

Empowerment of Agricultural Skills through Distance Education at Tamil Nadu Agricultural University

Dr. P. Santhy, Dr. G. Jothi and Dr. V. Valluvaparidasan

Directorate of Open and Distance Learning, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University
Coimbatore - 641003, Tamil Nadu, odl@tnau.ac.in

ABSTRACT

The Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, a century old renowned institution committed for the development of agricultural education and research in the state of Tamil Nadu has ventured an innovative approach of commissioning open and distance learning programmes since 2005 for the benefit of various segments of the farming community *viz.*, farm women, rural youths, school dropouts, students and self help groups through its certificate courses which are skill oriented.

Certificate programmes of 21 numbers in the regional language of Tamil are offered. Some of the important courses are:

- Mushroom Cultivation
- Waste recycling and vermicomposting
- Preservation of Fruits and Vegetables
- Preparation of Bakery and Confectionary Products
- Propagation of Nursery Techniques
- Bee keeping

These courses are designed to upgrade the technical skill of farmers and to disseminate latest technologies related to the field of Agriculture. These courses are uniquely designed to create self-confidence, self employment and to enhance the income generated by the individual.

Moreover a set of certificate programmes (5), are also designed and offered, catering to the needs of those who live in urban areas *viz.*,

- Landscaping and Ornamental Gardening
- Commercial Horticulture
- Soil Fertility Management
- Mushroom Cultivation
- Coconut cultivation

Undergoing these programme not only bring them income but also make their life in more productive environment and beneficial to the society. The learners are exposed to practical situation and environment to gain knowledge and skill to be on par with regular students, which is a unique approach in the ODL mode at TNAU.

INTRODUCTION

India's topographical diversity, variety of climate and abundant cheap labour give it a natural advantage in agriculture and the agro-business. Its greatest strategic asset is land.

India is among the largest producers of vegetables and fruits in the world and has an equally strong floriculture base. Today India's agriculture has become globalised and the idea of integrating Indian agriculture with the world economy is getting government support. India has enormous potential as an exporter of agricultural commodities ranging from mushrooms to flowers, spices, cereals, oilseeds and vegetables.

The Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, a century years old renowned institution committed for the development of agricultural education in the state

concerned has ventured an innovative approach of starting open and distance learning programmes since 2005.

Skill oriented certificate programmes numbering 21 *viz.*, are offered in the regional language (Tamil) for the benefit of various segments of the farming community, self help groups, women entrepreneurs and those interested in establishing agro-based industries in rural areas. Certificate programmes numbering 5 *viz.*, are also offered in English for the people in the urban areas to motivate them in agro ecology and nurture their interest in environment concerned issues.

The contact programmes for the Certificate courses are arranged once in a month which are imparting practical skill to the learners. For example vermicomposting techniques, spawn preparation for the mushroom cultivation, nursery techniques like grafting, pruning, scion selection etc. are attended by the students as hands on training. These trainings are targeted over the self help groups (SHGs) through non-government organizations (NGOs).

Attendance to a tune of 60% in the Personal Contact Programme (PCP) have been made as mandatory so that candidates can attend skill oriented practical classes personally and gain confidence and quality education. Assignments for each subject and project work for each programme are also made compulsory to keep up the quality of the education. Special lectures from experts in relevant field of specialization are invited regularly which is adding value to the discussions. Well qualified faculties of our own university, as well as experts from other institutions related to specific field adds value to the contact programmes.

Course contents are designed based on the current situations and the needs of the society in Self Instructional Mode (SIM) which are learner friendly. The contents are listed with explanatory title helping the students to identify precisely, where they are and why they are studying the material.

The excellent infrastructure *viz.*, 10 colleges, 34 research stations, 14 krishi vigyan kendras, 5 plant clinic centres and one ATIC with >1000 outstanding internationally exposed faculties/scientists already existing in the university along with special additions for distance learners like air-conditioned classrooms, technologically advanced laboratories, greenhouses, with all electronic gadgets and latest ICT accessories are making the learning environment more conducive.

The examinations are conducted by the Controller of Examinations of the University. Not only these, a valuable library, biggest in South Asian country existing already in the University, helps the learners to go for additional references in addition to the library facilities existing in the Directorate of Open and Distance Learning.

SHGs in group of rural poor who have volunteered to organize themselves in to a group for eradication of poverty of the members. They save regularly and their savings is converted into a group corpus, which is utilized for common management. SHGs are acting as carriers for technology transfer to weaker section of the rural society by creating self employment.

NGOs work for the cause of the society and play vital role in ensuing proper training, coordination to the groups and putting them on a scientific approach. They open avenues for self employment and create opportunities for rural youth to empower themselves in updating knowledge and technology so that they can also compete with urban mass. By taking the advantage both SHG and NGOs the ODL programmes are scale-up to reach the unreachable youth at rural areas.

The learners are exposed to practical situation and environment to gain knowledge and to be on par with regular students, which is a unique approach in the ODL mode at TNAU. The following are the salient features of distance learning programmes of TNAU.

- Field visits like textile industries, effluent collection points etc.
- Students of MBA are exposed to special lectures on specific topics
- The interested students exposed to specific fields are permitted to share their experiences through discussions.

- Students are assigned with specific topics to collect literature wherein they are exposed to library references.

Moreover they are permitted to interact through a portal developed specifically for the distance learners of TNAU. This portal is unique that the registered candidates of this Directorate can enter in to the portal with a separate login ID for downloading the course materials, communications sent from the Directorate, to know the results of the examinations they have attended, to get the observations of their experiments conducted during their contact classes etc. Such sort of communications would accelerate as well as motivate the learners of distance education. Online courses are taking the learning beyond the restricting voice and thus creating a new paradigm of instruction.

The distance education institutions are facing the growing challenges of designing, developing, evaluating and managing courses over the internet (Seema Chandhok *et. al.* 2010). Through this portal the candidates who are separated geographically can discuss through this platform which would ultimately improve the quality of learning. According to Dellana *et. al.* 2000, Dunn (2000), Fender (1999), Inman & Kerwin (1999) distance education has been perceived as a means of providing education to those students challenged by spatial and temporal barriers. Even those candidates sailing in the ships, hailing from the army who are at the furthest places can contact the Directorate and avail all the facilities through this portal.

Scientists with specific field competency of our own University designed the syllabus and curriculum, debated and approved in the supreme body of the institution viz., academic council. Also provision is made to update the syllabus once in 4 years after debating in a scientific forum and in the Board of studies. Course material printed in a self instructional mode is supplied to the learners on the day of registration itself. More number of contact classes are arranged, so that even if they fail to attend one or two classes, the learning process may not be affected.

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