

The Experiences of the Transforming Extension Training in Hungary

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Abstract: Starting in 2014, the legislation pertaining to agricultural extension has undergone significant changes in Hungary. The Minister for Agriculture and the Minister heading the Prime Minister's Office issued a joint decree on agricultural and rural development extension activities. The decree lays greater emphasis on the existence of advisory competence and on the acquisition of the necessary knowledge and advisory skills. According to the new decree, an advisor has to participate in the basic training within one year of commencing agricultural extension activities and has also to pass a basic examination. In 2016, 230 newly registered advisors participated in compulsory basic training. The training was held in small groups. Our case study also wishes to provide an answer to how the training system that has been developed as a result of the measures implemented by the decree has changed the attitude of new advisors and the effectiveness of the work they perform. The applied training method concentrated on the participant's learning: it resulted in experience-based learning built on a foundation of structured practices, which included having the members of the training group solve tasks and situation exercises, which allowed them to determine the method, quality, and pace of learning. The light, playful mood ensured that participants showed their embedded behavioural patterns, which gave the group a chance to familiarise themselves with those and analyse them. The learning process was motivated and supported by an atmosphere based on trust and helping others. The feedback provided by the experiences and participants also confirms that the applied training method has proven to be very effective as regards the energy input and the achieved results. During the two-day training, participants underwent significant development regarding their self-knowledge, communication abilities, and cooperation skills.

Key words: agricultural extension, training of advisors, registry of agricultural advisors

1. Practical and Theoretical Background

Agriculture is an important sector of the Hungarian economy. In the case of most crops, the country's natural attributes, topographical qualities, and highly fertile soils make it possible to attain good yields. Presently, more than one and half million households are in some way connected to agriculture. The majority of producers operate as private farmers, with a smaller proportion working in the form of associated enterprises.

In order to ensure the necessary information, the government has created a multi-level extension service structure, which has changed and improved significantly over the last decades. As a result of this improvement more and more producers recognise the possibilities in extension and each year there are more people demanding these services.

1.1 Demands of Qualification of Agricultural Advisors

Admission to the **Registry of Agricultural Advisors** can be gained through application. The Registry of Agricultural Advisors contains the essential data of the agricultural advisors who possess the necessary – higher education – qualifications, experience, a police clearance certificate, and who do not pursue agro-commercial and/or agricultural agent activities. Agricultural advisors can be acknowledged in a maximum of three specializations out of the available 24, depending on their qualifications and experience.

Advisors can presently choose from the 24 specializations listed below:

Arable plant production	Land management
Animal husbandry	Processing animal products
Horticulture	Processing plant products
Landscaping and garden architecture	Processing vegetables and fruits
Veterinary science, animal health care	Beverage manufacturing
Forest and wood management	Processing tobacco products
Game management	Agricultural economy, farming
Fishery	Agro-tourism
Plant protection	Logistics
Melioration, water management	Ecological farming
Mechanical engineering	Nutrient management, soil protection
Environmental management	Rural development

Starting in 2014, the legislation pertaining to agricultural extension has undergone significant changes in Hungary. The Minister for Agriculture and the Minister heading the Prime Minister's Office issued a joint decree on agricultural and rural development extension activities. The decree lays greater emphasis on the existence of agricultural extension competence and on acquisition of the necessary knowledge and advisory skills. According to the new decree, an advisor has to participate in basic training within one year of commencing agricultural extension activities and also has to pass a basic examination. Advisors then have to acquire 50 credit points in the form of freely selected self-training.

1.2 Conditions of Being Enrolled and Staying in the Registry of Advisors

The **annual performance assessment of agricultural advisors** is implemented on the basis of the criteria set in the ministerial announcement. Table 1 shows the assessment criteria.

Table 1: The annual performance assessment of agricultural advisors

Assessment criteria	
1	Result of basic examination (according to the examination certificate)
2	Knowledge of agricultural subsidies
3	Number of agricultural advisory service contracts
4	Number of recurring contractors
5	Opinions of contractors
6	Number of presentations and programmes organised by the agricultural advisor
7	Obligatory further training
8	Other trainings

Source: Vér, Milics, and Kozári (2013)

The agricultural advisors' knowledge of the topics of the obligatory further training (Nos 1, 2 and 7 out of the assessment criteria) is assessed by computerised tests ensuing the completion of the further training.

The further training constitutes an important part, though it is merely one component of **the annual performance assessment of agricultural advisors**; the assessment based on the rest of the criteria has been designed and is implemented with the aid of MoA.

