



BY MARTYN HAINES

Raising the game

New alliance will address demand for specialist skill set

THE recently formed BlueEDU Aquaculture Sector Skills Alliance, approved in July 2016 in support of the European ‘blue growth’ agenda, had a very productive two days when it met in Brussels early in February.

By the end of the project meeting, it was clear that there is much for partners to look forward to from a unique opportunity for European aquaculture, which will start by putting our current workforce development practices under the spotlight.

The overriding ambition of this investigative Erasmus+ funded project is to inform the future development of innovative aquaculture Vocational Education and Training (VET) through partnership.

The BlueEDU mission

Over the next two years, through extensive engagement with industry and education and training providers in the 12 BlueEDU partner countries, the future skills needs and the nature of industry demand for VET will be established.

This will be correlated to the existing VET supply, including public and private sector provision and in company training, in an attempt to future proof VET provision.

Marine cage farming, at husbandry and site



“The European aquaculture workforce is relatively unqualified compared to other industries”

Opposite: Project manager Vytaute Ezerskiene; John Bostock, Catherine Pons, Martyn Haines, Dag Willmann, Panos Christoflogiannis; (front) John Birger Stav

manager level, is the chosen focus and common denominator between northern and southern European aquaculture. However, once proven, the methodology can be transferred and expanded to include other sectors.

From the outset, the perceived lack of skills in aquaculture to match the growing needs within the European labour market has been the subject of much debate. This is perhaps unsurprising as aquaculture has become a highly technological and demanding occupation.

The industry requires a workforce with an increasingly specialist skill set in order to get the best from the modern equipment and digital technology that companies have invested in.

The repercussions within the vocational education and training sector are significant and some providers have already recognised the growing challenge of keeping up to date with the pace of technological change.

How has the industry been coping?

Although colleges in some European countries continue to provide an important role in educating and training new entrants as well as work based learners, many aquaculture companies have done a commendable job in establishing their own staff development programmes.

This has included the provision of in-house induction and short courses for technical updating, as well as more comprehensive company bespoke training schemes. While some have been delivered in partnership with education and training providers, linked to the achievement of national qualification, many remain uncertificated.

There is no doubt that new recruits have benefited. However, there is also evidence to suggest that the European aquaculture workforce is relatively unqualified compared to other industries. This need not remain the case, as by modernising the way we deliver vocational education and training to widen access to respected national qualifications, our workforce could stand alongside European counterparts with their professionalism more widely recognised.

Education and training providers’ perspective

Added to the difficulty of keeping up to date, the practicalities of educating and training a widely dispersed workforce has been vexing aquaculture VET providers.

There is an emerging view that more could be done to increase the accessibility and quality of work based learning and vocational qualifications by modernising delivery methods.

Providers are mindful that from an employer’s perspective, as well as being technically up to date, any vocational education and training system must deliver reliable qualifications in a time and cost efficient manner.

While many are confident that the quality and accessibility and efficiency of aquaculture qualifications can be improved through the smart deploy-



ment of learning technologies, it is important that this is done *with* industry and not *to* industry, if we are to successfully change the aquaculture VET paradigm.

This is a big ask, and difficult for any provider to achieve in isolation. Collaborative development would appear to be the most logical way forward if the VET sector is serious about raising its game, assisted by a revitalised partnership with the aquaculture sector.

Innovative education and training developed in partnership

The BlueEDU investigative phase will conclude by December 2018, and the results will inform subsequent bids to support the collaborative development of VET and qualifications in demand.

It is envisaged that clusters of national and pan European education and training development partnerships will form, and that a more productive working relationship between providers and the aquaculture industry will be catalysed.

Industry involvement

To these ends, the BlueEDU partners will be organising demonstrations of innovative education and training methods and focus groups with industry and VET providers, in order to gather and record feedback.

Information will be posted on websites and social media to widen participation. It will require a concerted effort and a range of technologies and approaches to collect a reliable and representative data set to evidence the industry’s education and training needs within compelling bids subsequently.

Everyone in the producer and aquaculture supply companies, from fish husbandry staff to the CEO, will be encouraged to assist, so we can all make the best of this opportunity.

The BlueEDU partnership looks forward to working with its associated partners and the industry to enhance work based learning in all its forms. Our vision is to make high quality innovative vocational education and training that makes respected national qualifications a first choice, transforming the way that we support our growing aquaculture workforce.

More information and details on the BlueEDU aims and objectives are

available on the Pisces Learning website www.pisceslearning.com

Martyn Haines is director of Pisces Learning Innovations, an education consultancy and partner within the BlueEDU Aquaculture Sector Skills Alliance, and welcomes your questions. He can be contacted by phone (01387 840697) and at info@pisceslearning.com.

The 12 BlueEDU countries

Northern Europe: Norway, Scotland, Faroes, Ireland, Finland and Iceland

Southern Europe: Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Croatia and Cyprus

The BlueEDU partnership

Professor John Birger Stav, Norwegian University for Science and Technology (NTNU) and lead partner
John Bostock, University of Stirling
Catherine Pons, Federation of Aquaculture Producers (FEAP)
Martyn Haines, Pisces Learning Innovations Ltd
Dag Willmann, Guri Kunna VET School
Panos Christoflogiannis, AQAURK

BlueEDU contribution to Erasmus+ Aims

- Modernising aquaculture Vocational Education and Training (VET) across Europe.
- Enhancing Vocational Education and Training (VET) as a first choice, which is Priority 3 for the New Skills Agenda for Europe
- Deploying the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to enable different national qualifications in aquaculture to be compared across countries