ASSESSMENT OF FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CHOICE OF AGRICULTURE AS A CAREER AMONG STUDENTS OF KOGI STATE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, ANKPA, NIGERIA

[*]Shaibu, D.O., [**]Oluyomi, M.S. and [*]Husseini, S.
Department of Agricultural Education, School of Vocational and Technical Education, Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa, Nigeria
[**] Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Nigeria
Corresponding Email: omojoladamilola50@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study assessed factors that influence the choice of agricultural education as a career among students of Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa (KSCOEA). It specifically identified the areas of interest in agriculture among the students, ascertained the factors that influence students' choice of agricultural education programme, and identified the barriers to continuing with the agricultural profession among the students. A total of sixty-three (63) students (which represent 50% of the study population) of Agricultural Education, KSCOEA were randomly selected for the study. Primary data obtained through questionnaire administration were analysed using simple percentage and mean scores from a Likert type of rating scale. The result shows that 23.8% of the students preferred agricultural extension communication, 22.2% preferred fishery production, and 19% each of the students preferred crop production and animal science/production. The major factors that influence the choice of agricultural education among the students include employment guarantee (M=2.6; 86.7%), personal interest (M=2.4; 80%), and parental background (M=2.3; 76.7%). The major barriers to continuing in the field of agriculture education are financial constraints (63.5%) and unpredictable futures (46%). Among others, it was recommended that there is an urgent need to stimulate the interest of the youths in agriculture early in life through career guidance. Also, there is the need to introduce "General Agriculture" as General Studies (GST) into the curriculum of all fields of study in the two colleges of education in Kogi State and across the country. This will help in stimulating students' interest in the agricultural profession.

Keywords: Agriculture Education, Employment, Extension Communication, Finance

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture plays a critical role in the economic development and food security of Kogi State, Nigeria. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of young individuals choosing to pursue studies and careers in agriculture (Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO, 2017; Boerngen and Richard, 2020; Usman *et al.*, 2021). This trend is concerning as it raises questions about the sustainability of the agricultural sector and the need to attract and retain a skilled workforce to drive agricultural innovation and productivity. The issue of attracting youth to careers in agriculture is not unique to Kogi State but is a broader national and global concern. (Girdziute *et al*., 2022). As the agricultural workforce ages, there is an urgent need to replenish the sector with young talent and passionate individuals who can contribute to the growth and advancement of agriculture.

Career choice refers to the process through which individuals make decisions about the profession or field of work they wish to pursue. It involves a complex interplay of various factors, including personal interests, aptitudes, values, socioeconomic background, parental influence, societal expectations, and exposure to information (Owusu *et al*. 2022). The career choice process is highly influential during the formative years of education when students are exposed to various academic disciplines and career options.

Certain factors influence career choice among students of tertiary Institutions. Ferry (2006) identified schooling as one of the cultural and socioeconomic factors affecting the choice of a career. The influence of peer groups is also an important factor in choosing a professional career (Azubuike, 2011). Furthermore, student's family background and home experiences are found to exert powerful influences on educational careers (Faulkner, 2009).

In Nigeria, parents who are doctors, nurses, lawyers, politicians, and members of the armed forces among others want their children to take up their careers but this is not so in the agricultural profession. The farmers wish their children to become professionals in other fields like law, medicine, accounting, and engineering other than agriculture, due to the arduous way of life and suffering they experienced (Adebo and Sekumade, 2013). Thus, students' enrollment in the Agricultural Education programme is one of the lowest in Colleges of Education, especially in recent years. Usman *et al*. (2021) associated this recent decline with; the perception of agriculture as a low-paying difficult career, a lack of opportunities for young people in agriculture, a lack of access to education and training in agriculture, and a lack of support for young farmers.

Kogi State College of Education, as one of the colleges of higher learning in the state, has a crucial role in shaping the educational and career aspirations of its students. Understanding the factors that influence students' career choices, particularly in choosing agriculture as a career path, is vital in addressing the challenges of attracting and retaining young talent in the agricultural sector. The situation in the Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa (KSCOEA) is also the same as the institution has recorded a decline in the number of students that applied and enrolled on an agricultural education programme. This is despite the huge prospects (such as growing demand for food, investment opportunities in agricultural research and development, growing demand for organic and sustainable food, rise in precision agriculture, and potential for new agricultural products, among others) in the agricultural profession.

