

Strengthening Agricultural and Environmental Capacities through Distance Education and Locally Relevant Research



The promise of distance education

Distance education holds tremendous promise, offering viable and attractive options for advancing professional development while lowering the cost of university education. A new program called Strengthening Agricultural and Environmental Capacities through Distance Education and Locally Relevant Research (SAEC-DE) is working to create such options by linking international distance education with research for agricultural development and environmental protection at diverse sites around the developing world. The program is a collaborative effort of the University of Florida's Institute for Food and Agricultural Science (IFAS), two centers of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), CIAT and ICRISAT, and their partners.



The SAEC-DE Program enables researchers and development professionals to:

- Obtain a graduate degree without leaving home.
- Develop research skills locally with internationally recognized scientists.
- Work on applied research programs while completing their studies.
- Expand professional networks between universities and research centers.
- Impact local educational and research programs.
- Obtain a high-quality education at lower cost in professional, personal, and financial terms.

We hope the program will serve as a working model for other universities, CGIAR centers, and research institutions interested in creating locally relevant degree programs offered through distance education in developing countries.

The program complements the Global Open Food and Agriculture University (GO-FAU), which is coordinated by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) on behalf of the CGIAR. This initiative will synergize with GO-FAU in developing and offering the curriculum on agroecology.



Enhancing local capacity through CGIAR centers

The SAEC-DE Program enables professionals employed by research centers or partner universities to earn a degree, while continuing to work. Students can satisfy course requirements through distance education and carry out locally relevant thesis research under the joint supervision of university professors and CGIAR scientists. In addition, they can receive training in practical methods for research and development.

A fundamental strength of the SAEC-DE model is its emphasis on collaboration in capacity building. Program partners, including faculty of local universities and scientists at international centers, develop courses jointly and share teaching responsibilities, with emphasis on the relevance of course content to local contexts. The strengths and offerings of program partners are described briefly below. The program is working to expand its capacity strengthening activities with other CGIAR center partners and universities, developing with them new course curricula and materials, identifying students and research initiatives interested in taking part, and seeking innovative solutions to the technological challenges of distance education.



University of Florida/IFAS:- Offers three graduate degree programs (thesis or nonthesis) through distance education*:

1. ***Master of Science in Soil and Water Science***
 - *Environmental science track*
 - *Agroecology track (under development)*
2. ***Master of Science in Entomology***
3. ***Master of Science in Pest Management.***

* Students must comply with all entry requirements for the University of Florida.

International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT): Headquartered in Colombia, the center has half of its internationally recruited staff posted in Africa, Asia, and Central America. In the last 35 years, more than 8,800 visiting researchers have participated in different kinds of capacity strengthening activities at CIAT, and more than 2,000 of these people have carried out thesis research under the supervision of center researchers. CIAT's Tropical Soils, Biology, and Fertility Institute (TSBF), with over 35 research and technical staff in Nairobi and Kampala, is well placed to continue this tradition of capacity strengthening and to supervise students' research.

With initial funding from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for a pilot



project, CIAT is supporting four East African students in obtaining their master's degrees. In addition, a student supported by CIAT and the Consortium for Sustainable Development in the Andean Zone (CONDESAN) has recently started a distance masters program of the University of Florida, focusing on valuation of and payment for environmental services in the Andean region.

International Crop Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT): From its Asian regional hub and headquarters in India, the institute has developed close working relationships with more than 20 national universities over the last 30 years, and ICRISAT scientists in Asia have hosted and guided about 600 students at the masters and doctoral levels. It also hosts the Virtual Academy for the Semi-Arid Tropics (VASAT), a multi-partner coalition offering life-long learning in electronic mode to farm families and their intermediaries in the dry tropics. The institute will work with the University of Florida to set up a hub of the SAEC-DE Program in South and Southeast Asia.

More than half of ICRISAT's senior scientists are based in sub-saharan Africa. In collaboration with CIAT, the institute is supporting professionals from sub-Saharan Africa who are registered with the SAEC-DE Program.



Benefits of the SAEC-DE Program

The program's work so far shows that it can create significant benefits:

- Increasing the numbers and quality of faculty and scientists in developing country institutions by making advanced degrees more accessible and affordable.
- Developing long-term collaboration in capacity strengthening through distance education.
- Building collaboration between faculty, scientists, and students in participating institutions.
- Increasing CGIAR scientists' courtesy and adjunct affiliations with universities.
- Developing and strengthen locally relevant MSc and PhD programs through team teaching, faculty exchange, and joint course development and enhancement.
- Making intelligent use of knowledge sharing techniques as well as information and communication technologies (ICTs).



How to build a distance education linkage at your institution

- 1. Identify students in your programs or at local universities who would benefit from an advanced degree. Select students employed by government agencies, public and private research centers, or partner universities.**
Selected students will continue in their current positions on a part-time basis.
- 2. Identify key research areas of interest.**
Students can carry out thesis research on locally relevant topics that are pertinent to your project portfolio.
- 3. Identify key courses of interest and collaborate in course development and delivery.**

Funding

Participants in the SAEC-DE Program receive a degree granted by the University of Florida. A master's degree program requiring 30-36 credits costs about US\$12,500 (with an approximately 15 percent increase per year). This figure is based on current UF/IFAS fees of \$300 per credit for distance education courses.

The SAEC-DE Program is committed to creating and strengthening degrees based on local research



experience.* This, of course, comes at a cost. Non-tuition expenses include (1) incountryresearch activities and mentoring, (2) students' education-related expenses, and (3) program management and coordination, and these may vary widely according to location and student/mentor circumstances. In many cases the students' mentors might be their current supervisors and also thesis advisors. They are likely to see in this program an opportunity to support their young colleagues' thrive for professional and academic growth, without losing a valuable collaborator. Tuition and non-tuition expenses in such arrangement might be seen as an investment in human and institutional capacity building that might even lead to additional project ideas and funding. Considering that the part-time distance education study might take up to 4-5 years, we recommend to budget around US\$26,000 per student for a master's degree.

* Nonthesis options are also available through the University of Florida.

Contacts

University of Florida: Lisette Staal, Assistant Director, UF/IFAS International Programs, lstaal@ufl.edu

CIAT: Edith Hesse, Head, Information and Capacity Strengthening Unit (InforCap).
e.hesse@cgiar.org

ICRISAT: V. Balaji, Head of Knowledge Management and Sharing, v.balaji@cgiar.org. and Rex Navarro, Director of Communication and Special Assistant to the Director General, rex.navarro@cgiar.org