

THE VIRTUAL INSTITUTE

SHAPING POLICYMAKING DECISIONS IN AN ACADEMIC SETTING



GLOBAL CONTEXT

In today's increasingly complex world, countries at all stages of development need effective policymakers and negotiators with solid knowledge of international economic issues. They also need up-to-date analysis about how the changes in the world economy will impact their countries and which policies could best respond to both the opportunities and the challenges of globalization.

Academic institutions, such as universities and research centres, are a vital source of information and training in developing countries. They educate future policymakers and business leaders, and offer empirical research required for informed policymaking and negotiation.

The UNCTAD Virtual Institute works with universities and research centres in developing and transition countries. The aim is to help them to strengthen their teaching and research capacity in the areas of trade, investment and development, and increase the policy orientation and relevance of their work.

HOW DOES THE VIRTUAL INSTITUTE REACH POLICYMAKERS?

The Virtual Institute works with member institutions of its academic network on a long-term basis by providing services in three areas:

- (a) Support to degree programmes. The Virtual Institute provides advice on the design of university courses and programmes and develops teaching materials on trade and development issues, which universities then adapt to the contexts of their countries.
- (b) Professional development for research and teaching. The Institute offers training and learning opportunities for groups of academics (through regional and national workshops and online courses) and individuals (through fellowships and mentoring of research and training projects).
- (c) Cooperation within the Virtual Institute's academic network. The Institute also draws on the potential of South–South and North–South cooperation in its academic network and supports exchanges of experiences and joint projects.

PROGRAMME FACTS AND FIGURES

Programme scope: all regions

Programme start date: 2004

Number of Virtual Institute members:
119 academic institutions,
in 59 countries

Programme website:
vi.unctad.org



RESULTS AND IMPACT AT A GLANCE

In the 11 years since it was created, the Virtual Institute has helped embed trade and development topics into university programmes and create pools of researchers available to provide inputs to national policymakers in UNCTAD member countries. Key results include:

- The Virtual Institute's original five teaching materials nearly tripled and generated 35 adaptations to the contexts of 19 countries, as well as translations into nine languages.
- The libraries of member institutions have been kept well stocked – some 29,500 UNCTAD publications have been distributed.
- A total of 1,868 academics from 96 countries gained new skills and knowledge through 63 Virtual Institute workshops and online courses, which also generated 16 mentored research projects by researchers in 15 countries.
- The Institute provided training for over 1,600 students through its 59 study tours and visits.
- The network also nurtured 65 budding researchers from 20 countries through Virtual Institute fellowships at UNCTAD.

Brief highlights. During the second quarter of 2015, the Virtual Institute's national workshops on professional development trained 105 researchers in Bangladesh, the Gambia and the United Republic of Tanzania. In Bangladesh, 23 researchers were trained on analysis of the impact of trade and trade-related policies on household welfare. The workshop for the Gambia – hosted by the University of the Gambia – introduced 58 participants from academia and the public sector to ways in which domestic resources mobilization could help foster economic development in African countries. In the United Republic of Tanzania, the workshop guided 24 researchers through an economic analysis of non-tariff measures.

DONORS/ FUNDING SOURCE

Current: Finland

Past: Canada, Germany, Japan,
Norway, Spain, United Nations
Development Account

Results in-depth

Analysing trade and gender – a recent Virtual Institute workshop

The Virtual Institute's regional workshop on trade and gender analysis, using the latest Virtual Institute teaching materials, trained 25 researchers from 16 countries in sub-Saharan Africa in June 2015. The event was hosted by South African affiliate member, the North-West University, and funded by the Government of Finland.

Participants were trained on state-of-the-art research methodologies on trade and gender and learned about the sources, data and indicators used in empirical analysis in this area. Beyond theoretical explanations, participants engaged in hands-on practice using Stata statistical software.

All participants left the workshop determined to use the newly acquired knowledge and skills in their work, from enriching academic courses on international trade, development economics, agricultural policy and econometrics, to offering training on data management and Stata, and providing better support to students. Potential research applications included a paper on climate-related changes in economic activities for men and women and advising or providing research inputs to policymakers.