices sont publiés en ligne avec un accès ouvert pour un partage global. Il y a eu des défis tout au long de ce processus tel qu'élucidé dans ce document, en particulier en ce qui concerne les instructions aux auteurs, les citations incorrectes des références et une grammaire inadéquate. La plupart des articles ont dû passer 3 à 6 tours d'édition et de mise en forme, et fournissent des informations utiles pour guider les chercheurs, les praticiens, les décideurs et autres.

Mots-clés: Auteurs, processus éditorial, manuscrits, source, RUFORUM

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## **Introduction**

Publishing research online in a profit/non-profit repository increases exposure and visibility of research findings. Moreover, dissemination of research through electronic publishing has greatly increased opportunities for researchers and students to publish their work worldwide. This has also enabled students to acquire information through online platforms. When research is disseminated in a quality and standard way, readership increases and writing skills are improved. Therefore, in this era if research is not published online through open access, there is no way it can be disseminated better and faster worldwide. Journals and repositories have played a significant role in this matter and reached millions of readers through the platforms hence increasing readership. Research papers pass through a series of stages before publishing them. These stages often help improve quality of submitted manuscripts hence publishing quality papers.

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) is a network of 66 Universities with a presence spanning 26 countries across Africa. The network introduced the RUFORUM Working Document Series to help students, researchers and others disseminate research information and development experiences, and also make information available to end users including policy makers. It also aims at increasing visibility of research outputs from Africa, while at the same time providing readers and practitioners materials to inform their practices including policy. It is hoped that the information shared will aid to improve agricultural productivity and better living standards. Through RUFORUM's repository, quality and useful research and other materials like posters, reviews, short communications and dissertations have been disseminated to reach global audience especially students, researchers, farmers and policy makers, and other practitioners.

In preparation for the Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference, a call for papers was issued to students, researchers and other potential participants to be part of the Conference. Over 500 manuscripts were submitted from all over Africa and beyond. These manuscripts had to be reviewed, formatted and edited. This is when I was recruited as a consultant to work on this specific task. I am very grateful to serve as a Publication Assistant for my first time. A Publication Assistant supports the editorial staff in all activities leading to publication. The RUFORUM editorial staff involves a journal manager, editors, editor-in-chief, editorial assistant, reviewers and a Publication Assistant. Figure 1 illustrates the editorial workflow of a manuscript right from submission to production stage.

The proceedings nurtured me into a focused person right from the start although it was hard to keep up with a new working environment. An environment where everyone was busy and expected to deliver before the deadline. Working with new people in a different field; moreover Agriculture was not my area of expertise, something I had never thought of engaging in. Agriculture reminded me of my time at high school when I hated the subject but there I was, working with an agriculture organisation where agriculture is precious and

beautifully embraced. I learned to love it, started speaking the language and also began practicing it.

RUFORUM through the Working document series played a role in disseminating quality research findings which were published and posted in the Organization’s repository. Most of research was based on building capacity in agriculture and innovation. Papers accepted for publication were categorized into eleven sub themes namely, Partnerships and innovations to strengthen higher education in Africa; Strengthening ICT and knowledge management in agriculture; Strengthening University outreach, community engagement and innovation platforms; Sustainable environment and natural resources management; Sustainable intensification within smallholder crop value chains; Sustainable intensification within smallholder livestock value chains; Marine science and blue economy - fisheries and aquaculture; Reducing postharvest losses; Agricultural marketing pathways, product uptake, trade and policy; Strengthening gender mainstreaming to enhance agricultural productivity; and Addressing risk associated with climate change variability in agricultural systems.

