International Agriculture Centre:  
A Feasibility Study

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Abstract

Internationalization has increasingly become an integral part of the University of Saskatchewan — a leading agricultural university in Canada, partly because of the agricultural prominence on campus, and partly because of the expanding number of partnership requests from agricultural, continuing, and higher education institutions / research centres around the world. Accordingly, the U of S is considering the establishment of an international centre for agricultural training. A feasibility study was conducted in 2001. Data were collected from four international sectors: China, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Iran, and Mexico.

Five themes emerged from the results. They are: methodology and content; location of training; certification; external funding; and marketing of the centre to client groups. The results from each of these themes are reported in this paper. Some challenges were also identified during the feasibility study. Many of these came from local faculty and staff. Other authors in other papers identified many of the challenges reported in this paper.

The data collected in this study will prove useful in strengthening the experience of individuals involved in projects in China, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Iran, and Mexico. The challenges raised by local faculty, research scientists, and administrators will prove useful for any institution considering the establishment or expansion of an international training centre.
Agriculture has a prominent focus at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S). In addition to various colleges involved in agricultural research and teaching, the University is home to two major national research centres - the National Research Council’s Plant Biotechnology Institute, and the federal Agriculture & Agri-Food Canada Research Station. Also, part of the research complex is Innovation Place Research Park – North America’s largest agricultural biotechnology research park. More recently, the University of Saskatchewan became the location of the Canadian Light Source Inc. (opening in 2004) – the only synchrotron facility in Canada.

Internationalization has increasingly become an integral part of the U of S, partly because of this agriculture prominence, and partly because of the expanding number of partnership requests from agricultural, continuing and higher education institutions / research centres around the world. Requests like this are common to other educational institutions across North America (Etling, 2002). The increased interest in research, education and extension partnerships comes at an interesting time for the U of S. Faculty and staff are currently engaged in the development of a framework for the U of S which includes: (1) improving the quality of instructional programs; (2) intensifying research efforts; and, (3) fostering the teacher-scholar model. Internationalization can play a major role with all these initiatives.

The U of S takes seriously its responsibility to develop agriculture leaders who can compete in the global marketplace. The University recognizes that it cannot develop leaders of tomorrow by staying within the confines of its walls and teaching yesterday’s knowledge. Discovering new knowledge is therefore paramount to the future of the U of S. The University also recognizes that international research scientists, faculty and students, because of their cultural differences, view challenges and opportunities differently than Canadians and this diversity enhances research, education, and extension (Acker, 2000). Interaction with international students, faculty, and research scientists will also help U of S students develop global skills and knowledge, and a global attitude (Acker, 2000; U of S, 2001)

In the fall of 2000, a working group lead by Dr. Gordon Thompson was coordinated to investigate the feasibility of creating an international centre for agricultural extension training. Representatives of the committee included: Dr. Asit Sarkar (Director, U of S International), Dr. Ernie Barber (Dean, College of Agriculture), and Dr. Gordon Thompson (Dean, Extension Division). During a series of meeting, this committee agreed the focus of the centre should be broadened to encompass all agricultural training at the U of S, and that a feasibility study would be conducted.

Purpose

This paper describes a feasibility study contracted by the University of Saskatchewan to obtain information regarding the establishment of an international agriculture centre at the university. Also included are results obtained from the study, and implications for institutions contemplating establishment of similar centres.
Methods

A former faculty member in the Extension Division at the University of Saskatchewan, who had considerable international programming and administration experience, was contracted to coordinate the feasibility study. The individual assembled a diverse team to assist in this project. Team members had international experience, were very knowledgeable of the key issues and opportunities in agriculture within their respective countries, and were familiar with the activities and administration of the U of S. A Canada/China agri-business consulting firm located in the People’s Republic of China proved to be an effective method for gathering data from the culturally and politically sensitive country of China. Capitalizing on the expertise and current involvement of a Saskatchewan-based export partnership in Iran also proved to be very successful. To gather valuable information from Central and Eastern European countries, the researchers relied on numerous local and provincial organizations / institutions having had successful working partnerships with the region.

Data were collected from four international sectors: China, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Iran, and Mexico. Data were also collected from local stakeholders, including: the study sponsors: College of Agriculture faculty; Extension Division faculty; faculty and administration from other colleges on campus and other academic institutions; agri-business; Saskatchewan Government; Federal Government; and NGO’s. A variety of data collection methodologies were employed and are detailed below.

