

How agricultural is agricultural education and extension?

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A major question in agricultural education and extension is how agricultural these domains still are. Without doubt there is an agricultural element in both agricultural education and extension, but in many Western countries this element is getting smaller and smaller. The way in which one would answer this question depends on how broad the field of agriculture is defined. Is it only the primary sector of the economy (agriculture and fisheries) and the related input and output systems, or is it the whole agri-food system, including the secondary (manufacturing) and tertiary (services) sectors?

Clearly all economic sectors are tightly interwoven. Agricultural production cannot be isolated from the financing system, insurance provisions, logistics, packaging, public regulation, quality control, and many other components of and institutions within the economy and society.

This 'generic' character of agriculture, agricultural education and agricultural extension is reflected in many developments around the world. Take for instance the expansion of the European Union. When Poland joined the EU, one million farmers were added to the total population of farmers within the EU. But given production licensure, trade regulations and food safety conditions, the vast majority of these farmers needed to find another occupation. Large restructuring programs started, including extension programs, which should not exclusively focus on agricultural development, since better chances for a sustainable livelihood existed outside the primary sector. Farmers and farming families needed to reorient themselves and get prepared for activities, jobs or, where possible, small enterprises in other sectors.

Agricultural education is on the generalization track for years already. The number of students in what officially was called agricultural education in the Netherlands studying in programs that are focused on the primary production sector for instance is less than 5%. The large

majority is studying management, marketing, consumer behaviour, international development, food and nutrition, biotechnology, landscaping, environmental science, and animal care, to name a few fields. To soften the previously negative association with the field of agriculture in society and education, the phrase 'green' or 'life science' education became en vogue. Several agricultural universities in different countries have therefore renamed themselves, and deleted the word 'agriculture'.

Reframing agricultural education in the context of the general society is not only understandable but also necessary. It links societal developments to interests of students, which in many cases go far beyond the limits of traditional agriculture.

A consequence of the generalization trend in green education also is that agricultural education has to face the developments in other education sectors, not only in individual countries, but also internationally. Let me give an example. Europea is a network organization which consists of agricultural educators throughout the EU who are interested in exchanging information about, cooperation between and defending common interests of stakeholders in agricultural education. The full name of Europea is the 'Association of Agricultural Education in Europe'.

In the Fall of 2010, Europea organized an interesting gathering in Belgium which I attended, in which the generic education sector approach was apparent. The theme of the meeting was 'Future challenges for vocational education and training in the green sector'. Within this event a seminar was organized in which the results of the project 'CHallenges in Vocational Education and Training in the green sector' (CHAVET) were shared. The title of this seminar was 'Education policies and training systems for 2020'.

The seminar was opened in the Centre de Dépaysement de la Communauté Française in Saint-Vaast, Belgium, by Mr. Joël Gillet, President of Europea. Mr. Georges Demeester, former president and present national coordinator of Europea, also welcomed the participants and handed out prizes for a photo contest in agricultural education within the EU. The seminar proceeded in the Institut Provincial d'Enseignement Secondaire (IPES) in Ath, Wallonia, Belgium. The development of the name of this institute by the way supports my argument in this Editorial. The institute was named 'Institut Agricole de la Province de Hainaut' and

‘Institut Agricole et Technique du Hainaut (IATH)’ before it was given its present name. Mr. André Parfonry, Director of the IPES and Vice President of Europea Belgium also welcomed the participants. IPES is a large green educational institute with various programs, including an apprenticeship-system and a Bachelor and Master program. Mr. Joël Gillet explained that CHAVET is a Leonardo da Vinci project which was conducted during the last couple of years. The project team convened in various places in Europe. The seminar was about the results of the project. There were four Round tables (coordinated by Mr. Emile Bertrand, also a former president of Europe Belgium. The themes of the workshops were 1. Schools and companies: relationships, internships - equipment and new technologies; 2. Language learning for a vocational purpose; 3. Accreditation of prior learning and unit certification; and 4. Continuing training for teachers and trainers.

The following plenary session was chaired by Mr. Alain Talker, General Director for Teaching of Hainaut. The first speaker was Mr. Dominique Barthelemy, General Director from the Ministry of the French Community. The Results of the CHAVET survey were presented by Mr. Emile Bertrand, Mr. Piet Vanthems, General Secretary of the Boerenbond (Farmers Association), gave a presentation on ‘Expectations of the professionals and the economic world’; Mr. Jef Staes (journalist) gave a talk about ‘Innovative educational methods.’ Finally the reports of the workshops were presented. Mr Didier Leturcq, Deputy managing director, from the General Department of Education of the French Community, shared the seminar conclusions and future prospects. The next meeting of Europea will be in Hungary, and is chaired by Mr Imre Wayda, senior-counsellor of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, and next president of Europea.

Needless to say that the themes of the seminar were general VET (Vocational Education and Training)-themes: crossing the boundaries of the educational institutions, language learning for international communication, accreditation and qualification frameworks, and professional development of teaching staff. The same issues are being discussed in VET-sectors like administration, care and technology.

Would this generalization trend imply that the green education sector is better off under the responsibility of the ministry of education, as is the case in most European countries? We doubt that. The links between the actors in and around the agri-food cluster on the one hand,

and the green education system on the other hand, are quite strong in those countries in which the responsibility for green education lies in the hands of the ministry of agriculture, nature and food quality (which in the Netherlands merged with the ministry of economic affairs, and is expanded with the sector innovation, leading to the new ministry name of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation). Content-related innovation, for which green education was and still is renowned, can be more effectively and efficiently organized when there is close cooperation between the stakeholders in the agri-food sector (at large) and educational institutions.

My conclusion about the generalization trend in agricultural education and extension is that green education and extension need to be adapting themselves within the framework of new international developments, as is shown in the informative CHAVET-seminar, but that they also should retain a strong focus on content-related innovation, which at the end of the day is attracting students, delivering graduates with future skills, and developing competence of workers in the agri-food system to establish sustainable and responsible production of safe, healthy, and attractive food for all.

MARTIN MULDER, editor