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Academy “Agricultural Education and Science” – a bridge between agricultural education, science and business

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Conversation with Prof. Tonio Tonev, PhD, founder and manager of the Academy, on the occasion of the upcoming opening of the new academic year

The concept of the Academy “Agricultural Education and Science” is as an educational project in the field of agriculture, whose main goal is to unite the three pillars of the agro-sector, namely agricultural education, agricultural science and business. With the help of the extensive and practical experience of the specialists at

the Academy, and despite the severe epidemiological conditions that imposed distance learning as the preferred form of education, the first nearly 50 trainees successfully completed their training.

The Academy is distinguished by exceptional flexibility and adaptability. Part of the teaching material in each of the disciplines can be adapted to the interests of the majority of the audience. This does not exclude the possibilities for an individual approach to the specific interests of each separate trainee.

The Academy of Agricultural Education and Science – in support of agribusiness

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The founder and manager of the Academy, Prof. Tonio Tonev, PhD, has 35 years of experience as a lecturer in several core academic disciplines at the Agricultural University – Plovdiv. He is convinced that the knowledge and experience accumulated over the years will be useful for building an educated and functional agricultural community in our country.

"What gives me optimism and energy is the opportunity, through the Academy, to provide more knowledge to farmers" – Prof. Tonio Tonev, PhD

Professor Tonev, tell us how the idea for the Academy arose and how the first academic year ended?

Throughout my professional career I have had the privilege to do what I love most. I have accepted it as my mission to experiment and to teach students, colleagues and agricultural producers how to optimize agricultural production. I am grateful to fate that I still have the strength, desire and opportunity to continue doing this. Over the years I have established many personal contacts with companies from agribusiness. I am also grateful to my colleagues who unreservedly accepted my invitation and did not hesitate to become part of the Academy's team in order to share their professional experience with all those who wish to be trained with us.

The Academy was registered as a legal entity in August 2020, but began its educational process on 1 December 2020 and continued until March 2021, when, in practice, the theoretical training of the first cohort was completed. Our idea is that the Academy should have an online educational process every year in the winter period – from 15 November to 15 March. In this season, which is the freest from agricultural activities, lectures will be held from 17-18 to 20 hours. A total of 14 of the best and leading lecturers from the Agricultural University have been invited; they will train grain producers, winegrowers, fruit growers and farmers who need to enrich their knowledge. The training is divided into a total of 7 modules and 19 academic disciplines.

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During the past academic year, 48 people completed training with us in two of the core modules – “Applied Aspects of Plant Protection“ and “Soil Health“. I am pleased that those who were trained during the first year of the Academy expressed orally and in writing their very high evaluation of our activity, because they realized its benefits. One of the trainees, an exceptional professional with more than 30 years of experience, even shared with me at the end of the course that he was familiar with 95% of the information presented, but those 5% of new knowledge that he acquired through us were decisive for him. His conclusion is that the time and funds invested were worth it!

VIEWS

What modules and subjects are studied at the Academy?

In the past first academic year, two of the modules were launched: “Applied Aspects of Plant Protection“ and “Soil Health“ with a total of 10 academic disciplines. The first module had two intakes – in November and in January.

Training at the Academy “Agricultural Education and Science“ in 2021/2022 will be distance learning – online lectures in the winter period – from 15 November 2021 to mid-March 2022, and face-to-face training – in the field, three times, over two weekend days, in April, May and June 2022, according to a pre-agreed schedule and on trial plots prepared by us under the projects “Herbitour“ and “Maize – Queen of the Fields“, as well as on plots with production trials and in crops and plantations with phytosanitary problems. During these field days, the objects of demonstration will also include the presentation of results from joint trials commissioned to us by companies from the pesticide, seed and fertilizer business in Bulgaria. Production trials with new and original technological solutions for the control of diseases, pests and weeds in cultivated plants under conventional and no-till farming systems will also be shown.

Who are the other lecturers involved in the Academy besides you?

Some of the most prominent specialists from the Agricultural University in the fields of phytopathology, entomology and plant physiology teach at the Academy. It is precisely with these colleagues – Prof. Svetoslav Bobev, Prof. Radoslav Andreev and Prof. Andon Vasilev – that we jointly started the activities of the Academy.

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Through another, highly specialized module of the Academy, we offer training to interested trainees on current economic, organizational and institutional problems of the agrarian business. The economic module is envisaged to be flexible and adapted to the specific professional interests of the participants. The module is organized by one of the most distinguished specialists in agricultural economics – Prof. Aleksi Aleksiev and includes a group of specialists in the disciplines and thematic units chosen by the trainees.

Other exceptionally high-quality and sought-after lecturers at the Academy are our colleagues Assoc. Prof. Mladen Naydenov (a specialist in soil microbiology and microbial preparations in agriculture), Assoc. Prof. Krasimir Trendafilov (a specialist in soil degradation problems and in reclamation and technical solutions for efficient irrigation of agricultural crops) and Assoc. Prof. Angel Trifonov (a specialist in plant protection machinery). During the current academic year, I hope for a successful start of the modules "Breeding and Seed Production" with leading lecturer Assoc. Prof. Marina Marcheva, "Agroecology and Organic Farming" with lecturer Assoc. Prof. Anna Karova, as well as of two new disciplines – Fruit Growing and Viticulture, with leading lecturers Prof. Valentin Lichev and Prof. Venelin Roychev, respectively.

