

2012 AARES Distinguished Fellow

Jeff Davis



Jeff Davis has championed the economic evaluation of agricultural research in Australia for several decades. His contributions span original research, policy development and extension. This is one area where Australian economists are leaders internationally and Jeff's many contributions have been a key factor in achieving that recognition. In addition, he has facilitated the training of evaluation specialists and the institutionalisation of evaluation processes here and in many developing countries.

On the research front his PhD concerned the research production coefficient for US agriculture and led to a series of journal papers about lag structures in research and procedures for estimating the returns to research. His findings are still widely referenced. Returning to NSW Agriculture he was part of a small group which advised on research priority setting within the Department, an area where the Department's economists have continued to participate. Jeff remained an influential mentor to the Department's economists long after he left.

In parallel with this econometric work, Jeff wrote a seminal paper with Freebairn and Edwards in the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* in 1982 about the distribution of the gains from research in a multistage production system. This paper is probably the most widely cited paper on the distribution of the gains from research and has led to an extensive body of research since, particularly here in Australia.

When Jeff joined Jim Ryan's team at ACIAR they extended the Freebairn, Davis and Edwards work to develop a multiregional international trade model that gave ACIAR insights into commodities and regions where investment in research was likely to lead to the greatest gains. Anecdotally the ability of ACIAR, aided by this model, to be able to explain how it made its investments and to demonstrate the returns it was achieving, assisted in having its 'life' extended indefinitely beyond the sunset clause in the original legislation for its establishment.

At the RIRDC, among other responsibilities, Jeff provided direction to rice research in Australia. He developed processes for ex ante and ex post evaluations of research projects and this interest carried over on his return to ACIAR where he took responsibility for impact assessment activities. There are now 80 impact assessment studies published at ACIAR's website. Jeff commissioned Jenny Gordon of CIE to develop a set of guidelines for assessing the impact of research and these guidelines often inform impact assessment processes in other organisations. Importantly, these processes now extend beyond narrow market impacts and include environmental and societal impacts as well. ACIAR was spending about 2% of

its budget on evaluation work and was able to demonstrate that the benefits from its research exceeded its investment.

Jeff was always a strong advocate of the contribution of science to improving welfare in developing and developed countries alike and the importance of public funding. Consequently during his time at ACIAR and at the RIRDC Jeff would have given hundreds of seminars about the importance of being able to demonstrate these benefits as objectively as possible and about good practice in conducting impact assessment. He also spoke regularly about the actual benefits realised from ACIAR research when there has often been a climate of cynicism about the returns from agricultural research. There are many economists in agricultural research institutions throughout Asia who are grateful for Jeff's mentoring and resources he made available to fund their professional development and research.

Jeff has always been a strong supporter of AARES. In particular, through ACIAR and the RIRDC, Jeff has been responsible for continuous sponsorship of the annual conference back into the 90s, unmatched by any other organisation. ACIAR were the only sponsor of a Conference held in Sydney in the early 90s and discussions with Jeff about how AARES should approach sponsors has led to continuous development of its professionalism in this area.