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Perception of Agricultural Extension as a Career among Postgraduate Students of Agriculture in Selected Universities in South-West, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated perception of agricultural extension as a career among postgraduate agricultural students in selected universities in south-west, Nigeria. Multi-stage sampling technique was used to select 171 respondents across three universities. Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics (Chi-square, PPMC) at $p=0.05$. Majority were males (66.3%), Christians (81.7%) and single (73.5%) with mean age and mean formal years of education at 29.6 and 18.7 years, respectively. Lecture/classroom (67.3%) was the most important information source on agricultural extension, while similarity of course of study to personal and professional interest (mean=1.56) was the most paramount reason for the choice of present course of study. Majority (63.2%) possessed high knowledge of agricultural extension as a career, while 50.9% had a favourable perception towards the subject. Poor awareness of the potential careers in the discipline (77.1%), inadequate number of extension career resource centres (64.5%) and inadequate funding of agriculture (89.9%) were the major constraints facing respondents. Department ($\chi^2=15.184$), self-esteem of career in course of study ($r=0.217$) and constraints to agricultural extension ($r=-0.174$) were significantly related to respondents' perception of agricultural extension as a career. Respondents are knowledgeable that agricultural extension has many career opportunities and someone with a career in the discipline will be competitive in the job market. However, they have some constraints crucial to their perception of the subject. Thus, efforts should be made by various stakeholders to address these constraints in order to improve respondents' perception towards the discipline.

Key words: career opportunities, students' perception, agricultural extension.

Introduction

Human being must earn a living in order to meet the basic needs for foods, shelter and many other physical as well as psychological needs (AIMiskry, Baker and Mohamed, 2009). To achieve this, there would be an interaction involving work roles and other life roles over a person's lifespan thereby informing one of the essentials of a career. According to Ferry (2006), the perception a person has towards a job as the "ideal job" and one's career decision-making maturity affect the career choice one makes. It is worthy of note that the career path someone chooses is not simply a matching process,

but rather it is a decision said to be conditioned by other influencing factors in the environment one lives.

A career is the interaction of work roles and other life roles over a person's lifespan, including both paid and unpaid work in an individual's life, and people create career patterns as they make decisions about education, work, family and other life roles (UNESCO, 2002). In addition, a career can mean a pattern of work related experiences, such as job positions, jobs duties or activities, work related decisions; and subjective interpretations of work related events, such as work aspirations, expectations, values, needs and feelings about particular work experiences, that spans the course of a person's life (Greenhaus, Callanan & Godshalk, 2000). Agricultural is one of the world's oldest vocations i.e. career/job/profession. It offers specific training for self-reliance. Thus, agriculture is a lucrative profession that can solve the problem of high rate of unemployment among graduates of various higher institutions.

Agriculture is important to the Nigerian economy as it engages about 70% of the labour force and contributes over 40% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2000). Agriculture provides food for the teeming population and raw materials for industries. Despite the growth of industries, oil and commerce, it continues to be the principal economic activity of the people of Nigeria (Daudu, Chado, and Igbashal, 2009). The realization of the potentials inherent in agriculture led the Federal Government of Nigeria to initiate the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA), with a focus on the development of agricultural value chains that sets out to create over 3.5 million jobs (FMARD, 2011). Meanwhile, many students see agriculture as a profession of poor people because of poor standard of living of those that engage in it, lack of modern implement, poor income generation from the activities and the only option for survival when all hope is lost on the assumption that one need not to be educated before digging the soil and grow crops as well as rearing of animals. Hence, they develop dislike for the profession. However, advancements in science are constantly changing the things we farm and the way we farm them. Thus, agriculture nowadays involves many scientific practices which have become highly organized, specialized and mechanized.

