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Old but Not Old Fashioned: Agricultural Landscapes as European Heritage and Basis for Sustainable Multifunctional Farming to Earn a Living

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Abstract: Today, farmers are multioptional entrepreneurs, demanding far more skills than only those of agricultural production. The awareness of European agricultural landscape (EAL) values should enable farmers to create new business strategies. Open education repositories (OERs) based on online vocational education and training (VET) are still not widespread. The project FEAL (multifunctional farming for the sustainability of EALs) has brought interactive material online based on results of two questionnaire surveys performed in Germany, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain. A survey of 31 experts confirmed that VET activities are very much needed for farmers. A survey of 28 farmers had different aims and content. Data collected from farmers were used to evaluate basic farm attributes, farmers' characteristics, and keywords indicating the farms' activities, multifunctionality and sustainability, and EALs, specifying the presence of nature- and landscape-protected areas. A decision-making schema, applying a collection of terms from literature analysis and the questionnaire's results, is a support tool to develop a model of a farm that contributes to the preservation of the landscape's character, strengthening the landscape's quality, and sustainable business. The model presents the interactions of the farm (its territory and ancestral heritage, control of natural resources, tourism services and cultural events, public goods provision, and quality guarantees); socioeconomic strategies regarding quality, marketing, communication, business operation, and monitoring are proposed.

Keywords: European agricultural landscapes; case studies; heritage; vocational education and training; sustainable business; multifunctional farming

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1. Introduction

1.1. Awareness of Landscape Quality and the Importance of Vocational Education Training for Small and Family Farmers

The European Landscape Convention (2000) [1] defines the term cultural landscape very broadly to also include so-called everyday landscapes, to which agricultural landscapes, as well as urban or degraded areas, predominantly belong. Many centuries of agricultural land use have left a rich cultural tangible and intangible heritage manifested in land management, folklore traditions, rural infrastructure, and, last but not least, the landscape itself. The diversity of different landscapes in Europe would be inconceivable without agriculture, which is the defining factor in large parts of European landscapes. Some European agricultural landscapes (EALs) can be found all over Europe; others are limited to a few regions. Some are even disappearing [2]. The Institute for Research on European Agricultural Landscapes e.V. (EUCALAND) is an international network of experts who have taken on the task of investigating the cultural aspects of agricultural landscapes

since 2006 [3]. EUCALAND is the acronym for "European Culture expressed in Agricultural Landscapes". Its networking members have compiled and published a knowledge base on EALs. As basic work, a glossary has been developed, in which 40 agricultural terms and landscape types have been defined [4]. Within the FEAL project, an E-Atlas of the most pertinent EALs, with definitions and national contributions and specifics, has been set up. Each year, the EUCALAND experts elaborate a research study on a chosen EAL type that is defined in the EAL glossary [4]. The study is usually published in a scientific journal or as a chapter in a book. All processed EALs are finally implemented to the E-Atlas database. Such systematic teamwork ensures that the E-Atlas will be continuously enlarged [5].

Historically, a variety of agricultural systems developed in Europe have shaped our landscape [6,7]. Historical trajectories of former and recent land use through production–living–transportation cycles have formed the character of agricultural landscapes [8]. In Europe, 25% of the total land area is covered by arable land and permanent crops and 17% by permanent pastures and mixed mosaics [9] (together 42%). However, the prevailing part of the European population lives in urban areas, while only 28% live in the countryside [10]. Today, a rural character still dominates in many parts of Europe. Small and family farms exist in a high number, although one sometimes gets the impression that only large-scale farming plays a role today. In the case of traditional food grain cultivation on high-quality soils, family farmers have an advantage. However, farming corporations may overcome individual farms by pooling land and labor, which helps them to overcome economically weak periods or periods of labor shortage [11]. Farmers are facing many different challenges today, starting from their core business, that underlie changing conditions due to climate change, economic and administration frame conditions, and globalization. The European Union (EU) countries' agricultural policies are influenced by decisions and rules that are set up in Brussels [12]. In non-EU countries, the agricultural sector suffers from inadequate national subsidies and low trade prices of agricultural products [13]. However, the risk of global trend fluctuations might be managed and limited by farmers through strengthening the farms' resilience by the diversification of their labor power outside agriculture [14].

This short introduction clearly shows that farmers deal with many (one could also say, too many) constraints and preconditions. Today, farmers should be considered multioptional entrepreneurs who are steadily renewing and adapting education. However, according to the specific conditions of farmers, the displacements that are required in order to participate in educational training courses are complicated in some periods of the year. Depending on the farm's specialization and location, participation is impossible all year long. Open education resources (OERs) [15] would be a solution, but unfortunately, online-based vocational education training (VET) [16,17] for farmers is not yet very common. Therefore, the FEAL project [18] set up and developed OERs for farmers in several categories. The awareness of EALs values will enable farmers to diversify or create new businesses and empower themselves in their self-conceptions. The project is based on case studies on successful multifunctional and sustainable farming and the E-Atlas of EALs, and it also provides training modules. The E-Atlas is based on previously developed classifications of EALs [4].

1.2. Multifunctional Agriculture, Fusing Natural, Cultural, and Historical Heritage and Sustainable Land Use

Multifunctionality links sustainable agriculture, food safety, and territorial balance [19], and the primary functions of multifunctional agriculture, defined by the Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD), comprise food and fiber supply, landscape-shaping activities, provision of environmental benefits, and contribution to the socioeconomic viability of many rural areas [20]. Sustainable land-use systems provide different multiplied ecosystem services [21]. The concept of ecosystem services was developed by the international work program "Millennium Ecosystem Assessment" [22]. Ecosystem services are tangible goods and intangible services provided by ecosystems contributing to human life and well-being. A close relationship between farm multifunctionality and its ecosystem services is evident. Recently, increasing attention has been directed towards the

design of agricultural landscape, which is the process of the arrangement of spatial features in the landscape itself [23,24]. Sustainability goes beyond being a purely environmental issue and includes economic viability as well as social acceptability [25].

Landscapes and the environment constitute primary territorial and functional settings for a multifunctional farm. Since the last decade, the ecological diversity, biocultural heterogeneity, and aesthetic quality of the rural landscape have overcome a conservative productive model of agricultural monoblocks with specialized production [26,27]. The application of landscape ecology to food system research has brought benefits for both disciplines, and the integrative analysis of food systems poses new challenges in scientific branches dealing with sustainability [28]. Multifunctional farming improves ecological stability and biodiversity [29,30], provides many ecosystem services, delivering benefits for a wide spectrum of the human population [31,32], and prevents natural hazards [33,34]; some farms are important producers of renewable energy [35,36]. Nassauer and Opdam [37] defined landscape design as "any intentional change of landscape pattern for the purpose of sustainably providing ecosystem services while recognizably meeting societal needs". Target farms' production and society demands should coincide with landscape and environmental potentials [38,39]. Deep respect and understanding of the natural environment are mirrored in permaculture farms [40] and farms practicing ecodesign [41,42], and both kinds of farms often transform their knowledge into educational courses organized by the farms.

