



## The Seventh African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Triennial Conference 2021

Research project management and development of interdisciplinary skills

Date: 6<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021

Registration Link: <https://bit.ly/3AmLOa7>

### Concept Note

**Title** Virtual training course for Early-Career Scientists (Postdocs, GTAs, CARP and PARI doctoral students) on Research project management and development of interdisciplinary skills

**Background** The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) is a network of 129 universities in 38 African countries spanning the African continent. RUFORUM was established to promote the integration of member universities into Africa's development processes, particularly within the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP); provide a platform for networking, resource mobilization and advocacy to transform universities for relevance towards inclusive sustainable development; and to rationalize resource use and enhance economies of scale and scope. The RUFORUM Network is mandated to strengthen the quality and relevance of postgraduate training and research in African universities. Especially in agriculture, science, technology, and innovation—through activities designed to improve the capacity of African universities and research centres to generate knowledge relevant to Africa's development challenges.

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) in partnership with RUFORUM member universities in Benin has organised a 5 day training on Research project management and development of interdisciplinary skills.

**Context of the training course** Being in an early stage of career, it is time to explore the possibilities of applying the skills acquired through training and the first research projects undertaken. Whereas a classical career in research would encompass deepening in a field of specialisation — often the one of the PhD training or the one of the first employer — in order to become a subject-matter specialist, the correlation with other specialisations, other domains and

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current or future societal needs is often neglected or suppressed in a twilight zone. Apart from curiosity-driven research, research can also be founded on demands from a wide and varied spectrum of stakeholders across society.

Today's demands for scientific and technological solutions are piling up, ranging from understanding the effects of climate changes and knowing how to control or adapt to these changes, exploring ways to maximise yields with as little (in)organic inputs as possible, diversifying agricultural produces for economic and health reasons, to genetic engineering and automation of processes along agricultural value chains. Solutions requiring scientific support are put on the political agenda because of their emergency nature at various levels in society or of concerns about the planetary health. The third decade of this century is characterised by a hunt on evidence-based solutions in a high gear with the accompanying request for quick delivery.

A 21<sup>st</sup> century researcher must be equipped with more skills than those received during training at tertiary education institutes. Responding adequately to societal needs means upgrading of the specialisation glasses to a 360° multi-layered lens with zooming in/out features. But though the demand for science-based solutions is high, the availability of research funds to identify solutions is limited and fragmented, resulting in tough competition among scientists. To survive in this research desert require adaptive skills, networking and systems thinking. Not surprisingly, the world is talking nowadays in terms of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), food systems and agricultural transformation processes. Hence, it is time to adapt to the evolving policy environment.

Whereas classical project management is about controlling time and budget, the aspects of people-centredness and result-centredness are also key ingredients in delivering a successful project, both content-wise and usage-wise. Working together across institutions, borders and cultures and with a variety of stakeholders from different disciplines and socio-economic sectors is a challenge which requires symbiosis between project members, but also coaching and mentoring from a project leader. Only when they all work in unison, they will be in a position to achieve the project's objectives and take credit of positive impacts. Similarly, the relations with the target groups, donor community and other stakeholders need to be symbiotic too. Surviving in this project inner and outer space, *id est*, the project environment, requires a full understanding of the various project management components as communication, project structure, strengths and weaknesses, leadership, intercultural collaboration, cross-sectoral collaboration, systems thinking, monitoring and evaluation, assumption control, risk management, and time, people and budget management.

**Aims and objectives of**

The overall aim of the training course is to enable Early-Career Scientists (Postdocs, GTAs, CARP and PARI doctoral students) improve their

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## the training course

research project management skills and steer their project, project members and other stakeholders towards jointly achieved results. The meeting will present an opportunity for scientists to learn from each other and how to interact in an ever evolving project environment.

## Approach and methodology

The 5-day virtual training course will be held in English and will be a facilitator-led meeting and in order to allow for active engagement, the facilitator will use plenary sessions, group work, role play and peer review. The use of visual aids including wall cards, flip-over charts, videos and PowerPoint presentations will enable to capture contributions and ideas from individuals and groups.

It is expected that all invited participants are willing to fully engage in the 5-day virtual training course which is subdivided into the following sessions:

- The first day will be used to introduce the concept of project cycle management, research cycle management, project management terminology and project environment. Participants will be challenged to discuss on common project management language and the role they play as a project member within a project.
- The second day, participants will have to map and analyse the stakeholders present in the project environment and the stakeholders' needs. A project and stakeholder meeting will be held on progress and risks and failure analysis. This will be followed by reflection and group work, for which virtual groups will be created. Critical interventions by different groups will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of approaches applied by the various *ad hoc* installed project teams.
- The third day, a project meeting will be held on annual financial monitoring and unforeseen events. This will be followed by reflection and group work. Critical interventions by different groups will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of approaches applied by the various *ad hoc* installed project teams. The second half of the third day will concentrate on participatory leadership skills with a focus on information exchange methods, collection of information, effective meeting set-ups and people management.
- The fourth day, groups will be focusing on leadership and systems thinking, and on designing and implementing a project communication strategy. The exploration of the needs of target audiences and the ways to service them will be looked at from different angles through group work and shared in a plenary session. An introduction will be given on speech techniques.
- The fifth day will be dedicated to communication skills (elevator pitches, influencing skills) and monitoring/reporting skills, and closed by an evaluation of the training course.

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The exchange of experiences and ideas, and the various interactions will be very useful for the improvement of understanding the position of a project and its dynamics and the role a project leader has herein in the sphere of societal relevance with the ultimate goal to satisfy societal needs and to contribute to inclusive and sustainable development.

### Outputs/ outcomes

The training course will deliver the following outputs and outcomes:

1. An improved understanding of the value of a project within the web of societal stakeholders.
2. An insight into participatory leadership methods.
3. An improved understanding of internal and external project communication.
4. A different view on result-oriented collaboration within a project team.

The participants will be experimenting social skills during the training course and be prepared to use their newly acquired social skills in their working environment.

### Venue and participants

The training course will be held online. Participants will be Early-Career Scientists (Postdocs, GTAs, CARP and PARI doctoral students) from member universities of RUFORUM from all the corners of the African continent.

### Training course organiser and contact

The organiser is Gerard den Ouden, independent consultant, research programme manager and trainer in proposal development, strategic planning, project management and systems thinking.  
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