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Editorial – Extension education theory and research in India

Dear reader,

On January 27-30, 2016, the international conference on extension education took place in Varanasi, India. The conference was organized by the Department of Extension Education of the Institute of Agricultural Sciences, at the Banaras Hindu University (BHU), which is with nearly 40,000 students, one of the largest residential universities in Asia. The major thrust behind this conference was Dr Kalyan Ghadei, faculty member of the Department, and recent visiting professor at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA, in the United States. BHU was founded in 1916, so the university is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. Varanasi is the global centre of Hinduism, and considered to be one of the most ancient cities which still exists. The city lies on the banks of the river Ganga (Ganges), which is considered to be holy in the Hindu religion. It is a destination of pilgrimage and cremation, as Hindus believe that all sins are washed off by a holy dip in the river, and that when the ashes of the deceased are being spread into its water, the soul goes directly to heaven. With the city of Sarnath at only thirteen kilometres (which is, because of the hectic traffic, still a one hour drive from the centre of Varanasi), it is a melting pot of belief systems, as Sarnath is a global pilgrimage destination for Buddhists, as this is the place where Buddha gave his first teaching in 528 BCE. There are magnificent excavations with remaining structures of temples and stupas.

Against the background of the cultural heritage of BHU, it was to be expected that there were various rituals performed during the inaugural function of the conference, such as garlanding the bust of the university founder Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, the lighting of the lamp, the kulgeet (the BHU Anthem, written by Dr S.S.Bhtnagar: ‘So sweet serene, infinitely beautiful. This is the presiding centre of all learning ...’) by students of the Department of Performing Arts of BHU, the floral welcome of guests, and chanting by the Organizing Secretary, impressive.

On the first day, the conference was opened with the inaugural session. The welcome address was given by Conference Director Prof Ravi Pratap Singh, who was followed by Joint Conference Director Prof. A. Vaishampayan who is the Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and who gave an introduction on BHU, who was followed by the Organizing Conference Secretary, Dr Kalyan Ghadei, who gave an overview of the conference organization. He mentioned that the organizing committee received 418 submissions which were reviewed, of which 221 were accepted as paper presentations and 187 as poster presentations, which is a total of 408, and an acceptance rate of 98%. The conference participants were from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the USA. Furthermore he stated that the conference covered three major themes: agricultural extension education, agricultural education research and agricultural education services.

The next part of the function was the 'felicitation' of the guests and conferring the agricultural leadership award, followed by the launch of the book of abstracts of the conference and the collection of articles about agricultural extension education by Dr Ghadei. Next, Guest of Honour Dr. V.V. Sadamate, former advisor of the Agricultural Planning Commission of India, Guest of Honour Prof. G. Trivedi, former Vice Chancellor of RAU, followed by myself, Chief Patron and Vice Chancellor Prof. Girish Chandra Tripathi, Vice Chancellor of BHU, and Conference Chairman, Prof. A.K. Singh, Head of the Department of Extension Education, had the floor.

The inaugural session showed what I have experienced earlier at an international extension education conference in New Delhi, which is that very many functionaries are being involved in sessions. Not only was this the case in the plenary sessions, but also in paper sessions, in which there were chairs, co-chairs and typically two rapporteurs, and of course the presenters.

There were several keynote speeches. I was given the honour to give the opening keynote, which was on Emerging Trends in Competence-Based Extension Education Science. My argument was that extension education science has been in an identity crisis, as many theories from the past are not valid any more. Many newer theories have been developed, but there is an enormous diversity and a lack of consensus. I stated that an important characteristic of extension education is that it is a learning process, and that I conceptualize extension education from that perspective. But also in the learning sciences there are many developments, and differences of opinion. I have listed various extension education and learning theories, and said that competence-based extension education is of key importance for the advancement of extension education theory, research and practice. I have explained what I mean by competence-based extension education, which is in line with what I have been publishing in the *Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension* before. I see competence as the capability to realize effective performance. I distinguished the three categories of competence theory, which are related to 1. behaviour training, 2. integrated education, and 3. situated professional development, and added three categories of competencies, for 1. known tasks, 2. known occupations, and 3. the unknown future. I stated that the latter category of competencies needs much attention in education, as agricultural education prepares graduates who not only have to be able to carry out given tasks and fulfil defined responsibilities, but who also need to be able to create new solutions for given and future challenges, stressing the importance of competence domains like creativity, creation-ability, entrepreneurship, mindfulness, and intuition.

