

In the Beginning there was E.W. Hofstee or the Birth of Rural Sociology in Wageningen

The history of rural sociology in Wageningen goes back to the appointment of Evert Willem (E.W.) Hofstee as professor in economic geography in 1946. While his appointment by Royal Decree took place on May 9, 1946, he started to work at the university on September 15, 1946, even though his formal employment did not start until October 1, 1946, and he gave his inaugural lecture “On the causes of diversity in agricultural regions in the Netherlands” on October 30, 1946.

The appointment of E.W. Hofstee not only marked the beginning of rural sociology in Wageningen, his work also laid the foundations for the social sciences department at this university. Moreover, Hofstee played an important role in the development of rural sociology in Europe. He was the co-founder and first president of the ‘European Society for Rural Sociology’ (1957) and co-founder of the journal ‘Sociologia Ruralis’ (1960).

Hofstee’s original teaching assignment was ‘Economic and Social Geography and Social Statistics’. The position for an economic geographer, who would also do social statistics, went back to a pre-advice of a committee led by professor Edelman to the Senate of the Wageningen Agricultural University on September 21, 1945. The committee recommended the appointment of a professor in economic geography. A few days later, on September 27, 1945, the rector

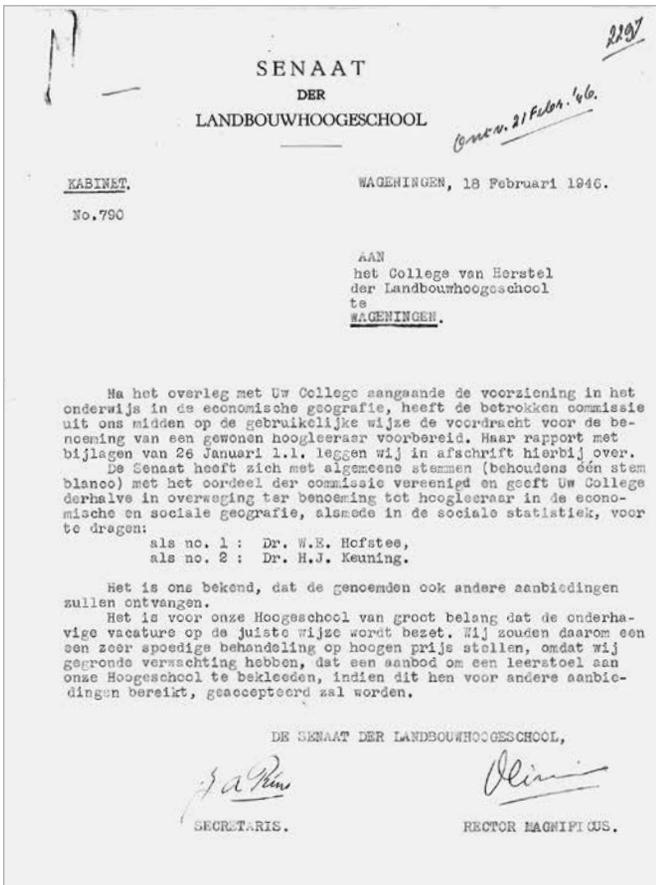
requested the ‘Committee for the Restoration of the Agricultural University’ (‘College van Herstel van de Landbouwhogeschool’), responsible for the post-World War II re-establishment of the university, to open a vacancy for a professor in economic geography. With regard to the necessity of such a position, the Appointment Advisory Committee stated on January 26, 1946 that together with the increasing role of the state in the economy, “there is a growing need for agricultural engineers who have received economic and socio-geographical training. Knowledge of the structure of countries and peoples that compete with Dutch agricultural, horticultural and forestry products as well as knowledge of the structure of agricultural society in our own country and the Dutch-Indies is necessary.”

Hofstee was one of the 13 candidates who applied for the new position and became the selection committee’s first choice. The committee argued that Hofstee was a good speaker, had didactic skills, did important research and had strong letters of recommendation. Moreover, the committee was looking for someone who would be able to develop his research agenda with determination and perseverance and thought Hofstee was the right person for this.

Hofstee had clearly explained his ambition in his application letter and the job interview. He told the committee that the task of the

professor should not remain limited to doing what most economic geographers did – making a ‘product topography’ - or ‘bringing together existing knowledge’. His ambition was higher. The agricultural engineer of the future, Hofstee argued, needs to understand the factors that determine the nature and scale of production. He considered it important that students learn how economic questions relate to social phenomena of a non-economic nature. Another important task, Hofstee argued, was to train agricultural engineers to become independent researchers of ‘concrete issues’. Hofstee’s ultimate ambition was to develop the university into a center of research on rural regions and agriculture. He considered the terms econom-

ic and social geography outdated, but had to wait until 1954 until his teaching assignment was given the name he preferred: sociography. Following his appointment in 1946, Hofstee not only developed rural sociology in Wageningen, but also made important contributions in the fields of geography, demography and household studies, extension studies, history, planning, and GIS. He was a board member of the Agricultural Economic Institute LEI, today’s Wageningen Economic Research (WEcR). Although he did not like the designation ‘Wageningen School’, he laid the foundations for a specific approach that was characterized by an interest in agency, meaning and diversity – an approach which continues to characterize rural sociology in Wageningen.



Nomination for the position of an economic geographer (which would become rural sociology) by the university’s senate (archive WUR)