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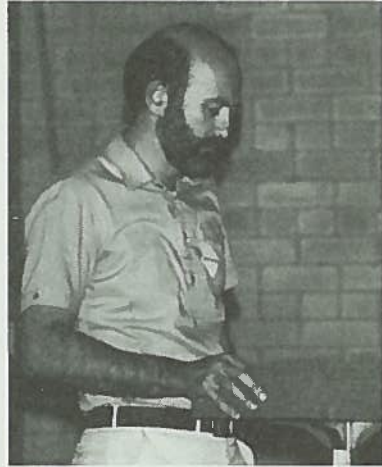
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The diversity of employment opportunities that agricultural economists have found has always surprised me. A casual reflection upon the current positions of fellow graduates of the 1960s identifies academics, teachers, commodity traders, bankers; bureaucrats, analysts and advisers of both the public and corporate sectors; lobbyists and primary producers. All of these are more or less engaged in the practice of their earlier academic training. In addition, of course, there are perhaps as many who have become publicans, restaurateurs, furniture restorers, layabouts and the like who no doubt have drawn on their training as agricultural economists, but who, however, could hardly be described as engaging in professional practice.



Despite the diversity of employment of agricultural economists in Australia, an element of cohesion exists which allows the identification of a professional ethic or paradigm which distinguishes a profession. A couple of factors have contributed to this cohesion.

The first, and probably most important, is the similarity in curriculum and standards between agricultural economics departments in universities around Australia. This is not surprising given that remarkably few faculty staff are not the product of an agricultural economics department of some other Australian university. Insularity and mediocrity have been avoided by additional overseas academic training and teaching experience of department staff but common origins have contributed to common interests and common standards.

From this has flowed a common identity amongst agricultural economists.

The second factor has been the Australian Agricultural Economics Society. The Society has provided a forum for the debate and communication of the endeavours of agricultural economists and others for about as long as the existence of agricultural economics here at Armidale. The standards to which the Society has aspired have been high without being elitist; it has fostered a sense of fellowship as well as the pursuit of excellence.

A third factor has undoubtedly been the genius, perspicacity and style of founding practitioners such as Crawford, Campbell and Lewis - to name just a few of that remarkable group who have continued to inspire a generation of agricultural economists to pursue the ideals forged in the early 1950s.

There is an argument that the description "agricultural economics" now too narrowly defines the ambit of professional interest and experience of those originally trained in the discipline. Indeed, many in professional practice, including those holding membership of the Society, are only distantly involved in agricultural issues and some not at all. Agricultural production, marketing and policy-making have been fertile fields in which agricultural economists have exercised their skills but many have found it intellectually and financially rewarding to apply the same skills to other sectors and problems. Those who retain their interest in the literature of agricultural economics and maintain membership of the Society realise the wider application of its approaches and methods.

While the application of economics to agriculture has been the distinguishing feature of the profession, the key elements in the training and therefore in the capacities of agricultural economists are not specific to any particular sector. These elements are, I believe:

- (i) a thorough grounding in production economics and other related fields of microeconomic theory of neo-classical economics;
- (ii) a capacity for empirical research in the sense of an ability to apply the models and structures of

microeconomics to a very wide range of real world problems and issues;

- (iii) a concern for the practical application of results and prescriptions.

It is hardly surprising that agricultural economics graduates having these skills have moved into employment not associated with agriculture. The structure of the economy has shifted significantly over the past twenty-five years and with it have come significant shifts in sectoral demands for skills of the sort that agricultural economists have acquired. At the time the Agricultural Economics Department was established at the University of New England and the Australian Agricultural Economics Society was formed, the agricultural sector figured much more prominently in the Australian economy. The study of its processes and problems promised and undoubtedly realised larger payoffs than could be achieved for other sectors. Today that assertion cannot be so easily accepted. Furthermore, the contribution that the profession has already made to improving the efficiency of production and marketing and to raising the level of policy debate has been considerable. Thus the incentives to shift the application of our professional skills to fields not related to agriculture are likely to be increasing.

What are some of the implications of this Diaspora of agricultural economists within Australia and internationally?

One implication, perhaps superficial, is that the profession does not do itself sufficient justice in continuing to use the description "agricultural economics". A description which more adequately identifies the ambit of interests of the wider paradigm is difficult to find. Because groupings of interests now exist around transport economics, labour economics and more recently business economics, any description such as "applied economics" connotes a catch-all of little informational value. Worse still, such a change would discard the valuable tradition of achievement which has distinguished the pursuit of the discipline in Australia.