From cultural and historical points of view, many contemporary agricultural systems have a parallel in historical ones, and this knowledge can contribute to the understanding of the current problems in agriculture and finding the appropriate solutions [43]. Multifunctional farming plays a key role in maintaining visual landscape quality [44,45] and the preservation of landscape character [46–48]. Rural landscapes are attractive for their valuable rural settlements, with their original and indigenous architectural features and identical local foods [49]. Thus, the modernization of the exterior façades of rural buildings and the maintenance of their aesthetic and visual quality should be performed sensitively by respecting a landscape's character [50].

Considering the values and quality of EALs, the most important are agri-tourism activities and the selling of local products by farmers. The quality of provided services and products is guaranteed by the farmers themselves and current legislation. Direct sale by a farm may be carried out through a farmhouse restaurant and coffee shop [51,52], cooperation with purchasing groups and box schemas [53–56], or systems of "pick-your-own", where a customer may self-collect products, for a certain price, directly at the farm [57,58]. From other aspects, quality is guaranteed by protected designations in accordance with EU legislation [59–61].

Multifunctional farms may provide a variety of services depending on social demand, such as festivals, tasting events, farmers' markets [62,63], and a variety of agritourism activities [64–66]. Social agriculture [67] or day-care services for the elderly or disadvantaged groups of the population [68] are designed for population groups with specific needs. In this case, the farm needs to involve specific competencies to organize specific areas equipped to carry out rehabilitative projects of garden or animal therapy. Therefore, in most cases, facilities must be sufficiently extensive, and specialized staff is needed. The education activities involve courses and workshops, ranging from topics associated with agriculture to issues such as rural crafts, cooking with wild herbs, or excursions in the natural environment [69,70]. Education activities may be related to certain time periods of the year (summer camps) or educational days co-organized with schools; they can be related to certain activities such as cheese making, traditional gardening, or beekeeping.

Interviews with farmers in the Pralormo municipality confirmed that landscapes of preserved traditional architecture in settlements, traditional land use, local food of high quality, and education provided by farmers are the most important activities for future farm sustainable development [71]. The content of previous statements implements the directives of the Italian Ministry of Agricultural Policies through the National Register of

Historical Rural Landscapes [72]. As the authors have noted, farmers in the rural areas that are included in the National Register will be supported by the Ministry, with specific funds that target the maintenance of the character of historical landscapes through the farms' activities.

Regardless of the cultural and historical values of EALs, agricultural soils also require adequate management. Sustainable farming is generally intended to be presented as green agriculture. Production and environmental functions of agricultural soils are reciprocal [73]. Organic farming [74] and conservation farming [75] are sustainable farming techniques that improve carbon sequestration in agri-ecosystems, as documented by Novara et al. [76] in their case study on sloping vineyards. No less important and well established in terms of research and practical aspects is integrated pesticide management [77], on-farm production of biogas from manure and agricultural waste [78], extensive grazing practices in traditional agricultural landscapes [79], renewable energy production [80], precision farming [81], and management of agroforestry systems [82].

Concluding the benefits, multifunctional farming shapes the ecology and visual appearance of the countryside to the point where, in many countries, the farmed landscape has a cultural value that reveals or exceeds its economic significance [83]. A model linking the sustainable business of a multifunctional farm and the quality of EALs is defined in a schema (Figure 1) adopted from Caporali [84].

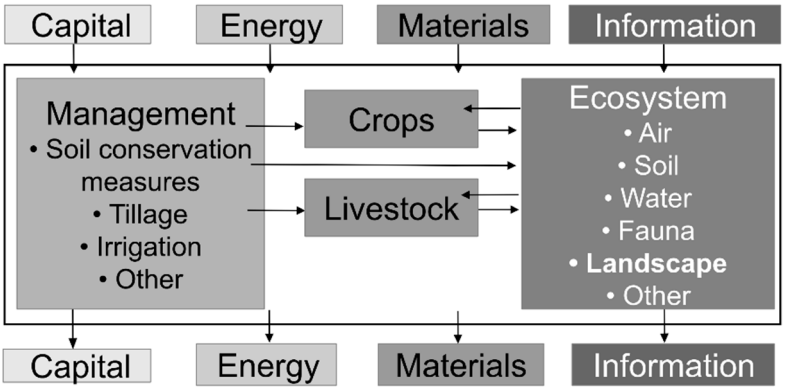

Figure 1. A model linking the sustainable business of a multifunctional farm and the quality of European agricultural landscapes. Adopted from Caporali [84].

1.3. The Aim and Parallels in Research of Multifunctional Farms

The main purpose of the study is the definition of a set of criteria that should be considered when a model of a multifunctional farm, practicing sustainable business to earn a living and preserving the landscape's quality, is introduced.

An essential investigation tool to identify a set of criteria for a multifunctional farm model is questionnaire surveys with experts and farmers. Questionnaire surveys and interviews with farmers are common investigation tools but very efficient methods to gather essential information about the reality they live in. Sometimes, their opinions may open a debate on problems where experts may provide different arguments and solutions than the farmers [85,86]. Therefore, opinions and attitudes from both sides are needed. The questionnaire with experts presented in this article was targeted at collecting opinions on the need for VET courses for small and family farmers, considering the relationship of the farms and landscape quality. A questionnaire for farmers was intended to collect opinions and real experiences on how to establish and operate multifunctional farms that practice sustainable business and preserve the landscape's quality. Further, a decision schema was applied to select relevant criteria that are important for a farmer when multifunctional entrepreneurship is to be established. The proposed model of a farm is intended to be applied in VET courses targeted mainly to small and family farms.

