

A PERSPECTIVE OF ONLINE LEARNING IN TROPICAL ANIMAL HEALTH WITH THE FOCUS ON SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The Department of Veterinary Tropical Diseases (South Africa) and the Department of Animal Health of the Institute of Tropical Medicine (Belgium) with the support of other partners developed a primarily web-based modular MSc in Veterinary Tropical Diseases and modules in Tropical Animal Health that can be taken for Continuing Professional Development (CPD). The degree programme and CPD modules were implemented during 2005/2006. In this presentation an overview will be given of the current status, number of candidates enrolled and the potential for future development of the degree programme and CPD modules. The impact of these training initiatives, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and further afield, pertaining to career development, funding opportunities and regional collaboration will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

New technologies such as the interactive potential of the World-wide Web creates new opportunities which enable information to be shared more freely, as well as allowing access to a wider client-base, utilizing expertise and other resources more efficiently wherever they may be available, and presenting educational information in a modern format.

Infectious and parasitic diseases pose a world-wide, major threat to animal health in the 21st century. Veterinarians and scientists in related professions are playing a key role in combating diseases that affect trade of animals and their products in international markets. The fact that certain wild animals harbour these agents but remain healthy, indicates

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that they often serve as reservoirs of disease. It is important to note that most of these diseases are the biggest constraint to the sustainable socio-economic development of communities in Africa.

The Department of Veterinary Tropical Diseases, in collaboration with the Department of Animal Health of the Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp, Belgium and with the support of Departments of Paraclinical Sciences and Production Animal Studies of the UP and the Department of Infectious Diseases and Immunology of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Utrecht University, the Netherlands has developed this new, primarily web-based course-work MSc degree programme in Veterinary Tropical Diseases and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) modules to address these needs.

This new primarily web-based MSc degree programme in Veterinary Tropical Diseases and modules for CPD focus on animal health management issues of infectious and parasitic diseases of domestic and wild animals, particularly in the Afrotropical (sub-Saharan) Region and the development of specific technical knowledge and skills that are required to make a diagnosis in microbiology, parasitology and molecular biology laboratories.

The degree and CPD programmes will appeal not only to students from Africa but also to those from all over the world. It will empower candidates with the knowledge and skills and it will also provide a foundation for further study, thus increasing a candidate's marketability and employability, particularly in those sectors dealing with animal health and production.

BENEFITS OF PROGRAMME

The benefits of the programme over the medium to long-term include the following: increased number of MSc and CPD students; strengthening of corporate identity of the partner institutions; strengthening internationalization of the partners involved; sensitizing students for further postgraduate studies e.g. PhD studies; and establishment of an "online platform" for other online activities.

There have already been requests from several international institutions to be "licensed" to use either some of the modules or multimedia products for postgraduate teaching in their institutions. The Department and its partners also has a contract with PRINT (Promotion for regional



Integration in the SADC livestock sector) to conduct training modules in Animal Health and Animal Production from 2007 to 2009.

IMPACT ON TEACHING PRACTICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The programme is unique in that most of the modules of the degree programme can also be taken for CPD purposes.

A total of 35 learners enrolled for CPD for the 8 modules that were run for the first time in 2005 and 88 students for the Research Methodology module in 2005/6. The Research Methodology module that was developed as part of the MSc (Veterinary Tropical Diseases) is also a compulsory module for all students that are enrolled for MSc studies in different departments in the Faculty. In 2007 a total of 102 learners have already enrolled for different online modules. The candidates are from the following countries: Botswana, Cameroon, Grenada, Italy, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa, St Lucia (Caribbean), Uganda, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, USA and Zimbabwe.

The MSc programme was implemented in February 2006: the first enrolment included learners from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1), Mozambique (2), Namibia (1), Saudi Arabia (1), South Africa (7) and Zimbabwe (1). In 2007 a further 15 MSc students enrolled for the degree programme : Democratic Republic of Congo (1), Holland (1), Sudan (1), South Africa (9), Swaziland (1), United Kingdom (1) and Zimbabwe (1).

Because of the quality and relevance of the modules that we have developed, an international donor, the ACP-EU Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA), the Netherlands have made 20 scholarships available for 2007 for each of the following modules for candidates from the SADC Region and other African-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP) countries:

- community-based Animal Health: Veterinary Communication and Extension;
- research Methodology.

Apart from the seed funding provided by the UP, all other costs to develop the programme came from outside sources (mainly from the Institutional Strengthening grant, Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp, Belgium).



The view has been expressed during an evaluation that the web-based MSc and CPD modules have the potential to have a significant impact on capacity of employees in research, academic and diagnostic institutions particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. It was also mentioned that in view of the severe human resource crisis in the veterinary sector in Africa, this course has a very high potential to contribute significantly to the strengthening of postgraduate veterinary training for the whole continent.

