

Workshop Report #6

Expanding Opportunities for Higher Education: Progress of the Global Open Agriculture and Food University

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**Expanding Opportunities for Higher Education:
Progress of the Global Open Agriculture and Food University**

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On the last day of the open sessions of the AGM, Norway sponsored a lunch meeting on “Expanding Opportunities for Higher Education: Progress of the Global Open Agriculture and Food University” in which 60 people attended. Ruth Haug, Director of NORAGRIC, chaired this meeting. Haug stressed that NORAGRIC is interested in this program because agriculture universities in the South have been neglected and this program solely focuses on strengthening the capacity of postgraduate education in the South. She informed the participants that the AGM in 2003 brought support to this program and that the meeting was an update of what has happened since then.

Dr. Kanayo Nwanze, Chair of the Centers Director Committee (CDC) and Director General of the West Africa Rice Development Association (WARDA), elaborated on the vision of the Global Open Agriculture and Food University. He informed the group that the Centers have been involved with this concept and are keen in widening their training and capacity strengthening of national systems in agriculture and related fields. The CDC Chair also was pleased with the interest of partners and saw the Global Open Agriculture and Food University as a vehicle for sharing CGIAR’s unique knowledge. Nwanze then added that the CDC will continue to discuss this program and guide the Task Force. Dr. Nwanze stressed: “The cost of education can be very high, but think about the cost of ignorance.” Following the session, Dr. Nwanze addressed the press and declared that the Open University has been launched.

Joachim von Braun, Director General of IFPRI, thanked the participants for their positive vote of confidence by coming to the luncheon meeting. von Braun said, “almost all love the idea of access to high quality, low cost programs that address gaps in higher agricultural education, but some are nervous now that we are implementing it.” He reiterated three key messages about the Global Open Agriculture and Food University: it is not degree granting, it should offer Masters-level education, and the content should be close to science. He then briefly described some of the milestones that have been achieved since the AGM 2003: formation of a CDC support group, the work of the Task Force, discussion and endorsement of the program at the May 2004 CDC meeting, Task Force Business Meeting on August 25, a Dialogue with Partners on August 26, and the endorsement of the Science Council.

Some key conclusions from these activities are:

1. a step-by step approach towards implementation needs to be taken;
2. partnerships need to be formed;
3. the role of the Global Open Agriculture and Food University should be catalytic;

4. a credible, small Program Advisory Committee (PAC) needs to be formed. Nominations are welcome and the Science Council has kindly agreed to select the members, while the Centers will manage the committee.

Module development will need to involve several people – professors in the universities, CGIAR experts, and distance education experts. A blended-learning approach involving distance learning and face-to face interaction should be used. The CGIAR Centers will be actively involved with research advice.

He stressed that the program received support from FAO as well as other organizations following the August 26 dialogue. He concluded by stressing that the funding plans include a clear stipulation for tuition, but further support is needed and he strongly encouraged those interested to express their financial or in-kind support.

Wilberforce Kisamba-Mugerwa, Division Director, ISNAR Division, IFPRI briefly spoke about the next steps for implementation. He stressed that we need to know what content is currently available within the CGIAR centers. Also, the governing body needs to be established as well as a committee of experts for content quality. A fundraising strategy needs to be developed to supplement the contributions from the centers. He emphasize that we should begin with pilot programs. He concluded that the CGIAR plans to expand its role in education not to compete, but to expand the group of beneficiaries already receiving CGIAR materials for courses.

Lastly, John Monyo, the Assistant Director General, Sustainable Development Department, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, provided some key areas in which FAO and this program can collaborate:

- a. needs assessment;
- b. mechanisms to engage partners;
- c. management of appropriate courseware; and
- d. research of higher technical education institutions.

He stated that FAO is in the business of facilitating agriculture and that capacity strengthening is a component. FAO supports the Global Open Agriculture and Food University concept. He briefly described a proposal prepared by FAO.

Following the formal presentations, there was approximately 45 minutes of discussion. Below is a compilation of these comments.

Thomas Geburek, head of the Austrian Delegation, is enthusiastic about virtual learning, but he wanted to know what is the subject focus of this program. Is it agriculture, forestry, and/ or fisheries? Also, what would the program like to achieve and in what timeframe. He also inquired about how to contribute from the Austrian-donor side as well as the university department side.

Stephan Krall from GTZ, wanted to know why this program would not offer degrees, and how much extra work would this require from researchers. He stressed that there should be competition between this initiative and other initiatives.

