

Draft

EDITORIAL: agricultural education and European vocational education policy making

Published as:

Mulder, M. (2015). Editorial: Agricultural Education and European Vocational Education Policy Making. *Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, (21),4, 289-292.

Kindly refer to the journal version for exact quotes because of detailed corrections and precise page numbers.

Dear reader. In a previous editorial of the JAEE I have been reporting on a conference of Europea in Belgium. Europea is the European association of agricultural education. The association uses to organize a conference in the country which has the half-year presidency of the European Union. This year the same happened, as Latvia had the presidency during the first half of 2015 and the conference was held in Riga. As the current secretary-general Henrik Dethlefsen was a key note speaker in the joint conferences of the Association of International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE) and the European Seminar of Extension and Education (ESEE) which was held in Wageningen, I decided to participate in the conference in Latvia, also because the conference theme which was announced was 'Sustainable Vocational Education for the Labour Market', and sustainable development is the normative framework from which we do our research at ECS. At the conference site it appeared that the conference theme was changed in 'Competitive and Sustainable Vocational Education and Training: Achievements and New Goals'. That is not quite the same, and definitely much broader, but still interesting. In any case the conference was about vocational education but did not exclusively focus on sustainability issues. Actually the conference in Belgium was also about generic vocational education issues at that time, and was not specifically aimed at agricultural education. I asked colleagues why this was the case and whether all Europea conferences are about generic vocational education. This appeared not to be the case; in some years generic vocational education issues are being addressed to learn something new within the community of agricultural education. I can see that that is important, because agricultural education is part of vocational education, at least at the senior secondary education level. Higher agricultural education is part of the higher education system.

The generic vocational education nature of the conference is reflected by the speaker list and the titles of the presentations. The opening of the conference was done by Ms Ilze Brante, Board member of the Vocational Education Association of Latvia, and who is also the Director of Ogre Technical School. Next Henrik Dethlefsen welcomed the participants on behalf of Europea International. Next, Ms Liga Mengelsone, Director General of the Employers' Confederation of Latvia had the floor. There seemed to be a remarkable consensus amongst the speakers that vocational education needs more attention and cooperation between all stakeholders, which is indeed a precondition for its success.

In session 1 of the conference there were three presentations which were followed up by a discussion with experts. The first presentation was given by Jasper van Loo from Cedefop, the

European Agency for the Development of Vocational Education, which is located in Thessaloniki in Greece. The topic of the presentation was ‘making VET more attractive: identifying what matters and progress up to date in Europe’. It is commonly known that in many countries vocational education and training (VET) is second choice, and that it therefore is less attractive for many parents and students. The first choice is to go to pre-university secondary education and college afterwards to do a Bachelor and Master which lead to many interesting professions. Vocational education is still seen as an education system which produces graduates with lower qualifications and fewer chances on the labour market for less interesting jobs. In other countries however the esteem of vocational education is quite high, as are the enrolment numbers. The average participation of students in vocational education in the age cohort from 14 to 18 years of age can go up to around 50%, although that percentage is slowly decreasing. However, in various countries the demand for graduates of vocational education has been quite high, but of course the banking crisis and economic recession of the last 7 years did not do good to vocational education, as youth unemployment figures in some EU countries have been, and still are, unacceptably high. This leaves graduates of vocational education, as graduates from the generic education system, left behind in the labour market. Van Loo painted the current state of affairs regarding the attractiveness of VET in the EU, and gave a number of quite generic recommendations, which, however, were not new, and have been tried before, but without significant success. What I missed in this presentation is that global issues, attractive learning environments and challenging learning processes can make a difference. By addressing these issues carefully, Wageningen University has achieved its present position of best university in the Netherlands according to students over the last 10 years. The number of first-year students have been doubled in the last 7 years. Agricultural education has a lot to offer in this respect: small scale education institutions, lots of personal contact between professors, lecturers and students, meaningful education programmes which are about the major challenges in the world like poverty, hunger, climate change and healthy lifestyles.

The next presentation was given by Lina Dzene, director of Dynamic University Ltd. She spoke about ‘How to ensure better VET to work transitions – lessons learnt from the ‘VET to work transition’ project. Finally, Anita Lice, advisor on education and employment of the Employer’s Confederation of Latvia, had the floor. She spoke about the ‘Availability and quality of traineeships in Latvia – survey results’.

