modernAKIS Together for Systems' Innovation

Support to generational renewal

AKIS-in-practice! 9.5

Generation Renewal of Agricultural Advisors in Estonia

Keywords/Tags

- Advisors training
- Peer-to-peer learning
- Study visits

Potential users

- Ministries responsible for agriculture and rural development
- Chambers of Agriculture and advisory services
- Educational institutions in the agricultural sector
- Coordination bodies for youth and regional development

RATIONALE

Estonian advisors operate as private enterprises as part of a mixed AKIS system that includes both publicly supported and private advice providers. Most of advisors are self-employed and do not work full-time. They have other duties, such as teaching or running their own businesses (e.g., bookkeeping), highlighting a diversified approach to their professional activities. The persons in the impartial advisory registry rely highly on the CAP support on advisory services. METK, Centre of Estonian Rural Research and Knowledge acts since 2023 as a back-office for all AKIS activities, including providing trainings and networking opportunities to private advisors.

SOLUTION

The "Nõustajate järelkasvu arendamise koolitusprogramm" (Training program for Generation Renewal of Agricultural Advisors 2024-2025) was planned to increase interest in agricultural advisory work. In essence, the program was a systemic effort to counteract the aging and potential decline of the advisory workforce by attracting and training new professionals, fostering mentorship, and integrating advisory services more deeply into the broader knowledge and innovation system of the rural economy.
Primary Problems Addressed:

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- **Aging Advisor Workforce:** A significant portion (56% in 2022 and 61% in 2024) of active advisors were aged 50 and above, leading to concerns about the sustainability and continuity of advisory services as many approach retirement.
- **Lack of New Entrants:**There has been a modest interest from young people in pursuing careers as agricultural advisors, and systematic recruitment of new consultants has been lacking for the past two decades.
- **Insufficient Coverage:**The existing advisory service may not cover all necessary fields and specific directions of farming and food processing sectors.
- **Complexity of Development:**Forming new advisors is a complex process, as it requires considerable knowledge and diverse practical experience.

IN PRACTICE

The Training Program for new advisors was carried out from July 31, 2024, to July 31, 2025. The program was conducted as a response to public procurement under the RDP support, measure 01, knowledge transfer programme by METK, Centre of Estonian Rural Research and Knowledge.
The program aimed to increase the total number of advisors, ensure age integration for service sustainability, improve the availability and coverage of advisory services (including new areas), develop mentorship, foster positive image for advisory services, and facilitate the smooth integration of the AKIS, knowledge transfer and advisory services into the rural economy.

The actual trainings in the program ran from October 2024 to June 2025, providing participants with in-depth knowledge of advisory methodology, specialized topics in the field, and practical experience under the guidance of experienced mentors. In addition, study tours were organized both in Estonia and abroad, as well as group meetings that helped expand the network necessary for work. Participants in the training program acquired knowledge and skills that will allow them to apply for inclusion in the list of advisors and take the first steps as a professional. The program emphasized applying new knowledge and understanding directly into practice, with participants analyzing their internship experiences.

The program was based on three pillars:

1. LEARNING - advisory methodology and professional knowledge of the field, both in a group and individually;
2. INTERNSHIP - support from a personal supervisor/mentor;
3. NETWORKING - study trips in Estonia and abroad and group meetings that expand the network necessary for work.

Compulsory training modules: Advisory methodology (CECRA Modules 1, 2 and 16):

- Module 1 (My role as an advisor): motivation as an advisor, understanding the advisor's role, strengths and weaknesses, cultural sensitivity, target groups and basic concepts.
- Module 2 (Communication and building relationships in advisory work) focused on communication fundamentals, models, techniques (e.g., active listening, questioning), structuring professional advisory interviews, and handling objections.
- Module 16 (Interactive innovation) covered innovation processes, roles of participants, creativity techniques, and managing innovation in multi-actor groups

Specialized thematic training:

