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Food for thought. Or, how a University of Applied Sciences is integrating people, planet and profit by seeing the food forest for the trees

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In order to provide education that is fine-tuned not only to an individual's interests and needs but also to the challenges that society presents future professionals with, a University of Applied Sciences (UAS) is presented with three distinct but interrelated challenges: a didactical, a practical and a scientific challenge. In this paper we describe how Van Hall Larenstein UAS (VHL) in the Netherlands, a 'green' university of applied sciences, is tackling these challenges in light of the post-normal governance condition in which a UAS is operating. This condition is typified by two interrelated shifts. The first is the shift from normal to post-normal science that emphasizes joint knowledge production in order to address real problems that are characterized by uncertainty, contested values, risks and urgency. The second shift is from government to governance in which a multitude of public and private actors influence policy and practices. The post-normal governance condition is especially applicable to the issue-driven field of forest and nature conservation for which VHL aims to educate future professionals. By discussing our involvement in the search for new economic models - such as food forests- on behalf of private forest owners, we show how a UAS can educate future professionals as well as contribute to a sustainable future.

A University of Applied Sciences (UAS) is in contrast to its academic sibling first and foremost an institute that trains and educates professionals rather than academics. UAS graduates are able to contribute to societal challenges by putting to work a set of competences acquired in their studies, which were taught by the lecturers and researchers that make up the staff of the UAS. Science plays a part, but it has its purpose in supporting applied practices. A UAS thus faces three distinct challenges: a didactical challenge of educating future professionals, the practical challenge of staying connected to society and its problems, and the scientific challenge that is focused on applied research. This characterization might seem straightforward, but within a post-normal governance context these three challenges are significant.

The practical, didactical and scientific challenges the VHL staff faces, requires them to leave the classroom and participate in the forefront of the complex practical reality of Dutch nature conservation. In the case of private forest owners who are looking for new ways to keep their terrains economically but also ecologically and socially sustainable, no easy answers are present. Although timber provides a steady income, dwindling government subsidies and increasing costs put stress on daily management. Because future professionals need to be able to address these kind of challenges, VHL staff is facilitating a learning community with the Dutch Forest and Nature reserve owners association (VBNE - Vereniging van Bos en Natuureigenaren) and the Federation for Private Landownership (FPG, Federatie Particulier Grondbezit). This community is focussed on addressing the individual challenges of its participants, but does so with manageable contributions of students from the course Forest and Nature Management.

Based on our experiences with this learning community, we sketch an integrative approach of six steps to tackling the post-normal governance condition. The six steps that we distinguish are:

1. Create a learning community focussed on a shared challenge
2. Generate questions rather than answers
3. Inspire!
4. Provide room for spontaneity
5. Take small steps
6. Come up with new questions

By discussing these steps in relation to the challenge of one of the participants, which focuses on the realisation of a food forest in his pine forest, we show how a societal relevant challenge is being tackled by a learning community. Not only are the individual private forest owners supported in their daily challenges, but we also succeed in presenting students with manageable tasks that help them to become the professional that strive for a sustainable future.

With the analyses presented in this paper we want to challenge and inspire researchers and lecturers in their post-normal domain, but we also aim to elicit experiences and best practices of other UAS's.
