

# Change in Agricultural Higher Education

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Change and leadership in agricultural higher education is a very important and challenging topic. The conference speakers and reaction panelists have presented many comments, examples, and stories on this subject. I have tried to organize my thoughts around three major points. First of all, I would like to address the subject of why change is needed and what are the triggers for change in agricultural higher education. Secondly, I would like to comment on the process of change itself based on the presentations made during this conference. Finally, I would like to discuss the management and the leadership of change and offer some conclusions in this regard.

## Why Change is Necessary

Many speakers at this conference offered a lot of very insightful comments and presentations on the need for change. To summarize these comments, I would say that there are some general reasons why change is needed in agricultural higher education all over the world. These triggers are more or less uniform throughout the world, but, of course, we can see them most clearly in the case of developed countries.

Trends and phenomena such as advances in information technology, globalization, and not staying with the status quo have been mentioned by previous speakers. These are obvious reasons why agricultural higher education needs to change along with the rest of higher education. But at the same time, this conference has presented evidence that there are also specific reasons why agricultural higher education needs to be changed even more than some other aspects of higher education.

First of all, as was mentioned by many speakers, the agriculture industry is declining in importance in most countries. I was shocked recently to learn that in my own country, Hungary, during this year, the car industry will export more than the Hungarian agriculture sector. Ten years ago, Hungary had no car industry at all. And, of course, we could go further with these sorts of examples. The changing role of agriculture is a strong reason to change agricultural higher education. It is also related to the fact that traditional agricultural subjects are being integrated with a set of additional subjects—food science, agribusiness, rural development, biology, biotechnology—all related to agriculture and are surely covering aspects previously covered in a traditional agricultural education. So, I would suggest that traditional agricultural education is also a declining industry. I think that is the most important specific reason for change in agricultural higher education.

This issue came up during our conference, but it has not received adequate attention. We were talking more about the obvious general reasons. I think that all of us, and especially the members of this consortium, have to pay more attention to the way in which the topic of agricultural higher education is packaged and presented. Agriculture or rural development? Agriculture or food science? Perhaps even the name of the consortium should be revisited on this basis. I think this is more important than changing the focus of the consortium by including research and education.

If we talk about change beyond these general reasons, there are a number of region-specific reasons why change is needed. We must understand that the content of the change is not necessarily the same in all regions of the world, though the general tendencies occur everywhere. For example, for countries in transition, obviously, there is a need for change there because of these general reasons. Right now, however, the main pressing issue is to adjust the system of agricultural higher education to suit the changing system of the economy and the management of the country. Institutions in transition economies should implement these changes in a way that allows them to cope with the global tendencies as well. But they need to change primarily because their environment changed dramatically and they do not fit the new environment or the requirements of that emerging new system. Traditionally, these countries have always separated their research and educational programs in different institutions. These programs are still focused on production and technology. There is little quality control. There are serious financial problems.

We might say similar things about the developing countries of the world where, again, all of the general tendencies occur. In developing countries, the main reason for change and moving ahead is really to create a system that is sustainable and to help the developing world solve its problems in institutional capacities, in human capacities, and in financial capacities.

In general, there are some overarching problems common to all institutions. However, there are definitely some specific local issues critical to the change process. Therefore, when we talk about change, we have to seek the right balance between general components of the change and the specific conditions in a given region. That is why I tend to agree with those who say that it is very difficult to copy foreign models in this change process. One can learn from all processes and from all examples, but solutions have to be local. They must be studied and suited to local conditions.

## The Process of Change

Another subject that arose during this conference is the process of change itself. What is involved in the change process? We have received a very good list of subjects from the case studies and the speakers' presentations in this regard. Obviously, I would begin the process with the highest priority: the need for refocusing teaching activities. This idea comes from the statement that I made earlier about broadening the curriculum of agricultural education. On the one hand, genetics, biology, and biotechnology should enter. On the other hand, natural resource management and environmental issues are inseparable from agricultural education. Finally, management, human aspects, and rural development are also essential parts of a new agenda and a new curriculum for agriculture.

Another subject that we discussed is the redesign of programs and the management of the agricultural educational process. I don't want to repeat the many good points which were made in this regard. I fully agree with those who emphasize that the teaching process as a whole needs to be less specialized in order to provide a good foundation for a flexible career for the students. I also agree that the development of personal capabilities and satisfaction of individual needs should receive higher priority in the teaching programs. I believe that modular training with many electives from which the students may choose is in the best interest of students.

The third issue, institutional and organizational reform, is one of the most difficult ones. And, on this issue we have not reached consensus as we have on some other issues. Many aspects of this theme have been addressed by previous speakers. First of all, it has been mentioned, but not discussed in detail, the special value of multidisciplinary universities. There are colleagues at this conference who come from an agricultural college at a multidisciplinary university, and there are several rectors of specialized agricultural universities. Although I do not want to draw any conclusions in this regard, I feel that the current global trend is toward multidisciplinary universities. We have to accept this trend because attending a multidisciplinary university offers students a lot of advantages compared with a specialized institution.

A second organizational and institutional issue is the relationship among education, research, and extension. Of course, for many countries, this does not seem to be a problem. In the United States or Western Europe there are institutions in which all of these activities are integrated in a proper manner. But this is not the case in all countries. For example, in my own part of the world, Central and Eastern Europe, one of the major problems is still the separation of research and education. I would argue that this institutional separation wastes resources. I would also suggest that this is a very important issue requiring additional discussion.

