

CHINA RURAL DISTANCE EDUCATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW COUNTRYSIDE

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Abstract

After entering the 21st century, the Chinese Government has attached great importance to agriculture, rural areas and farmers, and has adopted a series of policies in favor of agriculture, such as enhancing the construction of agricultural infrastructures, accelerating the progress in agricultural sciences and technologies, uplifting the comprehensive agriculture production capacity, promoting restructure of agriculture, creating more employment for rural workers, increasing investment in agriculture and realizing faster growth of rural income, which have brought about positive changes in agriculture and rural development. This year, the Chinese Central Government released its first major document on the building the new socialist countryside — the primary task in the 11th Five Year Plan period, in which it makes the top priority in improving education level of rural laborers and promoting overall development of rural society. The Central Agricultural Broadcasting and Television School (CABTS) as a rural distance education institution with 25 years of experiences has been consistently implementing farmers' training program in line with the needs to the country. This paper intends to present the audience with the rural distance education and training programs implemented by the CABTS in recent years, as well as its achievements and experiences, in promoting agricultural and rural economic development, ameliorating rural environment, increasing farmers' income, improving rural surplus labor transfer and strengthening skill training both in agriculture and non-agriculture sectors.

Key words: Rural distance education, Building a new countryside, Rural Laborer Transfer, New type of farmers,

INTRODUCTION

Since 2004, the Chinese Government has issued important documents for three consecutive years to promote the work of “agriculture, rural areas and farmers”. In Document Number One of the central government this year, it once again tabled the important tasks of constructing socialist new countryside, it emphasized at the same time training of new type of farmers so that farmers will have better education and technological skills and are good at farm business management, with the purpose of improving the overall quality of farmers. Farmers are the mainstream of new countryside construction, therefore, training and culturing millions of new type of farmers is a strategic, basic and fundamental work. Only when the tremendous human resources in rural areas are converted to human capital advantage to establish the source of sustained power driving new countryside construction, can the tasks of new countryside construction be accomplished. In order to meet the strategic requirements of the state in the work of “agriculture, rural area and farmers”, the Central Agricultural Broadcast and Television School (CABTS) is and will implement serials of education and training programs targeted at farmers, and such programs are playing important role in training new type of farmers and in serving new countryside.

Since its founding 25 years ago and as the largest rural distance education in the world, CABTS has already trained a large number of grassroots cadres, agricultural extension agents and farmers, and has made great contribution to the development of rural economy.

I. A Brief Introduction of CABTS

In 1980, the Ministry of Agriculture of China was given the mandate to contribute to distance education in agriculture. A subordinate institute, Central Agricultural Broadcasting School was established. CABTS has developed into the largest system of education for agriculture and rural development in the world. Its organizational structure involves five basic levels of schools.

The Central School is responsible for the overall management of the system, and for the production of audio-visual materials for use nation-wide. Teaching and learning are organized and evaluated through the following network of schools: 38 Provincial Schools, 330 Prefecture Schools, 2,408 County Schools, and 23,000 township teaching stations.

CABTS teaches its students both through distance education and face-to-face. Distance teaching is conducted through a range of media, including radio, television, audio and videotapes, video compact discs (VCD), Internet, Satellite and print materials. In addition, the instructional resources are delivered to farmers by “Science and Technology Caravan”, Farmer’s Library, Loudspeaker and etc.

Up to 2005, Secondary Diploma Education recruited 3.64 million students and graduated 1.87 million, Post-secondary Education recruited 124,000 students and graduated 104,000, and College-level Education recruited 450,000 and graduated 175,000; short courses in Green Certificate Training registered 9.24

million and 4.22 earned certificate, and 460,000 achieved Professional qualification Certificate after the Professional Skill Training and Applicable Agricultural Technology registered 112 million registrants.

