

Workshop Report #7¹

Consultative Meeting for Open Distance Learning Programs in Agriculture

New Delhi, India

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Organized by IGNOU

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The knowledge gap is an important factor in enlarging the divide between the rich and poor, both among and within nations.. In the agriculture sector, the rising cost of higher education along with other disincentives such as the lack of employment opportunities, declining teaching standards, and limited access to further education has constrained the capacity to develop well-trained experts in developing countries. Presently, the widening gulf between global advances in agricultural science and technology and its dissemination to user groups in developing countries has called for reorganizing the system and develop strategies wherein the large body of knowledge generated by agriculture scientists and researchers globally are made accessible to a larger audience.

It is well known that disseminating a large body of knowledge to a large and distributed user group can be addressed by a open and distance learning (ODL) system. The Global Open Food and Agriculture University, an open distance education program of the Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research (CGIAR) intends to reinvigorate the food and agricultural system in developing countries by strengthening the capacity of universities to deliver high-quality postgraduate agriculture education through ODL. . This CGIAR Program is to be initially implemented in collaboration with selected distance education and traditional universities in South Asia and Africa to strengthen their academic programs in Agricultural Economics and Agroecology. The program is highly collaborative with partners in the developing and developed countries.

On March 4, 2005. the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to collaborate in developing and delivering postgraduate level distance education courses in Agriculture. This program further proposes to include several State Agricultural Universities (SAU's) in India to collaborate in developing and delivering these courses. As a first step towards forging linkages between Agricultural Universities in India and the Global Open Food and Agriculture University, a consultative meeting was organized at IGNOU on March 18, 2005 and vice chancellors of six State Agricultural Universities—Tamil Nadu Agriculture University, Coimbatore; G. B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar; Maharana Pratap University of Agriculture and Technology, Udaipur; Narendra Deva University of Agriculture and Technology, Faizabad; Rajendra Agriculture University, Pusa; and Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik were initially invited. The objective of this preliminary meeting was:

1. To learn about the Global Open Food and Agriculture University;
2. To discuss opportunities for open distance education in agriculture;
3. To determine the level of interest of each SAU in the Global Open Food and Agriculture University; and
4. To identify areas of collaboration between SAU's, the Open University, and IGNOU.

The discussion focused on

1. Strengths of collaborating systems.
2. Partnership issues,
3. Action plan and activities for the future program, and
4. Issues related to signing MOUs amongst the partnering organizations.

A number of issues emerged from these discussions and will form a basis for developing the concept paper for implementing this Program in South Asia and developing the tripartite agreement between the SAUs in India, IGNOU and CGIAR through IFPRI.

Strengths of the Collaborating Systems

During the proceedings, the disparity between the human resources needed for the transforming agricultural sector and those being produced by the universities was discussed. It was agreed that agriculture education today needs to be of high-quality, relevant, dynamic and provide livelihood security. It was seen that the collaboration between IGNOU, SAUs, and the Global Open Food and Agriculture University will help address this need. The objective of this collaboration should be to develop a synergy to utilize the strengths of the different collaborating systems. It was also agreed that distance education was the only mode by which this world-class knowledge in agriculture, that was hereto inaccessible, can be made available to a wide array of agriculture professionals of the developing world.

In India, the apex body of the universities, the University Grants Commission, has recognized distance education as an important mode for imparting learning. During an all India meeting of Vice Chancellors of Indian Agricultural Universities, the issue of using distance education was discussed and it was mandated that in time agricultural education through distance mode will be an essential component of all agricultural universities. In India, IGNOU has an excellent infrastructure that can be use to deliver the agriculture courses developed collaboratively by the Open University partners. IGNOU presently offers 101 program with 900 courses through distance mode via a network of 48 Regional Centers and 1,200 study centers in India. IGNOU also offers some of its programs in 35 overseas centers especially in Asia and Africa,. IGNOU has a strong School of Agriculture which is already involved in developing a Postgraduate program in agriculture in collaboration with experts from IFPRI . Many agricultural universities in India have signed MOUs with IGNOU for development and delivery of agriculture programs, and several others are in the process. Although some agricultural universities are running non-formal programs in Agriculture, keeping the strength of IGNOU in mind, the conventional Agricultural

Universities agreed that they would need to use IGNOU's system for delivering these academic programs as they do not have experience in ODL.