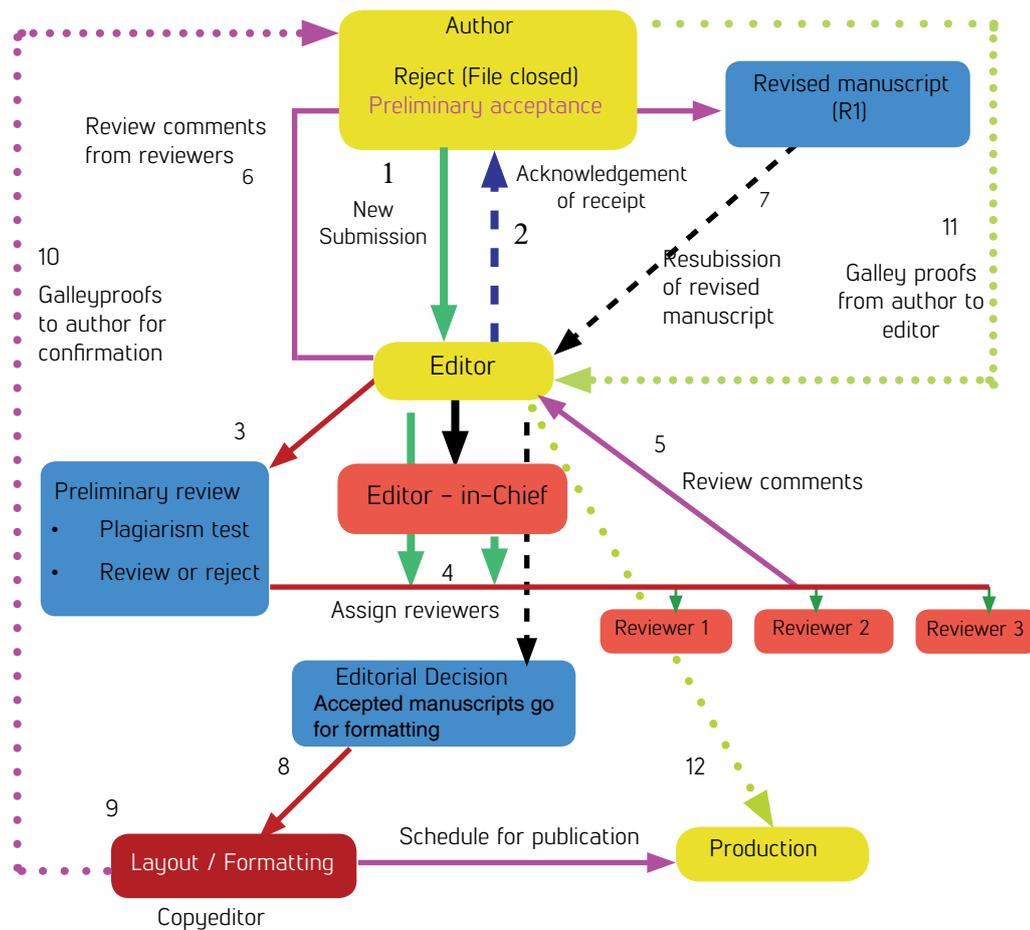


Figure 1. Editorial workflow of manuscripts

The editorial workflow of manuscripts consists of four major stages. First is the submission stage. At this stage the author submits a complete manuscript to the editor in an editable version (Ms Word) to enable reviews and editing. The submitted manuscript should be an original piece dealing with various facets of agriculture and development issues. We also receive review papers, and there is opportunity for graduate students to share their research concepts. The editor and the editorial assistant capture the details of the author and feeds the information into the system. The editor will then acknowledge receipt of the manuscript by sending a message to the author. The second stage is the review stage. The review process consists of two types, namely, a) preliminary review and additional review. Preliminary reviews are conducted by the editor to ensure that the manuscripts match the recommended standard and guidelines. This includes subjecting manuscripts to plagiarism check using the iThenticate anti-plagiarism software, and ensuring they are original. Poor quality and plagiarized manuscripts are rejected outright and comments sent to authors. b) Additional reviews: these are conducted by independent reviewers. The editor and Editor-in-Chief assigns reviewers for particular manuscripts ensuring a blind review. When reviews are conducted and completed, the reviewers send comments to the editor, who then sends them to the authors to modify their manuscripts basing on the comments and re-submit. Third is the copyediting stage. This is where formatting, layout and addition of edits from authors (galley proofs) takes place. In this stage, revised manuscripts formatted by the copyeditor are then sent to the editor who then sends them to the editor-in-chief for final decision. Approved papers are sent to authors by the copyeditor to proofread and confirm whether their papers can be published. Finally, the production stage. This is the last stage, where proofread and accepted papers are arranged for publication. The output of this entire process is categorised in volumes and issues, and this is always in a Portable Document Format (PDF).

### **Preparations for formatting manuscripts for the proceedings**

Initially, before formatting a manuscript, it should have been reviewed at a preliminary level. This level screens and weighs the status of a manuscript before moving it to the formatting stage. Manuscripts that are reviewed at that level ease the process of formatting; there is less or no errors at all. Manuscripts with errors can be improved and additional reviews conducted before sending them for formatting. Formatting stage in publication is termed as copyediting stage where review comments and other missing material that seem necessary before publication are incorporated. Poor quality and plagiarized manuscripts are rejected at the preliminary level are not formatted. Authors are sent comments with a point-to-point brief explaining the basis for rejection of their manuscripts. This helps in publishing quality and original research.

When conducting preliminary reviews, the editor studies the manuscripts before sending them for additional review. Manuscripts that pass the preliminary stage have to be within the recommended percentage of 30% when subjected to plagiarism. The iThenticate anti-plagiarism software provides a summary report with a percentage and sources where data was copied. The approved manuscripts are then formatted and sent for additional review.

