

**¹DISTANCE EXECUTIVE EDUCATION FOOD AND AGRIBUSINESS
ADVANCED MANAGEMENT PROGRAM**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this work is to introduce the Distance Executive Education Food and Agribusiness Advanced Management Program, which arose from the Food Agribusiness Mastership initiated in 1999. The experience accumulated through that year, when a high need of training was noticed and considering the remarkable academic results obtained encouraged us to enlarge the educative offer.

The Distance Program is a consequence of changes operated in the productive area that occurred during last decade in Argentina, as well as the new institutional orientation of the School of Agriculture, University of Buenos Aires where the Course is given, which has adopted a policy of a greater commitment to this area, training their graduates during all their professional life.

In this work we analyze the institutional changes, the need of training in Agribusiness area and the methodology applied for distance education.

2. THE INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

During last decade, Argentina reached the eighth place as food world producer and the fifth as exporter. This leadership position has a strong consolidating tendency for next decade and in time.

The success key was the harmonization of business strategies and public policies with comparative advantages. The knowledge creation and innovation capacities are essential to build competition. In consequence, the competitive advantages derive from the comparative advantages in an adequate framework of public policies and as a direct result of the correct business strategies efficiently applied.

In such context, there was an appearance of changes in the macroeconomic context as well as a massive adoption of technology to enlarge production, taking advantage of this favorable context.

However, the changes in the management capacity in agricultural and agro-industrial companies, most of them small and medium-sized companies, were slower and more difficult. This lack of capacity to run more competitive businesses determined that many companies disappeared and others are in a very weak position.

This rapid technical evolution was not followed by a management evolution, so professionals run their businesses relying on their own experiences instead of planning an

explicit strategy. This is the reason why present and future professionals require a distance training system.

Accordingly with changes taking place in the productive area, the School of Agriculture, University of Buenos Aires, has accomplished profound changes in its relationship with society. It has created new courses like Economics Licentiate and Agrarian Management, Intensive Agriculture and Floriculture, some in the geographic of those activities, like Junin, where the grade course is also given, and in locations like Carlos Casares, Escobar and San Pedro.

The Food Agribusiness Program, created in 1998, is also undergoing the same transformation process, with the purpose of being a medium of knowledge generation, diffusion and application over agricultural, industrial and commercial comparative advantages so as to create competitive advantages for Argentine food.

Therefore, it is essential the education of human resources in accordance with actual dynamics. The competitive re-engineering of companies involved in the agrifood system requires as basic condition a new professional profile and the transformation of human resources. This Program Direction considers that a permanent professional education and training is necessary to develop the abilities that allow new knowledge creation applicable to present business scenery.

Indeed, business competition and survival depend more every day on innovation capacity, which is a consequence of highly qualified human resources.

Beyond the Mastership interest there exists a high demand for in-house courses dictated at companies and institutions, many of them in far away cities of our country. For that reason, agreements were made to enable the existence of such courses, for instance at the National University of Entre Rios and at AACREA. Being impossible to attend all demands, the methodology of distance courses becomes very convenient.

For the abovementioned reasons, our Program designed this distance course with the support of professionals and executives of important agro-industrial companies. This distance course provides an executive management program with the high academic level of the mastership adapted to the needs of professionals who have business responsibilities and seek to consolidate their careers.

3. DISTANCE EXECUTIVE EDUCATION FOOD AND AGRIBUSINESS ADVANCED MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

3.1. Backgrounds.

The Distance Executive Education Food and Agribusiness Advanced Management Program arises from the Food Agribusiness Mastership initiated in 1999, when a high interest and participation was noticed.

The interest for that type of learning was evident through the 68 applicants for the two Rabobank scholarships.

After the first academic year, the evaluation showed very satisfactory results. Taking into account parameters as desertion, an endemic disease of professional post-graduate courses in Argentina, it was less than 5%. Regarding the participant's satisfaction, there was an evaluation system where all classes were tested. Those surveys showed an average of 3,46 over 4,00 (excellent).