Daniel Rocchi from the Ministry of Education and Research, France is very interested in the Global Open Agriculture and Food University because it focused on the South and new delivery techniques. The French want to collaborate on content, advice, and experiments. He suggested focusing course content on natural resources management and subject matter relating to private sector agriculture careers. He confirms with what Michel Petit stated at the August 26th dialogue.

Margaret Catley Carlson, ICARDA Board Chair, stressed her concern that North and West Africa are slipping to the bottom of a priority list. She also informed the group that this program could learn from CAP-Net in the Netherlands. Other observations included using radio networks, disseminating modules of the global best not just CGIAR material, and a focus on the needs of the users and not the suppliers.

Keiji Kainuma, member of the Science Council, briefed the participants about the Science Council meeting in September, and informed the group of its support for this program and in selecting PAC members. Lisa Sennerby-Forsse and himself as the members of the SC Committee on Mobilizing Science are the contacts person in the Science Council for this program.

Krishna Alluri of the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) emphasized its contributions to this program. CoL can facilitate open distance learning policy and has expertise in Learning Management System, Open Source distance learning, self-learning materials, and audio and ICT training.

Phil Dobie of UNDP showed a lot of excitement for this program, but wanted to have clearer picture of where it positioned itself.

Uzo Mokwunye, Chair of the Center Board Chairs (CBC), stated that the CBC stands 1001% behind the Global Open Agriculture and Food University. From his sub-Saharan Africa hat, he also support this program 1001% because he recognized that capacity strengthening has been a major production of the CGIAR system and it is the programs intentions to strengthen weak universities. He also emphasized at the meeting that the program does not have to give degrees in order to have the word university in the program's title. The United Nations University does not offer degrees.

Kevin Cleaver of the World Bank stated that even though Ian Johnson was not present he is enthusiastic about this program. He told the group that he was much more convinced about the benefits of this program than at the August 26th dialogue. Research by Carl Eicher illustrated that donors have withdrawn from agriculture education, but this education is needed and the CG is unique because it has the content to help fill this gap.

He also describe the World Bank experience in the Former Soviet Union, which illustrated that distance education was costly, much more time was required than planned. It was done, but it cost more in money and labor. Academics saw it as a threat, because they were afraid of losing the job. Cleaver stated, “If you are not in the long run then do not take part.” He concluded by saying “If [the program] starts slow and show progress money will come.”

The representative from IFAD expressed the experience of a network dedicated to education in sub-tropics, which was funded by the European Commission. A lesson learned from this experience was the more partners, the more time it took to agree upon final modules. Many of the modules that went through this process were outdated by the time they reach the universities.

Mort Neufville stated that the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) strongly supports this program, but an appropriate assessment on the interested countries, entry points of countries, and credentials are needed. There will also need to be upward and downward linkages for interactive courses such as links between universities and distance education delivery institutions.

Dyno Keatinge of ICRISAT briefly discussed the British experience of Open University. He stated that a short period of residency is a tremendous benefit and the residency could be served at CGIAR centers. He also disliked the current acronym and suggested the Global Open Food and Agriculture University (GO-FAR). The participants supported this suggestion

Other comments include:

- VASAT uses radio as a major source for transferring knowledge to farmers and academics.
- The African Virtual University is based in Nairobi and this program should be considered in collaborating with this program.

Response to Comments

Joachim von Braun briefly responded to some of the questions raised, but was limited because of time constraints. He thanked the Task Force for its advice, which has continuously brought us back to the ground. He first addressed the issue of focus. The focus will be defined from the demand-side. Initial conversation with South Asia and Southern Africa have shown strong support for agronomy and agri-business courses. The Global Open Agriculture and Food University could provide elements of a syllabus for these programs and not a complete syllabus. With regards to degrees, he stated that this program is about advancing education, and offering a degree is not necessary for advancing education. Also, offering degrees would open up a Pandora’s box of legal issues and the degree program would have to be approved by the Ministry of Science in each country. Furthermore, a degree from the Global Open Agriculture and Food University may not be worth a lot in many countries. If a partner university would like the Global Open Agriculture and Food University to endorse a degree then that is an option, but it would not grant degrees.

In response to additional work and the existing training activities of the Centers, he stated that it should not compete with traditional training. He mentioned that the CGIAR coached approximately 9000 students in the last decade on their own; a joint effort could be much larger.

He stressed that we will need to take a step-by step approach, and therefore, will not be able to do everything at the same time. We need to set priorities and we need to start with regions where we have strong partners. He encouraged ICARDA to find strong partners in West and North Africa to link with this program as well as encourage CIAT and CATIE to help find key strong partners in Latin America

Ruth Haug concluded the meeting by stating, "If you are planning for a year, plant rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a century, educate your people."