

APAARI-led webinar improves capacity of universities to engage agriculture students

A 1.5-hour webinar on 'How to make agricultural lectures more interactive for agricultural students' was organized in collaboration with the TAP/FAO for professors and deans of TNAU, India, and other universities that expressed interest in learning about this topic. The webinar was facilitated and moderated by APAARI through Bluejeans platform. In total, around 220 people participated in the webinar from: 14 colleges of TNAU, Sardarkrushinagar Dantiwada Agricultural University (SDAU), CSK Himachal Pradesh Krishi Vishvavidyalaya, and Professor Jayashankar Telengana State Agricultural University (PJTSAU) all from India; University of Alberta, Canada; and Agricultural University of Nitra, Slovakia; as well as international organizations, including FAO and Global Confederation of Higher Education Associations for Agricultural and Life Sciences (GCHERA).



The webinar enhanced the participants' capacity to deliver more interactive lectures and seminars to develop agricultural students' functional capacities (soft skills), such as confidence, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and negotiation, thereby help them become more innovative and empowered in their future careers in agriculture and rural development. Specifically, the webinar aimed to enhance the participants' capacity to:

1. Develop more effective communication with students.
2. Integrate interesting ways of presenting and discussing module topics.
3. Interact with students and engage them in discussions.
4. Introduce interactive tools and materials.

APAARI brought together interesting speakers from around the world, to highlight this important topic and contribute to capacity development in the region. The following were the speakers:

1. Dr. Ravi Khetarpal – Executive Secretary of APAARI - Introduction
2. Dr. N. Kumar, Vice-Chancellor of TNAU – Welcome statement

3. Ms. Marriette Gross, Head of Training Programmes, International Center for Development-Oriented Research in Agriculture (ICRA) – Making education work: Motivating students to employ graduates
4. Dr. Dileepkumar Guntuku, President, AgTech Innovation Labs, Iowa State University, USA – AgMOOCs in Flipped Classroom to promote interactive learning in agricultural education; and
5. Dr. Tonette Laude, Assistant Professor, Institute of Crop Science, College of Agriculture and Food Science, University of the Philippines – It’s fun to learn the science behind crops
6. Contribution of Dr. Frank Robinson, University of Alberta, Canada – The Game of Farm Life, Rural Café, and What’s behind the barn door
7. Dr. John Kennedy, Dean - School of Post Graduate Studies, TNAU – Reflection

Insights on how to design sessions in such a way that students practice the skills in order to get a job were presented by Ms. Gross, who explored two questions “What do my students need to learn?” and “What approach should we use to achieve it successfully?” She presented key learning steps that need to be applied in the higher education to address key gaps and facilitate transition from classroom to real life. These are as follows: (i) explanation (to know); (ii) intermediary exercise (to understand); (iii) core exercise (to be able to do); and (iv) internship and other real life learning (to do).

Traditional versus virtual learning was presented by Dr. Guntuku. While traditional classroom learning offers a limited number of seats, virtual online learning programmes offer unlimited classroom size. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are online courses aimed at large-scale participation and open access through Internet, offering quality education to the most remote corners of the world; helping people further their careers, and expanding their intellectual and personal networks with strong communities.

Creative pedagogies in crop science were explored by Dr. Laude. She shared interactive techniques practiced by the University of the Philippines, such as getting to know the students, ‘learning by doing’ e.g. through teaching students identify morphological characters associated with productivity, adaptability and marketability; bio-intensive gardening; edible landscaping; and rooftop and herbal gardens. Combined with visits to learning laboratories, the university has integrated the perspective that higher education is all about students – what they learn, what they experience and what they can apply.

Professor Frank Robinson, University of Alberta, Canada, has developed a number of innovative ways of engaging students through participatory learning in animal science, such as the ‘Game of Farm Life’ that engages animal science students in a reality show, ‘Rural Café’ that brings agriculture industry people and students together and let them sit and chat over coffee; and ‘What’s behind the barn doors’, which shows “five different doors” opened by students with different questions and exercises.

All these examples of interactive learning that were presented in the webinar demonstrate that there are no limits to creativity. Increasingly, university professors show a creative potential through introduction of innovative interactive educational methods in curricula, which encourages maximal development of students and their preparation for real life learning experiences. APAARI, in collaboration with ICRA, FAO and other partners, will continue to bring tailored activities to its member universities that will develop this creative and innovative potential among professors in Asia and the

Pacific. Such functional capacities are critical to facilitate successful careers of students after their graduation, and equip them with the skills they need to create agricultural jobs and sustainable agricultural development for future generations.