



Ideas and Suggestions for the Reform of agricultural Research & Education

Results of the Conference „The AgAssessment and the Transformation of Agricultural Research & Education“ on 28.11.08 in the University of Hohenheim

There is a need for a transformation in agricultural research and education, in order to meet the current challenges for the food and nutrition sector. FRESH, a student initiative which recognizes the central role of food and nutrition in this process, organized a strategic discussion on the AgAssessment (IAASTD) and its impact on teaching and research in agricultural universities. The objective of this conference was to establish a platform for dialogue between students, the university and the public, aiming to formulate concrete suggestions for the integration of the focal areas of the AgAssessment into agricultural research and education, especially in the University of Hohenheim, Germany. The main conclusions of the conference stress the need for more communication across disciplines and extension of internal and external networking, as well as a strengthening of the ethical and practical orientation of teaching.

Workshop Results

Through plenary sessions, four thematic workshops and a podium discussion, the event provided the opportunity to 140 participants and 12 experts to get informed and discuss their ideas for improvements of research and teaching in Hohenheim. The main findings of these discussions are presented in this paper. The complete documentation of the results and conclusions will be published at the beginning of 2009.

Biotechnology

- Universities should take the opportunity to implement independent research on biotechnology more intensely. Regarding this, protection of Intellectual Property Rights by patents should be abolished in public research institutions.
- The university should qualify students to critically evaluate biotechnology as a research method and in practical application.
- Development of "Open Source", i.e. providing and using methods and knowledge which have been gained from research.
- Biotechnology should be used more intensively for solving local problems.

Natural Resource Management

Natural Resource Management (NRM) is connected to environmental factors (eg. soil, water, plant and animal diversity, vegetation cover, renewable energy, climate and ecosystem services) as well as the need to meet human and socioeconomic objectives. At the same time, it involves the trade of these resources. For this reason, it is necessary that NRM is achieved through coordinated, trans-disciplinary action. The need for cooperation and communication places discipline-oriented universities before a structural challenge. The following issues were raised during this thematic discussion:



- *Project-based Teaching*

Work based in small projects should obtain a prominent role in university teaching and financing of such projects should be simplified. This is a way for enabling deepening of knowledge and methods, without neglecting the importance of general interdisciplinary training. Simultaneously, necessary skills should be cultivated for the performance of independent and objective-oriented research

- *Reduction of Transaction Costs and Adaptation of Incentive Structures.*

Within research, trans-disciplinary projects that require cooperation with external stakeholders usually have high and prohibitive transaction costs. To this end, training on communication methods and technical support need to be enhanced. Interdisciplinary publication of research results need to be further promoted.

- *Reduction of bureaucratic hurdles*

Hurdles like long financing times for even small grants (ie. for excursions) pose difficulties to professors and researchers. A simplification of implementation procedures can be promising for more efficient utilization of funds.

Local Knowledge & Women in Agriculture

There is a need for the University to build capacity for enabling an efficient and integrative flow of information between sources of traditional, non-traditional and conventional scientific knowledge. For this, it is necessary to prepare students and researchers more effectively towards efficient performance in field research and delivery of results based on real problems and real human needs. Other areas include a responsible, transparent communication and feedback of results to local communities and involved stakeholders.

- *Innovative Areas of Teaching & Learning through coordinated Modules on:*
Spirituality & Sustainability; Course on Interactive Participation in the Field; Certificate in Gender Studies.
- *Innovative Approaches through Experiential Teaching & Learning Opportunities:*
Study Abroad Programmes; Interaction with indigenous People & Farmers in Campus; Visits & Internships in Farms, grass-root Movements etc.; 'Farm in Residence' Programme; Seminars with the active involvement of students in the curricula.
- *Innovative Extracurricular Activities:*
Student Seed Bank; 'Eat-in' in Campus; Participation of Students in local Food Production

International Trade

- Issues in different countries cannot be treated in the same way, therefore a main focus of research should be to realize that different commercial strategies for different countries should be applied. Additionally, researchers should obtain an integrated view of influences of trade at the micro and macro levels (ie. trade liberalization), as well as emerging consequences to individual households. This can be achieved through enhanced cooperation between different research institutes in universities.
- Ethical principles should be explicitly integrated and discussed in the university training of agricultural economists. For example, this can be achieved through involvement of external stakeholders into teaching.



- It is often critically emphasized that transnational enterprises influence local markets and small-scale farmers because of their strong position in the trade system. This should be taken into consideration and investigated through empirical research.

General Results and emerging Suggestions

The event provided a platform for constructive and motivated interaction between students, professors and other university initiatives from Hohenheim and other universities. Thus, the communication process between students and professors in the University of Hohenheim was put into a different perspective. We would like to encourage the University to explicitly discuss and integrate the results of the conference and the AgAssessment into the teaching and research agenda. The most important priorities for agricultural research and education in universities are: internal and external networking, trans-disciplinarity, practical application and ethics.

