



E-ISSN: 2278-4136
P-ISSN: 2349-8234
JPP 2019; 8(3): 3269-3271
Received: 13-03-2019
Accepted: 15-04-2019

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Constraints faced by the learners of diploma in agri-inputs course through open and distance learning mode

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Abstract

The present study was conducted with 142 qualified students of Diploma in Agri Inputs (DAI) course offered at Vellore district of Tamil Nadu to know about the constraints experienced while learning the DAI course through Open and Distance Learning mode and to offer suggestions. The results of the study indicated that the family commitments (94.00%) and difficulty in attending the classes during the peak agricultural seasons (93.00%) were found as major personal constraints faced by the respondents. More than ninety per cent of the respondents had expressed high travelling cost (92.00%) and exam fees (91.00%) as the major economic constraints and were ranked as I and II respectively. Cent per cent of the respondents had suggested to obtain feedback from the students about the courses, arranging more field visits and to conduct more practical classes.

Keywords: Diploma in Agri-Inputs, open and distance learning, constraints, suggestions

Introduction

Distance education is the education of students who may not always be physically present at a school. Traditionally, this was offered as correspondence course where the student had communicated with the school through post. Today it involves online education. They are either hybrid, blended or distance learning. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) offering large-scale interactive participation and open access through the World Wide Web or other network technologies are the recent developments in distance education. Distance education is defined as institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructors (Schlosser, 2006) [6].

The Directorate of Open and Distance Learning of the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University was started during April, 2005. This Directorate concentrates its efforts on non-formal and continuing education for all those learners who aspire distance learning and interested in starting self employment programmes in rural areas with the objective to provide professional educational opportunities through Open and Distance Learning. The primary target groups are the farmers, employees of related Institutions and field service providers from local communities and school dropouts. The secondary target groups are Entrepreneurs, State Extension Personal, NGO's and Private Sector Institutions.

Agri-Input dealers are the primary source of raw materials for most of the farmers apart from government outlets. They play a major role in providing seeds and fertilizers, recommending pesticides and herbicides. They have obtained the farmers trust by consistent support and care for farmers. The easy accessibility of the Agri-Input dealers than Agricultural Officials is a major reason for their prevalence. Most of the input dealers do not have formal agricultural education. If these input dealers can be shaped as para-extension professionals they can contribute to bring a paradigm shift in Indian agriculture. Hence the Directorate of Open and Distance Learning, TNAU, Coimbatore started offering a one year Diploma course entitled "Diploma in Agri-Inputs" from August 2016 onwards which imparts relevant and location specific agricultural education to equip the input dealers with sufficient knowledge on crop protection and production technologies so as to enable them to address the day-to-day problems being faced by the farmers at the field level.

The open and distance learning methodology has been widely used in India from 1980. This is playing a vital role for enrollment of more number of students in higher education even from poor society. However, the students do not get qualitative higher education through open and distance learning mode due to constraints like lack of skills, improper training, infrastructure, learning environment, scarcity of teachers in the nearby study center, hidden cost and lack of

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interaction with classmates and teachers (Kundu 2014) [3]. Oliver *et al.*, (2018) [5] had suggested to add components of time management and study skills for students to practice and appoint advisors to distance learning students to help them create an appropriate study plan and consider adopting student leaders or peer tutors that have been used successfully in full-time study and conduct focus periodically with students to hear their views to improve students' persistence. So there involved lot of constraints in learning through ODL mode and appropriate suggestions can be offered to overcome the constraints. Hence the present study was undertaken to find out the constraints faced by the learners of DAI course offered through Open and Distance Learning mode in order to strengthen the course with the following objectives.

Objectives

1. To identify the constraints faced by the learners of Diploma in Agri Inputs course offered by ODL mode

2. To elucidate suggestions to overcome the constraints faced by the learners of Diploma in Agri Inputs course

Methodology

By employing whole sampling method, the present study was conducted with all the 142 qualified students from Agricultural Research Station, Virinjipuram, Vellore district of Tamil Nadu since the enrollment for the DAI course was the highest in this study centre out of 24 study centres of Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore. A well-structured interview schedule was prepared and the respondents were surveyed and data were obtained. The collected data were classified and analyzed by employing percentage analysis and frequencies to get the results.