A farm's multifunctionality can be interpreted in terms of its economic activities and multiply roles assigned to agriculture [87]. A decision-making schema integrating both economic and agricultural aspects, used to select a relevant set of criteria for a farm model, is based on three characteristics of a multifunctional farm, as defined by Brandt et al. [88]:

- A space where an entrepreneurship model is established;
- A target group for a farm's production;
- Different services provided to the community.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. A Questionnaire with Experts on the VET Need of Multifunctional Agriculture for Small and Family Farmers

VET experts completed questionnaires in Germany (5), Italy (10), Slovakia (5), Slovenia (7), and Spain (4). In total, 31 experts were involved in the survey (January–June 2017). The content of the questionnaire was developed by the FEAL consortium. The questions were intended to collect answers with the following assessment categories: very important, important, neutral, less important, and totally unimportant. The questionnaire consisted of seven groups of questions: (I) Situation of farming and agriculture; (II) situation of EALs; (III) situation of knowledge concerning EALs; (IV) vocational education and training (VET) and education concerning EALs; (V) importance of different factors to increase knowledge and skills in an integrated concept of farming and EALs; (VI) importance of possible obstacles for creating win–win situations for farming, considering EALs; (VII) importance of different skills/qualifications/knowledge for farmers who want to build up successful farms that foster the maintenance of EALs. Each group of questions contained a subset of questions specifying a given topic in detail (Table S1). The questionnaire revealed many opinions. For the purpose of this article, it is mainly the questions from Group IV on VET concerning EALs that are analyzed. The aim is to provide an overview of the need for VET for small, family, and, particularly, young farmers under 40. The complete survey outputs can be found in the FEAL state-of-the-art report [89].

2.2. A Questionnaire Survey with Farmers, Collecting Experiences in Mutlifuntional Farming

A questionnaire survey with farmers had different content from the previous one. Questionnaires were performed with 28 farmers in 5 countries (Germany, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain; September 2017–March 2018), directly at their farms. The content of the questionnaire was created by the FEAL consortium. The questionnaire was the basis for the development of a case study database, which is available online at the FEAL website [90]. The content of the questionnaires is mirrored in the case study structure. For the purpose of this article, the following data were evaluated: farmer's profile, counting age, gender, and education; farm's area [ha]; establishment of the farm or the date since a farmer has owned or rented the farm; frequency of keywords characterizing the relationship of a farm and a landscape. Frequency means the number of keyword occurrences per farm. Keywords on EALs were suggested by the FEAL experts. Other keywords about activities performed by the farms and multifunctional and sustainable agriculture were defined by the farmers with support from the FEAL experts. Farmers had to choose among the following keywords naming the EALs: Dehesa, Delta Landscape, Farmland, Heathland, Highland, Huerta, Meadow, Open Field Landscape, Orchard, Pasture, Semi Bocage, Terraced landscape, Vineyard, and Wooded Grassland. If farmers had difficulties in deciding which EAL their farm was located in, they could alternatively use the categories of Protected Area and Rural Area. Additionally, the FEAL experts assigned to each farm a status of its presence inside or outside of a nature and landscape protected area. The classification was important for the results interpretation.Then, the farmers were asked to provide keywords about activities performed on their farms and words characterizing multifunctionality and sustainability. The FEAL experts helped the farmers to define keywords if they were not sure of the terminology. The answers from the farmers were further processed by the FEAL experts. Repeating terms with similar meanings were consolidated, and the terminology was

unified. The following keywords, characterizing farming activities, were selected: Almond, Alpaca, Avocado, Beekeeping, Cattle, Cherry, Dairy Farm, Field Crops, Fighting Bull, Forestry, Fruit, Goats, Grassland/Pasture, Greenhouses, Horses, Horticulture, Legumes, Livestock, Mango, Medical Plants, Melon, Olive Trees, Pepper, Permanent Crops, Pigs, Potato, Poultry Processing, Sheep, and Vineyard. Multifunctionality and sustainability were defined by the following terms: Avoid Soil Erosion, Biodiversity, Cooperation, Direct Sales, Quality/Organic/Certified Production, Renewable Energy, Social Farming, Tourism and Recreation Related To EAL, Traditional Buildings, and Traditional Land Use.

The evaluation of the answers from interviews was performed in MS Excel™ 365 using a contingency table and graph. The number of farm-defined categories and the arithmetic mean were calculated for 28 farms. The questionnaire survey indicated the variability of the farm area across five European countries and EALs. Therefore, we adopted the classification of the European Commission [91], which is applied for the distribution of direct payments, to classify farms into categories according to the size of their utilized agricultural area (UAA): without land; 0.1 to under 5 ha; 5 to under 10 ha; 10 to under 20 ha; 20 to under 30; 30 to under 50 ha; 50 to under 75 ha; 75 to under 100 ha; 100 to under 150 ha; 150 ha to under 200 ha; more than 200 ha. Furthermore, based on the provided classification, we divided farms into categories according to their location in- or outside nature and protected landscape areas. We assumed that the farms located in protected areas would prevail within the categories exhibiting smaller farm sizes.

Furthermore, to distinguish small farms, we set up the rule of 30 ha to specify a separate group of farms associated with weaker opportunities to generate income from agricultural activities. These farms receive additional payments from the European Commission for the first 30 ha of UAA (Regulation of the EU No. 1307/2013), and, thus, they have a stronger predisposition to becoming multifunctional than larger farms [92]. We assumed that the farms with a size under 30 ha would prevail in nature- and landscape-protected areas.

Power Pivot in MS Excel™ 365 was used for the evaluation of quantitative data and text-based analyses of the farms. In the case of keywords presenting EALs, we differentiated two categories of farms, which were applied in further data processing and evaluations:

- Nature- and landscape-protected areas;
- Nature- and landscape-unprotected areas.

We realize that the presented results are interpreted only from the chosen dozens of farms, which do not exhibit a statistically representative sample. The driving factors for the selection of the farmers were whether they ran multifunctional and sustainable businesses and whether they agreed to promote and share their experiences publicly within the frame of the FEAL project.

2.3. A Decision-Making Schema to Select the Criteria for a Model of a Multifunctional Farm and Implementation of a Successful Business Strategy

The model of a multifunctional farm practicing sustainable business and preserving the landscape's quality is determined by the farm's characteristics and the management skills of the farmer. Decision-making schemas are very useful tools for farmers. Earlier, these schemas mainly adopted economic issues and resulted in business strategies. Recently, empirical studies have confirmed that simulation models of farms and farmers' decisions are altered by various factors such as the sociodemographic characteristics and psychological attributes of the farmer, the characteristics of the farm (as a household), the structure of the farm business, the wider social relations, and, finally, innovations [93]. Moreover, the decision-making of farmers is strongly affected by environmental factors. Therefore, knowledge is essential on how potential hazards can be mitigated [94]. The decision-making schema may interpret a model and explain the farm's situation or possible activities performed by the farm; a dynamic model may explain the possible trajectories of the farm's business development [95].

