

## **Agribusiness Career Choice among Secondary School Students: An Assessment of Start Them Early Program in Oyo State, Nigeria**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study empirically assessed the relationship between Start Them Early Program (STEP) and willingness to engage in agribusiness enterprises among students in selected secondary schools in Oyo state, Nigeria. The population of the study comprised 648 students and 54 STEP tutors who were interviewed using structured questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests. Results showed that nearly all the students (99.8%) had knowledge of agriculture, especially in crop production (41.0%), before STEP was introduced in their schools and it was mainly through their fathers' occupation (48.3%). From students' and tutors' perspectives, STEP enterprises significantly influenced students' willingness to engage in agribusiness in future at  $P < 0.01$ . To position the future youths in effective agribusiness operations, Oyo state government needs to incorporate STEP into the educational curriculum to cut across all secondary schools, to ensure the continuity of the program and bridge the farmers' age gap in Oyo State.*

**KEYWORDS:** agribusiness operations, livestock management, crop production, value addition

### **INTRODUCTION**

Agriculture is one of the earliest occupations of mankind. Agriculture is simply defined as the art and science (or management) that deals with the cultivation of crops and the rearing of animals for man's use (Kelvin, 2022). In other words, agriculture is defined as the deliberate effort made by man to till the soil, cultivate crops, and rear animals for food and other purposes. It also involves the sale of produce from the farm because production is not complete until the produce gets to the final consumer (Achal, 2023). Agricultural education, as the most powerful instrument in the world, serves as the bedrock that makes a nation attain fame or a particular height in terms of development. Thus, Machief and Magavin (2023) viewed agricultural education as the springboard

for socio-political, economic, and cultural development that enhances the production of skilled manpower for national development.

There are informal and formal systems of agricultural education. Although the formal structure of agricultural education should be encouraged, obtaining a certificate alone without a corresponding creative and mental power has no serious bearing on the purpose of education (Machieff and Magavin, 2023). There is a high demand for informal education at all levels in Nigeria that promotes skills acquisition for survival in society. By the same token, it is through such education that the acquired skills can be transferred into business development, which will in turn contribute to economic growth and development in Nigeria. And such education is entrepreneurship education, which serves as the springboard for the socio-economic growth and development of every nation. It prepares an individual to live in a dynamic or constantly changing society, contribute to such changes, and constantly advance the survival, growth, and development of the society (Ndubuisi and Ezeani, 2021).

Agriculture-related entrepreneurship education can be obtained on the school farm, it can be referred to as one of the complete learning zones and largely succeeds in taking learning to new heights (Kelvin, 2022). School farms come in handy when it comes to teaching a variety of topics in agriculture, be it crop rotation, mixed cropping, inter-cropping, *et cetera*. The knowledge obtained from practical sessions on the school farm helps students to reinforce what is taught in the classrooms and teaches pupils and students alike about eating healthy, how food arrives at our homes from the farms, and more (Achal, 2023). It also equips the pupils with first-hand knowledge of how to run agribusinesses, which is very important in cultivating an entrepreneurial spirit in the students. However, despite the important role that agriculture plays in Nigeria, many present-day pupils and students across states lack the knowledge of basic agriculture, agriculture business, and indeed the entire agriculture value chain, which is the process through which food gets from the farms to the final consumer (Daniel, 2023). As noted by Kelvin (2023), school children in Nigeria, a country widely acclaimed for its rich agricultural heritage, do not have the privilege of experiencing practical agriculture during their schooling. Only a few children and young people still have the opportunity to gain direct insights into the interrelationships of nature, the handling of animals, and the origin of their food.

More so, quite a number of secondary school dropouts with no defined skill lack the occupation to enable them to be self-employed and thus earn a living (Obidile *et al.*, 2023). This has increased the level of unemployment in state and the nation at large. It has also turned some of these youths into drug addicts and other criminals on the streets. To curb these problems, the practical aspect of agriculture in the school's curriculum should be given equal attention as the theory. To arouse the interest of secondary school students in agriculture in order to create a new generation of young people who understood the business of agriculture, the Start Them Early Program (STEP) was initiated and implemented in a partnership between the Oyo State Agribusiness Development Agency (OYSADA) and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in Oyo State in 2020. OYSADA was mandated to facilitate this

program. As a forward-looking state, the two parties are using this program to bridge a critical gap in the age of farmers, as it is a well-documented fact that the average age of farmers in Oyo State is 60–70 years (Lukman, 2022).

