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Obituary

Vale 'KO' Campbell



Keith Oliver Campbell, or 'KO' as he was affectionately known, passed away on 21 April 2004, aged 83.

When the University of Sydney appointed Keith Campbell as a Reader in Agricultural Economics in 1951, he became the first full-time Australian academic in his field. Keith went on to carve out an enviable personal career as an outstanding academic and academic administrator. However, and perhaps more importantly, he also played a major role in developing his discipline – and the associated profession of agricultural economics – in Australia.

Keith graduated from the University of Sydney with a 1st class Honours in Agricultural Science in 1943 and went to work in the NSW Department of Agriculture as an Economics Research Officer, a position he held until 1950 when he was made a Principal Economics Research Officer. On leave from the NSW Department from 1946 to 1949, he studied at the University of Chicago (for an MA and a PhD) and at Harvard (for an MPA).

Upon returning from the USA, Keith began lecturing part time in Agricultural Economics at the University of Sydney. In 1951, as mentioned earlier, he took up his appointment at Sydney. He was promoted to Research Professor in 1956 and so became the first person to hold a Chair in Agricultural Economics in Australia. With the formation of the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University

of Sydney in 1964, Keith became the Foundation Head of Department, a position he held with distinction until ill-health forced his early retirement in 1982.

Keith quickly earned the respect of his academic peers and he was elected a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Agricultural Sciences (as it was at that time) in 1963 and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia in 1964. He published extensively, including many articles in the *Economic Record*. Indeed, his list of publications includes three books, 13 chapters in books, over 70 refereed articles and more than 10 research reports. He continued to publish long after he retired from the University of Sydney. In fact, one of his most interesting contributions – a book entitled *Henry Parkes's Utopia* which he published in 1994 – is not even listed on his academic curriculum vitae.

During his 30 years at the University of Sydney, Keith served the university and its community of scholars in many ways. He was a campus leader in a broad sense being: President of the Sydney Association of University Teachers (1961–1962); President of the University of Sydney Staff Club (1966–1967); Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture (1968–1971); and President of the University of Sydney Association of Professors (1979–1980).

Despite Keith's outstanding contributions as an academic and academic administrator, it was his role in developing and fostering the profession of Agricultural Economics in Australia for which he will be best remembered – because so many others have benefited from his efforts in this regard.

The formal record shows that Keith was the Organising Secretary for the First Conference of the Australian Agricultural Economics Society (AAES) in 1957, the Foundation President of the Society (1957) and Member of Federal Council (1958–1977).

The informal record – for those who were active in the profession from the early 1950s to the early 1980s – is much longer and more complicated. Not only did KO Campbell have a guiding hand in so many of the AAES activities during this period, he also worked ceaselessly to link the Australian profession to the international profession.

His work with the International Association of Agricultural Economists (IAAE) began in 1955 when he became the Country Representative in Australia for the IAAE, a position he held until 1976. He persuaded the IAAE to hold its 13th Triennial International Conference in Sydney in 1967 and, as Chair of the Organising Committee, Keith raised the financial and human capital necessary for an outstandingly successful conference. These meetings provided an opportunity to showcase the Australian profession to the international leaders of the Agricultural Economics fraternity. Many younger members of the Australian profession subsequently 'grew their careers' on the contacts made at this gathering. After the Sydney conference, Keith continued to foster relationships between the Australian profession and the IAAE, being elected an IAAE Vice-President (1973–1976).

'KO' was a great character in many ways. A dry speaker, he never claimed to be an entertainer! But he could certainly 'call a spade a spade' when he judged the occasion warranted it. From time-to-time in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, Keith became notorious both on- and off-campus as the 'possum stirrer' from the bottom of Science Road at the University of Sydney.

On-campus, his concern that students in the Faculty of Agriculture understand the economic, social and environmental implications of agricultural production brought him into conflict with those who felt that ‘knowing how to make two blades of grass grow where one grew before’ was all that students needed to know.

Off-campus, his reasoned attacks in the media aimed at reforming some of the agricultural protection policies of the day greatly distressed powerful vested interests and rent seekers.

In these and other areas, Keith was a man well ahead of his time. He was an ‘old fashioned academic’ who believed that it was important for academics to engage in public policy debates without fear or favour. Both in his writings and in his public utterances, Keith used his considerable intellectual skills and his exceptional grasp of economics to argue logically and rationally ‘in the public interest’.

Perhaps because he dared to be different, Keith attracted many talented students to agricultural economics. He was always extremely supportive of former students. He was also very proud that so many of them had risen to prominence both in Australia and overseas.

Keith, despite work pressures, always endeavoured to maintain a healthy balance in his life, being a devoted family man and someone who participated enthusiastically in his local church and suburban community activities. Keith’s wife Christiana – also a former University of Sydney academic – and his daughter Catherine both pre-deceased him. He is survived by his son Bill and daughter Margaret and their respective families.

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