

Research Application Summary

Transitioning to the world of work through internship: Learning from a Regional Organisation

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Abstract

Three graduate students served as interns at the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) Secretariat in Kampala, Uganda. The Secretariat is the coordinating unit for 66 African universities in 26 African countries. The students were assigned to four departments/units; Partnerships and Business Management (PBM), Grants Management (GM) Training and Quality Assurance (TQA) and the Executive Secretary's Office on a rotational basis. The aim was to offer a holistic engagement within the institution and provide opportunity for diversified experiences and learning. Each unit within RUFORUM Secretariat provided opportunity for skills development and learning experience, such as uploading resources on the RUFORUM knowledge repository, thereby increasing efficiency in working with information management systems, engaging in proposal writing in respect to specific calls such as the African Union call, Intra-Africa Academic mobility, and Erasmus+, among other resource mobilisation calls that RUFORUM either directly or indirectly supports as a coordinating unit. During the period of internship, the interns were able to provide timely delivery on assigned tasks, increased their confidence and ability to communicate, including with high level dignitaries. They also had experience at responding to and handling protocol at various level of engagement. This internship experience has served as a catalyst and indicator to the interns that learning is a process, place-specific, situation-oriented and therefore it is a lifelong undertaking.

Key words: information management, knowledge repository, proposal development, mentorship, RUFORUM

Résumé

Trois étudiants diplômés ont eu l'occasion de travailler comme stagiaires au Forum Régional des Universités pour le Renforcement des Capacités en Agriculture (RUFORUM) à Kampala, en Ouganda. Le Secrétariat est l'unité de coordination de 66 universités africaines dans 26 pays africains. Les étudiants ont été affectés en rotation aux quatre départements / unités; Gestion des Partenariats et des Affaires (BPM), Gestion des subventions (GM); Formation et Assurance qualité (TQA) et au bureau du Secrétaire Exécutif. Le but était d'offrir un engagement holistique et de fournir des opportunités pour le développement des compétences diversifiées. Chaque unité au sein de RUFORUM a offert une opportunité pour développer un assortiment de compétences et d'expériences d'apprentissage telles que le téléchargement de ressources sur le répertoire de connaissances du RUFORUM, ce qui

accroît l'efficacité du travail avec les systèmes de gestion de l'information, l'engagement dans les processus de rédaction de propositions en réponse aux quelques appels tels que l'appel à projet de l'Union africaine, la mobilité académique intra-africaine et Erasmus +, parmi d'autres appels de mobilisation de ressources que le RUFORUM appuie directement ou indirectement en tant qu'unité de coordination. Pendant la période de stage, les stagiaires ont été en mesure de fournir en temps opportun des tâches assignées, augmenté leur confiance et leur capacité à communiquer et à gérer des dignitaires de haut niveau ainsi que de répondre et de gérer le protocole à différents niveaux d'engagement. Cette expérience de stage a servi de catalyseur et d'indicateur aux stagiaires que l'apprentissage est un processus axé spécifiquement à un endroit et une situation particuliers, et donc une entreprise à vie.

Mots clés: gestion de l'information, stage, répertoire de connaissances, développement de protocoles, mentorat, RUFORUM

Background

Organizations often provide internship opportunities to both graduate students and continuing students based on the organizational structure and setting. Internship provides an opportunity to gain practical experience in a particular field of study and learning new skills in an occupation or profession (Alaina, 2015). In this process, the interns are able to build professional skills and an understanding of the workplace. For example, as interns interact with colleagues, they will learn how to communicate effectively, work in teams, give and receive feedback.

