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Higher education at a distance in Bangladesh

October represents another significant date in the 25 year partnership between the Institute of Aquaculture, University of Stirling, UK and Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU). The two universities who have co-developed an innovative distance learning programme in Aquatic Resource Development (ARD) have arranged a special workshop in conjunction with Bangladesh Fisheries Research Forum and British Council Bangladesh to raise awareness of this exciting new opportunity for the development and education community, says a Press release.

This new form of distance education will ensure that many more students can receive qualifications that are relevant to the learning and development context in Bangladesh today. The programme fills a vital demand identified by DFID Bangladesh and other agencies to ensure education is relevant to contemporary development priorities. The programme is designed to empower individuals who wish to advance their education and strengthen the skill necessary to run and manage aquatic systems without having to leave their employment and lose income earning potential. Conventional advanced degree programmes for which candidates have to live their home and workplace clearly do not have that advantage. Many students participating in traditional courses do not finish their studies because of a need to seek employment. It is anticipated that the rapidly growing private sector in Bangladesh, acknowledged as a major engine of change for the future, is likely to find distance education attractive as a mechanism to retain trained professionals.

Delivery by distance learning is not a 'second best' option but rather the only viable option to meet the major objectives of the ARD programme. The course, probably unique in its kind both in the UK and Bangladesh, is a hybrid approach of a web-based learning environment together with practical components such as analytical kits, face-to-face tutorials, text, CD materials and summer schools. Students receive, as part of their study materials, not only a laptop on loan but also a complete water quality test kit, disease diagnostic materials and a digital camera as part of the course package. The course is based around a 'virtual classroom' to which only the participating students and tutors responsible for the day-today running of the course have access. The system allows remote facilitation and tutoring on a one-to-one basis or in groups. Students can read materials, discuss issues with fellow students and tutors, take self tests and quizzes to assess their own performance, view video clips and upload their assignments. Dr. Martin Van Brakel, one of the course coordinators says; "We already have over 40 students on the course who engage in a broad range of activities. The students enjoy the flexibility the course offers." The enthusiasm is reflected in the words of a student on the course who said at the end of last year's orientation week: "This course has changed my life!"

Our current group of students come from all across Bangladesh and represent a wide variety of backgrounds. Importantly, a feeling of group unity is achieved, which creates an excellent learning environment. "We are delighted by the level of participation demonstrated by the students and their level of enthusiasm" says Professor Md. Abdul Wahab from BAU. "Aquatic Resource Development is everybody's business; we want to broaden participation among professionals working in related sectors such as public health administration, irrigation management and livestock production". The distance learning programme allows participants to balance family life and employment with obtaining an internationally recognised degree. This improved accessibility will allow Bangladesh to better unlock the full potential of its people.

Distance education does not only ensure that students receive a high-level qualification but also has the potential to strengthen partner organizations through its delivery in-country. The capacity of BAU to act as a local hub for distance teaching to students based around Bangladesh is a core part of the approach. A multimedia teaching lab, furnished with broadband internet connections and computer desks, provides vital infrastructure to the distance learning environment. Students are supported locally by tutors at BAU who are experts in the various course subjects on which they provide additional inputs through face-to-face tutorials. BAU plays an important role in the application procedure for prospective students on the programme. Standard application forms can be downloaded via http://secure.stir.ac.uk/pgappwww/but should be sent to BAU. Course information is regularly published in the Institute of Aquaculture's magazine "Aquaculture News" http)://www.aquaculture.stir.ac.uk/AquaNews/index.htm. Hard copies of the magazine are also widely available through the Stirling-BAU alumni network.

The prospects for distance education in Bangladesh and other countries are bright as donor organizations recognise its potential impact to support development