Dr. Dipak De, Professor at BHU, followed with a presentation on Entrepreneurship, which nicely fitted to mine. He stressed the importance of various competencies in the field of entrepreneurship, such as sensitising needs, vitalising skills, capitalising capabilities, visualising options, channelling creativity, rationalising strategies, finalising plans, prioritising activities, customising services, popularising products, minimising expenses, maximising profits, legitimating deals and concretising values.

During the next day I gave a presentation about publishing research in scholarly journals and assessment of research output along the lines of what I published in my previous Editorial. There was a special request for giving this presentation, as the conference organizers thought that it could help the publishing of papers in academic journals by the conference participants. One of the key questions arising from the presentation was the unjust hegemony of the Web of Knowledge, the related impact factors of the journals included in the Science Citations Indices and the regional bias. This indeed is an issue which is

heavily debated worldwide, as the impact factor has been created not to assess researchers, but to assess the quality of a journal. However, institutional, national and international funding agencies and assessment organizations are increasingly looking at the impact factors of the journals in which researchers are publishing. In Wageningen University for instance, the Tenure Track system rewards assistants, associate and personal professors six credits for publications in the top quartile of the lists of journals in the WoS, with four credits for publications in the second to fourth quartile of the list, and two credits for international academic peer reviewed journals. Universities in most cases can determine by themselves which promotion and tenure criteria and standards they want to use.

Secondly, an essential question was related to the opinions of reviewers and editors regarding a manuscript. In my opinion, assessors of articles should be well-informed about the state of research in their field or specialisation. They have the full right to reject a manuscript which does not add new insights into a certain topic that may have been studied years ago. Whereas a theme may be new for a given author that does not mean that it is worthwhile to publish. The criterion is that a manuscript should be new in the field; it should be an original contribution. This, however, does not mean that an assessor should not reject a manuscript just based on disagreement with the theoretical background, or the methodological approach chosen. Personal preference for a kind of theory or methodology should be set aside, however difficult this is. Assessors should always try to be neutral umpires.

Other interesting lead papers were given by Dr. Sankar Acharya on social entropy and chaos in farm metabolism of India and the application of social physics in extension education, and Dr. V.V. Sadamate, on future agricultural extension strategies for enhanced performance. Dr. Anne Adrian, of Auburn University, USA, gave a keynote address on eXtension: Serving Extension Educators with Innovation and Professional Development. I think eXtension, pronounced as e-Extension, is a catchy concept, as it expresses the computer-enhanced practice of extension. eXtension is a US-wide foundation of stakeholders in extension, which provides performance support for extension professionals. It is embedded in the cooperative extension system within the USA and strives to contribute to innovation and is aimed at increasing impact. It provides an i-Three issue corps, an i-Three innovation lab, and i-Three project solutions. I think it is very good that the foundation is aiming for establishing measurable impact. eXtension has had interesting projects in 2015 as mapping, personalised learning, micro-learning, virtual communication and others such as virtual reality, mobile apps, and augmented reality. These are all cutting edge e-technology enhanced learning and development practices. Next steps are to support continuous professional development, communicating impact (what works and why?), pesticide training, competence framework development, and social media strategies. This is a timely and promising initiative in my opinion, and worth to be looked in more deeply.

Unfortunately, I could not attend the keynote of Dr. G. Trivedi.

There were 24 parallel sessions, each of which had one of more lead paper presentations. I could only attend some of them, of which the one of Dr. Niraj Kumar, was on branding agricultural education in the Indian Context. I found it an important contribution, as branding of agricultural education is essential. Branding is related to imaging, and there is no doubt that in many parts of the world agricultural education is perceived as less attractive than medical, business and computer science education. Agricultural educators can do a lot in terms of making their programs more attractive. This should be more than rebranding, as that behaviour is mercilessly punished by students. If agricultural education institutes want to

go the way of better branding, they should totally rethink their mission, vision, strategy and services. I told that Wageningen University did that, and that appeared to be a great strategic choice, as student numbers which were declining year after year, started to increase again, by such a rate that during the last ten years the number of BSc and MSc students more than doubled. A fierce discussion started because I had stated that it has also been important to rename the university, from Wageningen Agricultural University in to Wageningen University. Such a choice was heavily contested, as the agricultural scope of certain programs is their unique selling point, such was the argument. However, re-branding agricultural universities as universities which address global challenges like health, climate change, food for all, a green living environment, sustainable tourism, etc., whose mission statements could be in improving the quality of life (as is used in Wageningen), could help to reset the image the public has about the agricultural university.

