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Research Application Summary

Progression of a serialized Working Document Series: From Project progress reports to scholarly outputs

Nampala, M.P.¹, Tusiime, G.² & Adipala, E.¹

¹Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM), P. O. Box 16811,
Wandegeya, Kampala, Uganda

²College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Makerere University, P. O. Box 7062,
Kampala, Uganda

Corresponding author: p.nampala@ruforum.org, nampalap@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

The Working Document Series is a serialized (ISSN: 1607-9345 Hard copy; and ISSN: 1993- 8462 e-copy) collection of peer-reviewed scholarly articles that was launched in 2000. It was initially intended to capture proceedings of sub-regional cohort learning events at which University-based research teams supported under the auspices of the Forum for Agricultural Resource Husbandry (FORUM) which was a competitive grants programme initiated in 1992 that necessitated university based research teams to demonstrate through their proposed research a better understanding and improvements of smallholder cropping systems; and, in particular, how postgraduate students at Masters level play a central role in research as they engage with communities to obtain quality data for their respective theses. As part of cohort-learning, all the grantees and students attached to specific projects met to share research results and receive a peer-review of respective research. For this, a regional meeting was conducted once every two years. Since 1992 (initiation of the FORUM), and 2000 (Launch of the Working Document Series) several changes have manifested including institutionalization in 2004 of the FORUM into the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) and expanding to a membership of 85 member universities in 36 countries up from 10 universities in 5 countries of East and Southern Africa. This evolution and expansion has had a significant impact on the Working Document Series which transformed from the FORUM Working Document Series to the RUFORUM Working Document Series. In terms of content, it is no longer a collection of progress reports that are focused on particular disciplines supported projects but a multi-disciplinary peer-reviewed publication that serves as a repository for quality articles presented during RUFORUM Convening Events as well as articles on topical and contemporary issues in higher education and its impacts on socio-economic development. Over 2,000 articles have been published in 15 Issues. The manuscripts submitted are subjected to the rigor of quality analysis to ensure novelty and contribution to knowledge. To the benefit of the contributors, the published articles should be consigned to represent the respective content which could either be opinion, mini-review, application summary, conference proceedings, review article, original research/ journal article, etc. This will contribute to enhanced scholarship in Africa.

Key words: FORUM/RUFORUM, postgraduate students, scholarship, University-based research teams

Résumé

La série de documents de travail est une collection sérialisée (ISSN: 1607-9345 copie papier; et ISSN: 1993- 8462 copie électronique) d'articles scientifiques évalués par des pairs, qui a été lancée en 2000. Elle était initialement destinée à relater les actes des événements d'apprentissage dans la sous-région, au cours desquels des équipes de recherche universitaires ont été soutenues sous les auspices du FORUM, un programme de subventions compétitif lancé en 1992 qui a obligé des équipes de recherche universitaires à démontrer par le biais de leur proposition de recherche une meilleure compréhension et des améliorations des systèmes de culture des petits exploitants; et, en particulier, comment les étudiants de deuxième cycle jouent un rôle central dans la recherche tout en impliquant les communautés pour obtenir des données de qualité pour leurs thèses respectives. Dans le cadre de l'apprentissage par cohorte pour les boursiers et étudiants attachés à leurs projets respectifs, une réunion régionale a été organisée une fois tous les deux ans à des fins de présentation et d'examen par les pairs de la mise en œuvre de la recherche. Depuis 1992 (lancement du FORUM) et 2000 (lancement de la série de documents de travail), plusieurs changements se sont manifestés, notamment l'institutionnalisation en 2004 du FORUM en Forum régional des universités pour le renforcement des capacités en agriculture (RUFORUM) et l'élargissement à 85 membres universités membres dans 36 pays, contre 10 universités dans 5 pays d'Afrique orientale et australe. Cette évolution et cette expansion ont eu un impact significatif sur la série de documents de travail qui est passée de la série de documents de travail FORUM à la série de documents de travail RUFORUM. En termes de contenu, il ne s'agit plus d'une collection de rapports d'avancement axés sur des projets soutenus par des disciplines particulières, mais d'une publication multidisciplinaire évaluée par des pairs qui sert de référentiel d'articles de qualité présentés lors des événements de RUFORUM ainsi que d'articles sur des sujets d'actualité et les problèmes contemporains de l'enseignement supérieur et leurs impacts sur le développement socio-économique. Plus de 2 000 articles ont été publiés dans 15 numéros. Les manuscrits sont soumis à la rigueur de l'analyse de qualité pour assurer la nouveauté et la contribution aux connaissances. Au bénéfice des contributeurs, les articles publiés doivent être consignés pour représenter le contenu respectif qui peut être soit une opinion, une mini-revue, un résumé de candidature, des actes de conférence, un article de synthèse, une recherche originale / un article de revue, etc. Tout ceci contribuera à améliorer les bourses en Afrique.