Under the theme of institutional and organizational reform there is also the issue of internal reform of the institutions. Again, many speakers have commented on this subject, but I would just like to mention a few items. Dr. Richard Foster, underlined the importance of quality control and accountability. There is a need for the creation of quality control and accountability mechanisms inside our institutions.

There is also the issue of democracy inside the institutions. This is a difficult subject because you can make mistakes very easily. You find in Central Europe a kind of university structure in which students are sitting in the senate and making critical decisions with only part of the faculty involved, on subjects that they are not obviously competent to decide. But, of course, it was a good move to include them. The practical aspects of internal democracy issues should receive more attention. In addition, policies and procedures for promotion and evaluation of faculty members is an area in which a democratic and merit-based approach is vital. These are very, very important issues and should be included in the change agenda.

Another aspect of the change agenda is the method of financing institutions of higher education. To some extent this conference presented an optimistic picture. However, I do not think that the financing of agricultural higher education is in good enough shape worldwide that we can sidestep this subject as we have done at this conference. Of course, we were talking about success stories. Obviously, those who managed these successful reforms were able to get funding. Yet, with the decline of agriculture and with the crisis of traditional agricultural higher education, there is also a crisis of financing in many countries. Funding for agricultural higher education is in relatively good shape in places such as the United States and in Western Europe. If we go beyond the industrialized countries, however, we have to accept the fact that financing is a real problem. Just saying that these institutions should involve the private sector is not the solution in those countries. In the lesser-developed parts of the world, the governments cannot avoid partially funding higher education.

There is also a need for special attention not only to agricultural higher education but to higher education in general. The world is not only a world of growth; there are declining economies in the world as well. In declining economies, just to maintain and safeguard certain institutions is an immense task. In many parts of the world there are basic financial difficulties in agricultural higher education. The lack of change in these systems is not because they do not want to change or are unable to explain what they want, but because of severe financial constraints. If the gross domestic product (GDP) in a country has declined by 40 percent in 10 years, there is no money almost anywhere in the system to finance big projects or even to maintain a minimum level of operations. So, I think that this safeguarding function is also important and we should not forget about it.

And, finally institutional change involves globalization, a move toward a global system. Many speakers commented on this subject. This consortium can play an increasingly important role in facilitating this process and helping to identify and communicate new trends, as well as the needs of a changing agricultural higher education for a global international audience.

## The Management of Change

Obviously, change needs to be managed and universities need to be managed. There have been many statements to the effect that change cannot occur without devoted and appropriate management. There is no more vital function in a university than appropriate management and leadership. Many important and useful conclusions were made in this regard, such as those offered by Dr. Ramon de la Peña Manrique. He and others identified very clearly the management aspects of their success such as vision, energy, and ability.

I would like to stress one point which did not get enough attention, and that is teamwork. Major or minor institutional change cannot be managed without a team. Change cannot be implemented by a university president acting alone. There is a need for a group of devoted people who are ready to work for this change. And, of course, that immediately brings the incentive issue into the discussion. We need not only champions, but champions who are ready to work continuously and work for a sustained change. Based on my experience, I believe that leadership is extremely important but must be coupled with resources and a team working together toward a goal. This conference has provided a good list of the potential pitfalls of institutional management: isolation, inbreeding, provincialism, inadequate quality control, and so on. I believe that if our consortium will continue to work on the leadership subject, we will be able to further analyze useful case studies.

At this conference, we have heard examples of two clearly different models of managing agricultural higher education. One is more or less the U.S. model in which institutions are led by professional managers. Their tenure might be only four years on the average, but they are professional managers. The second model is common in Europe and many other places and is based on elected management. I believe that the elected leadership has a higher risk than a well-selected professional manager, and that is the reason why universities in my region are generally poorly managed. There are exceptions, of course, and there are good leaders everywhere who bring about visible results. I think first of Professor Dmytro Melnychuk who provides leadership for the National Agricultural University of Ukraine, which is one of or perhaps the leading agricultural institution in the

Commonwealth of Independent States. I do not want to downplay the importance of the others, but nevertheless, leadership is elected. When we talk about management issues, we should pay attention to this fact and perhaps be a bit more accepting of the professional management of universities.

## Conclusion

Finally, using the privilege of representing one of the sponsors of this conference, I would like to offer one final remark about the role of international organizations and donor activities. In terms of donor support, agricultural higher education receives much, much less attention than, for instance, agricultural research or other agricultural activities. To further exacerbate the situation at least in Central and Eastern Europe, there is a kind of jungle of donor activities that are not always appropriately coordinated and in some cases, even compete with one another. For example there is the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), European Union TACIS Program, the German government's international development agency (GTZ), the British Council Know How Fund, the Canadian Fund, and others I could cite. The forum provided by this Consortium can offer an opportunity to bring these donors together and have a discussion with them. We could tell them our agenda and try to facilitate a higher level of coordination.

I believe that this conference indicates that agricultural higher education is ready to face the challenges of fundamental change. I am also convinced that agricultural higher education will reach a new level of development where we will be able to supply more competitive and better-trained experts for all countries.