The concept of agriculture today embraces not only the traditional areas of food and fibre production, but an increasingly broad spectrum of related subjects and concerns which have become important to this evolving field (Jones, 1990). It has opened doors to an array of career choices and opportunities to many (Wright, 2011) among which is agricultural extension, agricultural economics, animal science, agronomy, fishery, forestry etc. In time past, most students of agriculture, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels were willing to study other agricultural courses but not agricultural extension, which as a result made departments of agricultural extension in universities to have less numbers of students enrolment. Arnold and Place (2010) supported this assertion by stating that extension continues to be the "best kept secret" and lacks recognition among students. Adedoyin (2004) defines agricultural extension as a comprehensive programme of services deliberately put in place for expanding, strengthening and empowering the capacity of the present and prospective farmers, farm families and other rural economic operators. A career in agricultural extension can open the doors to education and pave the way to a prosperous career, as it crosses virtually over all disciplines so career choices are endless.

However, the enrolment of students in agricultural extension, particularly at the postgraduate level, has now changed. Baseline data on previous enrolments in agricultural extension lead to the discovery of an increase in the number of people wanting to study agricultural extension, especially at the postgraduate level. Available data from the Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development, University of Ibadan, for example, shows that the number of students studying agricultural extension at the M.Sc. level has been on the increase, with enrolment figures of 26, 46 and 68 in the 2008/2009, 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 academic sessions, respectively. A similar trend has also been observed in other universities offering agricultural extension.

Graduates from other fields of agriculture are now willing to study agricultural extension at the postgraduate level, which is a contrast of what obtained in time past. Similar trend is observable at the undergraduate level. This increasing number of students wanting to study agricultural extension is likely to continue in the foreseeable future. The implication of this for agricultural transformation agenda is that more agricultural extension professionals will be available to effectively achieve its objectives rather than using non-agricultural extension professionals with consequent dwindling agricultural activities as currently being witnessed in the country. However, there has not been any empirical source to adduce a reason for the sudden interest in the discipline. In the light of the above, the study was designed to investigate the perception of Agricultural Extension as a career among postgraduate agricultural students in selected universities in South-West, Nigeria.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. identify the sources of information on Agricultural Extension available to the respondents;
2. ascertain the knowledge of the respondents on Agricultural Extension as a career;
3. determine the reason(s) for the choice of present course of study of the respondents;
4. identify the possible constraints to Agricultural Extension as a career;
5. ascertain the perception of the respondents on the prospects of Agricultural Extension as a career, among respondents.

Methodology

The study was conducted in the South-West of Nigeria, which comprises six states; Ekiti, Lagos Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo. The study area lies between latitudes 6° and 9° north and longitudes 2° and 6° east. It has a total land mass of $77,818\text{km}^2$ and a projected population of 28,767,752 in 2002 (NPC, 1991). Present in every state of the study area are federal, state and private universities and other higher institutions of learning. The population of postgraduate students in the region/zone cannot be estimated however, eight out of twenty-three Universities (including federal, state and private) are offering agriculture at post graduate level.

The population of the study consisted of postgraduate agricultural students (M.Sc.) from the faculties of agriculture across universities.

Multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted for the study. Purposive sampling was used to select federal and state universities with faculties of agriculture. Private universities were not included because they do not offer agriculture at the postgraduate level. Proportionately, random sampling was used to select two federal (U.I, FUNAAB) and one state (LAUTECH) universities. Random sampling was also used to select 25% of the students from each of the selected universities with 108, 37 and 26 out of 432(U.I),148 (FUNAAB) and 104 (LAUTECH), respectively making a total sample size of 171. Structured questionnaire was used to collect data. The variables measured include reasons for the choice of present course of study using a three-point Likert type scale of major reason (2), minor reason (1) and not a reason (0). These values were added and mean was calculated, items with scores equal to the mean and above were considered as major reasons. Similar method was used for respondents' sources of information {often (2), occasionally (1) and never (0)} and constraints (major constraint, minor constraint and not a constraint). Respondents' knowledge on agricultural extension as a career was measured with response options of 'yes' or 'no' and this was ranked based on the highest frequency. Meanwhile, Likert type scale of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree with score of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 respectively for positive statement and reverse order for negative statements was used to measure respondents' perception. Responses to the 21 perception statements were summed and mean was

calculated. Based on mean, respondents' perception was categorised into favourable (\geq mean) and unfavourable perception ($<$ mean).

