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EDITORIAL: The AIAEE/ESEE 2015 conference in retrospect

Published as:

Mulder, M. (2015). Editorial: The AIAEE/ESEE 2015 conference in retrospect. *Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, (21)5, 399-403.

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

Dear Reader,

In issue 2 of the 2015 Volume of the Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension I have been writing about the organization of the joint conference of the Association of Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE) and the European Conference of Extension and Education (ESEE), which took place earlier this year in Wageningen, the Netherlands. I promised in that editorial to write a short piece about how the conference was in the next editorial of the JAEE. But because of another interesting conference of Europea on ‘Competitive and Sustainable Vocational Education and Training: Achievements and New Goals’ which took place in May in Latvia, and research assessment in June of a number of Wageningen Graduate Schools, one of which is the Wageningen School of Social Sciences in which my chair group Education and Competence Studies (ECS) is participating, I decided to write about those activities first in my previous two editorials. As said, both were interesting, and there are two main things that kept hanging in my mind about these activities. First of all, that the association of agricultural school and colleges in Europe, which Europea is, organized a conference about general vocational education and training issues within Europe, and that is proposed a generic declaration of vocational education and training within the European vocational education and training policy framework. Next, that the peer review of research, which took place on the basis of the Standard Evaluation Protocol, which is an elaborate procedure of preparing self-assessment reports and organizing meetings with the international research assessment committee and representatives of the management of the graduate school and the chair groups, and which is endorsed by the Netherlands Association of Cooperating Universities (VSNU), the Royal Academy of Sciences (KNAW), and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), resulted in a very fine assessment report about the research achievements of ECS. This is important because for the next six years the research assessment results will be seen as a major indicator of the quality of chair groups, and thus of their status, within the university. At this point of time of writing only the pre-final assessment results are

announced to the chair groups, but when the final assessment is known, I will mention that in a next editorial, maybe with some impressions and critical remarks of how the research assessment works in practice.

But now I will share my experiences with the AIAEE/ESEE 2015 conference. As said in the Editorial of issue 2 of this year, we got much more response on the call for proposals than we expected. This holds for the AIAEE and for the ESEE side. Organizers Pete Vergot III and Renee Pardello expected around 75 participants, and we in Wageningen were hoping for the same number of people attending, especially because the previous conference in Finland drew only around 50, and the one in Antalya around 75 active participants. However, at the end of the day we had around 350 participants, and 231 abstract, paper, symposium and roundtable presentations, 37 posters, 5 professional development sessions, 2 keynotes and a grand opening session. This caused much more work than we anticipated, but of course this created a very positive atmosphere. We interpreted it as a massive signal that the field of agricultural education and extension is live and kicking. This feeling was amplified during the opening session of the conference, when the large auditorium of the Forum building was packed, and two adjacent smaller rooms with video connections were occupied as well. One hilarious moment should be mentioned here, as it was so comical. During my opening speech I mentioned that there were four esteemed colleagues who were member of the Honorary Committee of the conference, Prof Anne van den Ban, Prof Harri Westermarck, Prof Burton Swanson, and Prof Milan Slavík, of which one of them participated in the conference. Right at that time Anne van den Ban walked through the front door right into the conference room, which created a bight laughter and a thunderous applause. Many people thought this was staged, but in fact Anne was sitting in one of the adjacent rooms and when I started talking about the Honorary Committee he was pushed into the room with the words: ‘Go inside the big room, as they are speaking about you’. Most funny things happen just like that.

