

Experiences and lessons from implementing RUFORUM supported regional MSc. and PhD programmes

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview on the implementation of joint postgraduate degree training programmes being run by RUFORUM, a consortium of 25 universities in the eastern, central and southern Africa region. These programmes involve joint training by faculty from different universities at a common centre (lead university). The paper discusses some of the challenges and opportunities encountered and clearly shows that a new generation of competent, skilled and highly motivated pool of young scientists are being trained to spearhead agricultural development in the region.

Key words: Agriculture, postgraduate training, RUFORUM

Résumé

Ce document donne un aperçu sur la mise en œuvre de la formation de programmes d'études post-universitaires communs gérés par RUFORUM, un consortium de 25 universités dans région de l'Afrique l'est, du centrale et australe. Ces programmes concernent la formation conjointe des professeurs de différentes universités à un centre commun (Université de plomb). Le document examine certains défis et opportunités rencontrées, et montre clairement que la nouvelle génération de pool de jeunes scientifiques, compétents, qualifiés et très motivés sont formés comme fer de lance du développement agricole dans la région.

Mots clés: Agriculture, formation de troisième cycle, RUFORUM

Background

Graduate training and research are the major generation and delivery mechanisms for RUFORUM outputs. The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) has spearheaded the design and implementation of regional MSc and PhD programmes with its 25 member universities. These programmes are designed with major stakeholders in agriculture to respond to specific capacity gaps within the realm of agriculture in Eastern, Central and Southern

Africa, in support of the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) process. Through rigorous peer review, RUFORUM improves the relevance and focus of degree curricula and associated field activities. The programmes also provide opportunities for professional growth to programme alumni and senior faculty (Adipala and Blackie, 2010; Blackie, 2010; Patel and Woome, 2000). The focus is to train the students in Africa, while offering opportunity for international exposure. A follow-up of past RUFORUM supported graduates reveal that all are employed and contributing to national and regional development. Others have joined academia or international research. Through the graduate research grants RUFORUM has provided training opportunities to over 500 MSc students.

What makes RUFORUM programmes regional?

RUFORUM spearheaded programmes must conform to set criteria that ensures that they are truly regional: (i) they respond to issues of regional importance; (ii) are guided by Memorandum of Understanding signed by the 95 Universities' Vice Chancellors, (iii) are jointly owned by the 20 universities, (iv) all member universities are involved in running the programmes though the university with comparative advantage hosts and coordinates the programme, and (v) joint curricular development.

To date RUFORUM has spearheaded the implementation of three regional MSc. and four PhD programmes (Table 1).

Table 1. RUFORUM spearhead regional courses and enrolment.

MSc Agricultural Information and Communication Management	15
MSc. Research Methods	29
MSc. Plant Breeding and Seed Systems	28
PhD Agricultural and Resource Economics	9
PhD Aquaculture Fisheries Science	10
PhD Plant Breeding and Biotechnology	22
PhD Dryland Resource Management	18
SCARDA supported MSc. students in various programmes ¹	34

¹SCARDA (Strengthening Capacity for Agricultural Research for Development in Africa) is a Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) initiative to strengthen research capacity in Africa. It is implemented by the sub-regional organisations which in the case of Eastern and Southern Africa, by ASARECA

Another two programmes are scheduled to commence in 2010. These are the PhD Programme in Soil and Water Management to be hosted by Sokoine University of Agriculture and Technology (SUA) and the Agricultural and Rural Innovation Studies (ARIS) to be jointly offered by three universities (Makerere, Egerton and Sokoine).

Lessons and experiences. Since 2005, RUFORUM has gone through a number of processes to design and implement joint postgraduate degree training programmes. Some of the experiences and lessons learnt so far are briefly described below.