Results and Discussion

Personal characteristics of respondents

The age distribution of the respondents as shown in Table 1 reveals that majority (73.4%) were within the ages of 21-30 years and the mean age was 29.6 years. These imply that most of the respondents are young, active and adventurous, and would probably be aware of the career prospects and opportunities in agricultural extension.

The results further reveal that majority of the students were males (66.3%) corroborating the finding of Oladeji and Thomas (2010) that across universities, the ratio of male to female respondents is higher in favour of males. This can be as a result of the commonly held concept that agriculture is mainly for males because of the drudgery associated with it (Agbebaku, 2004). Since marriage confers responsibility (Akinbile, 2007), it follows that most (73.5%) of the students decided to put in for postgraduate study while they were single so as to ensure full concentration on their studies. The modal household size was 1-5 people (62.6%), with a mean of five (5). This indicates that majority of the respondents are still with their parents and may need some guidance or being influenced by the opinion of their parents.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by personal characteristics

Variables	Categories	Percentage (n = 171)
Age	21-30	73.4
	31-40	24.1
	41-50	2.5
Sex	Male	66.3
	Female	33.7
Marital Status	Single	73.5
	Married	26.5
Household Size	1-5	62.6
	6-10	34.5
	11-15	2.3
	16-20	0.6
Religion	Christianity	81.7
	Islam	18.3
Years of Formal education	1-10	3.3
	11-20	66.4
	21-30	29.6
	31-40	0.7

Source: Field Survey, 2012.

Sources of information on agricultural extension and their ranks

Table 2 presents the distribution of the respondents based on the frequency of receipt of information on agricultural extension from the listed sources. Majority (67.3%) got information on agricultural extension from lecture room. Other sources through which they received information on the subject were book/journals (62.5%), Internet (60.9%), radio (54.5%), relatives/friends (51.2%), television (50.0%), and newspapers (33.5%).

It is apparent that the respondents had access to variety of sources of information on agricultural extension which could be attributed to their high literacy level. This corroborates Zijp (1994) that agricultural information transfer, sourcing and usage thrive better in places where people are highly educated.

Lecture room, with the highest mean value of 1.66, ranked 1st, implying that it was the most source of information to the respondents. This could be consequent on the fact that the respondents, being students, were exposed to issues on agricultural extension during lecture periods. The higher ranks for books/journals (2nd) and internet (3rd) over the radio (4th) and television (5th) as sources of agricultural extension information could be adduced to the fact that less information on agriculture is normally available on radio and television relative to books/journals. The probable reason for this is the dearth of sponsorship for agricultural programmes by private organisations or individuals, which however is needed to broadcast agricultural programmes on these sources.

Table 2: Frequency of receipt of information on agricultural extension as a career

S/N	Information Sources	Never	Occasional	Often	Mean	Rank
1.	Relatives/Friends	10.5	38.3	51.2	1.41	6 th
2.	Radio	3.5	41.8	54.5	1.51	4 th
3.	Television	4.5	45.1	50.0	1.45	5 th
4.	Newspapers	16.2	50.3	33.5	1.17	8 th
5.	Internet	8.1	31.1	60.9	1.53	3 rd
6.	Lecture room	1.3	31.4	67.3	1.66	1 st
7.	Books/Journals	1.2	33.5	62.5	1.64	2 nd

Source: Field Survey, 2012

Knowledge of respondents on agricultural extension as a career

The knowledge of respondents as presented in Table 3 indicates that 63.2% possessed high knowledge while 36.8% possessed low knowledge on agricultural extension as a career and the mean score was 20.9. This might have resulted from the level of exposure of the respondents to agricultural extension during their undergraduate days as students of agriculture.

One of the implications of this high knowledge on agricultural extension as a career is that they would be able to form an attitude on the subject i.e. favourable or unfavourable. Meanwhile the favourable their attitude the better for agricultural extension as they may decide to have a career in the discipline or recommend it to others, all because they are better informed of its career prospects and opportunities. Again, this high knowledge possessed by respondents is also pertinent to the career development of agricultural extension (Helme, 2010).