In particular, agricultural university research and education should be also focused on:

- Enhanced communication and coordination between the faculties and institutes, between Universities and practice, as well as between students and professors. For example, the involvement of external experts could be strengthened.
- Social responsibility in agricultural practice as well as ethical standards in the research process. This could be implemented through the institution of a Chair on Ethics and Philosophy of Agricultural, Natural and Economic Sciences.
- Redefinition and re-evaluation of ecological, social and economic impacts of agricultural activities, science and technology. This can occur through application-oriented case studies.
- Recognition of universities as communities of both educators and learners, through enhancing the dialogue between them.
- Promoting self-confidence and responsibility among students through integrative project-based work (ie. together with undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD students), especially in interdisciplinary study course from the early stages in university education.

Overview

As a student initiative, we welcome further contact with the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences in the University of Hohenheim and wish to continue the established dialogue between students and professors. Through this, we expect to promote the ideas for improvements that resulted from our conference, towards a positive transformation of agricultural research and education. Successful implementation of the suggested inputs in the University of Hohenheim, is expected to be diffused for improvements in other universities. We welcome your contribution to this dialogue.

Contact Person: Pavlos Georgiadis
mailto: pgeo@uni-hohenheim.de
Phone: +49 (0) 17621 777098

How FRESH sees this Conference

Our demands over the natural environment necessitate a renewed dialogue on our food systems. From production to processing and consumption, our choices have an enormous impact. All over the world, terms and peoples' demands are being redefined. Current crises in the interlinked sectors of Food, Energy and the Economy necessitate action at multiple levels. But they also provide a unique opportunity for current socio-political and academic institutions to change their ways of functioning, thinking and acting. By re-discovering, demonstrating and utilizing the basic values of our civilization that envisage that all humans are connected. The values that recognize that we have mutual responsibilities to help each other in order to meet the need for a more hopeful future.

We now know very well about what we are about to face. We are even in a position to model and foresee the challenges for the next generations. What are we doing for this? In order to find the right solutions, we need to ask the right questions. What kind of world do we want? How can we make humanity recognize the ecological circumstances that allowed our survival and our civilization? How can we understand that Nature and Culture is not a barrier? How can we produce in such a way that respects the planet's biodiversity instead of reducing it? How can we do all these?

Most of the times, the generation that takes decisions is not the one that pays the consequences. That is why we put the utmost of our efforts to organize the Conference on 'The AgAssessment and the Transformation of Agricultural Research & Education'. We invited internal and external experts to interact with students towards a fruitful discussion. We encouraged our fellow students to be part of this process. We asked them what they think. How can we do things better? What needs to be done?

The Conference focused in four of the most relevant themes, covered by the AgAssessment (IAASTD). We chose to discuss about **Biotechnology**, because we believe that it needs to produce more solutions than problems. We chose to discuss about **Natural Resource Management**, because we believe that sound practices can be achieved through better communication, co-operation, education and trans-disciplinarity. We chose to discuss about **International Trade**, because we believe that speculation and long chains are not more an option. We chose to discuss about **Local Knowledge & Women in Agriculture**, because we believe that indigenous communities are part of the solution, not part of the problem! And that women hold the key to some of the most painful challenges, like the global population.

The Food Revitalisation & Eco-Gastronomic Society of Hohenheim (FRESH) represents a new generation of people involved in agricultural research and education. We are the ones that will try to achieve the Efficiency Revolution. We are the ones that will have to start thinking for not just feeding people, but every life on Earth! This is what 'Feeding the World' really means. We want to know about our food and we take pleasure from this knowledge. We see this as a source of pleasure that unites all people that share it. We want to know the history of the food we enjoy and where it comes from. We like to imagine the hands of the people who have produced, transported, processed and cooked it before it is served to our plate. We don't want the food we eat to deprive food from others in the world. We like traditional farmers, the relationship they have with the Earth and their way of appreciating what is good. We understand that good belongs to everyone! That pleasure belongs to everyone, for it is human nature.

We understand that there is a clear connection between our PLATE and our PLANET.

Our message is clear! In order to make poverty history, we need to make DIALOGUE the future! We need to make BIODIVERSITY the future! We need to make CULTURAL DIVERSITY the future! We need to make FOOD REVITALISATION and ECO-GASTRONOMY the future!

The Conference succeeded in generating a platform for creative and progressive discussion between the students and the Faculty of the University, as well as the public. This dialogue does not finish now and FRESH is committed to its responsibilities towards keeping it alive. Any initiative with a creative spirit can lead in this way towards a positive change that will enhance the revitalisation of the history and the future of food and its production process. We hence present the results of our Conference and we are looking forward to discuss its ideas and considerations as of how can we see this transformation in research and education taking place. What steps need to be done first?

<http://fresh.uni-hohenheim.de>