

Trajectories of Thai students in agricultural training and their willingness to become farmer

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I. Introduction

As many countries in Asia, Thailand is facing an unprecedented ageing of its population, a phenomenon that affect particularly the agricultural sector. The agriculture labor force has continually decreased for many years due to the exodus of young people from rural areas. A commonly used argument to explain this situation is that young people are no longer attracted or interested in farming. Colleges of agriculture are a major component of agriculture education in Thailand. According to directors and teachers of these colleges, many of their students would be interested to become farmer but stumble over important constraints. This study aims to assess this idea, by: 1) analysing the vision that students have of farming and 2) identifying the students who would be ready to become farmers, their plan to achieve it and the difficulties they think they will face.

We interviewed 137 students from three colleges of agriculture and technology in the provinces of Chachoengsao (25 students), Sa Kaew (24 students) and Roi Et (88 students). Interviewees were 50 first-year students and 87 second-year students in Agriculture Bor Wor Sor within the age range of 18 and 26 years old (average: 19.5). Most of students are from the same province as the college where they study (79%) or surrounding provinces (7%).

The colleges of agriculture and technology provide different levels of agriculture education to students (Bor Wor Chor, Bor Wor Sor) and farmers (special curriculum). These colleges instruct about farming skills and agricultural knowledge but there is a lack of clarity about whether the aim is to train farmers or farm laborers. These colleges face a major problem: the number of students has declined over the past 20 years in parallel of a decrease in the budget and in the number of teachers.

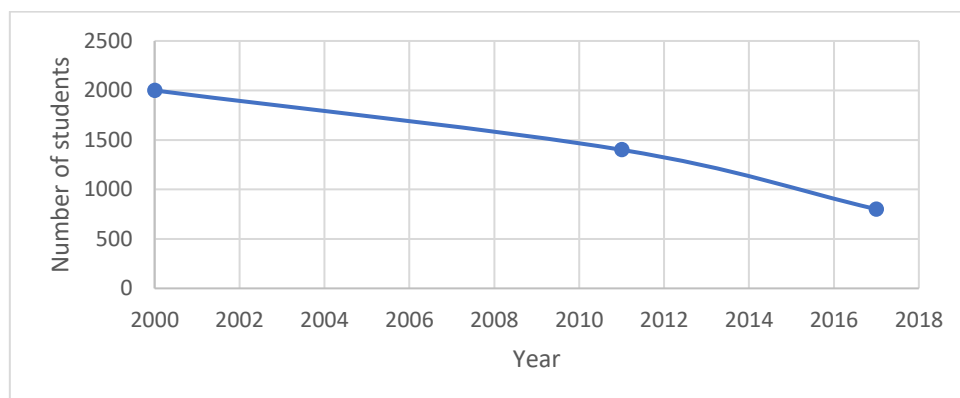


Figure 1: Evolution of the number of students in the Khon Kaen college of agriculture and technology (Source: college administration)

II. Results

Students' background

86% of students are from farming families. They grow food crops (rice, cassava, corn...) for 40% of students, cash crops (sugarcane, hevea, palm tree) for 8% of students, do polyculture-animal breeding for 14% of students and raise fish and shrimp for 14% of students. For 62% of interviewees, farming is the main activity of at least one of the parents or main family members. Half of Bor Wor Sor students is from highschool and the other half studied in Bor Wor Chor in the same college they study now. **Figure 2** describes the origin of students and the next step they plan to reach after the completion of their Bor Wor Sor.