However, more serious consequences are possible if the ambit of interests of those constituting the current professional paradigm are, or appear to be, too narrowly circumscribed. The view has been expressed that the formation in recent years of the Farm Management Society

and the Society of Business Economists is an indication of an emerging loss of identity by the agricultural economics profession. I am not convinced that this is the case. The development of such separate groupings is more a measure of the increasing breadth and depth of economics as an applied discipline in Australia and an increasing need for specialisation as a result.

However, any prospect of the deterioration and eventual disintegration of the paradigm deserves some assessment of the benefits which it generates. The profession, largely through the Society and the common interests and standards of the university departments, provides a forum for the debate of ideas, a place to register and communicate advances in knowledge, and a collective aspiration for excellence. These are tangible benefits accruing both to society generally and to members of the profession. If the loss of these benefits can be avoided then the means to do so deserve our attention.

The Council of the Agricultural Economics Society is aware that the Society must be responsive to any shift in interests of the membership. Membership has been well maintained over the years but the Society has looked for opportunities to ensure that this continues. Currently the Society is assessing the status of the *Journal* and whether it caters for the interests of sufficient of the membership. The view has been expressed that the Society fails to provide an avenue for the publication of pieces of work which are less substantial, more pragmatic and perhaps less rigorous than the type of work which is currently published in the *Journal*. The argument is that by far the majority of members are engaged in occupations which do not allow them to produce substantial, polished pieces of work. They may, however, have the opportunity to produce shorter pieces and many may see merit in their publication. In the past, the *Review* provided such a forum but an apparent shift in editorial policy towards that of the *Journal* has resulted in a narrowing of the opportunity for members of the profession to have material published. A clearer separation of the functions of the *Journal* from those of the *Review* could well broaden the scope of professional literature in Australia and be one means by which the interests of the profession could be attained.

My main concern is that because the description "agricultural economist" inadequately describes the capacities of graduates in the discipline it may entice too few good

students into so-called "agricultural economics" at university. The description to many people suggests a course of study which directs students along a narrow career path in a declining (relatively) economic sector. My contacts with metropolitan high-school students discussing careers suggest almost complete ignorance of the discipline and of the career prospects it opens. Experience with recruiting staff to both the N.S.W. Department of Agriculture and the AMLC suggests that the agricultural economics graduate with a well-structured degree is more capable at an early stage in his/her career of independently undertaking sound analysis of real-world economic issues than are most economics graduates. Where the well-structured degree includes training in the application of economic principles and methods to real-world issues, the graduate easily fits into occupations which require a capacity for analysis. This observation is supported by the number of agricultural economists who have risen to senior research and executive positions in both private and public sectors.

However, good agricultural economists within a decade of graduation are hard to find out there in the market place. This observation supports my earlier concern that too few good students are entering agricultural economics at university. There is a real "seller's market" each year for the top graduates of all Australia's agricultural economics departments. On the other hand, any advertisement for an economic analyst's position with the AMLC, for example, attracts applications from a very large number of agricultural economics graduates of mediocre ability and with poorly structured degrees. This is fairly typical, I understand, with advertisements for positions with other public and private sector organisations. Such graduates lack the training and ability to make good analysts and advisers and, from discussions with them, it seems their career prospects are fairly bleak.

The big challenge to university departments therefore appears to me to be (i) to find ways of enticing a greater number of capable students into courses currently constituting agricultural economics degrees; and (ii) to exclude less capable students who do themselves and the reputations of agricultural economics departments no good by undertaking poorly structured degrees with low levels of achievement.

Let me sum up:

1. The professional grouping of agricultural economists, especially via the Agricultural Economics Society, clearly provides tangible benefits but to a diminishing proportion of agricultural economists in Australia. Reasonable efforts should be made to ensure that the professional grouping is attractive to as many as possible consistent with the ideals and values which provide cohesion to the professional grouping.
2. The career prospects for competent graduates with well-structured degrees remain very attractive, yet a diminishing number appears to be coming out of universities. Even fewer with postgraduate training at master's degree level seem to be entering the job market.
3. In celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of agricultural economics at New England, an important issue which deserves consideration is the apparent decline in the capacity of this, and other universities, to attract greater numbers of competent students.