The general theme of the conference was ‘Competence and Excellence in Extension and Education’. This theme is inspired on the research program of ECS on professional competence, competence development, competence-based learning arrangements, and competence assessment. If you are new to the field you can learn more about that by reading an older publication in the JAEE of mine (Mulder, 2001) and synthesis chapter on professional competence in a book about professional learning of Stephen Billett and others (Mulder, 2014) which contains a description of the genesis of the competence movement and a review of the literature in this field. Whereas our research programme on professional competence comprises all professions which are covered by undergraduate and graduate programmes at Wageningen University (ranging from purchasing, food safety, business ethics to sustainability to name a few), we pay special attention to extension and education professionals in these domains. As I have stated earlier, we see the agricultural extension and education practice as being very wide and diverse. More current terms for it are consultancy, facilitation, learner support, etc. As some critical commentators view competence as a minimum and standardized level of desired performance, I find it important to note that I see competence as the generic capability to perform certain tasks, to solve certain problems, and to create and realize transformations. This has nothing to do with the first-generation of

competence practices which consisted of detailed training of series of precisely defined tasks, but more with a holistic view on not only teaching theory, but also on integrated learning which includes application and getting practical experience. To stress that the conference theme was not aimed at minimum performance standards we added ‘excellence’ in extension and education. This is related to the notion that a lot of attention is needed for the radical improvement of quality in agricultural extension and education worldwide; again, agricultural extension and education looked at from its widest possible perspective. This theme of the conference was the foundation of a whole strand on quality assessment, quality improvement, and impact measurement in education and extension. The general conclusion of this strand – and the whole conference theme – in my opinion is, that there is sufficient sense of urgency to pay attention to the value added and quality of agricultural education and extension, and that a lot has been done on this already, but that there also is a large room for improvement.

As said, there were two key note speeches, one by Marianne Cerf of INRA in France, and one by Henrik Dethlefsen, secretary-general of Europea, from Denmark. Europea maintains international contacts with the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAEE) and the European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (EFVET). The two key notes were very different, the one of Cerf being scholarly and fundamental, whereas the one of Dethlefsen was practical and policy-oriented. Cerf was talking about agricultural extension and Dethlefsen about agricultural education. The title of the keynote of Cerf was ‘Envisioning the contribution of extension work to the transition towards sustainability in agriculture and within rural areas’. She positioned Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) in Europe and presented an activity-based perspective on the work and organization of extension as a basis for analyzing the contribution of extension to processes of transition which are aimed at achieving more sustainability in agriculture and rural space. She juxtaposed two approaches towards sustainability of system innovation and transition, and of transformational change, which is of more socio-ecological nature, with emphasis on deliberative stakeholder arenas. The approach also includes, in the words of Cerf: co-evolution of problem formulation, transformative intention building, acting as translator among different social worlds, and helping to build shared vision. This is quite different from the socio-technical systems perspective which emphasises networking, innovation brokerage, and transactive mediation. Next, she addressed the questions as what organization is needed to get farmers more involved in processes of exploration, which competence should be developed and how, and gave examples of this from France. She pointed at the ever increasing diversity of the work of extension, stressed the importance of establishing a developmental activity-based approach of extension work, and finalized her keynote with three proposals, which I summarize here:

1. Let extension professionals reflect upon institutional and organizational arrangements which support design-use relations.
2. Create and maintain discussion spaces among extension professionals based on work analysis and experience sharing.
3. Reframe back office work by focusing less on experiments and ready-to-apply solutions, and more on scientific monitoring and guidelines for exploration.

Directly after the keynote I said that this keynote was very thought-provoking, and typical French, by which I meant that the speech was rich in *discours*, deep in scientific insight, and good in terms of opportunities to reflect upon.

The keynote of Henrik Dethlefsen was entitled ‘Towards Excellence in Agricultural Education? Some Reflections of a Practitioner’. With this title Dethlefsen wanted to express his pride in not being a theoretician, but a teacher.

