

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Exceptional Achiever Award from the University of Pretoria (annually, 2004 – 2016)
- Vice-President: International Association of Agricultural Economists (2006 – 2009)
- Agricultural Scientist of the Year Award (2004)

## DEFINING MOMENT

Johann Kirsten considers his 1996 appointment as Head of Department at the University of Pretoria's Department of Agricultural Economics – at the age of 35 – to be a defining moment in his career.

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

When he is not leading Stellenbosch University's Bureau for Economic Research, he rears sheep on the farm he bought in the Karoo back in 2010.

## A PROBLEM SOLVER PAR EXCELLENCE

Johann Kirsten has dedicated his career to tackle some of South Africa's most stubborn problems and to protect some of its most cherished treasures. He has focused on the agricultural economy, food security and the land debate. He has masterminded the development of signature products like 'Karoo lamb' and 'Rooibos tea' into certified brands. Kirsten not only developed a university department into one of the most recognised in Africa, but also secured a multi-million-rand grant to keep igniting young minds.

Kirsten was born in Cape Town in 1961. The agricultural seed was planted early. As a young boy, he would look forward to holidays on his family's farm. He enrolled for a BSc Agriculture degree in Agricultural Economics at Stellenbosch University (SU) in 1980, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, Professor Frederik Tomlinson, who was seen as the father of the field in South Africa. "It helped me to understand how interesting, entertaining and complex agricultural economics could be."

As a young man he moved to Pretoria in 1987 to work as an agricultural economist at the Department of Agriculture and completed his Master's degree at

the University of Pretoria (UP). He was posted to the South African embassy in London in 1989 as an agricultural attaché, where he gained a deeper understanding of international food systems, agricultural commodity markets and the global politics of agriculture and trade.

By early 1992, it was clear that change was coming to South Africa and Kirsten was among those embassy staff who were recalled from around the world. He joined UP under his mentor and former supervisor, Dr Johan van Zyl, who recruited him as a lecturer in the Department of Agricultural Economics, Extension and Rural Development. In 1994, as the new, democratic South Africa was born, Johann Kirsten obtained his PhD and was appointed a senior lecturer the following year.

Kirsten was involved in the crucial process of considering new agricultural and land reform policies for the State. In 1996 he joined forces with Van Zyl and several international colleagues to publish a seminal book, *Agricultural Land Reform in South Africa*, which highlighted the best ways to implement the process and warned against mistakes that could lead to delay or failure. Kirsten says it has been difficult to watch "each and every one" of those mistakes being made. "None of the lessons were taken seriously and therefore we're now in the terrible situation where we still have land being central to the argument for injustice and inequality."

In the same year that the book was published, Kirsten was elevated to associate professor and head of department, once again following in the footsteps of his legendary grandfather who had been Head of Department half a century before.

## FROM THE GROUND UP

Kirsten spent the next 20 years rebuilding and cultivating a department that had been "left in tatters" by the sudden departure of its two previous Heads of Department. He engineered a series of changes and expansions: "I created a number of new units, recruited a set of interesting people and did a number of juggling acts that saved and expanded the department."



