

Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA) PhD Position - University of the Free State (UFS)

Call for Applications: PhD Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA) 2026-2028

1. Background

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) in partnership with Mastercard Foundation, Gulu University (Uganda), Egerton University (Kenya), Africa University (Zimbabwe), University of the Free State (South Africa), Malawi University of Science and Technology (Malawi), University of Eldoret (Kenya), Uganda Martyrs University (Uganda), University of Port Harcourt (Nigeria), University of Cape Coast (Ghana), University of Bamenda (Cameroon), National University of Agriculture (Benin), and Université Mohammed VI Polytechnique (Morocco) are implementing a 10-year programme (2023-2033) called Transforming African Agricultural Universities to Meaningfully Contribute to Africa's Growth and Development (TAGDev 2.0). The programme seeks to strengthen universities and TVET institutions to better serve communities by skilling and empowering Africa's young people and their institutions to drive inclusive, equitable and climate resilient transformation of agriculture and agrifood systems. The TAGDev 2.0 programme will support young African students that are economically disadvantaged but academically competent to access university education. The scholarship is open to both female and male applicants. However, females, refugees, internally displaced persons, and persons with disabilities are highly encouraged to apply.

2. Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA)

The Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA) Programme contributes to one of RUFORUM's three strategic goals to "build synergy from networks of specialisation to develop quality human resources and capacity required to intensify and increase Africa's agricultural productivity and competitiveness" and its Vision 2030 Strategy that focuses on building postgraduate training and research capacity in its member universities. The GTA programme has been implemented since 2015 to: (i) improve the quality of higher education and increase the pool of PhD-level trained academic staff in African universities; (ii) provide opportunities for the doctoral research to contribute more directly to African development; (iii) strengthen inter- university collaboration in the field of higher education in Africa; and (iv) promote staff mobility among RUFORUM member universities, and across Africa.

Under the GTA arrangement:

- I. The sending universities nominate the staff to be trained and RUFORUM Secretariat helps to get them placed in receiving (host) Universities.

2. The sending universities commit to pay for travel, health insurance, upkeep and research of their staff under training.
3. The receiving/host universities waive the fees and associated costs, and provide accommodation for the admitted GTA Fellows.
4. Once admission process is completed, the sending and host universities and the nominated GTA Fellow sign a Tripartite Agreement to guide the hosting and training of the Fellow.
5. In some cases where opportunities exist, the host University may attach the GTA Fellow to the research program at the hosting university.
6. The RUFORUM Secretariat facilitates the GTA arrangement and follows up on the GTA training.

3. Eligible Program

This call for a three-year scholarship for the 2026-2028 academic year is open to applicants interested in and eligible to study a PhD at the University of the Free State, South Africa.

Program Name: PhD in Sustainable Agriculture

Research Background/Theme:

Position I: Disease Surveillance and Prevention through Skilled Herder Networks

Research Background/Theme:

The Department for Sustainable Food Systems and Development at the University of the Free State in collaboration with RUFORUM, is pleased to announce a call for applications for the GTA Program focusing on disease surveillance and prevention in communal livestock systems. This fellowship offers early-career researchers a unique opportunity to contribute to cutting-edge research developing integrated monitoring systems for diseases affecting both animals and humans, with particular focus on early warning systems operated by skilled herders.

The successful candidate will investigate how professionally trained herders can serve as the foundation for effective zoonotic disease surveillance and prevention systems in communal farming areas. The research will explore the intersection of herder skill development, disease monitoring capacity, and community health protection. Specific research areas include:

- **Herder-based surveillance systems:** Developing and testing protocols for herders to identify, report, and respond to zoonotic disease threats including Foot-and-Mouth Disease, Rift Valley Fever, Brucellosis, and emerging pathogens

- **Digital reporting platforms:** Creating mobile-based disease reporting systems that connect herders directly with veterinary and public health authorities for rapid response
- **Training methodology development:** Designing evidence-based training programs that build herder capacity in disease recognition, sample collection, and biosecurity practices
- **Early warning system integration:** Investigating how herder networks can be integrated with existing veterinary and public health surveillance systems for enhanced disease preparedness
- **Community engagement strategies:** Developing approaches to ensure community acceptance and participation in herder-led surveillance activities
- **Impact assessment:** Evaluating the effectiveness of herder-based surveillance on disease prevention, outbreak response time, and community health outcomes

Specific Research Project Title:

Skilled Herders as Frontline Guardians: Developing Disease Surveillance and Early Warning Systems in Communal Livestock Areas

This fellowship provides a platform for interdisciplinary research, combining expertise in agriculture, climate science, communication, and technology to address the pressing challenges facing food security in a changing climate.

The successful applicant will be expected to live in Bloemfontein, South Africa, when not conducting fieldwork. The candidate will undertake independent and collaborative research aligned with the Research Chair's objectives, publish high-quality research in accredited journals, contribute to lecturing in the department, and supervise and mentor postgraduate students.

Specific Research Project Title (If applicable): Building Resilient and Sustainable Food Systems through Innovation in Communication and Technology

Centre Director: Prof JW Swanepoel

Department: Sustainable Food Systems and Development

Faculty: Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences

General Admission Requirements to the University of the Free State for the above program:

- I. Hold a relevant Master's degree in agricultural extension, rural development, agricultural economics, sustainable agriculture, or a closely related field

2. Have a publication record in accredited journals, with at least 2 publications.
3. Relevant teaching experience.
4. Be able to conduct independent research.
5. Be under the age of 40.

Additional Requirements Specific to this Position:

1. Experience with econometrics models will be an advantage;
2. Willingness to conduct fieldwork in remote places
3. A valid driving license

Application Process:

1. Applicants must be nominated by their sending University, a RUFORUM member University.
2. Interested candidates should submit the following documents to Prof Jan Swanepoel (SwanepoelJW@ufs.ac.za) and Ms Selma Nghituwamhata (s.nghituwamhata@ruforum.org) with the subject line: *Application for Graduate Teaching Assistantship* by **30 November 2025**:
 - A detailed Curriculum Vitae (CV)
 - A cover letter outlining their research interests and suitability for the position
 - Certified copies of academic transcripts and degree certificates
 - A research proposal (maximum three pages) outlining their proposed research project
 - A list of publications
 - Two copies of academic work or publications
 - A letter of nomination from their home (sending) university.
 - Contact information for at least two academic referees
 - A Power Point (no more than 15 slides) summarizing his/her previous experience and skill set with an emphasis his/her teamwork and team player environment.
3. Shortlisted candidates will be contacted for an interview.
4. We encourage eligible candidates to apply and take advantage of this opportunity to build their academic and research careers within the RUFORUM network.

Contact Information:

For further inquiries, please contact:

Prof Jan Swanepoel, Director: Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, University of the Free State (SwanepoelJW@ufs.ac.za) and Ms Selma Nghituwamhata (s.nghituwamhata@ruforum.org).

RUFORUM Secretariat Information:

For more information on the RUFORUM GTA Programme, please visit the RUFORUM website:
<https://www.ruforum.org/gta>

For more information on the University of the Free State, see: www.ufs.ac.za