According to the STEP team (2023), more young people are interested in agribusiness, and impressive outcomes are obtained. The students have shown great enthusiasm as they learn more about the business of agriculture, and some have even gone ahead to set up enterprises at home, putting into practical use the things they are learning in class. This study will empirically examine the relationship between the STEP and students' willingness to choose a career in agribusiness among selected secondary school students in Oyo State, Nigeria, with a view to providing recommendations that will improve students' agro-entrepreneurship and hence, bridge the gap in farmers' age and reduce the level of unemployment in Oyo State and Nigeria at large.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions were answered in this paper:

- i. Do the students have agriculture related knowledge prior the introduction of the STEP to their school?
- ii. What is the level of student's engagement in Start Them Early Program in the selected secondary schools?
- iii. What are the perceptions of the students on the agribusiness enterprises introduced by STEP?
- iv. Are the students willing to engage in agribusiness enterprises in the future?
- v. What is the relationship between students' perception of STEP and students' willingness to engage in agribusiness enterprises from students and tutors' perspectives?

### **Objectives of the study**

The main objective of this study is to assess the relationship Start Them Early Program (STEP) and willingness to engage in agribusiness enterprises among students in selected secondary schools in Oyo state, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to

- i. Investigate agriculture related knowledge possessed by the students prior the introduction of STEP in the selected schools.
- ii. Assess the level of the students' engagement in STEP enterprises.
- iii. Evaluate the perception of the students on STEP enterprises
- iv. Ascertain the willingness to engage in agribusiness enterprises in the future among the students.
- v. Assess the relationship between students' perception of STEP and the students' willingness to engage in agribusiness enterprises from students and tutors' perspectives.

## **Hypothesis**

The following null hypothesis guides this study

H<sub>0</sub>: Students' perception of Start Them Early Program do not significantly influence their willingness to engage in agribusiness enterprises.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Concept of Start Them Early Program (STEP), Oyo**

The STEP's inception is one of IITA's efforts in 2018 to ensure that young people embrace agriculture as a career and business. STEP is designed to empower younger youths with quality agribusiness, digital, and soft skills to foster their inclusion in modern agriculture and mitigate the crucial youth unemployment challenge while also reducing hunger in Africa. The project is being implemented in the DR Congo, Kenya, and Nigeria. STEP currently operates in schools across 6 states (Kano, Kaduna, Lagos, Osun, Oyo and Imo state) in Nigeria, with a rapidly expanding reach. The program was initiated in Oyo state as a collaboration between the OYSADA and the IITA in 2020. The program aims to introduce agribusiness development to secondary school students in Oyo state. Under the STEP, students are trained in various aspects of agribusiness, including laboratory science, crop production and mechanization, livestock management, information and communication technology (ICT), and value addition.

STEP started with one school but recently runs in thirteen schools across different geopolitical zones in Oyo State. The schools are UMCA Secondary Grammar School, Igbeti; Iresaadu High School, Iresaadu; Bishop Phillips Academy, Ibadan; Fasola Grammar School, Fasola; Methodist High School, Ibadan; Adegun Asake Grammar School, Igangan; Mount Olivet Grammar School, Ibadan; Apode High School, Eruwa; Christ High School, Ibadan; Iropo Grammar School, Igboho; Parapo Community Grammar School, Saki; Ogbomosho Grammar School, Paku, Ogbomosho and Wesley College of Science, Ibadan. All the thirteen schools are reported to have benefited from upgrades to their facilities as part of the program. Since 2021, thousands of students have been involved in STEP. Currently, not all the students are engaged as those who participated in STEP were randomly selected into each enterprise initially.

### **Empirical Review**

Machief and Magavin (2023) assessed the current learning process in vocational education, the challenges of learning vocational education, and strategies for improving the learning of vocational education in senior secondary schools for skill development and self-reliance in Jos South Local Government Area of Plateau State. Three research questions were asked, and three hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study, and data were collected through a structured questionnaire from 30 students and 20 teachers from 8 secondary schools that offer vocational technical subjects. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and t-test was used to test the hypotheses. It was found that most vocational

subjects were taught theoretically without adequate practical lessons to balance the learning processes due to inadequate training facilities and equipment, a shortage of vocational teachers, inadequate funding of vocational education, poor planning, and societal misconceptions about vocational education, amongst others.

