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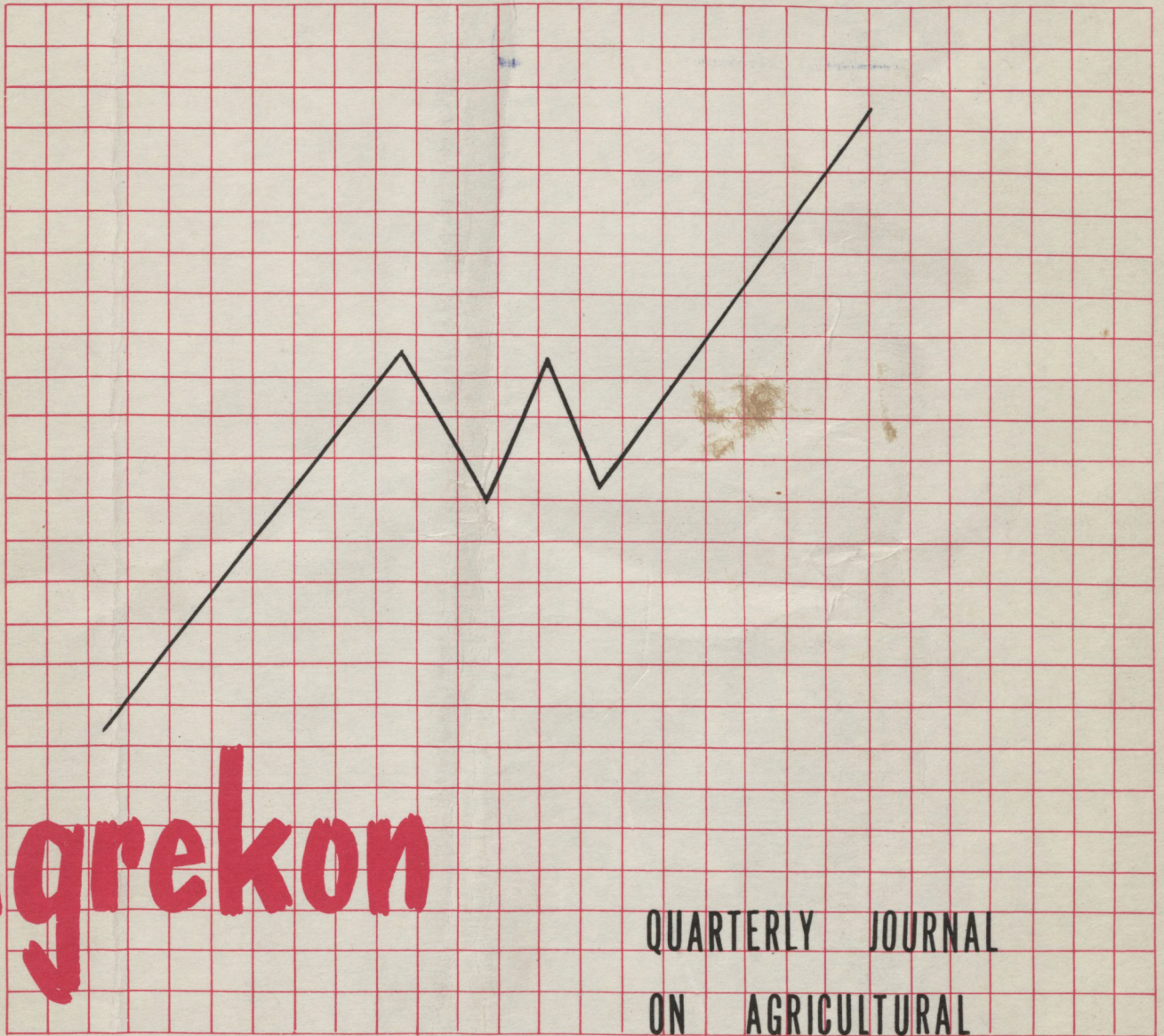
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# THE STUDENT'S STANDPOINT

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The viewpoints expressed in this paper are those of the average student who has graduated from the various faculties of agriculture. Some of the viewpoints inevitably hold good for certain faculties but not for others. The purpose of this paper is to provide a true reflection of the student's viewpoint.