Mots clés: FORUM / RUFORUM, étudiants de deuxième et troisième cycle, bourse, équipes de recherche universitaires

Introduction

The higher education landscape in Africa is changing rapidly and universities are in particular challenged to ensure quality amidst the dynamics of increased demand for higher degrees. Despite the growth especially in number of institutions of higher learning, university research and research structures are poorly funded by respective national governments which are burdened by foreign debts. Inadequately paid professionals suffer a disincentive to address difficult and time consuming problems or opt to leave the public sector or home countries in search of better remuneration (Klitgaard, 1989). Weaknesses in university education exist in both facilities and orientation, with over-emphasis on classical scientific knowledge and memorization rather than experiential-learning which is a recipe a hands-on problem-solving graduate (Oenema, 1989; Norman *et al.*, 1994). The later challenge is largely in part the prime reason for which the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) and its precursor the Forum for Agricultural Resource Husbandry (FORUM) were initiated (Bharati *et al.*, 1999; Bharati and Woome, 2000; Adipala and Kywamanywa, 2002; Nampala *et al.*, 2016a).

Both the FORUM and RUFORUM agenda nurture/natured scholarship. As indicated by Bharati and Woomeer (2000), “early in the formulation of an operational strategy, the Forum decided not to produce proceedings of its joint biennial meetings, but rather encourage the dissemination of research findings and results via publications in international and regional journals”. This remained the case for the period between 1992 – 1999, but in 2000 the need for proceedings was apparent and it was resolved that the proceedings would be packaged as a “Working Document Series” with brief research application summaries that would not duplicate data intended for scholarly journals. This paper is intended to highlight the evolution of the “Working Document Series” and optimize its use in scholarship.

Methodology

Data and information used in this paper is based on review of published FORUM/RUFORUM Working Document Series. In addition, the authors have had opportunity to serve as Guest Editors to several articles and Issues of the Series and their experience in this process was put to use in the generation of ideas presented in this paper.

Results and Discussion

The FORUM/RUFORUM Working Document Series reviewed are presented in Table 1. Volumes 1 - 7 were processed under the FORUM and were labeled as a series “Forum Working Document” while the subsequent Volumes are under the series “RUFORUM Working Documents”. The number, structure, content and type of papers presented in the Volumes are a representation of the progression and transformation over the years. For example, the first Forum Working Document contains 90 abstracts packages as “Research Application Summaries”, while the RUFORUM Working Document Series 8 contains 496 articles that are presented with all key features of a standard scholarly publication (Anon., 2000). The shift in numbers of abstracts and/ or articles presented represents the evolution first from FORUM to RUFORUM but also that changes and growth within RUFORUM. While the FORUM convened events that only focused on bringing together university research teams that involved faculty and students with a view to build effective research teams and provide opportunity for mentoring young scholars; the RUFORUM has continued this mission albeit with an expanded scope. Thus, since 2012 as indicated in Tusiime *et al.* (2012), it has not only been sharing project implementation progress but the focus has been broader thematic areas that address inter-and-multidisciplinary aspects in higher education and its impacts on key sectors in socio-economic growth.