The Agricultural universities in India have an immense knowledge base and have been contributing to the agricultural development in their respective regions. The SAUs taking part in the consultative meeting viz Tamil Nadu Agriculture University, Coimbatore; G. B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar; Maharana Pratap University of Agriculture and Technology, Udaipur; Narendra Deva University of Agriculture and Technology, Faizabad and Rajendra Agriculture University, Pusa, are premier centres for agricultural education and research in India. Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) Nashik, the state/regional open university in Maharashtra state of India has a strong department of agriculture and has been developing and delivering a number of agriculture courses through distance mode in the Maharashtra state.

While discussing the ODL system, it was seen that the scope of ODL today is expanding and ODL universities are better funded. With the growing interest in distance education they have the capability of generating more revenue in the future. However the credibility of education through ODL is sometimes questioned because of inconsistency in the examination and evaluation system. Improving the credibility of degrees from Open Universities is an issue that will need special attention.

Attention will also be needed towards bringing about an attitudinal shift of partners universities from teacher centric to learner centric learning. In the distance mode of learning and teaching there is a basic pedagogical shift as the teacher becomes a facilitator for the motivated learner. The challenge lies in ensuring the quality of teaching material matches the learning standard of the learner.

Another issue discussed by the forum was the weak linkage between practical and theory in the Indian Agricultural Education System. This weakness is mainly attributed to the resource crunch being faced by some Agricultural Universities. The issue of resources will need to be kept in mind when delivering the jointly developed Open University courses so that the on hand learning aspect of the courses is not compromised. Doubts were raised by conventional universities about the effectiveness of imparting practical education through distance mode. It was explained that with experience IGNOU has learnt that conducting practicals through distance mode is very convenient as the practical component is done through face-to-face teaching at the study center. Preparation of the study material on the other hand, is more challenging as the teacher has to be built into the text so that complete and comprehensive knowledge is delivered effectively through the distance learning study material.

Delivery of ODL courses in developed countries is heavily dependent on technology and e-learning methodologies. However it is essential to know how distance learners of developing countries learn. The delivery model for the courses developed under this Program therefore has to be framed accordingly and this common model can be implemented uniformly across South Asia and Africa.

Partnerships

The CGIAR systems as well as the NAARS have tremendous human and physical assets, and both systems have mutually benefited from each other in the past in terms of research and education. IGNOU has established its credibility as the largest ODL university in the democratic world and delivery of the courses through IGNOU was welcomed by the participating institutions. The forum was informed that during prior discussions and meetings held by the CGIAR, it was decided that this Program in collaboration with its partners would offer Postgraduate academic programs in Agricultural. Certificate courses of 6 months duration, Diploma of 1 year duration and Postgraduate Degree of 2 years duration could be considered. Doctoral or Research degree, if offered could be for 3 years. The aim of this Program is to strengthen the collaborating partners and also use the existing strengths of the collaborating partners. The forum was also informed that while GOAFU will not be in the business of giving degrees, it is positive about its logo being used in the collaborative program. The participating experts however emphasized that the courses of this collaborative Program should have uniform standard of content, delivery, evaluation and certification and that the Global Open Food and Agricultural University would have to set standards to achieve this end.

It was proposed that in the collaborative arrangement, the Open University Program could undertake the needs assessment, prioritizing, monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment while the regional universities could be involved in monitoring, certifying, and evaluating the programs. The SAUS can also contribute to generating and incorporating local knowledge into the course and curriculum content, developing study material, and mobilizing funds for the implementation of this Program.

Many SAUs have already entered into MoU with other organizations and they welcomed collaboration with the CGIAR system. The SAUS offered to give their research centers for use for this Program and agreed to share the knowledge generated at their university. All the SAUs were keen that their PhD students should be given the opportunity to undertake research at CGIAR Centres and financial support be provided by the Program.

At most universities in India, teachers are not upgrading their knowledge base and therefore teaching is not dynamic and this issue is a major concern of the represented universities. The SAUs expressed that they would be looking at upgrading the skills and capabilities of the teachers through training provided by the Open University Program, and CGIAR's assistance in conducting training programs for the faculty would be welcomed. It was also discussed that since few scientists deliver content in the same fashion, the contribution of individual scientists will need to be reflected in material brought out through this collaborative arrangement. Agreement on the terms of such arrangements will need to be agreed upon with all the partners of this Program.

Action Plan and Activities for the Future Program

In the action plan for the Global Open Food and Agriculture University, it has been decided that postgraduate courses in agroecology and agricultural economics will be offered. As globalization and free trade has brought about a shift in the knowledge requirements in South

Asia and Africa, it was proposed that a need assessment of the demand existing in the region may be useful to identify the courses to be offered within the area of agroecology and agricultural economics. Also, the selected courses for offering will need to be developed so they can be adapted and expanded over time .