A decision-making schema for a set of criteria to create a model of a multifunctional farm practicing sustainable business and preserving the landscape's quality is displayed in Figure 2. It follows the economic and agricultural farm characteristics defined by Brandt et al. [88] and literature analysis on multifunctional and sustainable farming. The theory is expressed in terminology (Figure 2), which might create a terminological basis for VET addressed to small and family farmers who would like to establish a multifunctional farm with the sustainable business strategy of preserving and improving the landscape's quality. The schema is divided into four quadrants:

- "Landscape", mirroring the strong linkage of a farm and its territory;
- "Environment", constituting a potential for land-use resources;
- "Production", targeting public goods provision and quality guarantees;
- "Society", reflecting public demand for services, tourism, and cultural events.

The managerial skills of each farmer are different according to each individual but there exists a way on how these skills can be trained, boosted, and refined. Strategies applied in the farm's model follow the modules of the FEAL training system [96], which was developed for VET courses. The farm's strategies may run independently on each farm, and they are expressed in five modular strategies: quality, marketing, communication, business operation, and monitoring:

1. Quality strategy mirrors a farmer's effort to improve business quality in parallel to the growing quality of EALs, providing maintenance in a sustainable manner. An attractive landscape with valuable features constitutes an asset of high-quality attributes that are necessary for further development and refinement of multifunctional entrepreneurship. Farmers may learn from E-Atlas [5] and case studies [90] representing multifunctional farms in a broader international context.
2. Marketing strategy is an entrepreneurial concept that solves interactions and, sometimes, contradictions between professional agriculture based on optimal land use and soil management and the shaping of landscapes through nonagricultural activities rooted in in-depth knowledge on natural resources and the cultural heritage of the landscape. Competence in all kinds of outdoor facilities and services can be provided by well-structured planning and the use of marketing solutions for ecotourism-friendly clients and tour operators.
3. Communication strategy describes the effective communication and cooperation of the farm. Win–win situations arise from effective forms of collaboration, depending on good communication strategies. Farmers might use traditional and modern channels (internet) for communication. Establishing and keeping communication alive among farmers and stakeholders is very important. Effective communication involves good verbal and nonverbal communication, interpersonal skills, active listening and receiving feedback, and conflict solutions.
4. Business operation strategy and a well-designed business plan rely on the ability to handle the complexity of the farm's model and to think clearly and deeply, strengthening the farm's position towards negotiations with financial partners, fostering a systematic approach to the implementation of the farm's projects, and giving an overview on the progress, stagnation, or regress of the farm's model. The business strategy of small and family entrepreneurs relies on the original services and products provided by the farms. Therefore, three essential questions might be recalled and adopted in their business plans: Where do I do my business? How do I do my business? How do I reach a target group?
5. Monitoring strategy denotes monitoring dependences of the individual strategies applied by the farm because the failure of one strategy usually affects others. The understanding of wasted effort, the solving of less problematic issues, and the fast identification of lost opportunities will help to avoid future failures or their repetition. Therefore, a farmer needs to know the right time to perform an assumed activity and the right activity that will bring the best economic profit.

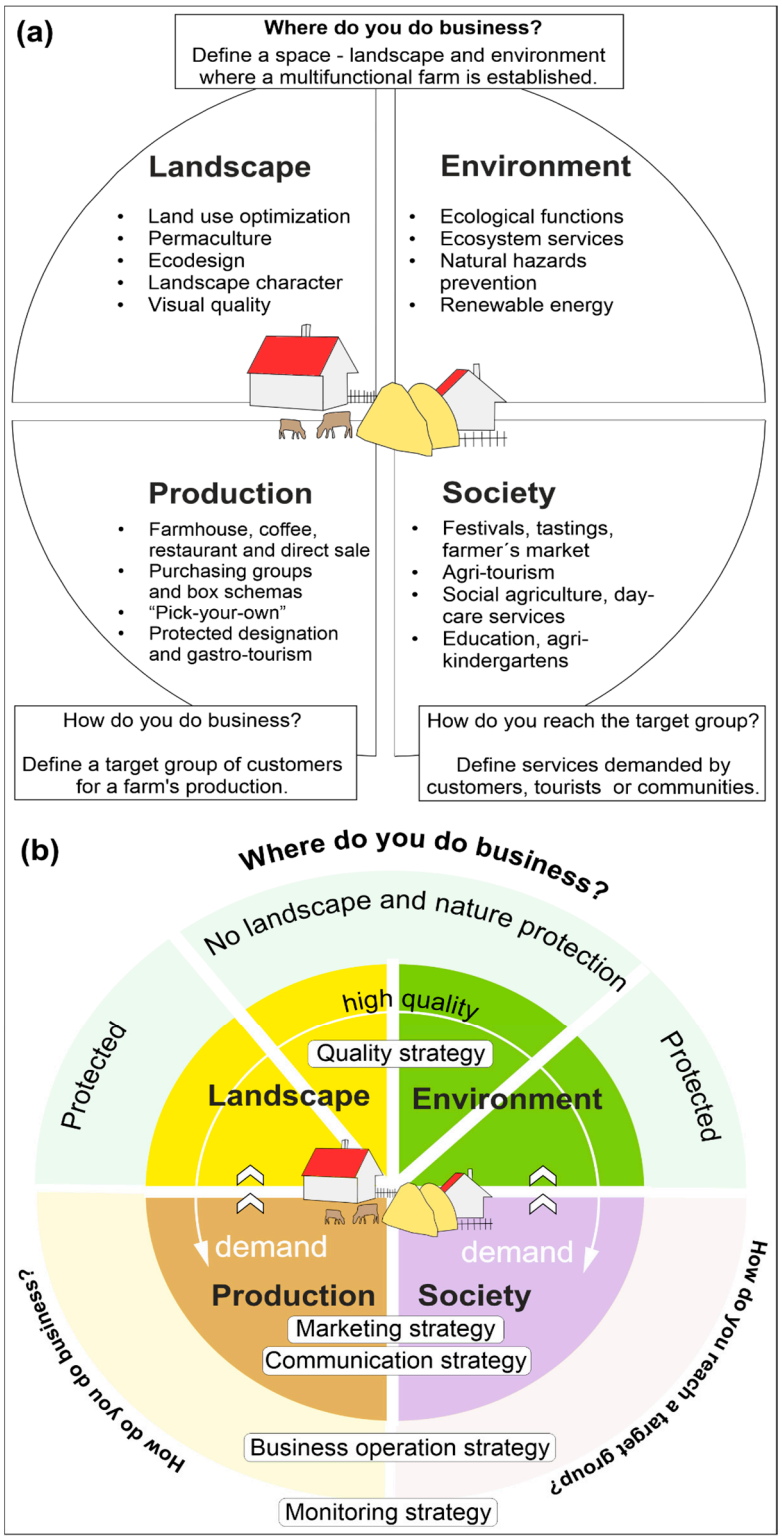

Figure 2. Terminology based on literature analysis of multifunctional and sustainable farming, which should be addressed to small and family farmers through vocational education training (**a**). A decision-making schema for a set of criteria for a model of a multifunctional farm practicing sustainable business to earn a living and preserving the landscape's quality (**b**).