In a situation where employment opportunities are hard to come by as is the case in most of Sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda inclusive, internship becomes a good opportunity to facilitate transitions to the world of work (Olga, 2007; OECD and ILO, 2011). Generating viable employment for young people remains a serious global problem. This situation is particularly acute in Sub-Saharan Africa where some 600 million people are currently under the age of 25, and the majority lack employment skills. Many still do not have access to quality and reliable economic opportunities, either through self- or formal employment. The economic and social costs of this challenge are high and need to be addressed. Solutions require a holistic approach at the level of individual young people, at the level of collaborating organizations and at the level of government leadership, so as to create enabling environments and remove obstacles to youth employment, entrepreneurship and productivity (The MasterCard Foundation, 2015).

In this case, an opportunity for internship at a regional organisation becomes a promise of hope. Regional level organisations operating with international level staffing have been known to provide a range of experiences suitable to novices in transition. This is because of the capacity building, enhancement and exposure to new knowledge, skills and perspectives, increase in flexibility and adaptability in the organisation.

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) is a network of 66 African Universities with a vision; ‘A vibrant Agricultural sector linked to African Universities which produce high performing graduates and high-quality research responsive to the demands of Africa’s farmers for innovations and able to generate sustainable livelihoods and national economic development’ and a mission; ‘To strengthen the capacities of African Universities to foster innovations responsive to demands of small-holder farmers through the training of high quality researchers, the output of impact oriented research and the maintenance of collaborative working relations among researchers, farmers, national Agricultural research institutions and governments. The institution’s core activities are derived from the seven key thrusts of focus in its Strategic Business Plan (see Box 1). RUFORUM has a coordinating Secretariat based at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda.

In delivery of its strategic thrusts, the RUFORUM Secretariat maintains a lean staffing to enhance efficiency and value add to national initiatives. Interns thus bring to RUFORUM Secretariat additional staff and creativity that help the regional organisation to deliver on its mandate. Whilst gaining skills from the various organizational operations, the interns get immersed with different project activities and networking events within RUFORUM and are required to deliver on various tasks and responsibilities routinely assigned to them. The purpose of this paper is to share learning experiences as interns over the period of attachment with RUFORUM. The paper presents the process of internship placement at RUFORUM, assignment of duties and learning experiences in operations from various units, and puts the overall internship perspective at RUFORUM in context.

Box 1: RUFORUM strategic thrusts

1. Masters and doctoral programmes responsive to stakeholder needs and national/ regional development goals;
 2. Shared research and education/ training facilities and capacities rationalised for enhanced economies of scope and scale;
 3. Innovative education/ training, research and outreach activities supported by adaptive management structures in universities contributing to policy and development practice;
 4. Operational capacity and approaches for innovative, quality and impact-oriented agricultural R4D mainstreamed in universities;
 5. Increased participation and voices of women in education/ training, research, and production and marketing of knowledge;
 6. Increased use of technology to support effective, decentralized learning and the sharing of knowledge;
 7. A dynamic regional platform for policy advocacy, lobbying, coordination and resource mobilization for improved education/ training, research and outreach by universities.
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Source: RUFORUM Strategic Plan, 2005-2015

Internship placement process at RUFORUM Secretariat. Internship placement at the RUFORUM Secretariat is organized through an open call for applicants through an online advert that requires expression of interest through the submission of an application accompanied with requisite copies of academic documents and curriculum vitae. It targets especially graduate students. In our case, 11 applicants were shortlisted for oral interviews. The interview process was really a tough one that required proficiency with practical work experience in the field of uploading data content on repositories and proposal development processes. Surprisingly, we were shortlisted as the three candidates who emerged the best, out of the 11 applicants. Eventually we were appointed and assigned specific roles in a given stipulated period of 6 months. Each intern was assigned a terms of reference with roles and responsibilities to execute. These roles and responsibilities changed as rotation to units occurred. These roles and responsibilities are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Roles and responsibilities for interns at RUFORUM Secretariat

