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Forum

Supply and Demand in Agricultural Economics Education

Introduction

R. G. Dumsday and G. W. Edwards*

In planning and proposing the "Teaching Swapmeet" for the 1988 Annual Conference of the Australian Agricultural Economics Society we offered the following reasons:

- (1) Teaching in agricultural economics is clearly of considerable importance to the Society;
- (2) There does not appear to have been a special session on teaching at our annual conferences since the Society was formed;
- (3) We are in the midst of another round of reviews of the tertiary education system;
- (4) The other reasons are entirely selfish.

As any well-trained economist would expect, the selfish rationale was uppermost in our minds. La Trobe University had recently appointed Tony Chisholm to succeed John Freebairn as Professor of Agricultural Economics and Business Management. In addition, the University in its collective wisdom had decided that the School of Agriculture should soon be submitted to an external review. This was obviously the time to internally review our teaching and research programs.

Teaching in agricultural economics *is* of importance to the continued health and vitality of the Society. There is some evidence that our profession is aging, that we are not attracting as many keen and well-trained young minds as once was the case. There is a need to take a close look at the attractiveness of courses in Australia and to develop new ways of promoting the discipline, particularly among tertiary undergraduates.

It is not desirable to rely entirely on overseas postgraduate programs for the production of specialists in agricultural economics. In the best departments there

are strong complementary relationships between undergraduate and postgraduate programs. If it is felt that economies of size, particularly in *coursework* postgraduate programs, strongly favour schools in the U.S.A., we should see what can be done to overcome size disadvantages in offering these programs in Australia. Thankfully, there has already been progress in this area since the Swapmeet was held, with the establishment at the University of New England of a Key Centre in Agricultural Economics. We congratulate our UNE colleagues on their success which will have important positive spillover effects for the profession.

We should also address the question of whether the likely future for agricultural economics warrants special teaching programs in this area. The short answer to this question appears to be yes. Several writers, including Alan Lloyd (1988) and Jerry Sharples (1988) have strongly questioned the "flavour of the month" notion that agriculture in Australia is a sunset industry. We have strong comparative advantages in this industry and they are likely to be maintained, so long as governments continue to support relevant programs of teaching and research. Agricultural economics and agricultural science courses have a good record in terms of producing applied economists who are well equipped to help solve practical industry problems. An advantage of these courses is that they are one year longer than standard economics courses and it appears to be the final year that adds most of the value.

The Swapmeet was successful in providing the opportunity to swap teaching ideas and materials. It was well attended by producers and consumers and as David Godden has pointed out, it was fascinating to see the extent of divergence

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in views on agricultural economics education among academics and employers and to observe that, if anything, the divergence was greater within each camp. It is appropriate that we should hold such a meeting in Australia's Bicentennial year. However, it is embarrassing that it has taken the Society about 30 years to get around to it. We hope that these meetings become a regular feature of future conferences.

References

- LLOYD, A. G. (1988). "The importance of agriculture: what hope for agriculture and what needs to be done?" *Review of Marketing and Agricultural Economics*, 56 (1), 129-134.
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Teaching Agricultural Economics

Anthony Chisholm *

The issue of what kinds of knowledge and skills students should master by the time they graduate has not been addressed before by either the Australian Economics or Agricultural Economics professions so far as the author is aware. The issue has only rarely been raised in a serious way by the American economics profession. However, I believe that the American Agricultural Economics Association discusses these issues every three years or so at their Annual Meetings, but these sessions are not as a rule published in their Proceedings.

The comparative lack of attention to teaching issues by economists (American Agricultural Economics Association excepted) is peculiar in the light of significant professional interest in examining the outcomes of a wide variety of public projects through cost-benefit analysis and other economic frameworks. A goal commonly postulated by economists is that they try to teach students how economists think, but they have little evidence as to their success. Whatever success, or lack of it, teachers have had in teaching students how economists think, the economics profession is generally seen to have done a bad job in communicating basic economic principles to the public (Rees 1986).

We would expect communication of macroeconomic principles to the public to be poor since there are deep conflicts within the profession in this area. But in the area of microeconomics, where there is substantial agreement among economists on basic principles, it is nevertheless easy to pose questions to which most economists would answer yes while most non-economists would answer no. See, for example, the questions posed by

* La Trobe University. I am grateful to Geoff Edwards for some useful discussion.