- Digital Skills in Rural Economy: Focused on precision farming, digital agriculture, data collection, management, and protection systems, and technological advancements.
- Agricultural Entrepreneurship: Explored business fundamentals, support systems, financing, business lifecycle, business model/plan development, market analysis, and financial management.
- Cooperatives in Agriculture: Explored different forms of cooperation, legal aspects, EU objectives for producer organizations, funding, and overcoming obstacles.
- Circular Bioeconomy: Discussed the potential of bio- and circular bioeconomy, technologies, sustainable solutions in agriculture, and waste management.
- Environmental Protection: Covered sustainable management, environmental protection requirements related to water, soil, biodiversity, air, and climate change mitigation.
- Specialty area training: Participants were encouraged to select courses relevant to their future advisory field, such as crop cultivation, organic farming, horticulture. Individual study allowed participants to take elective courses from universities or vocational centers, with costs compensated by METK (up to 6 EAP per participant), including courses offered abroad

Each participant was assigned a personal supervisor or mentor (experienced advisors, academics or entrepreneurs). Meetings were flexible in frequency, time, and location, tailored to individual needs.

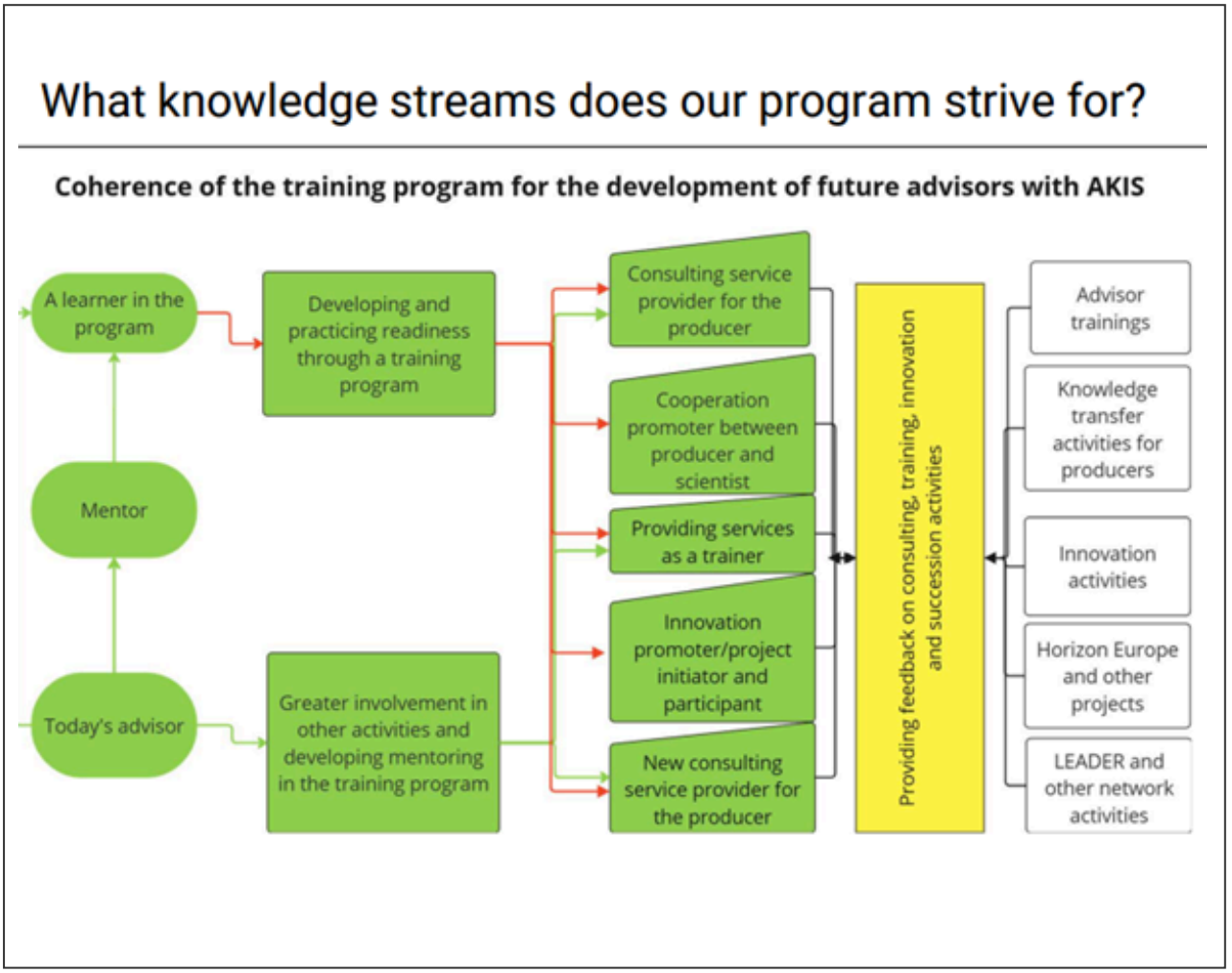
Compulsory practical training: advising at least five companies in cooperation with a supervisor/mentor. Minimum 20 working days over three consecutive calendar months, involving analysis of advisory needs and preparing a practice report. This also included familiarization with companies, supervisory authorities, R&D institutions, and professional associations. Limited opportunities for practice abroad were also available.