Role and responsibility	Task description
Updating and uploading publications to the RUFORUM Knowledge repository	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The RUFORUM repository (http://repository.ruforum.org) is a major information and dissemination tool for the network to provide free access to resources in its collection. • Task included increasing the number of archived information/resources from the initial base of 500 to 1420 resources. • Documents were uploaded under the different collection for ease of access, these are also in open access. Resources of target included theses and dissertations, project summaries, journal articles, conferences and workshops reports and newsletters.
Providing support in proposal writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RUFORUM is a capacity building organization that is focused on mobilizing research teams • Develop and Update the writing teams, collected admission and supporting documents, responding to queries about the call from universities and partners. • Focused attention to support write shops for competitive research grants. Write shops targeted EU research calls including Erasmus+, Applied Research Fund (ARF) and Intra-Africa Academic Mobility. • Communicating to project development teams with regards to proposal development requirements as may be guided by RUFORUM Secretariat staff.
Updating RUFORUM Information Management System (RIMS) with Principal Investigators, students contacts, and grant projects such as supporting the entry and cleaning of data of RUFORUM Students and Projects (FAPA, CARPs, GRGs, and NUGs). (NUGs).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RUFORUM runs a competitive grants scheme. As such there are principal investigators (PIs) implementing a range of projects. Data from PIs including their project profiles were collected and put in data bases, and also uploaded • Task involved clearing backlog uploads for the periods of 2010 to 2015. • Uploading records for PIs and the projects including student profiles. Information for Field Attachment Programme Awards (FAPAs), Community Action Research Programmes (CARPs), Graduate Research Grants (GRGs) and Nurturing Grants. The number included 512 students and 148 PIs leading projects.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Captured and re-edited students data in the RUFORUM Information Management System (RIMS), basically filling in the missing fields, such as bio information, financial details, PIs, cohorts, research titles and abstracts. There are 1425 students contacts so far added in RIMS.
<p>Supporting the overall organisation of the RUFORUM Biennial Conference 2016</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Biennial Conference is Africa’s most comprehensive higher agricultural education meeting that brings together stakeholders from across the globe. ● All the three interns supported the organisation of the 2016 Biennial conference. ● It involved compiling list of participants to attend the Conference in order to have a comprehensive planning and organisation. ● Drafting and sending out official invitations to the participants to attend the conference. ● Compiling, storing and making available all the documents relevant to the Biennial Conference like conference programme, concept notes, minutes etc. ● Documenting meetings during the Conference preparation, during the conference, and making them available for staff use.
<p>Assisting in keeping records of meetings, reviews, events, workshops and processes with regard to resource mobilization and other events</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● RUFORUM being a regional and capacity building body holds many meetings in preparation of Submission of Proposals and capacity building workshops meaning that it needs to track proceedings from these activities.
<p>Compiling and indexing information on the Back to Office reports from the Secretariat staff who travel frequently</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● RUFORUM Secretariat has a document server where documents amongst staff are shared. This involved creating an MS. Access Database containing basic information of all trips of Secretariat staff, from 2005 to 2016. ● Compiling and indexing the Back to office reports (BTOR) that form part of the records for monitoring and evaluation at the RUFORUM Secretariat as well as for generation of activities for engagement with member universities and other stakeholders

Learning experiences from engagement at various units within the RUFORUM Secretariat. The placements and rotation to different units within the RUFORUM Secretariat was guided and defined in the terms reference. Interns were placed in five units; Knowledge Management, Partnerships and Business unit, Grants Management Unit, Training and Quality Assurance plus the Executive Secretary office. The activities performed are presented in Table 2, showing a brief summary of activities and respective lessons learned.