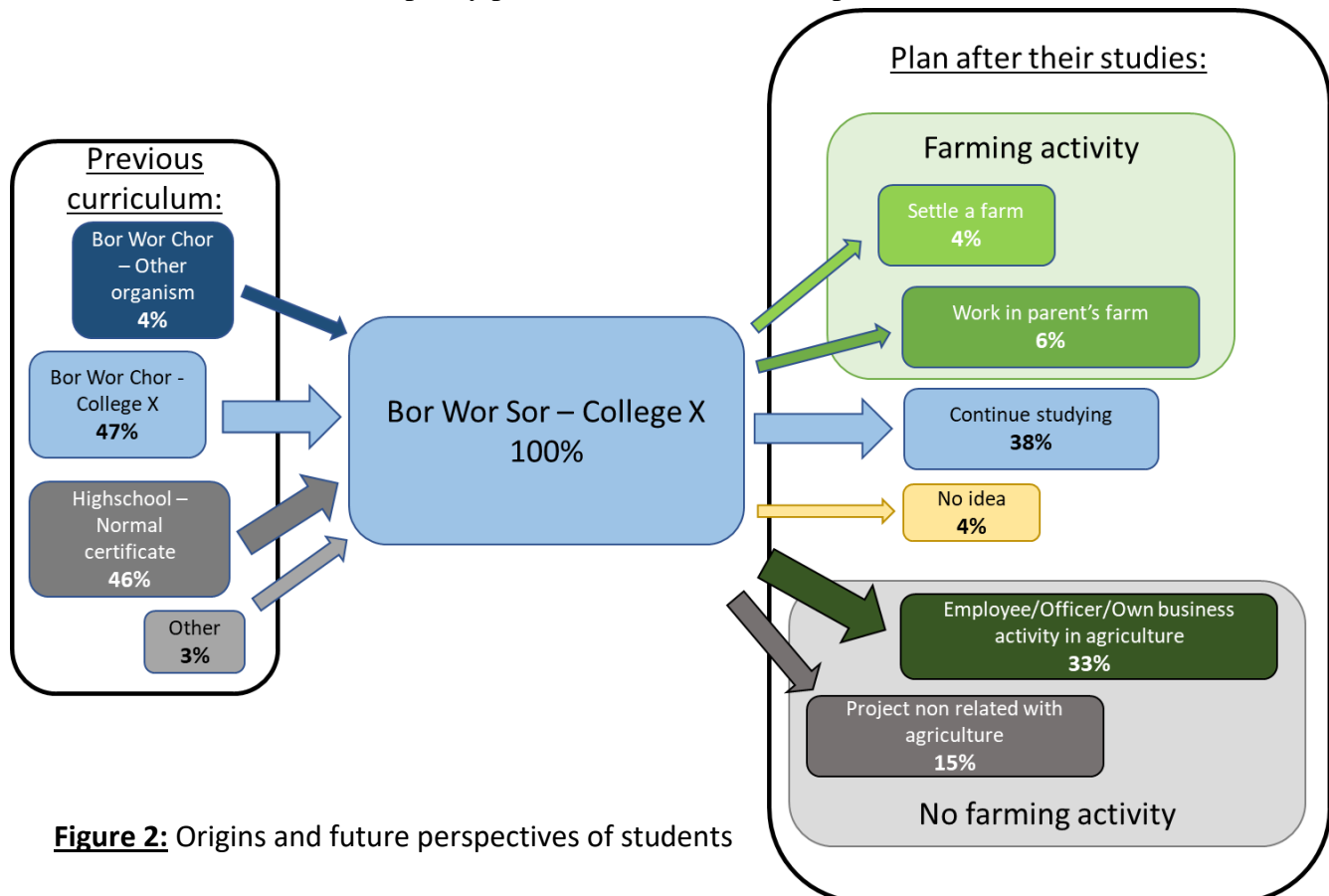


Figure 2: Origins and future perspectives of students

Agriculture Bor Wor Sor was the first choice of studies for 69% of students. By contrast, 16% would have preferred to go to University and 15% would have preferred to go to another training institution. 7% of students indicated they were forced by their parents to study in Agriculture Bor Wor Sor.

The reasons that prompted students to choose Agriculture Bor Wor Sor are: future prospects (23% to learn how to be a farmer, 20% to learn how to fix problems in family's farm, 15% to have good job opportunities, 8% to have the possibility of studying further) and personal values (47% of students). This last score points out the importance of agriculture traditional values, confirmed as, concerning agriculture, students are more inspired by classical models like their parents, public personalities (mostly the king Rama IX) or teachers (56% of students) than model farmers or senior students (23% of students). Students show strong attachment to their parents as 47% of them see the possibility of working with their family as farming positive point.

Contrarily to a general idea, financial and practical reasons only come in 3rd and 4th position to explain the motivation of students to initiate Bor Wor Sor curriculum.

Future plan

The question of the future of the students has been addressed in several ways. We asked them what they would like to do right after their studies, in 10 years and if they would like to become farmer one day in the future. The answers to these 3 questions are summarized in the **Figure 3**.

