DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMMES FOR RURAL SUSTAINABILITY

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The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has gained world-wide acceptance as the most cost-effective and convenient ways of reaching the education to the unreached. The growth of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has revolutionized its efficacy and spread. The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, in its public notice stated as regarding the distance education as “Providing opportunities to working professionals to update their knowledge, enabling them to switch over to new disciplines and professions and enhancing their qualifications for career advancement” (Para 6-II, MHRD, GOI - 2009).

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 into 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, unemployed rural youths, school dropouts, students and self help groups.

SHGs is 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. As such the state of Tamil Nadu is having a total number of 1.40 lakh self help groups and are functioning with 23.83 lakh members, out of which 2.82 lakh SHGs are women SHGs.

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The school dropouts are estimated to be 7.1 lakhs at primary school levels, 2.6 lakhs at upper primary school levels and 1.5 lakhs at higher secondary level in the state. They need alternative education system which could be executed only through open and distance learning systems. Keeping these in view only the farm university of the Tamil Nadu state has ventured into distance education programmes focusing on agriculture and allied subjects. Though the government is providing food for primary education, children are forced for employment for family income. Those group of school dropouts if provided with either a skill or a knowledge to gain an income through agriculture or its allied activities. Henceforth, certificate programmes including various skills and technologies are formulated to sustain the income of farm families and alleviate poverty.

The University is having an excellent infrastructure viz., 10 colleges, 36 research stations, 14 krishi vigyan kendras, 5 plant clinic centres and one Agricultural Technology Information Centre with outstanding scientists committed to the University are the strengths of Tamil Nadu Agricultural University.

Currently 21 certificate courses, 3 PG Degree and 3 PG Diplomas are being offered. The Directorate of Open and Distance Learning has been established with the following objectives:

- To encourage and provide higher education, particularly to those who find it difficult to tread the formal or conventional route of education.
- To create and provide need-based and career-oriented courses particularly suited to working professionals, house-wives and weaker sections of the society.
- To cater to a bouquet of courses which can produce more and more employable and employment-generating technicians, professionals, technocrats, entrepreneurs and the much in-demand human resource.

This Directorate is offering PG programmes for the benefit of the learners who are already employed for getting technical updating in their relevant field, which will
certainly help them in building their capacity further for carrier advancement. Certificate programmes of specific topics viz., landscaping and ornamental gardening, nursery technology, commercial horticulture, mushroom cultivation, solid waste management etc. for a duration of six months both in regional language as well as in English to benefit various sectors of people to enhance their financial status and ultimately their social upliftment. These courses are need based, problem-solving, inculcating technical skill and knowledge to the farmers for self employment. The practical classes conducted once in a month related to specific field adds value to the contact programmes. In these practical classes the candidates are made to experience the practical skill they want. Course contents are designed based on the current situations and challenges of the society.

Following are the list of courses offered from the Directorate of Open and Distance Learning as certificate programmes:

- Hybrid Seed Production in Cotton and Maize
- Sugarcane Production Technology
- Vegetable Seed Production
- Nursery Techniques and Propagation of Horticultural Plants
- Mushroom Production
- Preservation of Fruits and Vegetables
- Wasteland Development
- Bee Keeping
- Waste Recycling and Vermicomposting
- Repair and Maintenance of Farm Equipments and Machineries
- Coconut Cultivation Technology
- Cotton Cultivation Technology
- Landscaping and Ornamental Gardening
- Modern Irrigation Management
- Bakery and Confectionary Products
- Medicinal Plants
Modern Weed Management
Jatropha Cultivation
Flower Cultivation
Organic Farming

Moreover, a set of certificate programmes (5), are 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

Currently, an unique programme first of its kind in the World of agricultural scenario called B.F.Tech. (Bachelor of Farm Technology) is being planned to be offered exclusively for the farmers above the age group of 30. This programme is meant to impart only the practical skills and latest technology developments in the field of agriculture.

Tamil Nadu has 80 lakh farm families in Tamil Nadu which fall under the small and marginal categories. Tamil Nadu Agricultural University which is always concerned on the upliftment of farming community as well as the enhancement of productivity has planned to empower the farmers with all available and skills to the farming community.

As a measure towards this mission it is planned to introduce a Bachelor degree programme exclusively for farmers named B.F. Tech. It is a pioneer attempt and first of its kind in the global agricultural scenario.

The degree programme of B.F.Tech. has been structured in such a way, that the farmers should have the privilege of being a degree holder and an expert in agricultural technologies, with utmost self-confidence and a recognition in the society.
Special features of the Degree programme

- To perform farming and allied activities with a scientific dent of mind and updated, technical do how, know how and what how.
- Farmers will be provided with technologies from ploughing to harvesting, apart from post harvest to value addition technologies.
- The curriculum is devised to promote field visits, study tours and practical skills, enabling the farmers to impregnate scientific knowledge and skill
- Demonstration and hands on Trainings related to agricultural technologies would be conducted in the Personal Contact Programme (PCP) arranged for 10 days / semester.
- Semester pattern will be adopted for three years and 4 course will be offered per semester

Future programmes

Future programmes
PG Diploma
- Eco-friendly Pest Management
- Plant Quarantine
- Multimedia Techniques in Agriculture
- Food Science & Technology
- Energy Management

Certificate programmes
- Hill Crop Management

Reference