

Invited address

UNIVERSITY AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS EDUCATION: CHANGING FUNCTIONS AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

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Agricultural economics is a branch of applied economics born at the turn of the 20th century. Its primary role was to use economic and its own newly developed methods to contribute towards an improved use of resources in agricultural production. It is recognized as one of the fundamental disciplines in university-level agricultural education, with its own subjects, modules and programmes. University-level education in agricultural economics (UEAE) traditionally rests on four pillars: agricultural economics, farm management, food marketing and agricultural policy, complemented by numerous other fields that extend beyond the narrow framework of economics and into other social sciences.

In this presentation, we will attempt to answer the following questions: i) Why do we have UEAE? ii) What are the current situation and trends in the field? iii) What are potential strategies for the future of UEAE? In answering them, I will build on a literature review and personal expertise in the field and I will mainly focus on the situation in Former Yugoslav countries (SE Europe). A lecture of this sort would normally demand systematic and extensive research, so my approach here is more of an essay, whose intention is mainly to stimulate further discussion.

The field of UEAE was born as a result of the fact that exclusively economic education was unable to equip agricultural engineers with the tools necessary for their trade. Due to the specifics of production-related and social processes in agriculture, specific knowledge and skills were necessary that demanded independent and original theories, methods, data sources and approaches. This led to special university programmes in the field of agricultural economics. Thus, in most university-level organisations active in the field of agriculture (and partly also in economics), an entire vertically integrated corpus of knowledge was formed, specialized in agricultural economics. By applying a social science approach, this knowledge shaped generations of agricultural economists around the globe, who played an important role in the development of agriculture. Highlighting the significance and societal role of agriculture, especially experts for farm management and agricultural policy played important roles due to extensive knowledge of agriculture at the micro- (production) and macro (societal) level, which can only be attained through specialization in these two fields of agricultural economics.

In ex-Yugoslavia, agricultural economics gradually gained prominence after World War II. Its basic purpose was to support the economics and organisation at socialist large agricultural holdings. It was considered marginal and even heretic to study the social and economic situation of family farms. Agricultural policy was also often about legitimizing previous political decisions. Agricultural marketing was in its infancy. Regardless, curricula contained numerous fundamental agricultural economic theories and practices, and education in the field of agricultural economics in most republics in the federation was better than that in other socialist countries. This was also due to a solid foundation in Marxist political economy, which represented a good basis for economic thinking.

The transition to a market economy and democracy substantially transformed the field in South-Eastern Europe. Gradually the curriculum adopted the basic structure of courses and disciplines from the Anglo-Saxon and German world, which meant using the same textbooks

and approaches. During transition, different institutions and fields of agricultural economics in the region successfully connected to the economy and state administration.

After the '90s, agriculture changed significantly globally as well as in Europe and the region. It is affected by technological advances, environmental change, globalisation, political and economic shifts, and new societal perceptions of food production and its influences. In the best of European and other high-ranking universities, this has led to the introduction of new subjects and skills that mainly touch the fields of environment, nutrition, communication and consumer science. It is also becoming a clear trend that certain traditional skills and approaches (e.g. farm management, as well as agricultural policy) are no longer crucial segments of knowledge offered by agricultural universities and faculties. This part is moving to the high-school and vocational level, being dropped from the selection of the most prominent, important subjects in curricula. Agricultural economics is losing its traditional platform and forming a new one, which is mainly developing into a wider social science and tackling societal issues. New subjects and programmes are being formed. This is also changing the skillset of graduates, who in such universities are following market trends.

In the countries of SE Europe, we did not significantly change the structure and content of modules after transition, and, importantly, we have not upgraded them. Similarly, traditional disciplines are losing ground in the universities that we like to compare ourselves with. Is it not that UEAE is losing in the long run at SEE faculties? Is it not also reflected in the willingness of students to study in this field? It is my hypothesis that we should reflect deeply and reform programmes and courses. Perhaps it is worth considering a common approach for all the key faculties in the region.

The fundamental questions of a new strategy in agricultural economics education at agricultural faculties in the region should be based on strengthening knowledge related to agriculture and rural development, while expanding our skillset with knowledge from the social sciences and exploring societally relevant issues. The main goal is to retain relevance among the disciplines of agricultural sciences, and especially improve the competencies of graduates. A number of issues for further discussion has been recognized; I will only list a few here:

- Strengthening farm management to support practical production decision-making.
- In the field of agricultural policy, strengthen the evidence-based and policy cycle approach, as well as macroeconomics and an understanding of markets.
- Improve business education, especially in the fields of finance and agri-food marketing.
- Strengthen the supply-chain approach in both production and processing of food.
- Emphasize consumer science.
- Develop a range of disciplines in the field of environmental economics and biodiversity.
- Strengthen the exploration of the potential and effects of using big data, block-chain technology and digitalization in the field.
- Strengthen strategic planning as a skill in education.
- Introduce communicology as a fundamental discipline in education.
- Improve qualitative research and introduce sociological and anthropological elements into education.
- Reintroduce cooperatives and knowledge regarding organisational integration into the curriculum.
- Give development economics and rural development a new meaning, especially in the sense of building capacity for understanding broader issues and project management.