II. Needs of national development

China is a big country with large farm population whose educational level is rather low, hence the task of bringing up farmers' education level is heavy. According to statistics, among the 490 million rural laborers, only 13% have senior high school and higher education, 36.7% have primary school and lower education level, and only less than 5% of farmers have received systematic professional training, therefore, the tasks of education and training of farmers are very heavy. Therefore, developing modern agriculture in China, accelerating agricultural science and technology progress and promoting farmers' income growth require that farmers remaining in farming industry must improve their professional skills, which can be realized through training in agricultural techniques and skills. On the other hand, along with accelerated urbanization and industrialization, training to prepare rural laborers to be transferred to other sectors rather than farming must be well organized so as to promote the transfer of rural surplus laborers. A team of rural grassroots cadres and backbone demonstrations farmers with middle and high level education must be nurtured, enabling them to become the fortress in agricultural and rural economic development.

III. Education and training of farmers

1. Training of new type of farmers in science and technology

Building a new socialist countryside is a major historic task in the process of modernizing the country. Farmers are the mainstream in building a new socialist countryside, therefore, creating a new type of farmer who has a good basic education and understand both agricultural techniques and business operations, and improving the overall quality of farmers are the important guarantee of new socialist countryside construction. Nurturing new type of farmers is a long-term yet arduous task. Delivering training in agricultural practical technologies is the central task of implementing rural distance education. CABTS has carried out various applicable technology training, Green Certificate Training, Professional Skill Training, Youth Farmer Training and getting science and technologies to farmer households.

Green Certificate Education, in part inspired by the success of the Green Certificate Program in Alberta, has been adopted by CABTS since the mid 1980's. Over 3.6 million graduates have achieved competence in hog production, poultry production, household business management, fruit and vegetable production, crops, greenhouse vegetables, and horticultural skills. These people have worked as technicians, business managers, production supervisors, and farmers.

The Professional Skill Training is a skill-based training program. A certificate records training and competence of trainees in achieving specific skills for jobs in a specified farm industry. The certificate is issued by the government

department.

Applicable Agricultural Technology Training is the most welcomed program by people in rural areas. According to a recent survey, more than 50% of farmers preferred to learn applicable agricultural technology, of whom, 45% liked face-to-face and site-based training or demonstration. To date, there have been approximately 112 million registrants in this program. In recent years, with the rural-urban migration of labor, training subjects have been broadened from agriculture to household appliance maintenance, hairdressing, cooking, housekeeping, etc. These training programs enable migrants to find jobs more easily.

2. Sunshine Program of Rural Laborer Transfer Training

Among the 490 million rural laborers in China, 320 million are engaged in agricultural production that only needs 170 million laborers. The employment pressure of rural surplus laborers has become more and more outstanding. Against such backdrop, even more forceful policy measures should be taken to accelerate the transfer of rural laborers to non-farming sectors. In order to bring prosperity to farmers, the number of farmers must be reduced so as to increase the per capita availability of resources in rural areas and to promote rational deployment of resources, it in turn will increase farmers' income and realize coordinated development between rural and urban areas.

In order to accelerate the transfer of rural laborers to urban areas, to improve the quality and employment capacities of farmers to be transferred and to promote income increase of farmers and rural/agricultural economic development, the Chinese Government formulated the "National Plan for Training of Rural Migrant Workers 2003-2010". The horizon of training of the plan is as the follows: from 2003 to 2005, before transfer and employment orientation training will be delivered to 10 million rural laborers who will be transferred to non-farming sectors and to urban areas, and professional skill training will be delivered to half of the 10 million rural laborers. On-job training will be provided to 50 million farmer migrant workers who have been employed in non-farming sectors already. From 2006 to 2010, before transfer and employment orientation training will be delivered to 50 million rural laborers who will be transferred to non-farming sectors and to urban areas, and professional skill training will be delivered to 30 million rural laborers of the 50 million. Meanwhile, on-job training will be offered to 200 million farmer migrant workers who have been employed in non-farming sectors. In order to implement the Plan, the Ministry of Agriculture of China in association with other ministries and commissions have been implemented the "Sunshine Program of Training for Rural Laborer Transfer" while support is given to the major areas of rural laborer export. Through tailored training for orders, training for fixed locations and employment areas, professional skill training is offered to farmers to be transferred.

In 2004, the central government budget arranged 250 million RMB Yuan of funds to subsidize farmers who participate in such training at the standard rate of 100 RMB Yuan per day. Over 2.5 million farmers were trained and transferred in 2004 and over 80% of the trained were employed.