3. Results

A synthesis of opinions and knowledge status of experts on VET activities for small and family farmers gives an overview of the need and sufficiency in five European countries.

Feedback from farmers, gathered through questionnaires, brought both quantitative and qualitative data. A comparison of the farm areas, regarding their location in protected or unprotected areas and farming activities, brought insight into the relationship between the size of the farms, the status of nature and landscape protection, and their farming activities. Data on farmers indicated age, gender, and education preferences when they established the farms' business. Qualitative data on farms were expressed in keywords defining EAL, farming activities, and multifunctionality and sustainability of the farms. Keywords were further adopted for the farm' model using a decision-making schema. Finally, we proposed a model of a multifunctional farm, linking sustainable business strategy and the quality of European agricultural landscapes.

3.1. Evaluation of the Questionnaire with Experts on the Need and Sufficiency of VET for Small and Family Farmers

The answers of all involved experts are compiled in Table S2, and it shows all results. For the purpose of this article, we interpreted the evaluation of the answers related to VET addressed to small and family farmers (Group IV—VET and education concerning EAL; Figure S1); these results are highlighted (grey-shaded) in Table S2. It was especially interesting to see that the answers were more or less coherent within one country but differed strongly among the European regions.

"IV.1 VET activities concerning EALs for small and family (young) farmers are sufficient in your country." In all countries, the answers have a negative tendency, especially in Slovakia and Spain, where the majority disagreed; it was only in Italy that the majority judged this question neutrally.

"IV.2 After completing the education (VET, university degree, or others), in most of the cases, the farmers know the relationship between their farm and EALs." The answers varied a lot in the involved countries, while there was agreement in Italy, Slovakia, and Slovenia and some neutral responses from Slovakia, Italy, and Germany; there were also several disagreements or even strong disagreements in all countries.

"IV.3 Rural society has sufficient education and training concerning EALs." We observed a significant negative tendency in the answers. While in Italy, Slovenia, and Slovakia, more or less than 50% of experts answered neutrally, all the others and the second half of Slovenia and Slovakia disagreed or even strongly disagreed.

"IV.4 After completing the education (VET, university degree or others), in most of the cases, rural society and rural stakeholders know the relationship between farms and EALs." While there were agreements as well as disagreements, many answers were neutral. Therefore, we were not able to deduce the situation of knowledge on the EALs in rural society.

3.2. Results from the Farmers' Questionnaire Survey

3.2.1. Evaluation of Multifunctional Farm Attributes and Farmer Data

The results of the whole questionnaire survey are provided in Table S3. For the purpose of this article, interesting data relationships were picked up.

The mean farm size, extrapolated over the 28 farms, was 114.41 ha, which is not very meaningful due to large national differences. The result affected the farm area in Italy very extensively. Although farms smaller than 30 ha have a stronger predisposition to became multifunctional than larger farms, our survey proved that except for farms in Slovakia, they were larger in all other countries. The farms in Italy exhibited the highest area mean (374.8 ha), followed by Germany (98.5 ha), Spain (55.07 ha), Slovenia (53 ha), and Slovakia (17.6 ha) (Table 1).

Table 1. Evaluation of farming activities in relation to the mean of farm area.

Countries/Farming Activities	The Mean of the Farm Area [ha]
Germany	98.50
Cattle, Fruit, Grassland/Pasture, Livestock, Permanent Crops	60.00
Cattle, Grassland/Pasture, Livestock, Pigs, Poultry, Processing	110.00
Dairy Farm, Goats, Grassland/Pasture, Livestock, Processing	41.00
Field Crops, Livestock, Pigs	180.00
Field Crops, Livestock, Potato, Poultry	150.00
Livestock, Cattle, Horses, Grassland/Pasture Processing	50.00
Spain	55.07
Almond, Cherry, Olive Trees, Permanent Crops	25.00
Almond, Permanent Crops, Processing, Vineyard	3.00
Avocado, Fruit, Mango, Permanent Crops	4.50
Beekeeping, Processing	0.00
Dairy Farm, Goats, Livestock, Processing	2.00
Fighting Bull, Grassland/Pasture, Livestock	350.00
Greenhouses, Horticulture, Melon, Pepper	1.00
Italy	374.80
Alpaca, Livestock, Processing	28.00
Cattle, Livestock, Medical Plants, Pigs, Processing	1500.00
Field Crops, Horticulture, Legumes, Processing	160.00
Grassland/Pasture, Horses, Horticulture, Legumes	36.00
Olive Trees, Permanent Crops, Processing	150.00
Slovenia	53.00
Cattle, Forestry, Grassland/Pasture, Livestock	50.00
Dairy Farm, Forestry, Grassland/Pasture, Processing	176.00
Forestry, Fruit, Horticulture, Livestock Processing, Sheep	15.00
Forestry, Grassland/Pasture, Horticulture, Livestock	16.00
Permanent Crops, Processing	8.00
Slovakia	17.60
Beekeeping	1.00
Cattle, Dairy Farm, Goats, Livestock, Pigs, Processing	22.00
Cattle, Grassland/Pasture, Horses, Livestock	25.00
Dairy Farm, Livestock, Processing	10.00
Livestock, Medical Plant Processing	30.00
Mean of the total farm area	114.41

The farms located inside protected areas had an average farm area of 83.92 ha, while the mean farm area in unprotected landscapes was higher, 137.28 ha. The farms within a category from 0 to under 30 ha represent half of all the farms. While farms inside nature- and landscape-protected areas were found to include only 5 farms under 30 ha, outside nature- and landscape-protected areas, there were 9 farms and farms in the category 0.1 to under 5 ha prevailed. An equal number of farms larger than 30 ha (7) was found in both categories of nature and landscape protection (Table 2). These results did not confirm our presumption that farms located inside protected areas could be smaller and exhibit a farm size of under 30 ha.

Table 2. Categorization of the farms according to farm area.