Annual reports submitted by agricultural advisors serve as the basis of assessment. The assessment **criteria** along with the **detailed rules** are disclosed in the form of a **ministerial announcement** at the beginning of the assessment period.

1.2.1 Basic Training and Examination

Regulations on the further training and performance assessment of agricultural advisors are disclosed in an annual announcement issued by the ministerial department in charge of managing agricultural advisory activities.

Obligatory further training is realised in the form of a **basic examination**, to be taken within 1 year ensuing the commencement of agricultural advisory activities (except for those completing university course on extension).

Topics of the basic examination:

- a) the system and practice of supported agricultural and rural development extension,
- b) knowledge of the related IT systems,
- c) agricultural extension basics and methodology.

1.2.2 Compulsory Yearly Further Training and Examination

The obligatory further training – including its course material – is free of charge for agricultural advisors.

Last year the National Extension Committee elaborated a recommendation about the modification of the yearly compulsory training for the registered advisors. This compulsory training happens in a credit system (NAK 2017).

The topics of the trainings are as follows:

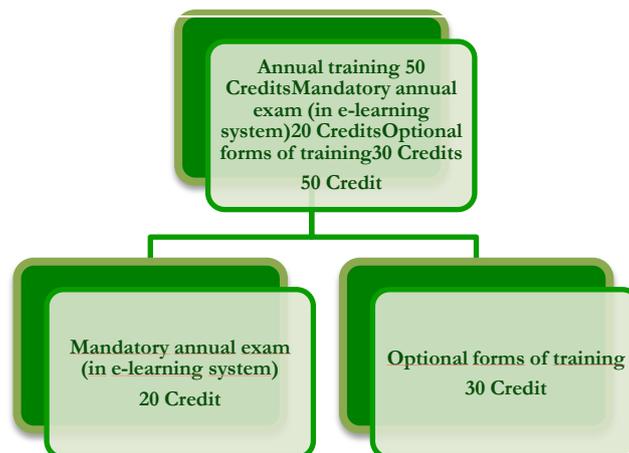


Figure 1: Yearly further trainings (credit system)

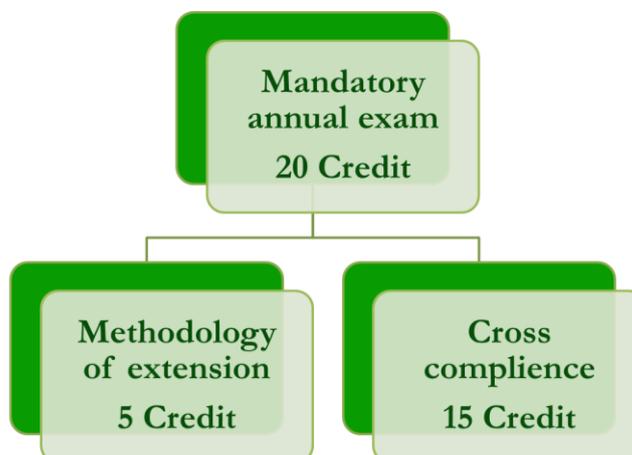


Figure 2: Fields of annual training opportunities

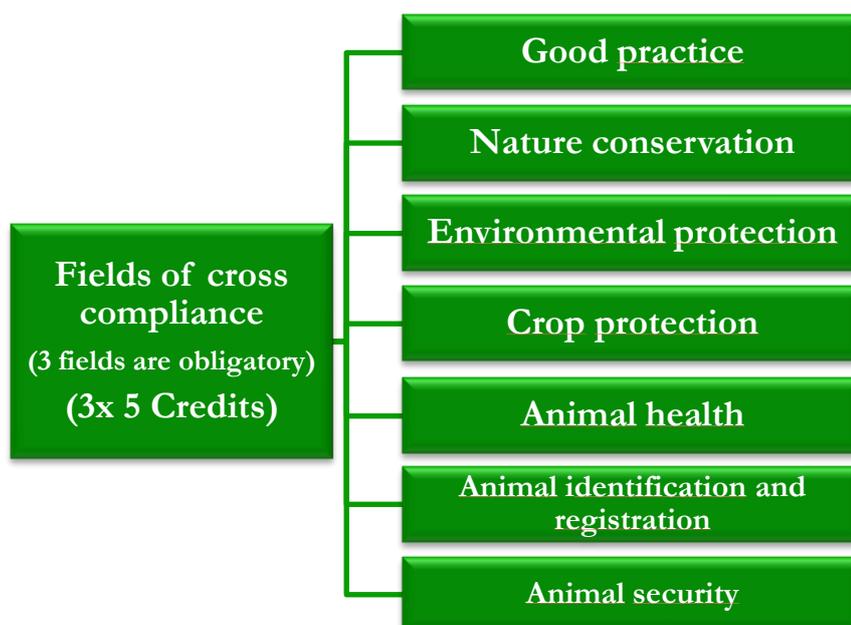


Figure 3: Fields of cross compliance (15 credits)