- There is still limited understanding of RUFORUM and its objectives in universities, particularly among staff who are not RUFORUM programme coordinators, Heads of Departments, Deans or Vice Chancellors. RUFORUM is often not viewed as a network which the universities own but more of as an external outfit. The collaboration amongst member universities is supposed to be guided by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Vice Chancellors in 2005. The MoU has been instrumental in facilitating the implementation of the regional programmes. However, it remains an opportunity yet to be fully utilized by RUFORUM universities.
- Two unique aspects of the PhD programmes are *regionality* and *coursework*. All universities that host these programmes have to institutionalize these unique features. This involves change, which takes time, and needs patience as well as persistence. We have learnt that the process is faster when there is someone who believes in the programme, is dedicated to the process and a good communicator, i.e., the champion.
- Not enough attention was given to the preparation, management and coordination aspects of the programmes. During implementation the RUFORUM Secretariat, course coordinators and the university have had to deal with issues on a *fire-fight* basis.
- The stakeholder consultation process during curricula development has been highly commended in the region. However, it has been realized that the curricula is over-loaded leaving students with hardly time to read and learn by themselves. Access to online resources is still a challenge due to low internet connectivity.
- The initial investment into regional programmes is high. Although the Secretariat mobilizes resources to support the start-up phase of the programmes at the respective host universities, these resources are only a very small proportion of the requirement. The understanding is that the host university with collaborating universities and partners would mobilize resources to support the programmes. This has only been realized to a very limited extent.
- RUFORUM Secretariat is seen as a *donor* among universities. It is taking time to change this mindset and has

partly contributed to dampening institutions' own potential to mobilize resources.

- Communication and information exchange within the network is a great challenge. There is still limited information exchange and communication between individuals and institutions within RUFORUM network.
- The demand for the training programmes is great. Applications for admission to each of the four regional PhD programmes have ranged from 48 to 73. Although applicants have all been suitable for doctorate studies, the actual intake can only accommodate maximum of about 20 per intake. We have to think as a network, how to effectively meet this demand without compromising quality.
- Although it is often said or commonly believed that African universities are beauracratc and unwilling to change, our experience is that this is not entirely true. In the past two years, RUFORUM universities have been flexible, accommodative and have changed in a number of ways.
- There is a diversity of students on these programmes, which is an opportunity in itself. The students establish friendship and linkages that will be useful through out their professional and personal life. The regional programmes have provided effective platforms for networking, collaboration and mentorship.
- Implementation and hosting of the regional programmes has benefited universities in many ways. One of these is the increased flow of financial resources through overheads charged on training grants, specific financial support to the universities in terms upgrade of training facilities, staff skill enhancement, etc.
- Since the implementation of the programmes started, the number of RUFORUM universities collaborating and partnering has increased. Collaboration and partnerships have been very visible in terms of writing proposals for funding to support the programmes through scholarships, upgrade of facilities, small research grants, and specific skill enhancement for staff and students. Universities in the network have known more about each other and appreciated each others strengths and weaknesses more than ever before. Network universities now see themselves as partners rather than competitors. This development has presented unique opportunities for (i) universities that are strong in specific aspects to work with and build capacity for those that are weak in those aspects, and (ii) pooling and rationalizing use of the limited resources in our member universities for joint training and research.

- Many donors and development partners are becoming more willing to invest in capacity development. However one challenge has been how to ensure wider reach. In the past five years, RUFORUM has provided an attractive regional network of universities, with a coordinating node that facilitates and brokers partnerships. This has resulted in more universities being linked to more funding opportunities. This is also marketing RUFORUM member universities.

Outcome and Impact

The regional training programmes and students are like seeds in our hands ready to be planted and nurtured to maturity. We have the future stock of researchers, scientists, lecturers, and Vice Chancellors in our hands. We all



have the opportunity to work together as a network of professionals and stakeholders in agriculture to make a success story in building Africa's capacity for capacity building in agriculture is being strengthened. It is a dream worth living for. As a Network we have already trained 560 M.Sc. students (out of 800 targeted by 2013) all of whom are employed, and in varied sectors; we are currently training 80 PhD students out of the targeted 150 by 2013. These are our seeds for tomorrow.

RUFORUM as a network has the potential to shape agricultural development in Africa. But, we have to make it happen through ownership. A well thought out capacity development, and quality assurance strategies are imperative.

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