

# Evaluation of the Certification Procedure of Farm Advisors in Greece <sup>†</sup>

Ekaterini Alexaki <sup>1</sup>, Ioannis Dimitriadis <sup>1</sup>, Efstratios Michalis <sup>2,\*</sup> , Christina-Eleni Giatra <sup>2</sup> and Athanasios Ragkos <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Directorate of Development and Extension, General Directorate of Quality Assurance of Agricultural Products, Hellenic Agricultural Organization–DIMITRA, 111 45 Athens, Greece; kalexaki@elgo.gr (E.A.); idimitriadis@elgo.gr (I.D.)

<sup>2</sup> Agricultural Economics Research Institute, Hellenic Agricultural Organization-DIMITRA, 111 45 Athens, Greece; chrgiatra@gmail.com (C.-E.G.); ragkos@elgo.gr (A.R.)

\* Correspondence: efstratiomichalis@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** Farm Advisory constitutes one of the most important tools to support rural development in the European Union and is also an integral part of Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS). The purpose of this paper is to present the results of the evaluation of the two calls for certification of Farm Advisors in Greece, which were addressed to individuals. The evaluation was based on a questionnaire survey of candidates who participated to the online certification procedure. The analysis is based on descriptive statistics methods and shows that overall most respondents were satisfied with most Modules, although they suggest to provide better links between scientific evidence and practical applications. Although there are serious limitations that do not permit to draw generalized conclusions, the evaluation procedure pointed out specific domains that require improvements and, especially, that a more robust evaluation system is required.

**Keywords:** Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS); questionnaire survey; training material



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## 1. Introduction

Farm Advisory constitutes one of the most important tools to support rural development in the European Union and is also an integral part of Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) [1]. Farm Advisors are qualified to give farmers sound advices on a variety of issues, including but not limited to land eligibility, conditionality, and scheme applications. They can also assist farmers in meeting their obligations and avoiding financial penalties under EU and national funded Schemes [2].

Under Article 15 of Reg (EU) 1305/2013, Greece programmed two out of the three possible options for the 2014–2020 period, i.e., advisory services provision (Sub-measure 2.1 of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) of Greece “2014–2020”), and training of Farm Advisors (FAs) (sub-measure 2.3) [3,4]. Advisory services measures (art. 15—Measure 02 of the RDP) and co-operation/innovation (art. 35 and 56—M16 of the RDP) were also put into place with a broader application field, while the budget allocated to Advisory Services Measure 2 was more than double compared to the 2007–2013 period [4,5].

Based on this framework and also on the FA legislation under Reg (EU) 1306/2013, the Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food established a new framework in 2018 (Decision 163/13692/1 February 2018 of the Minister of Rural Development and Food), by means of which the Hellenic Agricultural Organization (ELGO)-DIMITRA was the designated Organization for training, certifying, and controlling FAs [6,7]. At its core was the introduction of the National Registers of certified FAs and advisory bodies, which were put under the responsibility of the ELGO-DIMITRA. With their certification and their

registration in the Register of Agricultural Advisors of ELGO-DIMITRA, the national Farm Advisory Service (FAS) was effectively put into operation, thus fulfilling an institutional obligation for Greece and also introducing an important development driver for the support of Greek farmers. In addition to the existing legal framework, the new Law 5035/2023 states that one of the objectives of ELGO-DIMITRA is "... the advisory aid of famers", while the responsibilities of ELGO-DIMITRA include "... the design, organization and implementation of education, training and information activities" (Article 4) [8]. Under the new legal framework, the General Directorate of Strategic Advisory and Rural Development is also introduced.

FAs can be certified in up to ten (10) of the following thematic fields (modules), depending on their specialization:

- Module 1. Cross Compliance—good agricultural and environmental conditions.
- Module 2. Requirements for implementing Article 11 of the Water Framework Directive.
- Module 3. Requirements for implementing Article 55 of Regulation (EC) No. 1107/2009, in particular compliance with the general principles of integrated pest management as referred to in Article 14 of Directive 2009/128/EC.
- Module 4. Climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Module 5. Organic farming.
- Module 6. Modernization of agricultural farms—improvement to sustainability—competitiveness.
- Module 7. Risk management in agriculture and animal husbandry.
- Module 8. Implementation of standards for workspace safety.
- Module 9. Management of rural environment—integrated management in agricultural production. Part 2: Requirements for the application in crop production (national standards AGRO2).
- Module 10. Advisory for young farmers: farm management; cooperation and market access; regulatory obligations; new technologies.

