THE GHANA FIELD SCHOOL: A PROPOSAL FOR LeiASA FROM CA-OS

Since a few years, the Institute CA-OS runs a Field School in Ghana for its Masters students. The students, who each do an individual research project, are guided into their field sites by a CA-OS supervisor and his Ghanaian counterpart in January, by an introduction to the country (Accra, Kumasi, Tamale) accompanied by exercises that familiarize them with the country and its peoples, modes of travel, forms of politeness and proper conduct, and – particularly important – provoke them into finding out what research style fits them best. They are then guided into their field site, where they do research for a week before rejoining the group for a long weekend of (much appreciated) evaluation. This introduction makes the students’ research proper far more effective. Some six weeks into their research (by the end of February), they are visited by a second CA-OS supervisor, who joins them in the field for an interim assessment of research progress, and to adapt or fine-tune the student’s final research activities if necessary. The combination of coaching during field entry and repeated supervision kick-starts students into a reflexive research experience that cannot be simulated but only experienced in situ: how one relates to the communicative context of the new place, how one adapts one’s own capacities to it, how one rediscovers the use of one’s eyes, ears and communicative skills in a strange place. In the CA-OS experience, the Field School raises the quality of the resulting MA theses with one and even two full points on a scale of 1 to 10.

CA-OS proposes to open the Ghana Field School to other members of LeiASA in an effort to consolidate the Field School’s gains, increase interdisciplinary collaboration, expand the contacts and research sites available to Leiden students, and increase the social impact of researchers from both Leiden and Ghana. Beyond the ethnographic focus of CA-OS, the Field School is suited for (for example) oral history projects, field linguistics, (ethno)archaeology, (ethno)biology and other field research in art and architecture, social science or medicine. We work with the University of Accra at Legon and Tamale Development University, and with local organizations in the sphere of trade, heritage, mining, indigenous affairs, tourism, and much more, and can offer additional guidance both by Ghanaian and Dutch-Ghanaian contacts. Expanding the Field School is therefore also a way of increasing the social impact of academics from both Leiden and Ghana.

The current staff investment suffices for the supervision of 8 CA-OS students per year, and covers material and salary costs of two staff members, and one Ghanaian counterpart; travel and housing are covered by students and/or the grants they manage to acquire. It is expensive: against an average “income” of €7.000,- (7 successful students x 15 ECTS x €65,90), CA-OS invests €22.750 a year. (Of course, ECTS are not the only standard against which teaching efforts are or should be measured.) The Field School would be able to accommodate double the number of students from Leiden against a lower cost, but only with the financial participation of LeiASA and/or other Institutes of Leiden University. CA-OS has already taken the first steps to back-up the supervision and advisory roles by recruiting additional Ghanaian counterparts. Doubling the number of students at the MA-level would require doubling Ghanaian and CA-OS supervision during the “February” visits (the staff investment in the January program does not need the same increase). This would raise the total cost to €31.000. With a CA-OS “income” of €7.000,-, this would require an additional €24.000,- to cover the remaining cost.

If that deficit can be covered, CA-OS offers Leiden students at the MA level a research experience they are not able to create on their own. Apart from the field entry exercises that familiarize them
with Ghanaian life in a way not duplicated by either tourism or volunteer work, they have the additional advantage of (indigenous) advice on where to do research, where to settle, how to approach assistants and/or collaborators, and how to behave towards them. If these students’ research projects take a similar amount of time as the CA-OS Master projects, they will profit from a second moment of supervision and adjustment of research strategies. CA-OS supervisors will not claim “income” in ECTS from other participating Leiden Institutes; they will, to the contrary, be available as messengers bringing disciplinary advice from their Institutes’ supervisors to the students in the field during the February visits.

CA-OS proposes that this arrangement starts by preparing students for a January trip in September of the academic year 2016-2017. This will allow Institutes of Leiden University to advertise the possibility and set up the required arrangements during the Spring of 2016. LeiASA can stimulate this project by covering the deficit of €24,000,- in 2016-2017 from its integration fund, so that participating Institutes can experiment with sending students to the Ghana Field School under this arrangement without cost.\(^1\) Obviously, this cost would have to be shouldered by the separate Institutes in later years if the arrangement is to become sustainable.

For making the experiment fully sustainable, a further investment in “backing up” staff Field School expertise would be necessary by covering the salary and material costs of two additional CA-OS staff members who accompany the Field School trainees to “learn the trade” from their colleagues, either in 2016-2017, or in 2017-2018. This would involve a one-time investment of approximately €19,000,-.

Finally, CA-OS can offer a cheaper option for BA-students (suggested by a question about the Field School from Leiden University College) provided this helps to further cover costs. Modeled partly on the Winter School that CA-OS runs in the Philippines since 2010, one can propose that BA students can compete for a limited number of places in the Field School by means of a well-prepared research proposal (for example, contributing to their capstone project at LUC or a BA thesis elsewhere). The best students will then be awarded a place by a jury consisting of members of the sending institute and a supervisor of the Ghana Field School. They can join the field entry class, but may leave earlier than the Master students (for example, after a research stint of three weeks, i.e. by the middle of February). The average fee for such projects would be €2,000,- per student.

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\(^1\) If only €35,000,- is available for teaching initiatives from the integration fund, then LeiASA should consider making funds available from Research Collaboration or Collaboration with African partners. Alternatively, participating Institutes can contribute a smaller fee per student, stepping up their contribution in the next years when the experiment proves successful.