The individual papers were grouped in five categories of sessions, which were labelled as 1. Innovative methods and effectiveness of teaching methods in extension education, 2. New media, ICTs and communication research, 3. Women and youth access to extension services and their empowerment, 4. Restructuring the extension education curriculum and policy initiatives and innovations in extension services, and 5. Sustainable agriculture. The number of sessions per category differed significantly. There was only one session on sustainable agriculture. Based on an analysis of the content descriptions and lead papers, I came to the following description of the themes addressed in the conference.

1. Descriptions and future trends of extension. This theme covered sessions and papers on policy initiatives and innovations in extension services, private sector/ NGOs/ producer organizations and their role in agricultural extension, agricultural extension services: status and prospects, research on agricultural innovations systems, justification for support of extension services, global trends in agricultural extension research, future agricultural extension Strategies : for enhanced performance, initiatives in agricultural education and extension in India under AIP, new dimensions of extension education, and scapegoating of extension for failure on transfer.
2. Farmer-centred research. This theme covered farmers-centred research in extension education, farmers-scientists interaction, and innovative methods in training of extension personnel and farmers, research and publishing on extension and education, advances in evaluation and impact research methodology, emerging trends in extension research, bibliometric analysis of extension research output, new research designs and methods/ tools in extension education, and impact of extension services.
3. Extension education development. This theme included institutional and infrastructure development for better teaching and learning in extension education, prioritization of extension education in the overall frame of farming system developments, restructuring extension education curriculum, values, capacity development of extension students and professionals, innovative methods of teaching for extension education, and effectiveness of teaching methods in extension education.
4. Specific domains. This included morality and ethics in extension education, entrepreneurship development among extension students, sustainable agriculture, and gender mainstreaming.
5. Information and communication technology (ICT), including ICT in Agricultural Extension and ICT's deployed in extension to improve Farm Productivity.

So these themes covered the three grand themes of the conference largely (education, research and extension practice). On top of that, there were a number of specific domains, which are partly related to education (ethics and entrepreneurship), and partly to extension practice (sustainable agriculture and gender mainstreaming), but these topics should all be applied in both agricultural education and agricultural extension.

This listing of conference themes and subthemes shows that the scope of the conference was quite broad, and that it gave a good overview of the field. Like in the conference in New Delhi which I already mentioned, quite some authors of submissions did not show up. At the end of the day, only 42 abstracts were published in the book of abstracts, which is only 10% of the 408 accepted papers and posters. Strategies need to be found to make conferences like these more effective in terms of presence of programmed presenters. Apart from this detail, the conference was more than worth attending. Again, many old friends in the field of agricultural education and extension have met again, and new friends have been made.

On special request of Professor Rajendra Kumar Pandey, chair of the Department of Animal Husbandry & Dairy of the Institute of Agricultural Sciences, I spoke with a group of students. They had various questions which, I think, are relevant for many students who would like to come to Wageningen. Therefore I am finalizing this Editorial with remarks I made during the class. The most important question was about to get a fellowship for an MSc study, a PhD project, a post-doctoral fellowship, a visiting professorship, etc. My remarks were that it is first necessary to find the professor in whose work you are seriously interested. Contact this person and establish a sort of working relationship at a distance. Secondly, for an MSc grant, try to find financing. NUFFIC and Wageningen University itself provide scholarships. These are pretty selective. For getting entrance in the PhD- or Postdoc-level, it is utterly important to have started publishing articles in international and peer reviewed journals, preferably listed in Scopus and the Web of Knowledge. Candidates should have a strong CV already, before they are admitted to the PhD. Furthermore, they also should write research proposals which are strictly aligned to the research program of the chair holder. Given the collective effort in Wageningen to publish world-class research, proposals which are outside the scope of the group of the chair holder will likely not be admitted. The last important question was to whom students could address if they would want to come to Wageningen to study this domain. Related to that I have described the current golden triangle of research, education and business in the agro-food and environment sector. Extension as it was known until the 1990s does not exist anymore. Farmers who need information have to pay for it. Big commercial farmers are entrepreneurs, and the biggest cooperatives and processing industries have their own Research and Development professionals or even departments. Wageningen University does not have a special professor on agricultural extension any more. Nevertheless, interested candidates can always look at the website of the Social Sciences Department to see which professor is closest to the field of study. That would be the person to contact.

In total I think the agricultural extension education profession should be grateful for Dr Ghadei for his effort and that of his conference organization team, as colleagues will appreciate the enormous amount of work which has been involved in the organization of a conference of this size.

For the rest, I wish you lots of pleasure with the articles in this issue.