The certification is of indefinite duration in compliance with the obligations arising from relevant EU and national legislation.

The certification and registration of FAs in the Register of ELGO-DIMITRA is subject to the successful attendance of a training program (Decision No. 163/13692/01.02.2018 of the Minister of Rural Development and Food) [9]. Until 2023, ELGO-DIMITRA has published three Calls for the expression of interest for certification as FAs (two for individuals—2018 and 2021—and one for legal entities—2021) [10–12]. Candidates followed the program exclusively on an e-learning platform, through which they had access to the thematic fields they applied for and also to training material (an e-book) [13]. After the completion of each thematic field, trainees were evaluated with an online test, which included multiple-choice questions and true/false statements. Participants were graded on a scale of 0 to 100%, and a minimum score of 75% was required in order to successfully finalize the attendance of the training (with the possibility for a re-evaluation).

In both Calls, the success rates of participants were over 95% for all thematic fields, while participation was 87% in the first Call and 78% in the second. As a result, by the end of October 2022, 3980 individuals were registered as FAs, most of which were agronomists (63.8%), followed by agricultural technologists (various expertise) (21.8%), foresters (3.9%), and veterinarians (2.3%), while the remaining ones came from several other backgrounds. Additionally, 98 legal persons were registered.

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of the evaluation of the two Calls that were addressed to individuals. The evaluation is based on a questionnaire that was addressed to all participants.

## 2. Methods

During the posting week of each thematic field, an evaluation questionnaire was sent to participants along with the training material. The questionnaire included the following eight closed-ended questions (evaluation items): clear, complete content; structure and

organization of content; modern—topical knowledge; links between scientific knowledge and practice; suitability for e-learning; met expected results and training needs; effectiveness of the training method; and general impression. Participants could answer using a five-point Likert (1–5) scale (1 = not at all; 2 = a little; 3 = quite a bit; 4 = a lot; 5 = very much). In addition, during the first call, an open field was available to respondents, where they were free to record their observations and comments about the certification process. In the second Call, it was obligatory for all participants to fill out the questionnaire and submit it after the examination test, while in the first one, this was optional. In both Calls, the evaluation process was fully anonymous. The analysis was based on descriptive statistical methods (means).

### 3. Results and Discussion

In total, only 867 responses were received in the first Call (for all sections), and 8358 responses (average 836/module) in the second Call (obligatory in both Calls; the same person may have answered more than once, but in each case in the context of a different section). This difference does not allow to make comparative assumptions and conclusions. However, some basic observations can be derived, which are useful for future Calls.

- The small number of responses on the first Call compared to the second implies that candidates were not highly motivated to share their comments about the process. It is also interesting to note that while 218 people participated in the evaluation of the first Module, in the following ones only 60–111 responses were received.
- The section of trainees who were satisfied with all eight evaluation items (rated 4 or 5) increased in size in the second Call (from slightly over 50% to more than 67%), while, similarly, negatively satisfied trainees (rated 1 or 2) were between 10 and 20% per Module in the first Call but less than 10% in the second.
- All average scores per Module were higher on the second Call compared to the first.
- In the first Call, Modules seven and eight received the highest scores among all Modules in four and two items, respectively. In the second, Modules five and eight received the highest scores in four and three items, respectively. On the other hand, Modules 9 (first call) and 6 (second Call) were ranked the lowest for all eight items.
- While participants recognized that the program was characterized by “modern and up-to-date knowledge”, the lack of connection between scientific knowledge and practical application was identified as a key problem in both Calls.

### 4. Conclusions

The results of descriptive statistics capture some indicative trends in participants' opinions. However, there are serious limitations that do not permit drawing generalized conclusions. First, the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents were not recorded (e.g., age, gender, specialty, and employment status), which does not allow us to draw conclusions for different disciplines or professional backgrounds. Second, most qualitative observations and comments (in text form) that were submitted do not refer to specific parts of the evaluation and thus do not allow for the drawing of relevant conclusions. Given these limitations, the following actions could contribute to the improvement of the evaluation but also of the whole certification process:

1. A more robust evaluation procedure, with a redesigned questionnaire to include more questions and respondents' sociodemographic profile.
2. Improve the links between the training material and practical applications (interactive exercises, audiovisual demonstration material).
3. Regular update of the content of all Modules; revision of existing or addition of new ones.
4. A post-certification survey of registered FAs.
5. Development of a monitoring system for the action in order to record the professional activities of FAs.

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