However, the mayor problem of those who are very interested but cannot apply for the mastership, is the course's length and the high number of class hours per week, and in some other cases the lack of need to obtain an academic degree with a mastership level, conforming with an update on the subject.

For all those reasons, the University of Buenos Aires designs the present distance post-graduate course to provide learning tools to professionals and business people interested on this subject but unable to dedicate the required time to attend mastership lectures or live far away from Buenos Aires. This system may also allow the participation of professionals from other Latin American countries, who showed great interest in this possibility.

Among distance courses, the UBA XXI distance course acquired great importance. That course was designed in 1986 as an innovative alternative for people interested in attending courses from the *Ciclo Básico Común*¹ or for those who wanted to complete their studies but could not attend regular classes, who were then incorporated as UBA external students.

This system constitutes a helpful answer to the number of problems that difficult the assistance to regular courses and is a different option that covers contrasting styles and possibilities. Then, the distance education arises as a need of extending the formal educational system to people who has no access to it, due to work schedules, geographical, age and/or health limitations. In that way, UBA XXI constituted an innovative way to access university studies.

The evolution of that type of course was completely positive. The main indicators are the rise in the number of subjects dictated through this methodology and the number of people who opted to this program (over ²400,000 students in all the 19 UBA University campus all around the country).

The result of this educational enterprise adjusted to a specific student's demand was a growing number of applicants (for instance, three times higher in Buenos Aires province).

¹ The *Ciclo Básico Común* is an pre-university period in which the students are introduced in the basic knowledge related to their studies.

This number shows the interest on professional education and training outside the physical educational institutions.

3.2. Purpose.

The main purpose of this Program is to provide education and training to business people, professionals and officials regarding the Food Agribusiness area, making use of an educational strategy that harmonizes the theoretical framework with case discussion focalized on the competitive management of agrifood chains. The analysis and intervention field of this Program is the company, the relationships with the agrifood system and with the local and international environment.

This Executive Education Food and Agribusiness Advanced Management Program can be also regularly attended at the house of the School of Agriculture. It offers 200 class hours with the same curricula structure as the distance course.

3.3. Professors.

The professors in charge of the distance course are the same than in the Food Agribusiness Mastership of the UBA, belonging to the Economics and Agriculture Schools. Professors from other universities and professionals with executive positions in the private area also participate in the course.

There are over twenty international seminars offered as part of cooperation activities between the Food Agribusiness Program and several foreign universities. The distance course students can personally attend those seminars.

This Course supervision is in charge of the Advisory Committee for the Food Agribusiness Program, which is designated according to the corresponding resolution by the School of Agriculture.

3.4. Participant's profile.

This Program is aimed to professionals and business people with executive positions in companies and institutions of the agrifood system dedicated to commodities production and distribution; primary production companies; cooperatives, storing companies and exporters; banking and insurance institutions; market operators, agro-industrials, logistics, distribution and retailers.

To date, the student's demand comes from agricultural producers, free-lance professionals, official research and agricultural institutions and representatives from agrifood companies.

Most of the participants come from the country's provinces and even there was still no massive promotion of this course, inquires from other Latin American countries were already received.

3.5. Advertising.

The advertising strategy of the distance education system has two types of mechanisms: general and specific. Among the former there are advertisements and reviews in newspapers and area magazines, mailings, etc. The later is based on agreements with different institutions, like producers associations, business chambers, province governments and area companies.

3.6. Costs.

The distance course has a value of 4,000 dollars; there is a 50% institutional discounts for groups of over 20 students.

3.7. Methodology and Curricula Design for the Distance Program.

The distance program provides the students an adequate tuition without interrupting their professional career, allowing them to study in the preferred places and time and applying the new knowledge to their specific area of interest. They can also integrate to a net of professors and other students, which is difficult to achieve in small or medium sized communities.