Table 3: Categorisation of respondents' knowledge on agricultural extension as a career

Knowledge Categories	Percentage (n=171)	Mean	Standard Deviation
High (21-24)	63.2	20.9	2.7
Low (1-20)	36.8		

Source: Field Survey, 2012.

Reasons for the choice of present course of study

Table 4 shows that similarity of course of study to personal and professional interest (65.5%) was considered to be a major reason for the choice of present course of study by the respondents. This means that there is less need to motivate the person who is interested in something because interest is related to his/her abilities and what they value (Athanasou, 2009). Other major reasons adduced were means of providing service to the agricultural community (50.0%) and self-esteem of career in course of study (43.4%). It could be said that several major reasons informed the choice of present course of study of the respondents, but the reasons differed among them. Other minor reasons prompted by respondents include; encouragement by relatives, peers, advisors (44.6%) and prevailing high rate of unemployment (41.8%).

These factors to some extent can influence a person's choice of course of study as indicated in Table 4. Similarity of course of study to personal and professional interest was the most paramount and thus ranked 1st (mean=1.56). This implies that if a particular course of study is similar to a person's innate career yearnings, they are most likely to toe the path of that career since they believe they can find fulfilment in it. One could also say that the respondents are studying their respective agricultural courses as these courses are similar to their area of interests, both personally and professionally. Incidentally, both ranking 3rd are similarity of course of study with academic/work experience and means of providing service to the agricultural community. This becomes interesting because not only do the respondents desire to just have a career for their personal benefit, but they also wish to offer community service for the benefit of society. Interestingly, high rate of unemployment, which is the popular view/opinion in society that many people enroll for postgraduate study because of lack of jobs however ranked 6th meaning that it is not true in all cases.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents by reasons for choice of present course of study

S/N	Reasons	Mean	Standard deviation	Rank
1.	Encouragement by relatives, peers, colleagues, advisors, etc	0.90	0.74	5 th
2.	Similarity of course of study with academic/work experience	1.28	0.73	3 rd
3.	Nature of course of study/job expectations	1.45	0.66	2 nd
4.	Similarity of course of study to personal and professional interest	1.58	0.65	1 st
5.	Partnership of course of study with the university	0.70	0.78	7 th
6.	Non-formal nature/structure of work	0.57	0.66	8 th
7.	Means of providing service to the agricultural community	1.28	0.80	3 rd
8.	Self-esteem of career in course of study	1.23	0.76	4 th
9.	Prevailing high rate of unemployment	0.83	0.80	6 th
10.	Avenue to escape delayed marriage	0.20	0.52	9 th

Source: Field survey, 2012

Constraints to agricultural extension as a career

Table 5 shows the constraints facing agricultural extension as a career. One of the major constraints, was poor awareness of the potential careers in the discipline (77.1%). This suggests that most people are still left in the dark regarding the career prospects and opportunities inherent in agricultural extension, which buttresses the finding of Arnold and Place (2010) that extension continues to be the "best kept secret" and lacks recognition among students. Other major constraints were: inadequate number of extension career resource centres (64.5%), which supposed to mirror the discipline to the society; and government's inadequate funding of agriculture (89.9%), which corroborated Agbamu (2005) that inadequacy and instability of funding affect the Nigerian extension service. On the other hand were the minor constraints, which included uncertainty in agricultural extension (43.8%) and lack of readiness to make a career decision (45.9%). One would observe that extension is so broad but at the same time not properly defined in terms of its career pathway, which could account for these findings.

Table 5: Distribution of respondents by constraints to agricultural extension as a career

S/N	Constraints	Mean	Standard deviation	Rank
1.	Poor awareness of the potential careers in agriculture extension	1.73	0.53	2 nd
2.	Unattractiveness of agriculture extension workers	1.31	0.74	6 th
3.	Inadequate number of extension career counsellors	1.54	0.63	5 th
4.	Uncertainty in agriculture extension	1.22	0.72	7 th
5.	Lack of readiness to make a career decision	1.22	0.70	7 th
6.	Inadequate number of extension career resource centres	1.60	0.58	4 rd
7.	Poor recognition of agricultural extension by government	1.70	0.55	3 nd
8.	Poor funding of agriculture by government	1.88	0.38	1 st

Source: Field survey, 2012.