Table 2: Lessons learnt by interns attached to the various units at the RUFORUM Secretariat

Activity	Lessons learned
Knowledge Management	
Updating and uploading publications to the RUFORUM Knowledge repository.	- There is a visible increase in readership of documents in the Knowledge Repository. There is also increased access to research content. The repository also provides a simple effective storage mechanism of documents.
Capturing and archiving Back to Office Reports (BTORs)	- Learnt how to create a database using MS Access database.
Resource Mobilisation	
Providing support in proposal writing	- Coordinating large research teams to respond to specific calls. - Being open minded and improving interpersonal skills. - Mobilisation skills particularly to identify and engage experts across different universities in proposal development processes and stages. - Ensuring functional partnership is a challenge but enhances success
Training and Quality Assurance	
Cross checking and adding Students contact details in the RUFORUM Information Management System (RIMS)	- Data base system operations and decode areas for further improvement. - Gave exposure to putting in place sound process and compliance guidelines
Grants Management Unit	
RUFORUM Projects (Field attachment Programme, Community Action Research Program, Graduate Research Grants, Nurturing Grants, Graduate Teaching Assistantship)	- Increased skills and capability in data management including: data entry, data cleaning, querying, retrieval, among others. - Gave exposure to online monitoring and evaluation
Capturing new students contact details into the RUFORUM Information Management System which were later linked to their Principal Investigators and projects. It has a total number of 100 students contacts, and located in RUFORUM Information Management System (RIMS) - http://rims.ruforum.org/	- Obtained experience in profiling one self and activities, including marketing skills
FAPA Projects - They are also captured in rims.ruforum.org and close to 52 projects.	- Captured field experience of students and perspective of potential employers

Support function to the Executive Office

Coordinating with all the Secretariat units for Biennial Conference activities	- Working with the Executive Secretary office gave exposure to deal with protocol issues and how to communicate to different persons
Storing and making available information relevant to the Biennial Conference	- Improved communication skills, protocol and handling various teams and their needs - Events organisation and management especially meetings, workshops, and conferences
Maintaining and updating list of participants for Biennial Conference	- This facilitated provision of updated information to relevant individuals as a result of good records management.
Giving support in drafting and sending invitation letters.	- Handling communication at various levels of hierarchy including with Vice Chancellors, Deans and Principals as well as partners and donors.
Drafting documents as assigned by the Executive Secretary's office	- Gained skills in documentation and reporting

About 90% of the tasks were computer based and this facilitated rapid familiarization with Microsoft office function tools. Further, the internship provided the interns with opportunity to master the tenets of office management including attention to detail, time keeping, dedication to duty, and sacrifice involving working beyond the expected time to ensure success of programmes. The system of rotating interns in different units enabled the interns to experience and learn diverse aspects of organisational arrangements and functioning in terms of programming.

Discussion

This lesson sharing paper shows that the RUFORUM internship placement is transparent and educative for workplace integration involving well guided and defined roles and responsibilities. This level of organization allows RUFORUM to recruit well deserving persons who are ready and committed to undertake a new experiential learning. The internships are beneficial to the interns but also to RUFORUM who benefit from more hands, increased staffing and provided linkages between universities and the workplace. According to Failte Ireland (2013) transparent and well guided recruitment processes allow organisations to appropriately recruit and place workers and individuals in their areas of competence thereby providing them with an initial avenue for excellence in service. Further, Thiel (2009) indicated that in organizational delivery and performance well defined roles allow staff to focus on delivery of their respective mandates leading to improved delivery and efficiency. Organisations need to adopt this system of recruitment and transparency to enable them achieve their goals and objectives.

Conclusion and recommendation

RUFORUM internship opportunity has offered us a great chance to grow and develop. It has propelled us to be able to overcome challenges and develop our careers. The programme has enhanced our critical thinking and analytical skills as well as improving our profession and ability to work in a multicultural environment. Working at RUFORUM as interns was not only an honor and privilege but a lifelong experience that will forever shape our competences. This great experience is outstanding and rare to find. In addition to our work, we recommend that RUFORUM continues to improve RUFORUM Information Management System. We also recommend that the Internship opportunity be continuous to pave way for graduate students to have hand on experience, skills strengthening and building capacities of graduates. Importantly there is need to strengthen further the orientation for the graduate interns, in terms of providing identity cards and facilitation by providing items such as Modems for heavy workloads.

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