Supportive group meetings and study trips were offered for the participants.

- **Reflection Group Meetings**: Provided additional support for learners' practical knowledge development and connection between theory and practice, also discussing the advisory system and career path.
- **Covision Group Meetings:** For supervisors/mentors to share experiences, discuss challenges, and ensure consistent guidance.
- **Study Trip to Ireland for learners:** A 6-day trip to learn about the Irish advisory system, AKIS center, and visit innovative agricultural enterprises.
- **Study Trip to Denmark for mentors/supervisors:** A 5-day trip focused on experience sharing, innovation, digital solutions, and environmental technologies in Danish agriculture.
- **Domestic Study Trips**: Conducted as part of reflection group meetings in North and South Estonia to familiarize participants with the work of R&D institutions, professional associations, and producer organizations

As a final touch, all participants were required to submit a thesis, an independent work reflecting the participant's prior learning, work experience, studies, activities, and skill acquisition during the program. It was compiled based on the basis of advisors occupational standard and defended at a seminar. An optional opportunity for participants to take the Level 5 or 6 consultant occupational qualification exam with specialization; and the exam fee was compensated.

The program also produced and updated three publications: the handbook K.Jalak "Nõu andjast nõustajaks" (From giving advice to be an adviser), quick reference cards "Koosloome töövahendid" (Tools of Co-creation), and a translation of handbook by E.Wielinga, S. Robijn "Energising networks. Tools for co-creation".



PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR REPLICABILITY

The training program for new Advisors was considered a pilot project as the last active recruitment of new advisors was over 20 years ago. Since this was a pilot project, the training program will probably be replicated for the next generation after a certain number of years.

The program was drawn up in 2022, with the expectation of implementing it within at least 1.5 years. However, the contract was signed so late (2024) that the actual training took place in just 8 months. The program's intensive nature, encompassing significant contact hours, practical training, and independent study (estimated at 28% of participants' working hours), presented a substantial workload. This intensity made it challenging for participants to fully utilize optional individual study opportunities or undertake practice abroad, as many found it difficult to balance with their existing work and family commitments.

Insights and Tips for Replication/Adaptation:

- **Realistic workload communication:** Clearly communicate the intensive time commitment of the program to prospective participants to manage expectations and ensure commitment. Consider structuring the program to allow for more flexibility or modularity to ease the burden on working professionals.
- **Embrace and promote ecognition of prior learning:** Actively integrate and emphasize the VÕTA mechanism from the outset. It proved invaluable for providing flexibility and acknowledging participants' diverse educational and professional backgrounds, especially when program timelines do not perfectly align with traditional academic calendars.
- **Proactive and diverse mentor recruitment:** Develop a robust and proactive mentor recruitment strategy. Direct outreach, such as engaging presentations at professional seminars, can be highly effective in attracting experienced advisors.
- **Flexible mentor support allocation:** Implement a flexible system for mentor hours, allowing the amount of support to be tailored to individual learner needs, potentially reducing over-allocation of resources.
- **The CECRA training modules:** (M1; M2; M16) were favorites of the program learners, because the feedback % was excellent and the feedback on the content, trainers and applicability was very good.
- **Balance theory with practical application:** For specialized training modules, ensure a strong practical component and case-study approach to complement theoretical knowledge, directly addressing feedback about overly theoretical content.
- **Provide ongoing mentor support for newly active advisors** in their initial months and establish learning circles for continued peer-to-peer learning. Organize joint activities, such as vision conferences or common study trips, to foster integration and collaboration between new and existing advisors.
- **Integrate study trips into program core:** Utilize domestic study trips as a compulsory component of practical training. These reflection group meetings proved effective in familiarizing participants with relevant organizations (R&D institutions, professional associations, producers) and expanding their networks, while fulfilling practice requirements.
- **Incentivize Professional Certification:** Covering the cost of professional exams can be a significant motivator for participants to pursue formal certification, leading to a higher rate of qualified advisors.
- **Invest in Post-Program Integration and Ongoing Support:** To ensure long-term success and integration, allocate resources for continued support and networking opportunities after program completion:
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- Implement initiatives to enhance the positive public image of advisors.
- **Offer additional specialized training** (e.g., "Advisor as a trainer" or international project management) to equip new advisors for broader roles within the AKIS framework and in research projects.
- **Streamline expense reimbursement:** Simplify the process for claiming practical training expenses to encourage higher participation and reduce administrative burden for learners. Explore alternative, less bureaucratic methods for expense tracking.
- **Refine budgeting and flexibility:** Review and adjust budget estimations based on actual utilization rates, especially for optional components. Consider built-in flexibility to reallocate funds to activities that prove more impactful or necessary during implementation.
- **Consider accountability for program completion:** As suggested in the program's web information, implementing a clause that allows for proportional reimbursement of costs for unjustified withdrawals could encourage participants' commitment and accountability.

BENEFITS

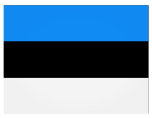
- The final beneficiaries of the project are agricultural and rural entrepreneurs. They now have 26 new advisors in ten main areas of advice and who are able to provide comprehensive advice to the company in various collaborations.
- Inspirational are the 43 people involved (including mentors), with different background, specialty and age, who are now full of energy network. METK coordinates AKIS implementation and now it has new advisors thatcan be involved in other AKIS activities (trainings, innovation projects, etc.).
- Simple basic theories (Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning and Malcolm S. Knowles "The Adult Learning Theory") works well, if you build up the program so that theory can be applied. The implementation of the principles of the AKIS should take place through network-based collaborative management, which provides an opportunity for creating social value, innovation, and solving complex problems where trust is most important aspect what acts like glue to support movement towards goals.
- Advisors are often competitors because they are private entrepreneurs in Estonia. Since the network created by the participants is valued, it can be hoped that in the future there will be more partners than competitors. The learners raised the issue of creating a representative organization for their advisors, which would be very welcome, as it would open up access to being a partner with legislators and improving the quality of advice.
- Each learner advised at least 5 companies, which means that we have over 100 companies more aware of the advisory service, and based on the cooperation that has been created, entrepreneurs are more confident in contacting and telling other entrepreneurs about the advisory service option.
- Young advisors are more likely to collaborate with research institutions so that in the future research results can be better applied in practice and the wishes of entrepreneurs can be better conveyed to research institutions. Many learners are entrepreneurs and belong to business representative organizations (e.g., the Young Farmers' Union), thus other entrepreneurs become more aware of the advisors, and advisors can also convey messages to politicians through representative organizations;

BENEFITS

- Youth engagement by providing educational opportunities and practical experience.
- Skill development tailored to the needs of the agricultural and rural sectors.
- Promotion of sustainable agricultural practices, encouraging participants to adopt new technologies and methods that can enhance productivity while minimizing environmental impact.
- Creation of networking opportunities among youth, local businesses, educational institutions, and agricultural organizations.

FURTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/good-practice/generation-renewal-training-programme-agricultural-advisors_en
- https://metk.agri.ee/noustajate-jarelkasvu-arendamise-koolitusprogramm
- https://metk.agri.ee/uudised/26-uut-noustajat-lopetas-edukalt-maaelu-teadmuskeskuse-jarelkasvuprogrammi
- https://metk.agri.ee/en/network-innovate-akis-nordic-baltic-space
- https://youtu.be/Ro0ce2cgN30



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