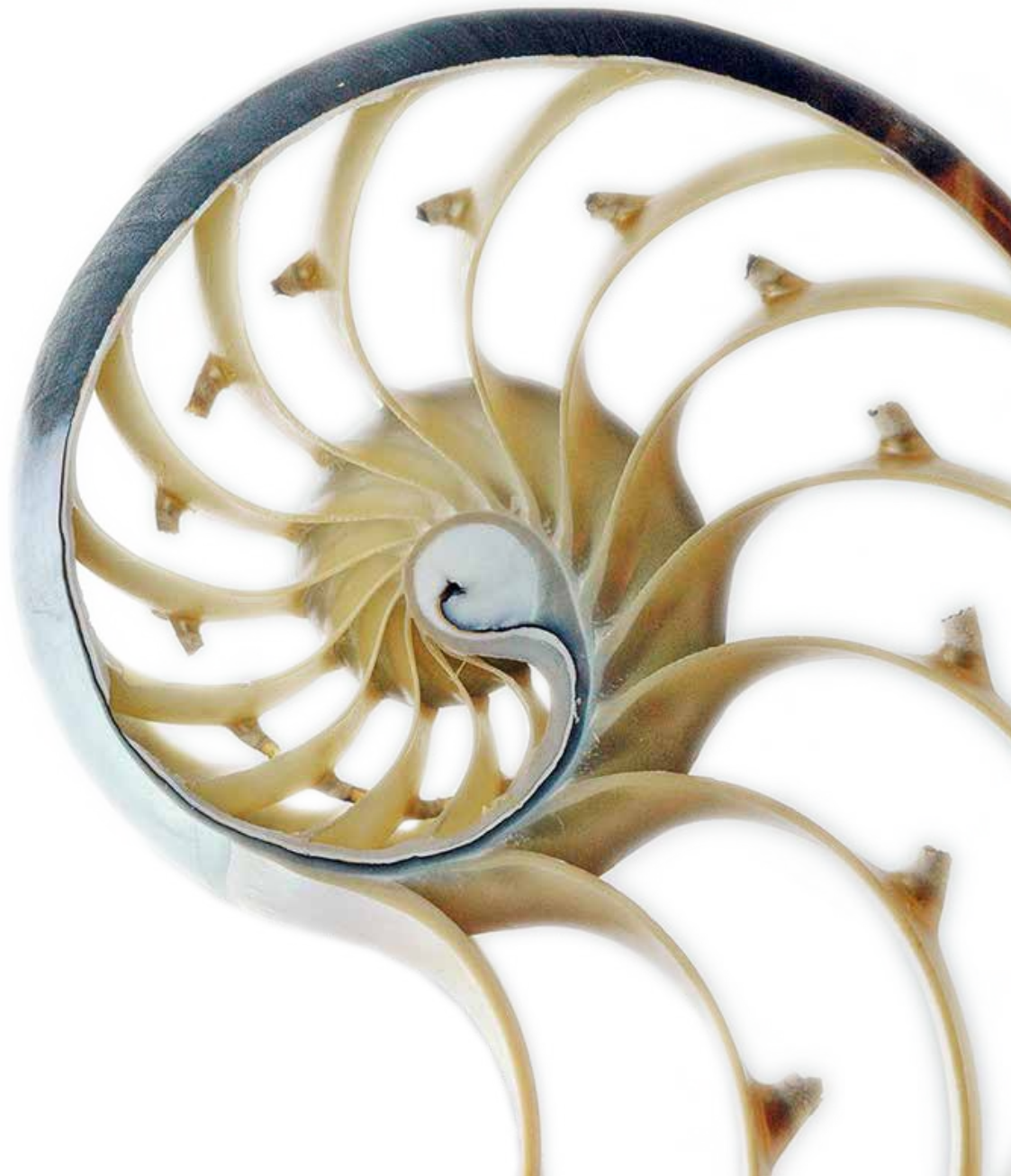
Kirsten redesigned the Master's-level agricultural policy analysis module to be on par with the best in the world and his institutional economics module became the only course of its kind in South Africa. He also supervised or co-supervised more than 100 postgraduate students: 75 at master's level and 28 PhD candidates. He played an important role in the establishment of the African Economic Research Consortium's collaborative Masters' programme in agricultural and applied economics, which brings scores of students together from 16 universities across Africa every year to share knowledge and skills.

In the early 2000s, Kirsten refocused on agricultural policy and helped write South Africa's draft *Agricultural Strategic Plan* under then President Thabo Mbeki, gaining insight into how the land reform issue was being handled and how "bureaucracy was stifling the entire project". He also drove the establishment of a new research unit, the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP), which models agricultural policy scenarios. "From a small idea, we developed it into an institution that makes invaluable inputs into policy decisions."

His academic achievements and personal perseverance helped him secure a string of national and international research grants at UP, culminating in a massive \$4.8 million (over R80-million at the going exchange rate) grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2011.

By 2008, Kirsten had shifted his focus away from pure agricultural economics and started to research the principles of institutional economics, specifically the economics of origin-based foods and the well-loved tastes of Karoo lamb, honeybush tea and Rooibos tea. His research into how they might be protected with geographical indications was instrumental in building protocols and systems of certification for all three South African products. "In the end, the sheep farmers challenged us to take the process even further," Kirsten says, "so we registered the certification mark for Karoo lamb, established an NGO and also started a non-profit company to protect the name 'Karoo Lamb'."

After 20 years at the helm of his department, Kirsten resigned from UP in 2016 and joined SU as a professor and head of the Bureau for Economic Research. There he focuses on economic research, consulting and policy-making. Kirsten has already left an indelible mark on agricultural economics and impacted the careers of countless students and professionals. His goals for the future are no less grand: "If we can turn the economy around, if we can finalise the land issue and if the Karoo Lamb initiative spreads to Europe, I would have achieved everything I set out to."



2020

# Legends of South African Science II

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

---

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), (2019). Legends of South African Science II.

[Online] Available at: DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/assaf.2018/0036>

<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11911/146>

*Downloaded from ASSAf Research Repository, Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)*