His speech consisted of four parts: 1. the wider context of agricultural education; 2. the landscape of agricultural education in Europe; 3. the current initiatives for the improvement of European agricultural education; and 4. a look into the future. Regarding agriculture he distinguished various phases agriculture went through: from subsistence farming to production and productivity, sustainability, multifunctionality, and the biobased economy. He also described the various generations, from the maturists, baby boomers, to generations X, Y and Z, which all have different orientations towards the digital society, aspirations and career attitudes, and which all show a different preference for learning. Regarding the landscape of agricultural education, he pointed at striking similarities between the various countries, in that in most of them there are agricultural education programs accessible from the age of 16 or 17, in which agriculture is defined in a broad sense. Examples of agricultural education programs Dethlefsen has given are: animal production, plant production, horticulture and gardening, landscaping, forestry, wine growing, animal care, machine operation etc. Most of these programs he sees as locally rooted, and his observation is that many educational institutions find it difficult to attract a sufficient number of students. But he also pointed at important differences, such as regarding the types of schools which provide agricultural education. In that respect he differentiates between specialized green schools for vocational education and training and upper-secondary schools with optional programmes or courses for agricultural education. Furthermore there is a big difference between countries to what extent they included work-based learning in their program. There are countries with a high share of work-based learning, and others with a low share.

Dethlefsen stated that agricultural education like all vocational education and training faces challenges regarding comparability and recognition which hamper international mobility, whereas this mobility is perceived as being very important. To realize this, one education and labour space should be created. Solutions the EU has created for these problems are the EQF (the European Qualifications Framework), the Bologna process in higher education, which has resulted in standardized bachelor, master and PhD programme structures, the ECTS (the European Credit Transfer System) and the 7-point grading scale of educational achievement (or performance). Mobility has been strongly supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007 to 2013, and is now facilitated by the Erasmus+ Programme which runs from 2014 to 2020. The numbers involved in this mobility programme are quite high: 2,2 million HE students, 700,000 VET students, 1,000,000 teachers and managers, with an annual budget of 2,6 billion Euros.

Major challenges Dethlefsen saw for the students of the green education sector in Europe were that there should be one European labour market in the green sector and more

agricultural management competence. Regarding VET schools he sees that there is a demand for programs reflecting the competence needs of the labour market, diversified programs (for industrial as well as small-scale future entrepreneurs), a systematic approach to management, innovation and entrepreneurship, more focus on sustainability, and developing capacities for integration of challenged students into mainstream education and labor market.

The conference tracks of ESEE were labeled. Themes were: Extension History, Learning, Systems, Impact, Theory and Staff Development, Professional Development, ICT, Education, Service Provisions and Family Farming, Assessment in Education and Extension, Performance and Facilitation, Innovation and Transition, Transdisciplinarity, Knowledge Management, Microcredit, Networking, Localizing, and Gender. In short: all popular and current issues in agricultural extension and education were addressed. The same holds for the AIAEE part of the conference.

The conference was concluded with a panel discussion, facilitated by Laurens Klerkx and Renate Wesselink. The panellists were Mark Balschweid, Amy Harder, Michael Kügler, Henrik Dethlefsen and Cees Leeuwis. Final remarks were made by Kristin Davis and undersigned. The composition of the panel, the questions and discussion, including the conclusions were a bit driven in the direction of a USA-Europe comparison, which resulted in a just cry for attention for *global* comparisons of practices, unfortunately after the session ended. Given the background of both the AIAEE and ESEE participants, who came from all continents, this remark was well-understood and needs to be taken into account in the future.

The venue of the next ESEE (2017) conference is Crete, Greece (dates not know yet). The venue of the next (2016) AIAEE conference will be Portland, Oregon, USA; the conference there will take place from April 4 – 8, 2016. Abstracts and posters should be submitted before Thursday, October 1, 2015.

During the conference various business meetings were held, including an editorial committee meeting of the JAEE. During the ESEE-related business meetings, one major discussion issue was the creation of the European *Society* of Extension and Education, which would provide a more solid foundation under the ESEE conferences, since until now, all risks and benefits go to the organizing institution. However, a society could create a business model which would generate funds to invest in further expansion of the scholarly field of agricultural extension and education. The coming year will be used to develop a business plan for the foundation of the society.

Martin Mulder
Editor-in-chief JAEE

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