From the numerous discussions with students, viewpoints on four aspects in particular, have emerged, namely:

1. Inter-disciplinary connection of the subject of [agricultural economics]
2. History of South African agriculture as viewed by the agricultural economist.
3. South African agriculture as foundation for training in agricultural economics.
4. Training in agricultural economics and the demands made on the agricultural economist of today.

These aspects are now discussed individually.

## 1. Inter-disciplinary connection of the subject agricultural economics

The student, whether of production or marketing economics, finds himself at the end of his training in a situation where concepts other than pure agricultural economics, are also applicable. Man is and will remain the central core around which everything revolves, whether he be a manager, consumer, producer, organiser, extension officer or whatever his role might be.

The student will have experienced a multitude of problems: Those of the production economist who has the task of drawing up an optimum farm plan for a region and who, although he makes use of a linear programming system, does not take into account the sociological and cultural background of the people concerned; those of the marketing economist who has to investigate market packaging and who does not consider the diverse contributions to the market of the population groups; and many more.

As regards the theoreticians, the need for inter-disciplinary research has already been stressed. Brand<sup>1</sup> postulates as follows: "These developments, which also form the background to the increasing interest in inter-disciplinary research which can be observed in various circles, evidently have their origin in an increasing realisation among scientists that their traditional approaches are not adequate for gaining a complete understanding of the

phenomena for which they have respectively accepted responsibility". And further: "At the micro-level it overlaps with sub-systems usually identified with disciplines such as sociology, communication science and social anthropology, while at the macro-level there is also an overlap with the system of political science". He comes to the following conclusion: "The inclusion of courses from these related sciences in the degree curricula followed by students in agricultural economics, could meanwhile contribute much to the ability of agricultural economists eventually to initiate true inter-disciplinary research".

From research on agricultural economics this necessity for inter-disciplinary research also follows. Mueller<sup>2</sup> expresses himself as follows: "In summary, we can see that production economics, behavioural theories of the firm, and financing and accounting relationships are inherently involved in a discussion of management perspectives, aims and approaches".

Groenewald<sup>3</sup> summarises his argument on the modern requirements of agricultural economic research as follows: "Agriculture is part of the economic framework and not a loose entity. Many problems in agricultural economics also get intertwined with biological, chemical, psychological, political and aesthetic problems. Philosophical views also exert an influence on agricultural economic problems. Thus, agricultural economics covers a wide field; this has over time also led to specialities inside agricultural economics".

Du Plessis<sup>4</sup> takes the question further and indicates the wide field covered by South African agriculture as well as the dangers inherent in fragmentary research. He points to the "four principles on which agriculture should be founded in order to retain its position in the national context that it may with success fulfil its given task.

To this end agriculture should be ...  
historic-traditionally founded;  
socially founded;  
ecologically founded; and  
economically founded.

It increasingly appears that various matters in the agricultural industry are being approached in a narrower economic sense and that on the basis of predominantly material suppositions, deductions are being arrived at which may lead to agriculture being affected in its most profound being".

The student's need is not a quantity of new subjects from other disciplines added to the present

degree course. His requirement is a subject or a method of teaching that will prepare him for the future by enabling him to see each task and instruction in its broader context. Any task requires a hypothesis and many hypotheses have fallen by the wayside in the past due to a lack on the part of the agricultural economist of knowledge broader than that given him by his own professional field.

## 2. History of South African agriculture as seen by the agricultural economist

Experience has taught the student that no task tackled within the field of agricultural economics can be successfully completed without a knowledge of the historical development of agriculture. It is common knowledge that agricultural production varies greatly from year to year and that the marketing processes are complicated thereby. Similarly, it is well known that the evolution of the co-operatives, the farm problem, the depopulation of rural areas, and other developments have given to South African agriculture characteristics and organisations which are unique in world agriculture. History is an essential starting point in any field of study as regards further development.

