

An example of impact and institutional change: training in scientific writing at KSUSTA, northern Nigeria



Training in scientific writing for researchers at KSUSTA (northern Nigeria) has had a measurable impact on the amount of funds being won by this group

Overview

To support researchers in the rapid publication of their results, AgShare.Today's capacity-building work includes the provision of in-depth training courses in journal article writing and grant proposal writing – both of which are key skills for researchers. The programme also provides follow-up support through an editing and mentoring service.

AgShare.Today has already run ten scientific write-shops, and a good illustration of how this training has had an impact is provided by the very first write-shop – held at Kebbi State University of Science and Technology, Aliero (KSUSTA) in northern Nigeria in June 2016. This measurably increased the confidence of researchers, built capacity, and led to new grants being won.

Why train at KSUSTA first?

The AgShare.Today team chose KSUSTA as the first location to provide science-writing training for two main reasons: (i) researchers from several different BMGF projects are stationed there, and (ii) the extremely remote location of KSUSTA means that staff don't receive as much capacity-building support of this type as other organizations do.

Who attended the training?

Thirty participants attended the course, with team members joining from three BMGF-funded projects: (i) the West African Virus Epidemiology (WAVE) Project, (ii) the Cassava Viruses in Northern Nigeria Project (CVNNP), and (iii) the Yam Badnavirus Project (YBP). This was the first time that most of the participants had received training in scientific writing.

An interactive approach

To ensure concrete outputs, the course was run as a five-day write-shop – with the theory of writing journal articles and grant proposals being taught in the morning, followed by afternoon sessions during which participants wrote proposals or articles that they needed to submit (as a way of practising what they had learned in the morning).

During these afternoon sessions, the trainers also worked one-to-one with participants to give individual guidance.

Overcoming issues: key lessons

Give time for second-language English speakers

One key issue that the trainers faced was that the participants were being taught to write in English, which was not their first language. Overcoming this required plenty of time to be given in the agenda to provide a well-paced course.

In addition, detailed training notes were provided as booklets that covered almost everything the trainers had to say. This allowed participants time to focus on what was being taught rather than only half listening as they struggled to take notes.

Plan for logistical issues

Logistical concerns were another major difficulty on this course. Constant power outages, and the failure of the air conditioning in the training room, for example, meant that the course was given in temperatures well over 40°C.

While nothing could be done about the temperatures beyond ensuring that everyone stayed hydrated, pre-printing of detailed notes and use of AgShare's battery-powered projector meant that loss of electricity had little impact on learning.

Pool participants' knowledge

The AgShare trainers also recognized the need to take account of course participants' local knowledge. For example, in addition to simply providing lists of funding agencies and tools to find grants, the trainers ran a session to explore what relevant funding agencies the participants were aware of. During this session, each participant identified only two or three agencies. But by combining their knowledge a list of 32 agencies was produced that could fund their research – several of which were local and weren't known to the trainers.

Impact

Following the course many of the participants began to actively apply for grants. And in June 2017 KSUSTA informed the AgShare team that those attending the course had now won grants totalling US\$50,000. While not a huge amount initially, this shows a real step-change in the attitude of researchers who prior to the AgShare training had not been applying for funds as they felt themselves unlikely to win.

Moreover, the agency that awarded the nine grants that made up this amount was the TETFund, one of the local Nigerian government

funding organizations identified as part of the knowledge-sharing exercise run during the course.

I write on behalf of KSUSTA to say a big thank you. Your visit of June 2016 has resulted in an increased number of research grants [being] won by [a] number of researchers in northern Nigeria. Most of these grants were in various fields of Agricultural research. [The] majority of those whose research was funded were participants who attended your research proposals writing training of June 2016. A big THANK YOU.

(Dr Ibrahim Mohammed, email – 14 June 2017)

In the second half of 2018, researchers at KSUSTA asked AgShare.Today to support them in the submission of a grant proposal valued at over US\$4 million. Again, this is an example of how the organization had become much more focused on winning funding for research.

Attribution of impact

It is difficult to attribute behaviour change entirely to the intervention of one group – as account needs to be taken of the complex interactions that influence institutional behaviour change. However, the increased focus evident in KSUSTA on applying for funding, and the comments provided by KSUSTA researchers themselves, offer a very strong argument that AgShare's work has had a major impact on the culture of applying for grants within KSUSTA.

Lessons learned

- Workshop-style approaches to capacity building that allow participants time to apply their learning to real-life work (rather than use of generic examples) are highly effective.
- Interactive knowledge-sharing sessions are needed to prompt participants to share local knowledge of benefit in highly specific contexts.