To optimize our educational programme, we will rely on the interest shown by our potential audience, which will indicate to us what other real needs exist.

Why do you devote special attention at the Academy to the module related to plant protection?

Yes, this is an extremely important aspect of agricultural production, namely the protection of cultivated plants from harmful organisms – weeds, diseases and pests. The course "Applied Aspects of Plant Protection" includes a total of 6 disciplines – "Phytopathology and Phytosanitary Monitoring of Diseases" – with lecturer Prof. Svetoslav Bobev, "Entomology and Phytosanitary Monitoring of Pests" – with lecturer Prof. Radoslav Andreev, and "Fundamentals of Agriculture with Herbology and Phytosanitary Monitoring of Weeds" – with lecturer Prof. Tonio Tonev. This three-member team has a history of more than 15 years of partnership in the joint delivery of the disciplines "Phytosanitary Monitoring and Expertise" and "Integrated Plant Protection" in the master's programmes in Plant Protection, from their establishment until now. The fourth discipline of this first module is "Abiotic Stress in Plants" – with lecturer Prof. Andon Vasilev. The discipline "Phytopharmacy" is taught by a team of three lecturers – Prof. Bobev (fungicides), Prof. Andreev (insecticides) and Assoc. Prof. Naydenov (microbiological plant protection products). The last discipline in this module is "Plant Protection Machinery" – with lecturer Assoc. Prof. Angel Trifonov.

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How will the academic courses proceed in 2021/2022?

Registration for the first module “Applied Aspects of Plant Protection“ is recommended to be completed before 15 November 2021, which is its start date. Registration for all other modules, except for the module “Applied Aspects of Plant Protection“, will continue after this date as well. The minimum number of participants for holding a specific module is at least 10 trainees. All those registered will participate within the announced number of hours in two-hour daily lectures from the respective module.

Within the upcoming academic year 2021-2022 we offer training in the following modules: Applied Aspects of Plant Protection, Soil Health, Economic, Organizational and Institutional Problems of the Agrarian Business, Breeding and Seed Production, Agroecology and Organic Farming, Viticulture and Fruit Growing.

The most extensive of these 7 modules that we present for 2021/2022 is “Applied Aspects of Plant Protection“ with six disciplines. The platform is designed in such a way that several different courses can be taken in parallel. The theoretical training is conducted entirely online. It is possible for some of the farmers to enrol in two or more modules within one academic year. In the field of plant protection, as well as in every other module, our curricula presented on the website can be flexible. In some situations, the audience may suggest to the lecturer what the next lecture should be. The lecturers are sufficiently well prepared so that if part of the trainees show interest in fruit growing or vegetable production, they can devote special attention to them.

Are there practical classes?

Of course. They are described in the curricula on the Academy’s website. Specifically for the plant protection module, in April, May and June, on one weekend, the trainees will be in the field to observe various trials that we are conducting.

Professor Tonev, you are known among the agricultural community in Bulgaria not only as a valuable lecturer at the Agricultural University in Plovdiv, but also for your two large-scale projects – “Herbitour“, which already has a 21-year history, and “Maize – Queen of the Fields“. How are these two initiatives of yours continuing to develop?

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A few days ago, I held interviews with students from the Agricultural University and gathered 14 of them in my team. They will help in setting up, conducting and recording trials. For them, the greatest advantage will be that they will be part of the projects and will be able to get in touch with practical science. Most of the students are in their second year, which gives them a time horizon to prove themselves. And when they graduate, if necessary, I will become a bridge between them and their future employers.

During the past summer, three student projects “Herbitour“ were held with the participation of approximately 50 people. My idea is that in 2022 there will not be a single student from the Agricultural University who does not know about “Herbitour“. Everyone who wishes will be able to join these open-air lessons. I am ready to be in the field even during weekends so that I can be as useful as possible to these young people, our future colleagues. I want to give them the chance to get in touch with the results of trials with the newest products.

Where are the trials under the “Herbitour“ project conducted?

In various places in the country. First of all – in the lands of the villages of Krumovo and Yagodovo, Plovdiv region, in partnership with the farmers brothers Yordan and Nikolay Raychev. They provided me with the opportunity to place my trial fields on 6-7 thousand decares of their land, for which I am very grateful to them.

This year to date, we have laid out trials in rapeseed and wheat in the lands of the village of Trud with Svetoslav Rusalov, the town of Saedinenie with Angel Vukodinov, the villages of Dobrich and Krepost in Dimitrovgrad municipality, and in the villages of Ovchi Kladenets and Miladinovtsi, Yambol region, with our colleagues Andon Chimshirev and Gospodin Balchev. Partner companies commissioning these trials are among the largest seed companies in the pesticide, seed and fertilizer business.

Other, no less serious partners in my activity as a lecturer are colleagues from practice, thanks to whom we diversified the educational process of the students of the Agricultural University. For example, in the summer of 2021, for the third year in a row, Venelin Delgyanski from Rakovski hosted students in the elective discipline “Innovative Approaches in Agribusiness“. Our partners in this activity in 2021 were also our colleagues Angel Vukodinov, Ivan Krastev and Aleksandar Kitev. Contacts with prominent agricultural producers and with the representatives of companies in the business of plant protection products, seeds, fertilizers and other agricultural products have always been an integral part of my educational process at the Agricultural University.

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For more and up-to-date information, please visit the ***website of the Academy "Agricultural Education and Science"*** *– www.acadzon.bg*