Category of the Farm's Area/Arithmetic Average [ha] within the Category	0/1	0.1–5/2.3	5–10/8	10–20/13.67	20–30/25	30–50/35.67	50–75/53.33	75–100/0	100–150/110	150–200/163.2	>200/925
Number of farms (totally 28)	1	5	1	3	4	3	3	0	1	5	2
Number of farms (12) inside nature- and landscape-protected areas	1	1	0	1	2	1	2	0	1	2	1
Number of farms (16) outside nature- and landscape-protected areas	0	4	1	2	2	2	1	0	0	3	1

The majority of farmers (16) had higher education. In this group, the age average was 53.9, and the mean farm area was 178.65 ha. Ten farmers had secondary education; their age average was 47.1, and the mean farm area was much lower, namely, 23.3 ha. Two farmers had primary education; the mean age was 52.5, and the mean farm area was 56 ha (Figure S2). In 2018, the mean of the years of production on the farms was 10 years. Among the participating farmers, 7 were female, with an average age of 45.9 years in comparison to the larger group of 21 male farmers (53.2). The highest age average of solely male farmers was in Italy (66.6). The youngest farmers were in Slovenia (41; Figure S3).

The relationship between the farm size and farming activities is expressed in the following statistics. The prevailing number of farms (19) performed activities based on animals that required more land for fodder productions. This fact is mirrored in the higher mean of farm area (150.05 ha). Other farms specializing in plant production (7) had an average size of 50.21 ha. Two farms were specialized in beekeeping, and the mean farm area was only 0.5 ha (Table S3). Beekeeping does not require renting or owning the land, and these farmers benefit other farmers. Bees provide pollination of cultivated plants in a neighborhood of a beekeeper farm.

3.2.2. Evaluation of Key Words on Farming Activities, Multifunctionality, and Sustainability, Adopted for a Farm's Model

In total, 10 keywords indicating multifunctional and sustainable farming were defined by the farmers in the questionnaire. For each farm, different combinations of these ten keywords might occur. The largest group of farmers (17) said that tourism, recreation, traditional buildings, and traditional land use were keywords characterizing their business; 7 farms were situated in protected landscapes, 11 focused on animal production, and 1 on beekeeping. Sixteen farms considered the following keywords to be important for their business: organic production, cooperation, and direct sale. Biodiversity was a keyword for 10 farms, from which 6 were situated in protected landscapes, and 8 were focused on animal production (Table S3).

Considering the farms in protected areas and the keywords that the interviewed farmers used to characterize their farms, we observed that the most frequent keywords were "Quality/Organic/Certified Production" (10) and "Biodiversity" (9). This demonstrates a positive relationship between a high-quality landscape, farm environment, and the high quality of farm production. In the case of farms situated outside of protected areas, the most frequent word was "Tourism and Recreation Related To EAL" (10), followed by "Quality/Organic/Certified Production" (8) (Figure S4).

3.3. A Model of a Multifunctional Farm, Linking Sustainable Business Strategy and the Quality of European Agricultural Landscapes

The proposed model, associating the sustainable business strategy of a multifunctional farm and the quality of EALs, relies on results of the questionnaire survey with farmers (Figure S5) and adopts the characteristics of the multifunctional farm based on literature analysis (Figure 2). These farm's characteristics, grounded in theory, present knowledge that might be addressed to small and family farmers through VET courses. Keywords that were implemented to the model reflected the real opinions of the farmers, and the keywords were assigned to the relevant farm activities, considering the relationships between the farm and the landscape, the environment, and its production and services.

Landscape and environment constitute spaces where entrepreneurship is established. The following landscape' characteristics are important for multifunctional farming:

- Land use optimization: traditionally cultivated land based on ancestral knowledge systems that are implemented in land-use planning incentives;
- Permacultural farm: diversifies its income to different sectors and takes care of socioenvironmental aspects;
- Ecodesing: joins the knowledge on nature, culture and environment, and agriecological practices that are applied for education purposes directly at the farm;

- Landscape character and visual quality: both attributes are important to evoke associations to "landscape images"; some landscapes remain outstanding in tourists' memories, and they feel the need to come back, which constitutes a basis for destination tourism;

The environment constitutes a potential for land-use resources; the following attributes are important for the multifunctional farm:

- Ecological functions run smoothly and effectively in nonintensively managed agroecosystems that are rich in natural habitats;
- Ecosystem services performed by farmers are no longer considered volunteer side products but services that are supported economically and indirectly recognized by the national agri-environmental schemes of rural development plans;
- Natural hazard prevention is rooted in applying optimal land use, eco-friendly farming, and diversification of cultivation practices or respecting traditional ancestral agricultural practices;
- Direct renewable energy production by a farm is usually linked with farms preferring intensive animal production (biogas stations) but also common are small wind power plants and solar or hydroelectric power plants.

Target groups mainly demand the following products from a farm:

- Farmhouse restaurant and coffee shop, expressed in the English acronym HoReCa, consisting of the words "hotel", "restaurant", and "café", which execute a particular sales strategy to offer the farms' products, without intermediaries, directly to hotels, restaurants, and bars;
- Direct sale promotes the idea of "taste the countryside", social farming projects, and organic farms in the hinterland of bigger cities, often in combination with farm shops or cultural events;
- Solidary farming is based on the tied and strong cooperation of farmers and persons paying a fixed monthly sum, guaranteeing the farmer an income and the subscribers locally produced food according to the seasons;
- Box schemas are distribution models for seasonal products that are delivered directly to consumer households; they usually work in complex web platforms, allowing the farmers to directly contact their target consumers;
- "Pick-your-own" is an activity that allows consumers to collect products directly from the farms' fields;
- Protected designation and gastrotourism rely on selling high-quality farm products under three schemes of geographical indications and traditional specialties, known as protected designation of origin (PDO), protected geographical indication (PGI), and traditional specialties guaranteed (TSG).

Multifunctional farms may provide a variety of services depending on social demand:

- Festivals, tastings, and farmers' markets present a direct marketing solution and maintain important social ties between producers and rural and urban populations and build an atmosphere of distinctiveness and a unique sense of place;
- Agritourism is strongly linked with tourism service provisioning, such as accommodation on farms, involving a variety of touristic activities (for instance, equestrian tourism, fishery, craft training courses, or ecoenvironmental excursions);
- Social agriculture is day-care services that employ several forms of acceptance for elderly people or persons with difficulties;
- Education: agrikindergartens contribute to the creation of a stable link between people and territory in a way that a farm becomes an environmental and food education center where people can directly experience nature, food, and traditions.