The opportunities of the optional forms of self-education can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Optional forms of self-education (30 credits/year)

Type of the event		Credits
Conferences	national	6
	regional	4
Technical and technological demonstrations	national	6
	regional	4
Variety shows		4
Forums		3
Introduction of innovations		5
Trainings related to actual tasks (e.g. filling in GN, e-application)		5
Software shows		4
Vocational and special engineer training		10
Agricultural journal subscription		3/pcs
Special exhibitions and fairs	national	6
	regional	3
Farmer days	national	6
	regional	3

Source: NAK 2017

2. Questions, Purpose

A condition for inclusion in the Registry of Agricultural Advisors is an engineering degree in the files of agriculture, forest management, or rural development; or 3 or 5 years of professional experience. The members of the training team already had the technical knowledge related to their qualifications, but they had not completed previous studies regarding the theoretical and practical issues of agricultural extension. In the interest of ensuring that partici-

pants learned the basics and methodology of agricultural extension, they had to participate in a two-day communications training.

The aim of the training was to assess and develop advisors' existing communication skills, to increase their ability to cooperate, and to learn the knowledge transfer methods that can be applied in agricultural extension.

E-learning study materials on the supported agriculture and rural development extension systems and the connected IT systems were created, which were made available to the advisors in the registry by way of the Agricultural Chamber's website. At the end of the training, the participants took an online test exam that covered these topics and an oral exam that covered the methodology topics.

3. Case Description

3.1 Preparations for the training

In 2016, of the 238 obligated advisors, 230 newly registered advisors participated in a mandatory basic training. To reach this high percentage of participation, *awareness-raising* programs were launched 2 months before start of the training with the aim of calling attention to their importance. In cooperation with the Chamber's employees, we jointly presented the structure, topics, and the availability of materials. Chamber employees also presented the conditions for registering for the training, including details of its importance and the penalties for failure to participate. Close to 70% of the obligated parties participated in the awareness raising programs, in addition to which all involved parties also received email *newsletters* on the training. Despite the above, only 50% had selected a training time and location as of the closing of the registration interface. Due to the importance of the training, we also used a third communication channel: we contacted people by *phone*. During the phone calls, we assessed the reasons why the advisor candidate did not register by the deadline. The following reasons were given:

- I misread the deadline,
- I entirely forgot,
- I didn't think it as that important,
- I didn't think the training was necessary.

However, the phone calls led to 96% registration within 1 day. Due to the above reasons, we decided to remind participants about the time and place of training in a *text message* on the day prior to the training. A significant part of the advisors went out of their way to express their gratitude for the comprehensive information provided about the exam with the use of multiple channels. Any negative feelings stemming from the mandatory nature of the training were soon dissipated as participants realised its importance.

The trainings were held in November and December, when advisors generally have less work. Even despite of this, close to 30% of the advisors indicated that they were not happy about participation because it is "mandatory". Since the majority had not yet participated in communications training, they did not have any expectations.

Registration was possible via an online interface, with the system automatically closing registration when a training group had 20 participants. Since the groups were filled in order of registration, the distribution of men and women was arbitrary. The group was therefore heterogeneous as regards sex, profession, and age. The youngest advisor was 28 years old and the oldest was 72. This heterogeneous composition provided for a possibility to get to know and accept different approaches.

We selected the training locations by taking into account the geographical spread of advisors. When selecting the location, another criterion was that free parking be available in the vicinity and that advisors travelling larger distances be able to find accommodation in the city. On the third day, participants took an online exam at the training location, which meant a computer

room was also required where at least 15 people could take the exam simultaneously. Advisors had to reach a score of 70% in the online exam to qualify for the verbal exam. A panel of three members evaluated advisor performance at the verbal exams, deciding whether they passed or failed.