Although the experts agreed that the two areas, agroecology and agricultural economics have been well thought of for implementation in the first phase, some experts were of the view that in the fast changing needs of the region agroecology and economics may not offer job opportunities to the learners. As agriculture is acquiring interface with industry, market oriented agriculture seems to be the need and the courses being offered through this Program should be demand driven and should make the students job generators and not job seekers. Some emerging frontier areas in agriculture like biotechnology, food security, watershed management, knowledge management in agriculture and information technology in agricultural development, agro biotech management (MBA), agro biodiversity, farming development and management, sustainable agriculture, research methods & statistical analysis, project planning and management, knowledge management, entrepreneurship development, sustainable development, operational research and strategic planning could be thought of and taken up in subsequent phases.

Four to five years are required for developing a postgraduate programme. However this time frame can be reduced by using material already developed in the CGIAR system and the partnering institutions, and converting them into distance education mode while ensuring that the quality of the material is maintained. Also a strategy has to be developed on how to share experiences amongst the regions and the adaptation of the course material to the local level.

Modalities have to be worked out to ensure that the courses developed are of world class quality and are internationally stamped. An implementation model for this will therefore need to be developed with the consensus of the partnering organizations. For conversion of the material into distance learning mode and delivery, the IGNOU model will first be looked into but the Open University Program will be open to any method that will work. It was concluded that CGIAR through IFPRI could organize content; IGNOU would focus on conversion into ODL mode and delivery while SAUs would provide the local input. There would be a focus on quality and competitive fee structure and for evaluation quality standards could be set by the Global Open Food and Agriculture University. The Open University will also focus on upgrading teaching staff through training of staff members.

Along with the strategy of bringing together and developing material, we will also need to think of building capacity for systemic research in how to deliver distance education agriculture courses through distance mode. A small module on Distance Education may need to be incorporated within the course to bring about a change in the mindset of the conventional learner.

Issues Related to Signing a MOU Amongst Partnering Organizations

All the participants wanted a clear mechanism on how the collaborative arrangement would work and the obligations of each organization clearly stated. Even through the Global Open Food and Agriculture University is a virtual collaborative arrangement, it should have a structure. It was suggested that some apex body, which could be IFPRI at Washington, could coordinate as the Headquarters while IGNOU and

the University of South Africa (UNISA) could be Regional offices which would coordinate the working of all partner universities in their region.

It was emphasized that the names of all the partners will need to be stated in any collaborative arrangement. In India and the rest of South Asia, partnership with the CGIAR system will go a long way in giving credibility and a stamp of quality to the course.

The mechanism for sharing finances and material was an important issue and all the institutions expressed that in a collaborative arrangement, the regional universities (SAU's) should be given proper status in terms of funds granted and there has to be proper sharing of resources and receipt between the partners. Also the agriculture universities expressed that they would want the degrees to be jointly given.

The issues thrown up during this discussion will form the basis for developing a concept paper on the distinct areas of partnership and models for collaboration. The partnership model worked out can be implemented in South Asia and other international ODL imparting organizations can also be partners in this collaborative arrangement according to their strengths. The concept paper will be circulated among the prospective partners for their views before another meeting is held.

List of Participants

1. **Prof. H. P. Dikshit** **X²**
Vice- Chancellor, IGNOU
2. **Prof. S. C. Garg**
Pro-Vice-Chancellor, IGNOU
3. **Dr. Panjab Singh**
Professor, SOA, IGNOU
4. **Dr. Suresh Babu**
IFPRI, Washington
5. **Dr. Rex Navarro** **X**
ICRISAT, Hyderabad, India
6. **Ms. Valerie Rhoe**
IFPRI, Washington
7. **Dr. P. L. Gautam / Dr S. P Gupta**, Director, Extn and Communication **X**
Vice Chancellor,
G. B. Pant University of Agriculture & Technology,
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8. **Dr. C. Ramasamy**
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Tamil Nadu Agricultural University,
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

² **X** represents those who could not attend the meeting

9. **Dr. Rajan Madhaorao Welukar**
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10. **Dr. Surya Gunjal**
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11. **Dr. S. L. Mehta** **X**
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13. **Dr. S. R. Singh**
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14. **Dr. M. K. Salooja**
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15. **Dr. M. C. Nair**
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20. **Dr. P. N. Pandey**
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21. **Shri Rajesh Singh**
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22. **Shri Rajiv Ranjan**
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