Employees of an agri-business consulting firm within the People’s Republic of China conducted interviews with targeted individuals within the Ministry of Agriculture. Also targeted were individuals currently involved in agriculture-related training programs in China sponsored by external funding agencies including World Bank, FAO, and CIDA; individuals from private agencies who recruit university students to study abroad; and administrators / faculty at two agricultural universities. In addition, administrators and staff at 21 Chinese agri-businesses participated in personal interviews. The U of S has a lengthy list of memos of agreement / understanding with higher education institutions across China. Data from these agreements yielded valuable information.

Countries within the CEE examined in the study included Russia, Ukraine, and Poland. The private consultant who gathered data from this region had an extensive network of contacts within government, academic institutions, and agri-business circles. These contacts and referrals proved rewarding and targeted interviews were the primary data collection methodology used in the CEE region.

The private consultant who gathered data from Iran also had an extensive network of contacts within government, academic institutions, and agri-business so that targeted interviews and discussions with officials in government, educational, and agribusiness circles yielded valuable data.

Existing partnerships between the U of S and specific Mexican institutes of higher education proved an excellent entry point for this project. A faculty member in Mexico was
contracted to interview administrators and faculty at various universities on the north and eastern sides of Mexico. Because of his close links to the federal ministry of agriculture, he was also contracted to gather data from that source. Consultants from the Canadian Trade Commission office in Guadalajara were also very helpful in providing data. Lastly, the director of the Centre for Agribusiness at the Technical Institute of Monterrey (Guadalajara Campus) surveyed agri-business faculty at his campus, and coordinated a survey of agri-businesses in and around Guadalajara.

Personal interviews with 35 targeted individuals representing local stakeholders yielded most of the data from this stakeholder group. Included in the stakeholders was the project leader, who has over 30 years of academic and administrative experience at the U of S. When available, websites, and existing documents were viewed and data collected from these sources. When culturally appropriate, electronic communication was used in some instances instead of face-to-face interviews. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the electronic communications.

Data collection focused on: availability of funds for staff training both internally and internationally; long-term commitment to agriculture; long-term commitment to agricultural training; opinions on the types of training (agriculture / extension) required in the country; availability of training programs in the country; cost of existing training programs in the country; and, perceived quality of existing training programs in the country; and preferred types of training.

Results

There was overwhelming support for the concept of an international agriculture centre, both locally and internationally (Wagner, 2001). There were, however, concerns raised from a few faculty and staff at the U of S. These concerns will be discussed later in this paper. Five themes emerged from the results. They are: methodology and content; location of training; certification; external funding; and marketing of the centre to client groups.

Methodology and Content: The primary function of the proposed international centre at the U of S is to develop customized training programs in agriculture and agricultural extension. As indicated through the survey, the content of programs would include agricultural production, marketing, agribusiness finances, extension practice and theory, communications and human resources, international trade negotiations, food safety and preservation, plus rural environment preservation. In China, Mexico, and Iran, it is imperative that any program be jointly developed, and be coordinated with a local partner such as a university, government organization / department, or business. Developing or coordinating programs without local connections would be disastrous. In all other countries surveyed, partnering with local governments, universities, or agribusiness was highly recommended in order to gain local support.

In China, it was also strongly recommended that a joint program include some local expertise and be supplemented by international expertise. This is a culturally sensitive issue
in China. Similarly, it was recommended in Mexico that any program be first conceptualized and implemented in Mexico using local expertise where feasible before inviting participants to attend events in Canada.

In most countries surveyed, one to two-week training programs in the country of origin are common while training programs which involve travel to Canada should be three to four weeks in length. The language of instruction must be the language of the country for China and Mexico. English translation is not common in China or in rural Mexico. It was reported in all other countries that the language of delivery can be English with translation in the local language or dialect.

Train-the-trainer programs are preferred in China, the CEE countries, and Mexico as this is the style of training with which participants from these regions would be most comfortable. In all the CEE countries, a tiered approach to training was preferred. Local experts would receive training in their regions. The top experts from these sessions would then travel to large centres for additional training. The top experts from these sessions would earn the right to travel overseas for additional training. Apprenticeship, work-study situations, hands-on, practical or applied training is highly recommended in Mexico, China, Ukraine, and Russia. In all countries surveyed, face-to-face instruction is preferred as current communication systems are not yet well positioned to provide effective and efficient distance-delivered programming at this time.

