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The next generation of European farmers: solutions from Romania

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In Romania, as in other member states of the European Union, the creation of a next generation of farmers is vital for a revived agricultural sector. The dual professional education, a system which combines work-based learning through apprenticeships in companies with school-based learning in technical and vocational high schools, is a viable solution for the labour force crisis in agriculture. But for it to work, respect for vocational education must be regained, and authorities must support schools and employers to develop strong partnerships.

Shifting patterns: why do we need work-based learning for the future farmers?

Over the last two decades, the greatest changes in employment took place in industry and agriculture. At EU level, the share of industry in total employment diminished from 20.7% to 15.3%, while the share of agriculture from 8.5%

to 4.5%. Moreover, in the next 15 years, the agricultural labour force is expected to decline by 28%, reaching 6.6 million people by 2030.

The next generation of farmers is a top priority for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). In all member states, the farmers population is getting older. Across the European Union, more than 68% of the population working in agriculture is over 40 years old. Between 2012 and 2016, the total EU agricultural employment shrank by 8%. Among the structural changes across the sector that are the causes of this trend, increased investment in technology is noteworthy. The necessary skills mix is shifting towards more technology-centred knowledge, thus agricultural training for farmers is becoming paramount. For a revived agricultural sector, a real generational change must take place.

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The same problem is encountered in Romania: almost 65% of the population working in agriculture is over 40 years old. The leaders of the agricultural associations warned the authorities that the Romanian agricultural producers face a very high labour force deficit. The workers are old, many of them have even exceeded the retirement age. The sector is not attractive for young people, and the education system does not provide them with the necessary skills. Often, producers are forced to import over-specialised workers at higher prices from neighbouring countries.

Technical and vocational education

The solution seems simple: the development of better technical and vocational education and training (TVET). However, the Romanian education system is unable to cope with the challenges of the labour market. This is a general problem of the entire system, but it becomes acute in the case of TVET.

In the last two decades, the technological and vocational sector suffered because of ill-fated reforms resulting in a constant decrease in popularity among youth. Technical and vocational high schools are perceived as the worst options available for eighth grade pupils.

The figures reflect the reality:

- 85% of employers consider that the number of TVET graduates is insufficient;

- 8 out of 10 craftsmen reckon that they learned more from practical experience outside schools than from schools;
- 70% of human resources managers say that TVET is not adapted to the requirements of the labour market.

For a quality technical and vocational education, more work-based learning is essential. However, the equipment and the workrooms, as well as the curricula, are old and inadequate, and the partnerships between high schools and economic agents are scarce. The Local Social Partnership Development Committees (CLDPS) are platforms intended to put together school inspectorates and employers at the local level. However, many employers have not been invited to dialogue, they have not heard about CLDPS or their opinion has not been taken into consideration.

“We, the economic agents, can offer practice opportunities for high schools. We also discussed with the agricultural machinery dealers, and they are eager to get involved and develop together with the schools study programmes, to ensure optimal conditions for learning, but the state has to open more agricultural schools”, says a leader of the National Agricultural Association.

Dual professional education: a potential solution for the need of work-based learning within TVET

The dual professional education is a branch of TVET. It combines work-based learning through

apprenticeships in companies, with school-based learning in technical and vocational high schools. The companies provide tutors for the pupils and they also get involved in the development of curricula. The dual professional education is often seen as a guarantee for an effective partnership between the school and the employer.

Students receive a scholarship from the national authorities, and at least the same amount of money from the employer. At the same time, the employer must ensure all the other material benefits of the students, the security norms at work and the medical insurance. All the expenses incurred by them for learning purposes are tax-deductible.

Most of the partnerships for dual education are usually concluded between schools and economic agents from industry and trade. In 2017-2018, for the first time in Romania, the model was piloted also in agriculture. Two schools implemented it, and presently 40 pupils are being prepared in an agricultural specialisation by high schools and the employers they collaborate with.

Can the dual system work for agricultural education?

There are, however, several challenges that agricultural dual professional education faces, which are not generally encountered in other sectors such as industry and trade.

First of all, in dual professional education, the pressure on employers is high. Small and medium enterprises might be unable to meet all the required conditions. More than 92% of the agricultural holdings in Romania have less than 5 ha. 5.3% of them have between 5 ha and 10 ha. Many of them lack the capacity to get involved in the formation of the future farmers. Only in the more developed regions dual professional education might have success, if clustered around big agricultural holdings.

Another challenge is represented by the strict conditions posed by the regulations of the dual professional education: the practical instruction must take place with groups of 10-15 students and the classes should not have more than three professional qualifications. Again, the majority of small farms do not need so many students. Classes formation in dual professional education proves to be difficult with the present regulation.

But things can get better

The fact that there are some challenges does not mean that dual professional education in agriculture is not one of the potential solutions for the crisis of the agricultural education in Romania.

To begin with, for a revived agricultural sector, the government must tackle the issue of the negative perception of the whole TVET. A national promotion campaign initiated by the Ministry of Education together with the National Centre for the Development of Vocational and

Technical Education (CNDIPT) would be useful in this sense. At the same time, local inspectorates should encourage high schools to develop their own promotion campaigns at a local level.

For a strong relationship between schools and economic agents, the CLDPS, as they are now, are not enough. Authorities should improve the capacity of the CLDPS. Moreover, additional tools, such as online platforms on which the high schools could get in touch directly with the employers, could be created in order to ensure a better communication between the stakeholders.

In addition to that, the local inspectorates could organise events intended to bring together high schools with farmers, employers, but also agricultural machinery manufacturers and dealers and representatives of the pharmaceutical industry (fertilisers, pesticides, fungicides etc). Students must also prove their skills to employers. Therefore, high schools should be directly interested in discussing the organisation of workshops and study visits that would help them enhance their skills.

If the rules upon which dual professional education is organised in Romania were to become more flexible in the case of the agricultural profile, it would be easier for high schools to start dual agricultural classes.

Furthermore, agricultural cooperatives consisting of unified small farms, also in great need of workers, could be encouraged to establish partnerships with agricultural high

schools. In a longer term, the creation of more cooperatives would contribute, though not directly, to solving the problem of the lack of potential from the part of the small agricultural holdings.

Finally, agricultural high schools should be helped to build capacity in order to be able to use opportunities such as Erasmus+ and European Social Fund to improve the skills of their students through exchange programmes for the youth, twinning programmes with agricultural high schools from other member states, workshops for gaining more transversal skills and other activities that would finally incentivise employers to become interested in the organisation of dual professional classes. Some high schools are already doing this, but others lack the capacity to make use of these opportunities. A more systematic approach could ensure the capacity building needed for them to get involved in such activities. Moreover, tracer studies should be concluded in order to monitor the evolution of the students in the labour market.

Conclusion

Dual professional education is a potential solution for the workforce crisis in Romanian agriculture. For a revived agricultural sector, young farmers must be properly trained.

However, for the dual education system to work some things must change: interest in agriculture and respect for the vocational education must be regained, and authorities must support

schools and employers to develop strong and functional partnerships.

The challenges Romania faces in the implementation of the dual system in agricultural education together with the set of solutions identified so far gives us the chance to regard work-based learning as an answer to the labour force crisis in European agriculture. Generally, the dual education system is not necessarily associated with agriculture. However, if carefully adapted to the agricultural sector and to national contexts, it can become an effective tool for creating the next generation of farmers in more member states of the European Union.

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