At the 1962 annual congress of The Agricultural Economic Society the President, W.H. Long, devoted his presidential address to the history of agriculture and agricultural economics<sup>5</sup>. The following were some of his thoughts:

"The economist, moreover, has to look to history to provide the function which for the scientist is provided by the controlled experiment. Economics by definition cannot be studied by setting up experiments, and the nearest approach to this method which is open to the economist is the detailed investigation of the past. But a study of history not only helps to explain how the present was evolved; it also reveals the long period trends which may help to forecast the future.

Men are men before they are lawyers or physicians, or manufacturers, and if you make them capable men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers and physicians, said J.S. Mill. One way of doing this is by giving them as wide an education as circumstances make possible, so that their thoughts are not circumscribed by one discipline only. I believe that the study of history is good insurance against this danger: I assert that as economists we are failing to make the best use of our resources by devoting so little of our time and interest to it".

The general opinion among students is that history can be included as a degree course in one of two ways, viz. as fully-fledged compulsory subject or included in every subject where the historic connection occurs. A prerequisite for its application as a fully-fledged subject, is that the history of South African agriculture must be evaluated by an agricultural economist and then be taught as a subject.

## 3. South African agriculture as foundation for training in agricultural economics

The student of agricultural economics has perforce to study prescribed works from other countries, which necessarily contain examples illustrating theoretical concepts drawn from the respective countries' agricultural situations. Admittedly, the basic principle remains the same even though the details may differ.

Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of this matter which are not what they should be. The currency units differ, as do measures and weights. For this reason the student experiences difficulties in the practical application of the theoretical principle. The subject is not fully "alive" as far as the student is concerned.

Opinions expressed by students, having a bearing on the following discussion, include many practical suggestions. The Divisions of Agricultural Production Economics and Agricultural Marketing Research have much data at their disposal and undertake annual projects which could most definitely be put to use by the four faculties of agriculture to place the student's theoretical training on a South African foundation. Consider the 1 200 or so farmers registered for the purpose of mail-in records with the Division of Agricultural Production Economics. Can the student obtain better practical experience than by making use of this information in a constructive manner in one way or another?

In addition, the Department of Agricultural Technical Services maintains many research organisations which regularly publish literally hundreds of experimental results on fertilizer application, weed control and many other aspects. Private organisations, as for example where Pioneer maize hybrids are undergoing tests, give ideal opportunities for the student to put theory into practice.

To sum up: The student wishes this subject to be alive and that the opportunities to make it so, do exist.

## 4. Agricultural economics education and the demands made on the agricultural economist of today

It is difficult to define in a few words the viewpoint of the student on the training in agricultural economics in the broader sense. Primarily, it amounts to this that his training does not fully prepare him for the demands which are made on him.

Long<sup>6</sup> claims an achievement for the agricultural economist which will cause many a student to hesitate to enter the outside world: "Now, however, the economist can generally exceed the craftsmanship of his colleagues in the physical and biological fields by virtue of the range and quality of his tools. And agricultural economics can claim to be the most profound and advanced of all applied fields in economics".

The general feeling among students is that the courses in agricultural economics, as set out in

university annuals, reflect very thorough planning by the respective departments. However, there seems to be considerable dissatisfaction among those students who have completed the degree courses which centres mainly around three aspects.

In the first place the student is made keenly aware that he cannot hope to pass every course unless thorough research is reflected in tests and examinations in the form of references to literature. Experience has, however, shown that many students are lazy and rely only on the lectures in the lecture hall (which are often dictated lectures), memorise these and pass their examinations on the strength of these notes. The zealous student, who later makes and is able to make a contribution in the field of the subject, has little reason in retrospect for pride of achievement in having successfully passed the examinations in his course of studies.

Secondly, it frequently appears that the lectures presented are obsolete and that the formal notes often remain unchanged for up to three generations. Students are of the opinion that this is one of the most important factors causing potentially good students to lose interest in their subjects.

In the third place, tasks and projects to be done by students, should be aimed more at the student's development and at extending his knowledge of South African agriculture. Seminar subjects should be adapted to what the student wishes to and should know and not what the advanced agricultural research worker would like to know.

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