The teaching mechanisms are the following:

- Printed material: obligatory and optional bibliography.
- On-line information through the web and e-mail, which include learning material and proposed activities that require a permanent updating and can be used through the duration of the course according to the student's needs.
- Videotapes with theoretical classes specially prepared for the distance course.
- Activity books to complement the theoretical classes and practice.
- Practical exercises that are sent to the students through Internet.
- On-line discussion forum, applied to case discussion or specific problems discussion, through chats with professors.
- Comprehensive questions for learning evaluation.
- Final lecture at the program house or in other institutions of the country or abroad through agreements. Those are comprehensive lectures also for evaluation purposes.

The preparation of the didactic material of the distance course is made with the UBA XXI program, the distance education area of the UBA, and is in charge of the design of the course according with the agribusiness academic contents.

This course has an evaluation system based on solving real business situation and comprehensive questions.

The students who approve the evaluations receive the Certificate of the Post-graduate Course in Executive Education Food and Agribusiness Advanced Management Program granted by the School of Agriculture of the University of Buenos Aires.

The students who approve the evaluations receive credits for equivalent courses in the Food Agribusiness Mastership and then can complete their studies through the remaining subjects, complementary activities and mastership thesis.

In that way, the distance course allows students to complete a learning experience designed to guide, orientate and accompany them without the necessity of class assistance.

The course teaching materials are made in accordance to each subject characteristics, as well as for the development of communication and exchange stages with professors, tutors and other students.

The teaching materials offer diverse possibilities for content development. Each subject is built from a teaching proposal that adjusts to the specific knowledge nature and related problems. In every case, orientation and proposed activities are included to ensure the comprehension of the main concepts as well as their relationship with the rest of the subjects.

Different orientation, exchange and communication stages have been planned to accompany students through their learning experience. They develop especially through the resources offered by electronic communication (e-mail, chat, web sites) and also by fax and telephone if necessary. Those stages include:

- Permanent communication with tutor: at the beginning of each subject, up to the end of it, an appointed tutor will be in contact with the students through e-mail. The tutor will orientate them in how to organize their studies, how to perform different activities and practical works and in the comprehension of themes or particularly complex aspects. The students will be able to contact their tutor to ask their doubts and ask for help in different situations that may come out during the learning process. On the other hand, the tutor may suggest on-line encounters among several students to discuss specific themes or the resolution of an assignment.
- On-line discussion forum: The discussion forum is a meeting possibility between students and professors through chat. Each subject professor plans these meetings according to contents development and to the possibility to introduce relevant themes. Each subject has a forum schedule indicating the theme, date and hour. The forum participation is not obligatory to approve the subjects.
- Study groups and communication among students: The tutors will provide the information to contact other students, promoting study groups through electronic communication. Then, the students will be able to exchange experiences and work in cooperation, which may result very positive for their course development.

3.8. Evaluation

The evaluation is made through practical works and a final exam.

The practical works are included during each subject development.

The tutor will cooperate with the students in the organization of them and will orientate them in their resolution. Through such exchanges the students will be able to evaluate their learning and work in the most problematic aspects. Some practical works are obligatory for the subject approval. The obligatory subjects will be sent through e-mail to their tutor and evaluated by professors collaborating with the tutor.

In the final exam, each subject evaluation requires to be present for a final test. Alternatives are being analyzed to minimize student's trips from far away places.

The curriculum design of the course contains the following subjects:

1. International agrifood scenery and Mercosur
2. Economics and strategy in agribusiness
3. Strategic direction and business management
4. Marketing and communication
5. Assets market and financial engineering
6. Projects elaboration and evaluation and business risk
7. Commodities businesses
8. Specialties businesses
9. Negotiation and organizational analysis
10. Case discussion

Also, other Latin American countries have inquired about agribusiness courses and we have received proposals to organize activities with the Luteran University of Brasil (ULBRA) and the University of Mexico (UNAM).

4. Conclusion

The distance program enlarges the academic offer in the agribusiness area, trying to help the changes occurred in the argentine agrifood system through an improvement of the management capacity of companies and through the post-graduate training to professionals that are unable to attend traditional university programs.

The present reality in which agrifood business develop in our country and in the rest of the continent demands a higher knowledge that can be offered by distance courses harmonizing the interests and needs of potential students.

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