The discussion with the experts was with Henrik Dethlefsen, Livija Marcinkevica, the Deputy Chairperson of the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia, Kristine Vagnere, Director of Ventspils Technical College and Mr Juris Silis, Chairman of the Board of Jelgava Printing House. The presentations by the speakers all addressed generic vocational education and training issues.

Session 2 was interesting as it showed examples of good practice. Various national members of Europa were invited to prepare posters, and some representatives of the teams who prepared the posters were invited to explain the content of the posters. These were interesting examples of projects which were carried out during the last couple of years, and which addressed VET contributions to the green economy. In this part of the programme there was

ample attention to cases which were specific for agricultural education. But there were also posters which addressed more general VET issues like the organizations of traineeships and workplace learning.

Session 3 was about the ‘Common goals for VET 2020’ and tried to reach conclusions and recommendations. The first speaker at the conference was Ms Marite Seile, Minister of Education and Science of Latvia. She spoke about the progress in the VET policy dossier at EU level as she was presiding the EU Council of Education Ministers during the presidency. The council is currently taking stock of what has been achieved and tries to move ahead with the VET reporting system in the EU. The intention is to make the reporting more efficient, as there are around 100 deliverables for the rapporteurs, which is considered as being a lot, and which implies a massive time investment by all stakeholders in the EU. The plan is to reduce that to only 5 key deliverables, in which others are subsumed. Examples of these key deliverables are legislation, transfer to the labour market, quality of VET, and curricula. Objectives in the current cooperation process are to strengthen practical and dual training, quality assessment tools, sectoral social dialogue, accessibility, professional competencies, attractiveness, IT-literacy, professional development of teachers, and the pedagogy of adult education. A declaration of VET Policy Recommendations is tabled to be signed in June. This declaration contains a series of policy goals which need attention during the period 2015-2020. This declaration could very well be ratified by the Council and then be one in the series of the Copenhagen declaration and the Bruges declaration on enhanced cooperation in vocational education and training.

The next speaker was Mr Armands Krauze, the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture in Latvia. He spoke in general terms about the position of agricultural education in Latvia. Next was Mr Vitalijs Gavrilovs, President of the Employers’ Confederation in Latvia. He presented the status, importance and future development of vocational education in Latvia and introduced and elaborated on strategic policy recommendations. These recommendations are:

- ‘1. Work-based learning (WBL) should be promoted in all its forms, and in this process involvement of social partners, companies and VET providers should be ensured and innovation and entrepreneurship should be facilitated.
2. Quality assurance mechanisms in VET should be further developed in line with the EQAVET (European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training, *MM*) recommendation and continuous information and feedback loops to initial VET and continuous VET systems should be established as part of quality assurance systems.
3. Access to training and qualifications for all in a life-long learning perspective should be enhanced, notably by increasing the quality, supply and accessibility of continuous VET, providing for efficient and integrated guidance services and flexible and permeable learning pathways.

4. Key competences in VET curricula should be further strengthened and more effective opportunities to acquire or develop those skills through initial or continuous VET should be provided.

5. Systematic approaches and opportunities for initial and continuous professional development of VET teachers and trainers and mentors should be introduced in both school and work based settings.

6. Equal partnership and shared responsibilities with the social partners – representatives of employers and trade unions – should be ensured in VET with a view to develop high quality, relevant and competitive VET’.

As said, the conference was addressing generic vocational education policy making, but this declaration is absolutely valuable, and made the conference special. For a moment I was thinking I was back in Cedefop, where I was working myself during the academic year 2004-2005. Following the imperatives formulated in this declaration will make vocational education and training, including agricultural education, a better system, not only within the EU members states, but also beyond that in the global South.

With this declaration the conference came to a conclusion. Interesting to note is also that I introduced myself to the Minister of Education, who appeared to be a former student of mine during the time I was teaching at the University of Twente, just before I went to Wageningen University. She attended my classes on human resource development; it’s a small world.

Coming back to the conference theme and the focus on sustainability. Sustainability in vocational education can be defined in different ways: ecological (what does to school do to contribute to a more sustainable world; is it carbon-neutral?), curricular (which programs or themes does it teach to prepare for jobs in which sustainability is a prominent topic?), social (to what extent does the school contribute to social cohesion and justice?) do the qualifications it provides add value to the social integration and societal participation of the graduates?), or institutional (is the school resilient, can it cope with the challenges within the education systems, and cope with the threats from outside?). It seems that Europea with this conference wanted to emphasize the social and institutional functions of vocational education, which are absolutely essential in current agricultural education policy making. So, although being generic of nature, the conference was worth the effort.

Martin Mulder, editor