Agricultural education encompasses formal learning programmes and training that focus on agriculture-related topics and skills. It includes both academic education at universities, colleges, and schools, as well as practical training and experiential learning in the agricultural field. (Innocent-Ene *et al*., 2022). Agricultural education equips students with the necessary knowledge, technical competencies, and problem-solving skills required for successful careers in agriculture.

Agricultural education as a programme or course has been offered in Nigerian Colleges of Education and KSCOE, Ankpa for decades. However, there is a recent drop in the number of students who choose Agricultural Education among their preferred courses during application. Students are faced with the problem of indecision when they are about to choose a course. This problem must be studied, taking into cognizance the role of entrepreneurial base of the course in the educational development of a nation. Since the foremost turning point in youth's lives involves the career choice they make, there is a need to understand the factors that influence the choice of agricultural education among students. Hence this study is intended to fill this knowledge gap.

The broad objective of this study is to examine factors that influence the choice of agricultural education among students of Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa. The specific objectives are to:

i. describe the socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents;
ii. identify factors that influence the choice of agricultural education among the students;
iii. identify students' areas of interest in the agricultural profession after NCE graduation;
iv. ascertain possible barriers to continuing with the agricultural profession among the students.

METHODOLOGY

Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa (KSCOEA) is a public middle-level teacher's training institution owned by Kogi State Government. It is situated in Ankpa, a major town in the eastern senatorial district of Kogi State. The College was affiliated to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria but de-affiliated in 1994 by the National Commission for Colleges of Education.

KSCOE has five (5) schools: Arts and Social Sciences, Education, Languages, Sciences, Vocational and Technical Education. The Department of Agricultural Education is of the School of Vocational and Technical Education. KSCOE operates a school system with several courses leading to the award of the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE). The courses are for a 3-year duration leading to the award of Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE). Admission to the College is in two categories which are through: Pre-NCE and direct entry via JAMB into year/level 100 or NCE 1. Candidates who do not meet the Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) admission requirements are admitted for a one-year preliminary study (pre-NCE) while candidates who satisfy all the JAMB admission criteria are admitted to NCE 1 for a full-time study. Other programmes floated in the college include the Degree programme in affiliation with Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University (ATBU), Bauchi, and the Professional Diploma in Education (PDE) programme.

The target population for this study consists of all the students in the Agricultural Education Department Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa which was 127 in the 2022/2023 academic session (KSCOEA Admission Office). The researchers purposively selected these students and used a simple random sampling technique to select the respondents for this study. A total of one hundred and two (102) students were randomly selected which represents 80% of the study population and spread across in Table 1 below. Out of 102 administered questionnaires, 100 copies were filled for data analysis and used for this study.

Table 1: Sampling Procedure

Level	Population	No. of Respondents
NCE I	36	29
NCE II	40	32
NCE III	51	41
Total	**127**	**102**

Source: Author's Computation using students' population

The primary source of data collection was used for the study. The primary data were collected with the aid of a structured questionnaire which was administered to the respondents by the researchers at an appointed time, day and venue and collected immediately. The data collected from the respondents were carefully analysed using both descriptive statistics – simple percentages and mean scores from a Likert-type scale. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v26 was used as the analytical software. The Likert rating is a method of ascribing quantitative values to qualitative perception to make it amenable to statistical analysis (Umeh *et al*. 2018). The three-point Likert type scale was used to ascertain the factors that influence the choice of agricultural education among the respondents as given below:

Strong Influence	SI	3
Influence	IF	2
No Influence	NI	1

The mean response to each item was calculated using the following formula:

$$X = \frac{\sum Fx}{n}$$

Where:

$\dot{X}$= Mean response

$\sum$= Summation

F = number of respondents choosing a particular scale point,

x = numerical value of the scale point

n = total number of respondents to the item.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic Characteristics of the Respondents

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents are described in Table 2. Findings from this study show that male students are more than their female counterparts. This finding could be associated with the general educational enrolment across gender in Nigeria; especially in the Northern part of the country where Kogi State is geographically located. Males are believed to proceed with their education beyond secondary school than females. This finding agrees with Adeyemi and Akpotu (2014) who reported that a gap existed between females and males in the tertiary education enrolment with lower female enrolment in all aspects of the tertiary Institutions. Additionally, Dokubo and Deebom (2014); Egun and Tibi (2010) identified a wide gender gap in students' enrolment in vocational education in favour of males.