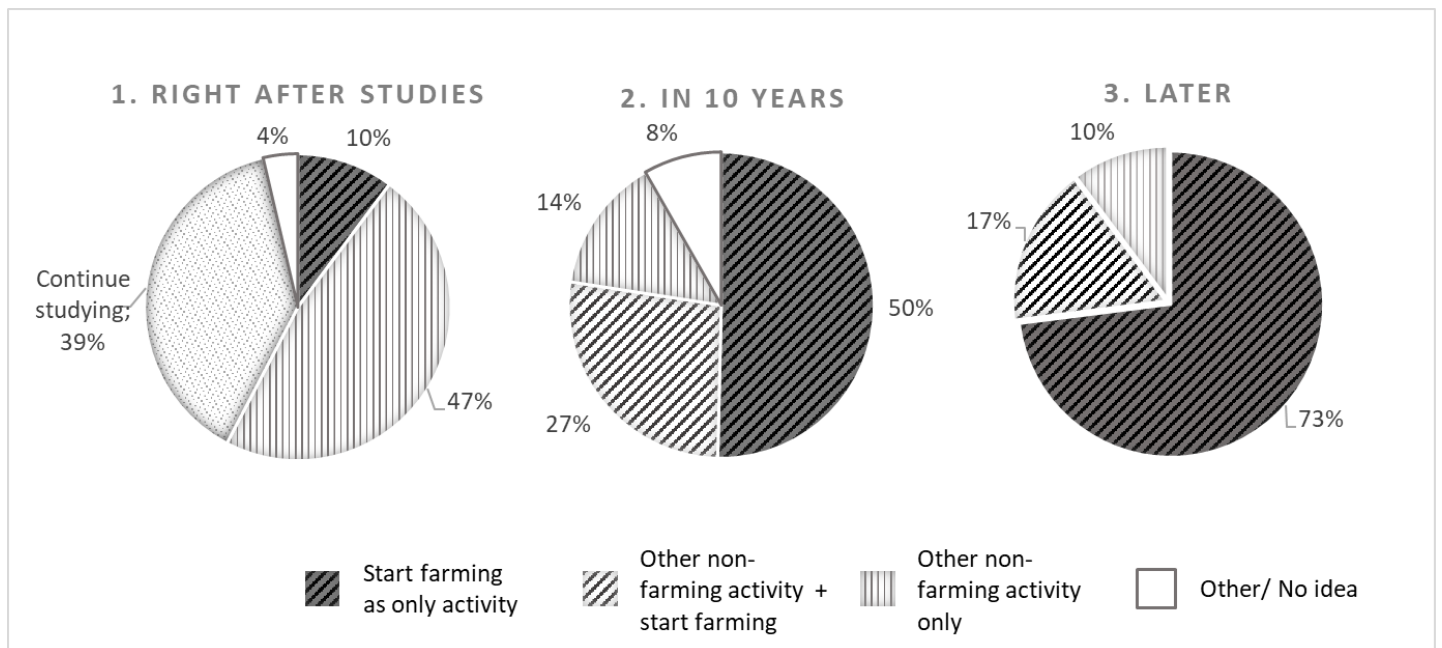


Figure 3: Students' plan for their future life at different steps

The rate of students planning to do farming right after studies is low and divided between those who want to settle a farm (4%) and those who want to work at parent's farm (6%). This low rate corresponds to the rate mentioned by college's directors and teachers. Much more students plan to do farming, not directly after the completion of their Bor Wor Sor, but later in their life. Many students want to be farmer but they consider that they need various elements before settling their farm such as knowledge for those who plan to study further and then start farming (12%) or capital for those who plan to have another occupation first and then start farming (14%). Finally, 9% of interviewees plan to have an other 1st occupation and do farming as part-time activity first and then, if they feel secure about the farming activity, to stop the other activity and do only farming.

Constraints to start farming

The results of the previous part suggest that students feel the constraints to get involve in farming. We asked them first what disadvantages they saw in farming and then which problems they think they would face in settling and managing their farms for the 90% of them who would like to do farming one day. For this last question, we directly proposed them 4 main problems that farmers can face: Lack of capital, lack of knowledge, land access and market access/lack of bargaining power.

Three main disadvantages were mentioned by students concerning farming activity: the hard work conditions (exhausting work, work in hot weather, exposure to pollution mainly) is a difficulty for **46%** of them, the lack of profitability and financial sustainability of farming activity is a difficulty for **44%** of them and the technical complexity of the activity is a difficulty for **36%** of them.

Concerning the problems they could encounter in settling a farm, **75%** mentioned lack of capital, **59%** mentioned lack of knowledge, **57%** access to market/bargaining power and **36%** mentioned access to land. This makes sense with previous results as the students' plan to continue studying in bachelor or plan to get a job first are their solutions to these problems they think they will face in settling a farm, lack of knowledge and lack of capital. This situation is also described by directors and teachers of colleges who mention the access to capital is like a wall in front of the students, hindering them from reaching their aim of being a farmer, as they are from poor family and do not have a lot of support to settle a farm.

We also asked students which kind of support young farmers should receive from government. According to students' ideas, government could provide support in term of:

1. **Access to land:** Help young who want to settle a farm to have access to sufficient (6%)
2. **Access to capital:** At the beginning of their activity, provide low interest loans, loans without refunding the 1st year (18%) and financial support (21%)
3. **Access to market:** Provide support to face price drop and middlemen influence in establishing a threshold price for crops which are very sensitive to price drops (27%) and create fair and accessible outlets (39%).
4. **Access to knowledge:** Provide regular trainings (14%) and technical support: experienced people could visit farms and help farmers with technical part of the farming activity (11%).

III. Conclusion

The director of a college of agriculture indicates during an interview that really few of his former students were now farmers except those who left college since more than 20 years. However, most students show deep interest for agriculture and see farming as a way to be free, to produce their own food and to live with their family. Even if most of their parents are farmers and own land, which provides them the security to inherit the farm later, students perceive that they miss something to be a successful farmer. Many students in agriculture studies are planning to become farmers but need first some prerequisites: capital, knowledge, sales network... because they consider these elements are essential to succeed in farming as they are aware of difficulties that farmers can meet (as their parents, neighbours...).

The focus of public support could thus be about how young people that completed agricultural training can be supported, so that they can start farming early in their professional life, and under conditions that would prompt these people to actively and lastingly engage in such activity.