

Research Application Summary

**Nurturing Agri-Entrepreneurial skills through students' attachments to agribusiness firms in northern Uganda: A case of the MSc. Agri-Enterprises Development Program of Gulu University**

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**Abstract**

Community attachment by agriculture students at Gulu University is carried out at both MSc. and undergraduate level. MSc. level students participate in the last two months of their second year of study. Student engagement with the community is not only a learning process but also helps develop students entrepreneurial skills. This synopsis is based on an end of attachment reports by seven students. Data provided in the reports were analysed and frequencies and percentages generated. The major problems facing the firms where students were attached included: inadequate market information access (85.7%), poor records management (42.9%) and unresponsive and unfriendly credit facilities (42.9%). Majority of the students were engaged in training activities and these were mostly in business planning, record keeping, and village savings and loan associations. Students recommended that students be supervised more, and that the attachment period be increased. Other recommendations were to get the students involved in contract farming, utilization of the farmer call centre at the university and strengthening record keeping. The importance of the attachment program cannot be over emphasized for both the students and the communities to which they are attached.

**Key words:** Community attachment, entrepreneurial skill development, Gulu University, students

**Résumé**

Les stages de formation dans les communautés par les étudiants en agriculture à l'Université de Gulu sont effectués à deux niveaux (Master et Licence). Les étudiants de niveau Master participent dans les deux derniers mois de leur deuxième année d'études. La liaison des étudiants auprès des communautés n'est pas seulement un processus d'apprentissage, mais aussi contribue à développer les compétences entrepreneuriales de ces derniers. Cette étude est basée sur les rapports de fin de stage de sept étudiants. Les données fournies dans les rapports ont été analysées et les fréquences générées. Les problèmes majeurs des étudiants étaient les suivants: accès inadéquat à l'information sur le marché (85,7%), gestion médiocre des dossiers (42,9%) et systèmes de crédit non réactif et hostile (42,9%). La majorité des

étudiants participaient à des activités de formation, principalement dans le domaine de la planification des affaires, de la gestion de dossiers, de l'épargne villageoise et des associations de prêt. Les étudiants ont recommandé qu'ils soient davantage supervisés et que la période de liaison soit étendue. D'autres recommandations visaient à impliquer les étudiants dans l'agriculture contractuelle, l'utilisation du centre d'appels des agriculteurs à l'université et le renforcement de la gestion des données. L'importance de ce programme ne peut être surestimée tant pour les étudiants que pour les communautés auxquelles ils sont rattachés.

Mots clés: stage communautaire, développement des compétences entrepreneuriales, université de Gulu, étudiants

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## **Background**

Gulu University is a government aided institution located in the Northern part of Uganda. It was established in 2002 with four faculties. The Faculty of Agriculture and Environment (FAE) was formed later in 2005. Community engagement (CE) is now emphasized in most universities including Gulu. The FAE takes community engagement seriously and is carried out at different levels including student-farmer level, student- agribusiness level, among others. Since engagement is mutually beneficial to students and the community, it makes knowledge sharing more experiential and the student has the desire and drive to learn more. This attachment is done at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The MSc. Agri-Enterprises Development (MAE) students in this report were attached to organizations ranging from farmer organizations to private sector agribusinesses. Students worked with support of an attachment guide and a university supervisor. The attachment process also helps students to develop entrepreneurship skills. The students not only identify problems in the community but also work out business ideas on how to overcome these problems. Students also build competence through continuous experience of value-creating processes (Dewey, 1916; Illeris, 2006). The MAE students in this report were attached to organizations ranging from farmer organizations, agribusiness and private sector institutions, among others. Another key benefits to students is the development of creativity and divergent thinking, ability to get ideas, to discover and create opportunities and solve problems (Baron, 2012). This paper reports and analyses feedback from MSc. Agri-Enterprises Development, students after a community engagement period.