During this process, I formatted 180 manuscripts (my colleague formatted over 200 papers). These manuscripts were branded with an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN), specific pages and a link on each paper to ease access for authors and users. Finalized papers had to be in PDF version with both English and French abstracts. Being new in this field (agriculture), learning to speak the same language with the editors was quite difficult. Publication language was tough, being a computer individual majoring in graphic design, the language was quite divergent, terms such as copyediting, scheduling and galleyproofs were new to me, but I had to be capable, efficient and submissive to work at the Secretariat. I formatted working document papers with samples given to me. Formatting was possible because I have been in that field for quite some time but the obstacle was learning to deliver good finished work as recommended by the editor and editor-in-chief.

### **Editing manuscripts**

Editing is also under copyediting stage, it needs a lot of patience, reading and vigilance. Manuscripts at this level are sent back to the Publication Assistant (copyeditor) from the reviewers to incorporate changes. These are then printed and sent back to the reviewer to proofread and confirm that the changes were accurately incorporated. The editor will then decide on the prominence of the manuscript according to the review comments. Papers are reviewed until they meet the recommended standard of being published.

This was a very tough process for me, at times a paper had to be reviewed more than five times with crosses everywhere and comments all over the paper, this somehow made me feel very unproductive. Although it was challenging, it was a learning process; learning how to be patient and working hard to deliver good work and also not exceeding the deadline. The editor-in-chief was so vigilant, any single mistake or error typed, he advised to change, even a coma. At times I felt I was not good enough to go on but that word he always used “push harder” moved me to stay focused and working harder for a clean output. There was a moment I wished some papers would have been dropped because of too many edits but that was not the case. Working on a paper for five or six times was too hectic but for a quality output that had to be done.

My fellow authors could not understand that formatting and editing research papers can be so stressful, but they expect their work to be published no matter the situation. I remember, in September 2016, I used to work Saturdays and Sundays, while others enjoyed their beds, went for prayers, nursed their children, I was formatting/editing papers and preparing them for additional reviews. This nurtured me into learning to work under pressure.

### **Sending review comments to authors**

In this step, review comments are sent to authors asking them to either modify the manuscripts or provide any missing information such as references, acknowledgement or concluding paragraphs.

I would send review comments to the authors as advised by the editor. However, they returned messages with questions instead of addressing the comments. Some authors

thought I was unfair to them, they felt I treated them differently than others whenever I asked for additional information.

### **Publishing articles in the repository**

This is the final and most exciting stage in journal works. At this stage articles are lined up and scheduled for publication. These are further crosschecked thoroughly to ensure there are no errors in the scheduled articles. The output of a finished article has to be in PDF format with full author and co-authors details, French and English abstracts, up-to-date reference list, concluding paragraph and acknowledgement. Finalized articles are then uploaded in the institutional repository that can be accessed via [repository.ruforum.org](http://repository.ruforum.org).

### **Lessons learned/Challenges**

When working with authors, there is a need to have patience and capability to respond to their queries. Authors come from various parts of Africa with different cultures, norms and English capacity. There should be a special way of handling authors and be able to meet their needs and address their queries. Authors in insecure countries e.g., South Sudan should be helped when carrying out their research. They should work hand in hand with the Editors during review process. This will improve author –editor relationships hence producing quality research papers.

When publishing research, it is important to conduct preliminary reviews and subject manuscripts to plagiarism to avoid moving poor quality and plagiarized manuscripts for review. Further, when issuing a call for papers, announcements for call for papers for the Biennial should be very accurate and stick to deadlines to avoid late submissions of manuscripts.

Authors sometimes submit similar manuscripts with different titles, which has to be checked and authors should be contacted to alert them about the matter. In most cases co-authors submit manuscripts without the main authors' knowledge with changed titles and omitting the main authors' names so that the manuscript looks different.

There is also a challenge that emerged every time review comments were sent to authors, some authors never acknowledged receipt of the message and when they did, instead of addressing a specific query, they changed the entire paper mostly references, tables and quotes, yet the manuscripts had been reviewed and sometimes at the final stage of production. This therefore elongated the scheduled publication date because additional review and editing had to be conducted again. Authors should be guided on how to address the comments and write to the editor before making any changes. Authors need to learn to follow instructions more closely.

### **Conclusion**

With challenges here and there, I learned a lot from the research papers. That is where I

derived the courage of working hard and also writing this paper. It always feels good when you work on a project and finalize with an output.

### **Acknowledgement**

I thank the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) for giving me an opportunity to be part of the RUFORUM Biennial Conference held in Cape Town, South Africa. This paper is a contribution to the 2016 Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference.

### **Reference**

RUFORUM institutional repository: RUFORUM Working Document Series 2016 Vol. 14  
Part 2: [repository.ruforum.org](http://repository.ruforum.org)