In 2005, the central government budget arranged 400 million RMB Yuan for the implementation of Sunshine Program. According to incomplete statistics, the central government input also mobilized 440 million RMB Yuan of input from provincial budget. The Program has been implemented in 1,700 counties through 7,139 training institutions. Trained rural laborers have reached 2.8 million and 2.5 million of the trained have found jobs accounting for 84%.

This year, the central government budget increased to 700 million RMB Yuan to support training of rural laborers for transfer to non-farming sectors and the program of science and technology training of new type of farmers. It plans to provide training to 3.5 million rural laborers.

In the process of implementing the training of program for rural labor force transfer, CABTS system has shouldered one third of the tasks.

3. Developing a well-trained rural human resources

The development of human resources in rural areas is mainly through undertaking vocational education, collaborative higher education and post-vocational continued education to train large number of township and village cadres, backbone farmers and demonstration households, who unite together and lead farmers to adopt advanced technologies for the development of agricultural production.

CABTS offers degree courses for farmers and professionals to improve their qualifications and stay current with developments in their fields of expertise.

Secondary Education Program on agricultural technology is planned for rural youth, farmers, agri-technicians, rural enterprise managers and rural grassroots leaders. The Central School and Provincial Schools offer about one hundred fields of specialization under four categories — Crop Cultivation, Animal Husbandry and Agricultural Economics and Management, and Agriculture Engineering. The system has developed over 360 courses with annual offerings of about 130 courses.

The Post-secondary Education Program on agricultural technology was mandated in 1999. The specializations are Agriculture Extension, Rural Economic Management, and Veterinary Science, which are designed to improve the qualifications of long-term employees and recent graduates from secondary education in agriculture.

College-level Degree Education has been offered in collaboration with other agricultural universities or colleges since 1995. The program is conducted by the provincial schools, and courses focus on local agriculture production situations.

In order to support the new countryside construction, as one of the 15 tasks to be accomplished by the Ministry of Agriculture in 2006, CABTS is implementing the “One million vocational graduates program”, which is to train a large number of human resources in rural areas to equip them with practical skills and vocational school diploma, who vehemently love agriculture and root in rural areas, and have education and civilized behaviors, who understand technologies and are good at farm business management. This program will strengthen their capacity

to lead farmers to prosperity so that they will become pioneers of constructing socialist new countryside and backbone for developing modern agriculture.

“One million vocational graduates program” will be based on industries and its curriculum development will center the needs of industries. Starting from this year, it is planned to use 10 years to train 1 million human resources with practical skills in rural areas and with vocational education diploma. Among them, there will be 350,000 skilled farmers in crop and animal farming and product processing; 450,000 skilled in farm business management and 200,000 skilled in different disciplines and sciences and technologies of importance to rural areas. During the 11th Five Year Plan, a total number of 500,000 skilled persons will be trained, who are good hands in production, farm business management, skilled workers and rural science and technology workers.

The Chinese Government attaches great importance to education and training of farmers. The principle of industries supporting agriculture and urban areas supporting rural areas presents a good development opportunity to the education and training of farmers in China. Since rural China covers extensive areas with striking differences among regions and farmers usually engage in multiple types of industries, education and training of farmers are of the features of individualization and multiple dimensions. Furthermore, education and training of farmers face many limiting factors and grave difficulties. Therefore, the role of modern distance education and training in agriculture should be fully tapped, which should be organically combined with traditional education methods. Radio, television, Internet, satellite networks and other modern education technologies should be utilized in an integrated manner so as to facilitate the learning of farmers in locations close to their fields. Traditional education and training methods of face-to-face instruction and hands-on teaching should be adopted. In education and training, farmers' will should be respected and attention should be given to the basics, systematic, accurate targeting and practicality, so as to address the practical problems farmers face in production and living.

In short, education and training of farmers conforms to the needs of the national development, and it should take farmers' needs and satisfy farmers as the starting point and the ultimo objective. Based on the principle of brining convenience to farmers and getting close to farmers, it is to use advanced ideology to culture farmers. Education and training should serve farmers with rich contents, attract farmers by vivid educational methods and serve farmers with convenient approaches. Training of new type of farmers in large-scale will provide forceful buttress in terms of human resources and talents to the construction of socialist new countryside.

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