**Location of Training:** One to two-week training programs are common and recommended by all the countries surveyed. Longer training programs are not as common, unless they involve travel abroad, in which case three to four-week programs are recommended. Data from China indicated that longer training programs in Canada (three to four weeks) are recommended, and should emphasize course work, experiential learning such as demonstration and field work, plus cultural awareness.

Programs delivered in the various countries might have to be offered several times in several regions as many of these countries are large and have an agricultural population spread across the country.

Results from the Iranian participants were different, in that there is a passionate interest by Iranians to spend time studying in Canada. Training sessions in Canada of one month are considered short-term. The exchange of faculty and research scientists was highly recommended by the Iranian counterparts.

**Certification:** In all countries surveyed, a formal joint training certificate is expected after any training program developed in partnership with an international institution. This theme appeared extremely important across the board. In some instances, a multi-language certificate was preferred. Certification is often used for promotion and salary decisions, although certification is not always linked to performance. Certificates of attendance are common and must be joint with the home institution.
Education is highly valued in most of the countries surveyed. Several countries actively support sending students abroad for additional education. The idea of developing joint degrees in agriculture and agricultural extension regularly surfaced in discussions in this and other studies (Acker, 2000). It was suggested that the language of instruction would be English, and that faculty from both institutions would actively teach in the program.

**External Funding:** Data from China indicated a willingness and ability to fund training in China for their staff at the national level whereas international development funds are commonly sought when developing programs at the provincial or municipal government levels. The Government of China often pays for training programs delivered internationally. CEE countries, possibly with the exception of Poland, expressed the willingness to support their own staff while being trained in their country. In many cases, they also expressed a willingness to try and cover the expenses of the visiting scholars from other countries, but indicated they did not have the available funds to cover costs of their staff while studying abroad. Costs incurred while in Canada, plus the honorariums for visiting scholars are expected to be paid from international development funds.

Whenever possible, Iran will pay for training costs both in country and internationally. A number of international development funding agencies have funds available for Iranian projects. Mexico, Ukraine, and Russia all have struggling economies and therefore all training costs must be covered through external funding agencies.

**Marketing the Program to Clients:** Word of mouth and successful pilot projects are the best marketing methods for all countries surveyed. Some countries are closely tied to Canada; however, this does not ensure that a partnership can be developed. A reputation must be created before partnerships are established. Using high quality, high profile instructors in a high profile program is recommended. Also recommended is the use of local staff who have high public profiles.

**Challenges:** As indicated earlier, some challenges were identified during the feasibility study. Many of these came from faculty and staff at the U of S. Positioning the centre within the University of Saskatchewan was identified as a vital issue if the centre is to evolve on a sustainable basis. It was proposed that this involve five steps: a) agreement on a clearly defined purpose and expectations of faculty and staff; b) establishing clearly defined roles and reporting structure; c) establishing a realistic budget for the centre; d) identifying sources of funding for the centre; and e) determination of strategies for program delivery.

A concern repeated by faculty, research scientists and college administrators revolved around the inability to find staff willing and able to participate in international projects. Existing research projects, teaching responsibilities and tenure were identified as factors limiting participation in international projects (Andreasen, 2002). The idea of using graduate students has tremendous merit, however concerns were expressed that international projects should not interfere with the students’ studies. The U of S has numerous long-term, well established international projects, and concern was expressed that a new centre should not put these projects in jeopardy.
Educational Importance, Implications, and Application

Organizational elements essential to the success of the study methodology were: a) the contracting of the study to a professor emeritus highly experienced in international programming and administration; b) the establishment of a diverse team of individuals knowledgeable of key issues and opportunities in agriculture within their respective countries; and, c) the use of culturally-sensitive data collection techniques.

The data collected in this study will prove useful in strengthening the experience of individuals involved in projects in China, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Iran, and Mexico. The challenges raised by local faculty, research scientists, and administrators will prove useful for any institution interested in establishing or expanding an international training centre. For the University of Saskatchewan, this feasibility study along with its recommendations has made an important contribution to further internationalizing the campus by providing a rationale and organizational vehicle for programs specifically directed at the delivery of international agriculture extension.

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