Table 2 presents the thematic areas featured in Working Document Series Nos. 1 and 14. All participants at RUFORUM convening events are expected to present a paper that merits publication in the RUFORUM Working Documents Series. The shift from narrow academic themes to broader aspects in research for development has increased submissions as well as the different categories of articles published. The different categories featuring in the Working Document Series include, among others, original research articles, mini-reviews, review articles, opinion pieces, editorial briefs/letters, thought pieces, synthesized speeches and pronouncements. The convening events have successfully been remodeled to ensure that academicians (faculty and graduate students) are not speaking to themselves but are meaningfully engaged with an array of stakeholders in the Agricultural and Higher Education Sectors (Nampala *et al.*, 2016).

Table 1. Key features of selected FORUM/RUFORUM Published Working Document Series

No.	Cover Page Description/Theme	Reference (Guest Editors/ Authors)
Forum Working Document No. 1	Fourth Regional Meeting of the Forum for Agricultural Resource Husbandry, 10 – 14 July 2000, Lilongwe, Malawi	Anon. (2000)
Forum Working Document Series No. 5	Fifth Regional Meeting of the Forum for Agricultural Resource Husbandry, 12 – 16 August 2002, Entebbe, Uganda	Nakitandwe <i>et al.</i> , (2002)
Forum Working Document No. 6	Summaries of Forum Research and Development Activities in Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe	Bharati <i>et al.</i> (2003)
Forum Working Document No. 7.	Curriculum Development and Transformation in Rural Development and Natural Resources Management	Bharati <i>et al.</i> (2003)
RUFORUM Working Document No. 8	Partnerships and Networking for Strengthening Agricultural Innovation and Higher Education in Africa	Tusiime <i>et al.</i> (2012)
RUFORUM Working Document Series No. 9 African Higher Education Week: Transforming Tertiary Agricultural	Nampala <i>et al.</i> (2014) Education - a Platform for the Way Forward	
RUFORUM Working Document No. 10	Leveraging the Power of Partnerships to effectively engage Universities for enhanced food security	Kihia <i>et al.</i> (2014)
RUFORUM Working Document No. 11	Key messages on the process and submissions in response to the sixth Graduate Research Grants Call	Egeru <i>et al.</i> (2015)
RUFORUM Working Document No. 14	Linking Agricultural Universities with Civil Society, the Private Sector, Governments and other Stakeholders in support of Agricultural Development in Africa Partnerships to unlock the Potential of Agricultural Development in Africa	Nampala <i>et al.</i> (2016b, c); Egeru <i>et al.</i> (2016)
RUFORUM Working Document No. 15	Enhancing contribution of African universities to the continent's development	Mensah and Egeru (2017)

Since inception, the FORUM/RUFORUM Working Documents Series have presented opportunity for a regular Volume that promotes scholarships including mentoring of graduate students as highlighted in the below quote:

“Compiled and edited by Makerere University FORUM Graduate students – J. Nakitandwe, V. Ekiyar, I. Rwomushana, J. Nalukwago and G. Taulya; and FORUM Principal Investigators; J. Mugisha and E. Adipala” (Nakitandwe et al., 2002)

The RUFORUM Working Document Series is now a double-blind peer-reviewed publication which is the expected standard for all scholarly publications. This implies that submission in response to call for papers as part of participation at RUFORUM convening events does not automatically imply that the submission will be processed and published. Instead the publication are now assessed for quality, authors given opportunity to improve and only those that merit are published. Extracts from reviewers of the recent submissions are captured below:

Table 2. Thematic areas to demonstration of the shift in terms of disciplines and focus of content published in the FORUM/RUFORUM Working Document Series

