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Distance Learning for Agricultural Development in Southern Africa

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Abstract

Agricultural knowledge to improve food security, protect natural resources and reduce poverty hardly reaches small-scale farmers. Distance learning offers researchers and extension workers a chance to keep updated and to transmit information to farmers.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Vancouver, Canada, in collaboration with the In-Service Training Trust (ISTT), Lusaka, Zambia, and with the advise of the Directorate of Distance Education (DDE), University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia, designed a programme with the goal “to contribute to sustainable improvement of food security and alleviation of poverty, while maintaining resources and environment, through access to knowledge by distance learning”. Two training workshops held in 2001 and 2002 at ISTT exposed participants — agricultural researchers, extension workers and educators from Namibia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia — to distance learning, and to design distance learning materials and programs. The content was “Agronomic management of cowpea and soybean in Southern and Eastern Africa”. Between the workshops, a pre-test ensured that the programme addressed the target audience: the frontline extension workers. The pre-test confirmed relevance, importance, acceptability, and user friendliness of the learning materials. It also showed information gaps and deficiencies in content and editing. During the second workshop, the participants analysed the pre-test results, communicated with local frontline extension workers, and improved their distance learning materials. Subsequently, between May 2003 and February 2004, depending on the growing season of cowpea and soybean, collaborating regional training institutions initiated the programme on a pilot basis: the Kulika Charitable Trust, Kampala, Uganda; the Agriculture Training Institute Ukiriguru, Mwanza, Tanzania; the University of Namibia; and the Zambia College of Agriculture, Monze, Zambia. Lessons learned from the pilot implementation included aspects of management of funding, reproduction and distribution of learning materials, advertisement of programs, recruitment of learners, distance learning, residence study and practice, learner support, and achievements. The training institutions consider now to integrate distance learning into their mainstream activities.

Keywords: Agricultural development, agricultural extension, agricultural research, agricultural training and education, open and distance learning (ODL), Southern Africa