## **Summary of literature**

For Gulu University, the process of student community engagement is looked at as a mutual benefit with the target communities. For this process, both the student and the farmer/firm to whom/which the students are attached benefit. The student learns from the farmer/firms and they too learn from the student. Engaged students are more likely to develop the skills, understandings, and attitudes essential to civic participation and to exercise them more than disengaged students (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). Students that engage with communities are more able to approach tasks in the field more confidently because they may have come into contact with such situations (Stipek, 1996). The process of engagement with the community also helps students identify research issues about a given

subject and carry out an action research that should be reported back to the community. When students are given opportunities to engage in community projects, they demonstrate an enthusiasm and passion for learning that cannot be generated when curriculum and instruction is limited to textbooks and worksheets (Brewster and Fager, 2000; White, 2000). They also develop a deep understanding of the subject matter and enhance their problem-solving skills.

### **Study description**

This study is based on a review of students' field attachment reports that were produced under supervision of university staff. A total of eight reports were analyzed. Data from these reports were analysed in Microsoft Excel.

### **Research application**

Attachments were carried out in Gulu and Lira districts, although Gulu took more students (57.1%). Of the major challenges faced by the various organizations where students were attached was inadequate market information that was the most common (85.7%). The other challenges are given in Table 1. Interestingly, access to planting materials was among the least challenges farmers faced. This is because many of them use their own saved seed.

**Table 1. Challenges faced by the various firms/farmer organizations**

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Inadequate market information	6	85.7
Inadequate extension services	1	14.3
Poor records management	3	42.9
Price fluctuation	1	14.3
Cultural factors barring women from participation	2	28.5
Inadequate planting materials	1	14.3
Unresponsive and unfriendly credit facilities	3	42.9
Pests and diseases	4	57.1
Lack of storage	2	28.5
Low productivity	2	28.5

This was thought to be due to the fact that a number of NGO's have carried out agricultural training in northern Uganda. Farmers therefore have gained skills on seed production.

During the field attachment the students were also engaged in various activities as summarized in the Table 2. Student activities carried out at various firms were agreed upon by the student and the firms to which they were attached. The activity most students got involved in was facilitating different kinds of training. These included: village savings and loans association, business plan development, record keeping, gender and agriculture, enterprise selection, among others. Other activities are given in Table 2. A number of

**Table 2. Activities in which students were engaged**

Activity	Frequency	Percentages
Training	7	100
Mobilization	4	57.1
Book keeping	4	57.1
Monitoring and evaluation	4	57.1
Conducting interviews	3	42.9

recommendations were also made by the students and these were directed at the organizations where they were attached and also to the university. The recommendations to the university included the following; more time should be set aside for supervision of students, increasing the attachment period, and to enforce submission of monthly reports. To the attachment firms, students recommended that more emphasis be put on good agricultural practices, involvement in contract farming, utilization of the farmer call centre at the university, proper record keeping, more emphasis on collective marketing and visits on the various farmer organizations.

### **Conclusion**

The student attachment process is not only an exercise that encourages refinement of leadership and entrepreneurial skills among the students but also gives them the opportunities to practice what they have been taught in class. It also allows them to learn concepts they may not have been taught in class, and above all enables them to innovate in the realms of Agri-Entrepreneurships. This process is unique as it leads to production of ‘plug and play’ graduates with the capacity to adapt to any conditions, face challenging tasks, start own enterprises and keeps the communities relevant in the implementation of University curricular.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors thank RUFORUM for sponsoring the MSc. studies at Gulu University, the Netherlands Government through the NUFFIC scholarship for Tailor Made Training Program in collaboration with the Maastricht School of Management for facilitating the initial MSc attachment program and the EDULINK project “Strengthening Universities Capacity to Enhance Agribusiness Competitiveness in East and West Africa” for enabling the first author to present these findings at the RUFORUM Biennial Conference. This paper is a contribution to the 2016 Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference.

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