Results and Discussion

The personal and economic constraints of the respondents were analyzed, ranked and presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Constraints faced by the respondents in DAI course offered through Open and Distance learning mode (n=142)

S. No.	Statements	Number	Per cent	Rank
I.	Personal Constraints			
1.	Lack of accommodation facilities during personal contact programmes and at the time of examinations	128	90.00	III
2.	Difficult to attend the classes during peak agricultural seasons	132	93.00	II
3.	Lack of communication and interaction amongst the classmates	94	66.00	IV
4.	Family commitments	134	94.00	I
II.	Economic Constraints			
1.	High course fee	125	88.00	III
2.	High travelling Cost	131	92.00	I
3.	Difficulty in remitting the fees in time	114	80.00	IV
4.	High exam fees	130	91.00	II

It could be interpreted from Table 1 that more than ninety per cent of the respondents had expressed the personal constraints like family commitments (94.00%) ranked as I (Stanley (2013), Akila (2015) [11, 2] and difficulty in attending the classes during peak agricultural seasons (93.00%) ranked as II. Lack of accommodation facilities during personal contact programmes and at the time of examinations (90.00%) Sridevi (2015) [9] and lack of communication and interaction among the classmates (66.00%) were the constraints ranked as III and IV respectively by the respondents. Regarding the economic constraints, more than 90.00 per cent of the respondents had

expressed high travelling cost (92.00%) and high exam fees (91.00%) as the major constraints and these were ranked as I and II respectively Thilagam (2009), Verma (2014), Sridevi (2015) Oliver *et al.*, (2018) [11, 8, 9, 5]. The respondents had also reported the constraints like high course fee (88.00%) and difficulty in remitting the fees in time (80.00%) Akila (2015) [2].

Suggestions elicited by the respondents to overcome the constraints in order to improve the DAI course is furnished in Table 2.

Table 2: Suggestions offered to Overcome the constraints in DAI course offered through Open and Distance Learning mode (n=142)

S. No.	Suggestions	Number	Per cent	Rank
1.	Provide more number of contact classes	125	88.00	VI
2.	Provide content with relevant pictures	130	91.00	V
3.	Arrange more practical classes rather than theory classes	142	100.00	I
4.	More field visits	142	100.00	I
5.	Handling the sections with skill oriented demonstrations	140	98.00	II
6.	Handling the sections with successful entrepreneurs in particular aspects	131	92.00	IV
7.	Reduction of course fee	115	81.00	VII
8.	Arranging discussion with banking people for loan facilities	138	97.00	III
9.	Improving the class room environment	43	30.00	VIII
10.	Obtaining feedback from the students about the courses	142	100.00	I

Cent per cent of the respondents had suggested to obtain feedback from the students about the courses, to arrange more field visits and to conduct more practical classes (Sidhakaran (2007), Archana (2014), Akila (2015) [7, 1, 2] rather than theory classes and these were ranked as I. Nearly cent per cent of the

respondents (98.00%) had suggested to handle the sections with skill oriented demonstrations and ranked as II. Arranging discussion with banking people for loan facilities (97.00%), handling the sections with successful entrepreneurs in particular aspects (92.00%), providing the course content with

relevant pictures (91.00%) (Maheswari (2011) [4], providing more number of contact classes (88.00%), reduction in course fee (81.00%) where ranked as III, IV, V, VI and VII respectively. Kundu (2014) [3] also suggested to consider fee

concession (half free or full free) to encourage the economically poor section of the society. Only 30.00 per cent had reported to improve the class room environment and ranked as VIII.

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3.	Arrange practical classes rather than theory classes	142	100.00	I
4.	More field visits	142	100.00	I
5.	Handling the sections with skill oriented demonstrations	140	98.00	II
6.	Handling the sessions with successful entrepreneurs in particular aspects	131	92.00	IV
7.	Course fee may be reduced	115	81.00	VII
8.	Arranging discussion with banking people for loan facilities	138	97.00	III
9.	Improve the class room environment	43	30.00	VIII
10.	Obtain feedback from student about the courses	142	100.00	I

Conclusion

The present study concluded that the respondents had expressed the major personal constraints as family commitments, difficulty in attending the classes during peak agricultural seasons and lack of accommodation facilities during personal contact programmes and at the time of examinations. High travelling cost and exam fees were revealed as major economic constraints. Cent per cent of the respondents had suggested to obtain the feedback from the students about the courses, to arrange more field visits and to conduct more practical classes rather than theory classes. They had also suggested arranging discussion with banking people for loan facilities, handling the sessions with successful entrepreneurs and reduction in course fee so as to enhance their participation in Diploma in Agri Inputs course.

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