Each farmer is responsible for a farm's business strategy. Its successful implementation lies in its inherent simplicity. The farm's model contains five modular strategies (quality, marketing, communication, business operation, and monitoring), which may

run independently on each farm. However, the most effective business runs only if these strategies are applied proportionally and concurrently on the farm (Figure 3).

Figure 3. A model of a farm executing a successful business strategy of multifunctional and sustainable farming by improving the quality of European agricultural landscapes.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Importance of the Concept of Multifunctional and Sustainable Agriculture

Previsions on rural development plans give relevant frameworks to integrate environmental aims into agricultural policy [97]. Considering the historical background, a concept of multifunctionality was introduced in the 1992 reform (the MacSharry reform), explaining compensatory aid for environmental protection as a result of European Commission aims for CAP [98]; hence, it has been integrated into the CAP Agenda since 2000. Regarding the questions on national legal situations towards the multifunctionality of farms (Tables S1 and S2), the experts, among others, have provided the following answers:

- *"Overall, multifunctional agriculture is well developed in your country."* While experts from Italy, Slovenia, and, partly, Slovakia strongly agreed or agreed, there was disagreement in the rest of Slovakia, Germany, and Spain.
- "Understanding of multifunctional/sustainable farming." and "Understanding of the relationship between multifunctional/sustainable farming and EALs" was evaluated as very important or important by the prevailing number of interviewed experts. Only in Germany and Slovakia was it evaluated as less important.
- "Exchange of successful experiences in multifunctional/sustainable farming creating win–win situations with maintenance and protection of EALs" was considered very important by a large majority of the interviewees.

The international survey of the FEAL project confirmed that farming has rapidly changed in the last decades by the proposed measures of OECD [20] and European policies [61,97–101]. It has evolved by adding value to the goods obtained from cultivation and livestock through the development of activities and the offer of many services provided to customers, tourists, or local communities.

Farmers are managers of natural resources and managers of extensive land in the countryside. Effects of land-use patterns on ecosystem services and ecological functions are of a central issue in academic debates. Payments or direct aid are linked to less intensive farming techniques and the implementation of environmentally friendly farming practices. Local authorities should be involved in order to apply ecological principles in land maintenance [102]. Therefore, the first question that a farmer needs to answer is "Where do you do business?" (Figure 3). Important drivers of sustainable land use are rooted in the creation of social capital linked with the consciousness of links between man and natural resources. If residents can identify the direct and indirect benefits of spatially determined ecosystem services, their personal awareness, experience, and knowledge of ecosystem services might contribute to the well-being of residents in the countryside [102]

Multifunctionality and sustainability of farms are frequently discussed in regional development policies. In the meantime, well-established central points of EU policy targeting the development of rural areas are important. Nevertheless, the concepts are not well-known to farmers. In the context of ecosystem services, we would like to note important subsidies allocated to farmers to adopt farming practices that can help meet environmental and climate change goals. CAP limits the "green direct payment" or "greening" to farms with more than 30 ha of arable land. The farms are recommended to grow at least three crops, and when arable land exceeds 15 ha, at least 5% of the farms' land must be reserved as an "ecological focus area" to improve biodiversity [95]. The results of the FEAL survey among farmers show that 14 from 28 farms are smaller than 30 ha. Most of them are in Eastern European countries like Slovenia and Slovakia. The achieved results of the farm areas have initiated a discussion on a redistributive payment set up by the European Commission [101]. The European Commission has stated that the majority of EU farm holdings are under 28 hectares. The farms' size in hectares to allocate this payment is limited to a threshold set by national authorities. Considering the recommended limit of 28 ha to address the redistributive payment, we would like to note that the mean of the farm area investigated within the FEAL project exceeded this limit in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Slovenia (Tables 1 and 2). Only the farms in Slovakia were below the limit (the farm size mean was 17.60 ha). Certainly, the FEAL analysis is not representative. However, it gives a spotlight to and might, nevertheless, represent the reality of many farmers. Some EALs are suitable for intensive agricultural production, and these farms would be disadvantaged, although they have applied "greening" measures and performed diverse crop production and multifunctional farming.

The natural, cultural, and historical heritage expressed in EALs requires adequate maintenance concerning several topics at different geographic scale levels. At the national level, nature and landscape conservation and landscape and spatial planning legislation are effective decision-making policy tools. European legislation, conventions, and the recommendations of the European Commission create a framework for national agricultural

policies and land-use management. Especially important for all kinds of landscapes is the European Landscape Convention (ELC) [1], which is not unaccountably signed by all European countries. At the international level, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) conventions play key roles; in the World Heritage Convention (1972) [103], cultural landscapes have been included in the convention since 1992. Furthermore, international agreements on nature- and culture-protected areas and objects are also important, namely, the European Convention for the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (1992) [104], the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention) (1971) [105], the Benelux Convention on Nature Conservation and Landscape Protection (1982) [106], and the Biodiversity Convention (Rio Convention) (1992) [107].

4.2. The Project Outcomes for the Situation in VET for Farmers in Europe

Regarding recent research, finding hard data or exact proof that education enhances farm performance is challenging [108]. However, the study by Obi and Ayodeji [109] proved that the production and technical efficiency of farms depends on gender, marital status, education, credit, experience, and farm size. The authors noted that not all studies indicated a direct positive relationship between the larger size of a farm and higher education attainment. Concurrently, the author cited a summary report "NatWest National Farm Survey. Summary Report and Tables" by the National Westminster Bank Agriculture Office (Coventry, Great Britain; 1992), demonstrating that although farmers on larger farms were trained at college or university, there was a peak amongst very small farms (under 20 ha). The number of small-scale intensive operations requires sophisticated management to prosper in this fierce and intensely competitive business. The results of the FEAL farm survey (Figures S2 and S3) fitted well in these findings. Although we did not find any statistics that would confirm or reject any significant relationship, we would like to mention some facts. The mean farm area was 178.65 ha, which was largest in the case of farmers who reached a higher education degree (16); their age mean was also the highest (53.9). The highest values of farm area and age of the farmers were found in Italy. Farmers who had a secondary education degree (10) cultivated farms exhibiting markedly lower farm areas (the mean farm area was 23.3 ha), and their age mean was also lower (47.1). We note the interesting result that female farmers occurred less frequently (7), and they had a lower mean of age (45.9) in comparison to the larger group of male farmers (21; 53.2). This result might correspond with the latest findings of other authors that male farmers are technically more efficient; the most positive effect was observed in the case of married farmers [109]. Studies done 20 years ago brought similar findings [110].