3.2 Training structure

Our case study also wishes to provide an answer to how the training system that has been developed as a result of the measures implemented by the decree has changed the attitude of new advisors and the effectiveness of the work they perform. The applied training method led to learning through the structured experience of practice concentrated on participant activity.

During the course of the training, participants learned the definition of agricultural extension as well as its financial and social objectives. They were provided an overview of the tasks performed by agricultural advisors. The training also included the job roles and tasks of the people working in the field of agricultural extension. They learned what farmers expect of advisors, the steps of advisory aimed at problem-solving and problem-avoidance, the motivational tools necessary for launching change, the role of communication in the work of advisors, and the factors that influence the effectiveness of the various communication channels. The above topics were aimed at filling a gap, as less than 5% of participants had taken part in similar trainings.

Following the theoretical part of the training, tests were used to assess the current level of interpersonal communication. We presented the factors that can significantly influence the efficiency of communication. The learning process was motivated and supported by an atmosphere based on trust and mutual help.

The members of the training group solved tasks and situation exercises, which allowed them to determine the method, quality, and pace of learning. The light, playful mood ensured that participants showed their embedded behavioural patterns, which gave the group a chance to familiarise themselves with those and analyse them.

The backbone of the training consisted of practices that simulated certain real-life situations in a playful environment. This playful nature ensured that participants acted spontaneously and displayed the behavioural patterns that had become embedded in the course of their everyday lives. After completing a given task, the group analysed the events and discussed their experiences. Recognizing and shedding light on the lessons thus learned ensured that when advisors encounter a similar situation or problem, they will avoid the usual pitfalls and will select a solution that differs from what they would have normally used and that is more effective.

Besides communication, the use of knowledge transfer methods also substantially influences the success of an advisor's work. Since the participants in the training program had not yet received methodology training, we provided a presentation of the knowledge transfer methods that can be used in agricultural extension, including the possibilities for their use and their weaknesses.

During the training, we also assessed what tools and methods the participants had used in their previous agricultural extension work and the effectiveness they had had. Advisors also had the possibility to share their personal experiences. Based on the feedback received from advisors, it can be established that those professionals were able to effectively use these methods even those who had acquired a second or even third degree in teaching. However, the number of advisors with such qualifications was negligible. Accordingly, the methodology that advisors are taught should be integrated in an expanded manner in the obligatory trainings.

The training also included a presentation of the agricultural knowledge and information system and dealt with the possibilities inherent in the cooperation between players. Advisors

have to continuously cooperate with the authorities, offices, and education institutions in the interest of serving their clients. The training provided us with a picture of the willingness of advisors to cooperate; by sharing their personal experiences, they presented the results they had achieved thus far.

4. Conclusion of the Training

Compared to the previous period, the training time had doubled, with a verbal exam added to it. The online exam could be taken at any time within 1 month after the training from anywhere, even from home. According to the new system, the mandatory training lasts 16 hours and the online exam has to be taken on-site, serving as a prerequisite for the subsequent oral exam. Since the training has undergone significant changes and has been made more stringent, comprehensive information had to be provided to ensure it was accepted. These programs allowed advisors to understand and partly or entirely accept the necessity of these changes.

Despite the above, we were only able to achieve a high level of participation by using several types of communication channels: letters, phone calls, and text messages.

The initial bad feelings due to the obligatory nature of the training were changed by providing ongoing, comprehensive information following the group information as well as with the use of individual communication methods.

The applied training method was used to transfer knowledge oriented around active practice.

The results of the interpersonal communication tests were worse than expected. Of 120 points, the advisors achieved an average of 82, which is equal to the communication skills of someone with average skills and a secondary education. Only 5% received exceptional results. If we accept the finding that the work of advisors is significantly influenced by their communication skills, the level of such skills has to be further developed in the future.

We also identified serious deficiencies based on the use of knowledge transfer methods. Less than 5% of the participants uses group knowledge-transfer methods. This was limited almost exclusively to those advisors who also had teaching qualifications or had previously worked at jobs where they had been required to organise presentations.

Although, in theory, advisors were familiar with the possibilities of cooperation, in practice they required help in solving the playful tasks.

At the end of the training, the advisors evaluated the training by filling out a satisfaction survey, which provided the following results:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. the location of the training: | 4.95 |
| 2. materials and availability: | 4.80 |
| 3. trainers: | 4.99 |
| 4. usefulness of the training: | 4.93 |
| 5. other recommendations: | more such trainings are required |

The feedback provided by participants also confirms that the applied training method has proven to be very effective as regards the energy input and the achieved results.

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