Forum Working Document No. 1	RUFORUM Working Document No. 14
Crop Nutrition	Partnerships and Innovations to Strengthen Higher Education in Africa
Striga Management	Strengthening ICT and Knowledge Management in Agriculture
Cassava Propagation and Cassava Mosaic Disease Control	Strengthening University Outreach, Community Engagement and Innovation Platforms
Disease Management in Sorghum and Maize	Sustainable Environment and Natural Resources Management
Integrated management of Legume Pests	Sustainable Intensification within Smallholder Crop Value Chains
Soil Fertility Management and Biodiversity in Cereal-Legume Intercrops	Sustainable Intensification within Smallholder Livestock Value Chains
Biodiversity and Biocontrol	Marine Science and Blue Economy – Fisheries and Aquaculture
Improved Finger Millet and Maize Cultivation	Reducing Postharvest Losses
Pests and Disease Control	Agricultural Marketing Pathways, Product Uptake, Trade and Policy
Soil Conservation	Strengthening Gender Mainstreaming to Enhance Agricultural Productivity
Biological Nitrogen Fixation	Addressing Risk Associated with Climate Change and Variability in Agricultural Systems
Socio-economics and Farmer Decision Making	
Replenishment of Soil Fertility	
Banana Propagation and Cultivation	
Potato Production and Data Analysis	

1. It was evident that authors never adhered to instructions when writing the extended abstracts or some never received instructions. For most authors, the standard of writing is generally poor.
2. It was clear that many of the extended abstracts were written by inexperienced students with no input or support from their supervisors. Non-English speaking authors also found it difficult to pass on the intended message.
3. Having also attended the Conference, and listened to some students and principal investigators presenting their projects, one could see a very big disconnect between the presentations and the papers written, the former being good and the latter poor. I concluded that the research done was good but that Principal Investigators probably never committed enough time to critically look through papers written and submitted by students under their supervision
4. A few papers were not submitted for formatting because they were poorly written, difficult to understand (poor language) or too long and therefore unfocussed.

5. A few authors did their best and wrote good extended abstracts. However, most abstracts were generally poorly written. There was strong evidence of senior authors not reading through “their” papers before their submission. These abstracts were most likely written by first authors (mostly students) and were submitted without review by the senior authors.

6. For the non-English speaking authors, it was evident that communicating in English was a big problem. Although for some the intended message was evident and therefore edited, for others it was difficult to even pick what the authors intended to communicate.

Conclusion and recommendations

The FORUM/RUFORUM Working Document Series has evolved into a quality scholarly outlet. Moving forward, the authors recommend the following:

Transform the Working Document Series into a Journal: The submissions are open and come in different categories including among others original research articles, mini-reviews, review articles, opinion pieces, editorial briefs/letters, thought pieces, synthesized speeches and pronouncements, etc. This recommendation would potentially ease the limitations and challenges of scholarly publishing in Africa as well as associated duplication challenges that may potentially arise especially with graduate students submitting manuscripts for consideration to journals whose data has in part been published in the Working Document Series. The formatting can be done in such a way that the manuscripts that merit publication are labelled at the very top with the respective category. This is a standard and increasingly becoming a common practice.

Authors should be given ample time: In subsequent publications, authors should be given ample time to prepare papers. There should be set deadlines which should be adhered to. This will allow authors to write properly but also keep away last minute submissions which in most cases are below expected standards.

Provide guidelines for preparing papers: Let instructions for preparing papers be provided. They should also be clear. These guidelines should be clear on the length of the paper, length of abstract, expected sections, style of presenting tables and graphs, style of referencing, etc. It should be made clear to authors that failure to adhere to instructions would lead to automatic rejection of the papers.

Submission form endorsed by authors: For papers from RUFORUM funded projects, we suggest that the secretariat design and accompany guidelines to writing papers with a form on which the PI or at least two authors endorse to prove that they have indeed looked at the manuscript and have approved it for submission. This will put pressure on senior authors to edit manuscripts before they are submitted. This will ensure that papers that are submitted are written properly so that RUFORUM Secretariat staff are not pushed into editing papers.

Enforcement of internal review (especially for RUFORUM funded Universities): Papers from RUFORUM funded Universities should be submitted through and cleared by a designated internal reviewer. This reviewer should ensure that papers meet the minimum editorial quality before submission.

Non-English speakers should submit early: The non-English speaking scientists should be encouraged to submit papers early so that there can be enough time for editors to interact with authors.

Non-English speakers could write papers in language they understand best: Now that RUFORUM is multi-lingual, non-English speaking scientists could also be allowed to write papers in the language they understand best. Such authors should not be made to feel that they are being coerced to be “English”.

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