The answers provided by the experts from five different European countries clearly show that the collaboration of experts among national, regional, and local levels is very important (Figure S1, Table S2). The same weight and importance were related to the exchange of good practice and awareness of EALs by farmers and other rural stakeholders. An interesting result of the questionnaires was the recognition of initiatives and advisory services, including VET, which are welcomed in order to help farmers adapt their business strategies in accordance with complicated legislation. These education services might be normally provided by local or regional chambers of agriculture and, at the national level, by a respective governmental body. However, a problem is the distance, time, and money spent on traveling to education centers from remote regions. Farmers have irregular working hours. Therefore, online portals and OERs for life-long learning are becoming more and more important for farmers. Agricultural knowledge systems are supported by several actors, including national agricultural research organizations, agricultural universities or agriculture colleges, advisory services, farmers, people engaged in farm activities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and entrepreneurs in rural areas [111]. Mainly in remote rural areas, NGOs play a crucial role [112]. A variety of life-long learning programs are offered. The farmers can use the innovative farming concepts they learn for their own profit, being more independent through direct income instead of subsidies.

However, online-based VET for farmers is not very common yet, especially when we talk about education aimed at applying knowledge on landscape values in multifunctional agriculture. Considering the results achieved by the questionnaire survey with experts (Figure S1), we can conclude that VET activities in this problem are demanded by farmers; mainly, the answers to Question IV.3 stressed this conclusion. The respondents answered that the knowledge of rural society of the relationship between farms and EALs is insufficient, and the result was the same in all countries.

To satisfy this demand, several Erasmus+ projects have been set up in the past few years, among them FEAL (2017–2019) [18] and the SoEngage project (2018–2020) [113] (Figure S6). The training modules of the FEAL project are available in seven languages: English, Slovak, German, Spanish, Italian, Slovenian, and French. This assures that the results are accessible for around 70% of European citizens who speak these languages as their mother tongue [114]. The FEAL modules are designed with a user-friendly and simple interface, allowing people who are not too familiar with online applications to use all features of the training system [96] (Figure S6). Returning to technical support and implementation, we note that some farmers might first need to improve their informatics skills, although, globally, IT technology has become more common in rural areas. Last but not least, technical infrastructure, especially fast internet and high-quality wires, is more important than ever, which is the governmental task of each country.

5. Conclusions

Traditionally, farmers have a strong relationship with their own land, and they are in touch with the landscape every day. The pandemic of COVID-19 has, again, pushed for the re-establishment of this renaissance of awareness towards the fact that food production is land-based and connected to farmers. Currently, society has a rising demand for good, healthy, and high-quality food. The demand is usually accompanied by the following customers' comment: "We love healthy and fresh food but, please, not too expensive!". It should be produced locally, with regard to a short carbon trace, but, on the other hand, a customer expects the same price as food intensively produced in either low-salary countries or based on chemical agriculture. A business plan is a living document that requires the proportional implementation of quality, marketing, communication, business, and monitoring strategies. Successful business plans can flexibly adopt regional, organic, and sustainable economy trends and create win–win situations for farmers, economies, ecology, and society.

Landscape attributes and environmental settings constitute a set of primary factors that determine a frame for a farm's activities. A specific complex of environmental and landscape factors might help make the farm's activities and products unique and original. Therefore, it depends on the farmers' knowledge of how to overcome existing constraints and implement the natural, cultural, and historic potential of EALs to the farm's marketing strategy. Considering the economic aspects of the farm, farmers are entrepreneurs facing many challenges and difficulties. Multifunctional farming requires various skills, which are far more than those related only to agricultural production. The model of the farm executing a successful business strategy of multifunctional and sustainable farming by improving the quality of European agricultural landscapes, as proposed in this article, might be addressed to small and family farms through VET courses.

Raising the awareness of farmers and stakeholders on landscape values and promoting adequate daily maintenance of agricultural landscapes would improve the quality of many common and exceptional EALs. The FEAL project, among other outputs, has resulted in the elaboration of training modules that might be applied in future VET online courses. The results presented in this article pointed to the fact of how relevant and important projects like FEAL are. Nevertheless, the existence of VET and OERs shall be integrated into training and education curricula; national chambers of agriculture, as well as consultants and regional development agencies, must play their roles as multipliers, informing farmers about these offers.

The quality of VET training materials and training courses is ensured with the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) [115]. It is a community of practitioners, bringing together member states, social partners, and the European Commission to promote European collaboration in developing and improving quality assurance in VET by using the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework. In October 2005, a prevailing number of EU member states founded the European Network for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (ENQA-VET) [116], with the aim of developing and implementing a common concept for quality assurance in VET. The countries represented in ENQA-VET reached an agreement to establish "National Quality Assurance Reference Points for VET" to promote quality assurance at the national level and to strengthen cooperation at the European level. Until 2010, these had preponderantly been attached to institutions or operated as an informal network (interinstitutional steering groups). The project outputs, based on the international exchange of good farming practices, as was the FEAL project, are presupposed to be implemented into future training materials of VET courses running under the rules of EQAVET, ensuring the quality of the provided education.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su13094650/s1. Table S1: Questions of a questionnaire survey with experts on multifunctional agriculture. Table S2: Results of a questionnaire survey with experts. Table S3: Quantitative data on farms and farmers and keywords from a questionnaire survey with farmers. Figure S1: Evaluation of answers from experts about the need for VET for small, family, and young farmers. Figure S2: Evaluation of the average farm area [ha] and farmers' age (dated to 2017) in relation to countries and education achieved by the farmers (DE—Germany, ES—Spain, IT—Italy, SI—Slovenia, SK—Slovakia). Figure S3: Evaluation of the farms ' rental or ownership (year since the farm was rented or owned by the farmers) and farmers' age (dated to 2017) in relation to countries and gender of the farmers (DE—Germany, ES—Spain, IT—Italy, SI—Slovenia, SK—Slovakia). Figure S4: Frequency of keywords on multifunctional and sustainable farming provided by the farmers and the mean of farm area, considering if the farm is located inside or outside of a protected area (DE—Germany, ES—Spain, IT—Italy, SI—Slovenia, SK—Slovakia). Figure S5: Keywords (KWs) grouped into categories characterizing a framework model of a farm practicing multifunctional and sustainable farming. The keywords were provided by the farmers during the questionnaire survey from September 2017 to March 2018. Figure S6: Examples from different Erasmus+ projects that have developed education and training materials for vocational education and training addressed to farmers, especially: FEAL, 2016–2019 [18] (a); SoEngage, 2018–2020 [113] (b).

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