The age distribution of the respondents implies that most of the students were young adults who could seek further educational and professional development in the field of agriculture. This finding agrees with Gobena (2018) who reported that 97.09% of tertiary institution students are below 25 years. The result is also in consonance with Salihu and Nordin (2019) who reported that most NCE II students in North-central Nigeria are very young with few old students. Furthermore, Ademola *et al.* (2014) found that about sixty-three percent of the population of students in Nigeria's tertiary institutions are under the age of twenty years.

The mode of entry into tertiary education can be a significant factor influencing students' career choices in agriculture. Based on the results in Table 2, many of the students (approximately 92.1%) entered through the Direct JAMB entry mode, while a smaller proportion (approximately 7.9%) opted for Pre NCE programs. The mode of entry can influence students' career choices in agriculture as it may shape their academic journey and exposure to various aspects of the field. For those who entered through Direct JAMB, their decision signifies a deliberate choice to focus on agriculture from the beginning, demonstrating a clear intent to pursue agricultural careers. On the other hand, students who started with Pre NCE programs may use this preparatory phase to explore different agricultural disciplines, gaining a broader understanding of the field before committing to a specific career path.

The result shows that the students in NCE 3 represent the highest proportion at approximately 39.7%, followed by NCE 2 students at 36.5%, and NCE 1 students at 23.8%. The current level of students in NCE can significantly impact their readiness and focus on agricultural careers. As students progress through their NCE program, they gain a deeper understanding of agriculture's scope, challenges, and potential opportunities. Their academic experiences, exposure to different agricultural fields, and practical engagements can shape their career preferences and motivations.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to socio-economic characteristics

Socio-economic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	55	55.00
Female	45	45.00
Total	**100**	**100.0**
Age (years)		
Below 15	5	5.00
15-20	36	36.00
21-25	41	41.00
26-30	12	12.00
Above 30	6	6.00
Total	**100**	**100.0**
Mode of Entry		
Direct JAMB	92	92.00
Pre NCE	8	8.00
Total	**100**	**100.0**
Current Level		
NCE 1	24	24.00
NCE 2	36	36.00
NCE 3	40	40.00
Total	**100**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

Factors that Influence the Choice of Agricultural Education

The mean score distribution on factors that influence the choice of agricultural education among the students of KSCOEA is presented in Table 3. The understanding that agriculture will enable the students to be self-employed had the greatest influence on the choice of agricultural education as a course with a mean score of 2.6 and a percentage of 86.7%. This finding is not surprising considering the high rate of unemployment among graduates of various courses in the country. The existing realities now encourage students to study courses that will allow them to be employers of labour since the said *white-collar* jobs are not available. Prospective graduates in agriculture can venture into any field of agriculture for self-employment and employment of others. This finding agrees with Abayomi *et al*. (2015) who reported similar results among students of the faculty of Agricultural Sciences in Ekiti State University, Nigeria.

Finding on personal interest in the field of agriculture has strong influence in the choice of agriculture education as a course among the students. This item has a mean score and proportion of 2.4 and 80%, respectively. This finding is in line with Onu and Ikehi (2013) who reported personal interest as an influence in the career decision-making process of agricultural science students in South-South Nigeria.