Perception of respondents on agricultural extension as a career

Perception index score with the mean of 68.5 was obtained and used to categorise into favourable (mean and above) and unfavourable (below mean) perceptions to agricultural extension as a career. Table 6 reveals that 50.9% of the respondents had favourable perception while 49.1% had unfavourable perception towards agricultural extension as a career. This slight difference may suggest the need for increased publicity in order to encourage attitudinal change towards the discipline. Notwithstanding, a favourable disposition is expected to lead to an enhancement of career development in agricultural extension as this would encourage/increase the number of people wanting to have a career in the discipline, raise the visibility of its career prospects and opportunities, and help to define its career pathways better.

Table 6: Categorisation of respondents' perception on agricultural extension as a career

Constraint Categories	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Favourable (69-105)	87	50.9	68.5	8.5
Unfavourable (1-68)	84	49.1		

Source: Field Survey, 2012.

Table 7a shows the results of the Chi-square for all the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents and perception of agricultural extension as a career. The results show that perception of agricultural extension as a career was significantly related to department ($\chi^2=15.184$, $p=0.034$). This points out that the department of study that a postgraduate student belongs affects the perception on agricultural extension as a career, as it could determine the student's knowledge on the subject which eventually has a bearing on his or her awareness and understanding of the careers in it. Thus, in considering the perception of students on agricultural extension as a career, the department of study must be given special consideration.

Table 7a: Relationship between socio-economic characteristics and perception of agricultural extension as a career

Characteristics	df	χ^2 value	p-value
Sex	1	0.576	0.516
Religion	1	1.061	0.327
Marital status	1	0.000	1.000
Department	7	14.413	0.034*
Educational Attainment	2	0.002	0.999
University	2	2.286	0.317

*p < 0.05

The result in table 7b shows that perception of agricultural extension as a career was significantly related to self-esteem of career in course of study ($r=0.217$, $p=0.005$). This shows that self-esteem of career in course of study strongly affects a person's perception on agricultural extension as a career. This corroborates the finding of Singaravelu, White, and Bringaze (2005) that examined factors influencing students' choice of major subjects and found that status and prestige of a career were important considerations for students. It is thus expedient that self-esteem of career in course of study should be given the right recognition when dealing with issues on why people decide to choose a particular course of study. There was also a significant relationship ($r=0.174$, $p=0.023$) between constraints faced by the respondents and perception of agricultural extension as a career. This infers that all the identified problems collectively have a direct bearing on the subject as perceived by the respondent (favourable and unfavourable).

Table 7b: Relationship between constraints and perception of agricultural extension as a career

Variables	r – value	p – value
Self esteem	0.217	0.005*
Constraint faced by respondents	-0.174	0.023*

p < 0.05

Conclusion and recommendation

The respondents were well informed on agricultural extension because they had access to various sources of information and lecture/classroom was the primal source of information, which consequently made them to possess high knowledge on the subject. Similarity of course of study to personal and professional interest was the most important reason for the choice of discipline. The respondents generally faced a high level of constraints towards agricultural extension as a career but their perception towards the subject was favourable. Efforts should be made at publicising agricultural extension at places such as career resource centres and professional agricultural organisations to reach larger audiences. Youth should be made aware of the potential careers in extension as they plan their academic programmes with advisors and counselors. Extension should also make it a priority to promote careers within college classrooms and offer job-shadowing opportunities in order to make it popular and more attractive. Agricultural extension should be given its rightful place among other fields of study as it is done by governments of more advanced countries. Government should increase its funding for the agricultural sector as this has a direct bearing on the career development of agriculture disciplines. Private organizations and individuals should contribute to the development of agricultural sector since it is the backbone of economy of any nation. Agricultural extension is the life wire of agricultural transformation in any country. For Agricultural Transformation Agenda to be achieved; agricultural extension should be allowed to play its facilitating role by serving as the nexus between every field of agriculture and agricultural extension professionals should be engaged where extension services are required.

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