

On-line Distance Learning for improving socioeconomic status of rural farming community in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Agriculture is the mainstay of the rural sector that occupies almost 75% of the total population. Farmers are resource poor and face tremendous constraints in gaining access to information and knowledge that could improve their livelihoods. Even though farmers have the aspiration and potential to pursue further education on new approaches, skills and techniques development has been negligible due to lack of opportunities and other constraints. Open and distance learning with appropriate information and communication technologies serves as a means for effective transfer of knowledge, information and technology, while being engaged in their cultivations thereby enabling to apply the knowledge directly to improve their cultivations and products.

University of Colombo Institute of Agro-technology and Rural Sciences was established in 2008 with a mandate of providing, promoting and developing higher education in Agro-technology and Rural Sciences among persons presently engaged in Agriculture and Agro-technology to uplift farming as a prestigious occupation. An On-line Diploma Programme in Agro-technology in the local language and in English was developed by the Institute to provide education to the farmers at their doorsteps. Content development and delivery of the programme were made possible through the facilities of Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) of the Ministry of Higher Education. Computer skills gained through orientation programme enabled the farmers to learn on-line. Learner performance improved with time. Extensive learner support was provided through by dedicated online tutors and mentors of the Institute. Quality was ensured through adherence to the quality standards developed by DEMP in partnership with Common Wealth of Learning (COL). The knowledge gained through the course is immediately applied in their cultivations.

This is the first ever attempt by the university system in the country in providing an opportunity for the farming community to pursue further and higher education while being engaged in their cultivation and transforms themselves to professional agri-business men and improves their socioeconomic status.

Introduction

Farmer education is in a very poor level in Sri Lanka due to various reasons. Most of the courses are in English and also on full time basis. The short term training programs are not effective in lifelong learning. Therefore, e-learning in local language for knowledge based agriculture is an urgent need for Sri Lankan farmers. The Institute for Agro-technology and Rural Sciences, University of Colombo located in Hambantota, 250 km away from Colombo, has a mandate in "providing, promoting and developing higher education in Agro-Technology and Rural Sciences among persons presently engaged in Agriculture and Agro-Technology"². It will cater to the changing individual and social needs by taking education through a blended learning mode to the doorsteps of the farming community who have never dreamt of entering the portals of higher education in their local language. Even though they have the aspiration and potential to pursue higher education, they could not do so, due to the lack of opportunities, personal, family or economic reasons. Online Diploma in Agro-technology is designed in a local language breaking above barriers and allowing farmers to enter a new way of education using modern ICT tools at any stage in their life. This is the first ever attempt by the country, the University system in the country, to provide an opportunity for the Sri Lankan Farming Community to pursue their higher education. The students are full time farmers who are involved in agriculture and communicate in local language Sinhala. Most of them cannot use other languages. The student satisfaction is at highest level for the online course developed in