Table 3: Mean score distribution on factors that influence choice of agricultural education

Research Items	SI (3)	IF (2)	NF (1)	MS	Prop. (%)	Remark
My parents background in agriculture was an encouragement.	29	21	13	2.3	76.7	Influence
My agricultural science teacher in my secondary school was my mentor.	23	17	23	2.0	66.7	Influence
I developed personal interest in agriculture from childhood.	40	10	13	2.4	80.0	Influence
Agriculture education was the only option for me because I passed Agricultural Science in my SSCE result.	15	13	35	1.7	56.7	No Influence
I dislike the financial status of farmers or agriculture professional.	12	21	3	1.3	43.3	No Influence
KSCOEA admission office gave me the course.	12	16	35	1.6	53.3	No Influence
My career guidance encouraged me to choose the course.	26	15	22	2.1	70.0	Influence
I have friends or peers who studied agriculture education.	20	17	26	2.0	66.7	Influence
I have poor educational performance in my secondary school.	13	14	36	1.6	53.3	No Influence
Engagement on social media was a major factor.	13	13	37	1.6	53.3	No Influence
I feel agriculture career is for the men.	15	20	28	1.8	60.0	No Influence
Career in agriculture allows me to engage in other livelihood activities	32	18	13	2.3	76.7	Influence
Agriculture education will enable me to be self-employed.	44	15	4	2.6	86.7	Influence
My Secondary school played crucial role in my choice of agriculture education.	27	19	17	2.2	73.3	Influence

Source: Field Survey, 2022NOTE: SI = Strong Influence, IF = Influence, NF= No Influence, TSS = Total Sum of Score, MS = Mean Score, Prop. = Proportion

The result on parents' role agrees with the observations that parents are strong factors in determining the choice of career of their children by Esters and Bowen (2004), Ferry (2006), and Azuibike (2011). Also, the flexibility of agriculture profession which allows people to engage in other income-generating activities has a strong influence on students' choice of agriculture education. Furthermore, students' previous educational experience, contact with previous career guidance, and friends or peers play a strong role in influencing the choice of agriculture education. However, the notion that agriculture was for men, agriculture education being the only option, being forced by the institution management to study agriculture education, poor educational performance in secondary school, engagement on social media, and dislike for the financial status of farmers or agriculture professionals have no influence on students' choice of agriculture as a profession.

The respondents further expressed dislike for the financial status of farmers or agriculture professionals with the lowest mean score of 1.3 and a proportion of 43.3%. This suggests that while some students might have reservations about the financial aspects of careers in agriculture, the majority do not consider it a significant deterrent in pursuing agricultural studies. To address this perception, it is essential to provide students with comprehensive information about the diverse and lucrative opportunities available in the modern agricultural sector. Highlighting successful agribusiness ventures, agricultural innovations, and potential for growth can help change students' attitudes towards the financial prospects of agricultural careers.

The second factor with relatively low mean scores and percentage values is the influence of KSCOEA management on students' choice of agricultural education. Approximately 53.3% of students mentioned this as a factor influencing their decision. While a significant proportion of students consider the institution's guidance, it is essential to further strengthen academic advising and career counseling services. Proactive efforts by educational institutions to actively promote and showcase the benefits of agricultural education, including specialized faculty, modern facilities, and career opportunities, can enhance students' confidence in pursuing agricultural studies.

The result on passing agricultural science in SCCE with a mean score of 1.7 and approximately 56.7% of students influenced by it, suggests that a considerable number of students are inspired to choose agricultural education due to their performance in Agricultural Science in the SSCE examination. This indicates that the inclusion of Agricultural Science in the curriculum plays a significant role in fostering interest and curiosity in agriculture. Educational institutions should capitalize on this interest by offering engaging and comprehensive agricultural courses, practical experiences, and exposure to diverse agricultural career options.

