

Editorial

These days, the considerable argument is that we should have a uniform name for the Department of Extension Education in Universities. Otherwise, the graduates will have difficulties to find a job. In my opinion, this name is much less important than the criteria which are used to select the most capable staff members for these Departments.

A key question is which qualities should such a staff member have. In my opinion, he should not teach his students a lot of facts, but he should increase their ability to analyse an extension problem and to develop a good solution for this problem, which is most likely different from solutions which have been used in the past either because we are now able to use new scientific ideas or because the situation is different. A major task of university staff members is also to develop new scientific theories and ideas. This implies that (s)he should be able to apply theories from different social sciences to the problems extension agents and extension managers face. Therefore, he should have a good knowledge and understanding of these theories in at least some of the social sciences and the ability and motivation to learn from clients and extension agents about the problems extension agents have in planning and managing their programmes and in communicating with clients. It is clear that long before his/her retirement, there will be many valuable theories, which (s)he did not learn as a student either because they have been developed afterwards or because a student is only able to learn a small proportion from the existing scientific theories. Also the problems extension agents face change continuously. Therefore, it is quite important to select a candidate, who is motivated and capable to continue to learn. This is also because otherwise (s)he will not be able to teach his/her students to continue to learn the rest of their lives.

If a candidate for a position of teaching extension education to home economics students has studied agricultural extension, (s)he may have slightly more difficulties to learn about the specific problems of home economics extension agents than one who has studied home economics extension. However, if there is good teamwork among the staff members of the College of Home Economics, it should not be difficult to overcome these problems. An important advantage of the candidate, who has studied agricultural extension, should be that he has more possibilities to introduce new ideas from his/her experiences in agriculture than one who has always studied and worked in home economics.

Let me illustrate this by describing the selection of staff members for the Department of Extension Education (later renamed Extension Science, renamed Communication and Innovation Studies) of Wageningen Agricultural University in the Netherlands. We did not like to appoint graduates of our own Department, unless they have first worked some 10 years elsewhere, because otherwise they

will have difficulties to introduce new ideas in the team. In first few years, we were the only Department of Extension Education in the country and we needed staff members who could teach in Dutch. Therefore, we appointed graduates from other social sciences, social psychology, sociology, communication and adult education and asked them to apply their discipline to find new ways to solve problems of extension agents and extension managers. We selected those social scientists, who had studied aspects of their discipline which were relevant for the development of extension education. The topic of their thesis and the content of their courses were important selection criteria. In addition, through this selection process, we could increase the number of candidates from which we could select the best staff member. It is much easier for a capable person to learn a new subject than for a not very capable person to become capable.

I am quite convinced that if we had appointed our own young graduates we would have got much less recognition from extension agents and extension scientists at home and abroad than we now receive for our contributions to the development of extension education as a discipline and for training capable graduates. It is true that some of the social scientists we appointed, had difficulties to apply their discipline to extension, but that is a risk one has to take if one likes to be innovative.

The result was that in terms of number of students extension education became one of the largest departments in the university, because a lot of students took this subject as an option. They realised that there is an urgent need for people who can integrate knowledge from different disciplines to solve practical problems. Furthermore, it is stimulating to study with teachers who try to develop new approaches and this gives them more changes on the labour market. To give just one example : The Ministry of Health needed for their unit in-charge of policies to combat AIDS a capable staff member, who understands how epidemics spread and how one can change human behaviour. One appointed a plant pathologist with a minor in extension, who succeeded well in applying the basic principles she had learned to this new field. That she lacked specific knowledge about AIDS was not considered a problem, because in the environment of a Ministry of Health it should not be difficult to acquire the necessary knowledge on this topic.

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