SPRINT SUCCESS STORIES

A MASTERS DEGREE FOR PROMOTING ORGANIC PRODUCTION IN ITALY

A successful training programme on organic farming in Italy has become a full Master's programme organised by the University of Bologna, in collaboration with the University of Parma. Since 2019, this course has helped workers to become equipped to thrive in the organic sector, including through training on ways of running a successful business and how to take advantage of market trends. Each of these topics makes organic farming more resilient and equipped to cope with moving away from using synthetic pesticides.

THE CHALLENGE

Previously, there was a complete absence of academic teaching about organic farming in Italy, despite its national importance - approximately 12% of Italian agriculture is organic, rising to around 20% in the Emilia Romagna region, close to the University of Bologna.

MAIN OBSTACLES

A key challenge that previously threatened the course was strong resistance against organic farming. This aversion existed both within and outside academia, with many academics showing scepticism our outright opposition towards organic farming. This led to delays in the organic training course becoming a full master's degree. Additionally, encouraging people to enrol on the course when it was first established proved difficult.

Once underway, the course was successful at bringing together a wide range of people from across the agricultural and regulatory sector. However, this was challenging due to a need to facilitate fruitful discussions between those with differing viewpoints.

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AS KEY

A key learning from developing the programme is the importance of two-way exchanges, with lecturers learning from their students and using participatory exercises to encourage engagement and innovation.

RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

Since the programme was only launched in 2019, it is difficult to quantify pesticide reductions. However, students who complete the course are motivated to remain within, spread, and strengthen the organic farming sector, so many will continue on this trajectory.

Several students who have completed the course are agricultural extensionists and so are now better able to provide advice to clients about reducing synthetic pesticide reliance and ways of converting towards organic production.

KEY OBJECTIVE

Provide education for individuals interested in the organic sector on how to work effectively within it.

EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS

KEY TOPICS COVERED

The master's degree covers a wide range of topics that support organic production including:

- Production itself, including plant protection;
- Environmental aspects, e.g., agroecology;
- Breeding;
- Diversification;
- Policies for organic management;
- Marketing

These subjects are taught during 200 hours of in-person and online lectures and educational field trips. Most lessons have a practical aspect, ensuring that the programme provides a concrete representation of real-life organic production.

INCLUSIVITY

Most lectures are held in the late afternoon/evening to enable more workers to complete the course. In addition, online lectures make distance learning possible.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Find out more about the Master's programme here: https://master.unibo.it/produzione-biologica/it

This factsheet was produced by Dr Charlotte Chivers, Countryside & Community Research Institute, and Josselin Rouillard, Ecologic Institute.

Research author: Daria Sgargi