Area of Interest in Agricultural Profession after NCE Graduation

The area of interest in the agricultural profession among students of KSCOE Ankpa after graduation is presented in Table 4. The low percentage recorded in most careers in agriculture among the students could be attributed to students' level of awareness and misconception about careers in agriculture. This finding agrees with Adejoh *et al*. (2016) who reported that students have misconceptions of agriculture work-related careers because not only are they unaware of the types of jobs in this sector, but they also have the impression that all jobs in this area have uninteresting pay. The findings also agree with Alalade *et al* (2018) when they revealed that a large majority of students in Ilorin, Kwara State are ignorant of the robust career opportunities offered in the field of agriculture. This explains why many of them prefer other courses they adjudged as being more lucrative. The result of this study however negates the findings of Darvishi (2003), who noted that students develop more interest and awareness of the engineering aspect of agriculture than agricultural science. Specifically, most students of agriculture education at KSCOEA preferred agricultural extension as a major focus or interest after graduation. This was followed by fishery production, crop production and animal science/production. None of the respondents choose food sciences. The findings on fishery production agree with Alalade *et al*. (2018) who reported Fishery and Agribusinesses as popular opportunities among students of agriculture.

Table 3: Students' choice of area of interest in the agricultural profession after graduation

Area of Interest	Frequency*	Percentage	Rank
Agricultural Extension	15	23.8	1st
Agricultural Economics	2	3.2	9th
Agricultural Education/Teaching	10	15.9	5th
Agricultural Engineering	5	7.9	6th
Agronomy/Soil Science	1	1.6	10th
Crop Production	12	19.0	3rd
Animal Science/Production	12	19.0	3rd
Fishery Production	14	22.2	2nd
Food Sciences	0	0	11th
Home Sciences and Management	3	4.8	8th
Forestry	5	7.9	6

Source: Field Survey, 2022 *** = multiple responses**

Barriers to Continuing with the Agricultural Profession

The possible barriers to continuing with the agricultural profession among students of agriculture education at KSCOEA are presented in Table 5. The major possible barriers include financial constraints and an unpredictable future. The findings of this study agree with Abayomi *et al*. (2015) who reported similar factors among undergraduate students of the faculty of agricultural sciences, at Ekiti State University, Nigeria. Furthermore, 34.9%, consider the fear of crop failure as a barrier to continuing with the agricultural profession. This suggests that students may have concerns about the risks and uncertainties associated with crop production. This finding underscores the importance of building resilience and risk management skills among students. Among the identified barriers, the "Attitudinal Problem" is the least commonly cited obstacle to continuing with the agricultural profession, with only a small percentage of students, approximately 4.8%, perceiving it as a hindrance. This indicates that most students do not view attitudinal issues as significant barriers in pursuing or remaining in agricultural careers.

Table 5: Barriers to continuing in the agriculture profession.

Barriers	***Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Rank**
Financial constraints	40	63.5	1st
Peer group's perception	3	4.8	11th
Land problem	15	23.8	5th
Attitudinal problem	3	4.8	11th
Psychology of being called a farmer	15	23.8	5th
Fear of crop failure	22	34.9	3rd
Fear of livestock failure	17	27.0	4th
Generally, lack of interest in the profession	5	7.9	10th
Insufficient skill acquisition	14	22.2	7th
Seasonality of agricultural produce	8	12.7	9th
Difficulty in accessing market for produce/products	14	22.2	7th
Unpredictable future	29	46.0	2nd

Source: Field Survey, 2022 NOTE: * = multiple responses

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded from the findings of the study that KSCOEA students have an interest in agricultural extension and fishery production. Employment guarantee, personal interest, parental background, and flexibility of the agricultural profession have a strong influence on students' choice of the course. However, students' continuity in the agricultural profession is threatened by Finance and Unpredictable Future. Based on findings from this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is a need to stimulate the interest of the youths in agriculture early in life through career guidance. Agriculture should be made compulsory at the primary and secondary levels, to inculcate the importance of the profession, and the spirit of farming in youths and respect for the dignity of labour.
2. The researchers suggest the introduction of "General Agriculture" as General Studies (GST) into the curriculum of all fields of study in the Colleges of Education in Kogi State and across the country. This will help stimulate students' interest in the agricultural profession, make Agricultural science more acceptable to the youth, and encourage the practice of Agriculture as a means of livelihood even when you are an expert in another profession.
3. Students should be encouraged to go on excursions to commercial agricultural farms/firms and agro-based industries as this will serve as motivation and change their orientation towards having an interest in the profession.
4. Existing students' industrial work experience should be well structured and monitored to enhance skill acquisition in all aspects/areas/fields of agriculture.

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