Ndubuisi and Ezeani (2021) determined the adequacy of educational resources for enhancing skill acquisition among business education students for job creation in tertiary institutions in Anambra State. Two research questions and two null hypotheses guided the study. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised 98 business educators from four tertiary institutions who offered business education programs in Anambra State. Data were analyzed using the mean, standard deviation, and t-test. Findings showed that the human and physical resources provided for enhancing skill acquisition among business education students for job creation were inadequate. It was further revealed that gender did not significantly influence business educators' mean responses on the adequacy of human and physical resources provided for enhancing skill acquisition among business education students for job creation.

Obidile *et al.* (2023) identified the vocational training needs of the youths, exploring their demographic characteristics that could influence their choice of vocational training in Anambra State. The study employed a correlational research design. The sample size of 2,520 youth was drawn from Anambra State using the purposive sampling technique. The collected data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation, bivariate correlation, t-test, chi-square, and multiple regression. Findings from the study showed that vocational training areas in artisan, agriculture, production/service and technical/technology like up-cycling and recycling, aquaculture, sales and marketing services, internet and digital services, among others, were identified as vocational training needs of the youths in Anambra State. The result further highlighted a significant association between education qualification and production/service training, among others.

Akosh *et al.* (2018) systematically reviewed existing literature on factors that influence youths' career choices in both collectivist and individualistic cultural settings from around the globe. A systematic review strategy using the Joana Briggs Institute's format was conducted. The ERIC, Psychinfo, Scopus, and Informit Platform databases were searched for articles published between January 1997 and May 2018. A total of 30 articles were included in the review, and they found that youth from collectivist cultures were mainly influenced by family expectations, whereby higher career congruence with parents increased career confidence and self-efficacy. Personal interest was highlighted as the major factor that influenced career choice in individualistic settings, and the youth were more independent in their career decision-making. Bicultural youth who were more acculturated to their host countries were more intrinsically motivated in their career decision-making.

Unay-Gailhard and Brennen (2021) explored the reported impacts of digital communication on career initiation into farming from a global perspective via the lens

of career theories. Seventy-three papers were synthesized into two domains: the impact of digital communication interactions on farming career initiation and the dynamics of digital communication initiatives that create opportunities to inspire youth into farming. From the review, the mainstream literature primarily aims to support the continuity of farming careers but pays little attention to the potential of digital communication to attract youth into farming. This review argues that career communications for farming receive insufficient attention and could be better integrated into agricultural communications strategies by using the potential of digital communications. The study concluded that economic and geographic factors, as well as societal and cultural norms, lead to negative perceptions of farming careers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Skill Acquisition Theory**

The two groups of theories regarding skill acquisition are the adaptive control of thought model and Ackerman's model.

#### **Adaptive Control of Thought Model (ACT)**

Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT) is a model of skill-based theories developed by John Anderson in 1982. The model proposed a framework for skill acquisition, including two major stages in the development of a cognitive skill, that is, the declarative and procedural stages. In this framework, facts are encoded in a propositional network, and procedures are encoded as productions. Within this theory, development involves the use of declarative knowledge, followed by procedural knowledge, with the latter's automatization. Therefore, skill acquisition is conceived to be a progression through declarative, procedural, and autonomous stages. These three stages resemble the three stages of cognitive, associative, and autonomous stages posited by Fitts in 1964 for skill acquisition. This is because in the cognitive stage, knowledge is declarative and needs to be interpreted. Interpreting knowledge is slow and may lead to errors if the relevant knowledge cannot be retrieved at the right time. Procedural knowledge, on the other hand, is compiled quickly and free of errors and can be associated with the autonomous stage. The associative stage is an in-between stage, during which part of the knowledge is declarative and another part is compiled.

#### **Ackerman's Model**

The Ackerman theory was proposed in 1988 and posits that there are different abilities underlying performance at consecutive stages of skill acquisition. In phase 1, general ability measures, such as abstract reasoning, underlie performance. In phase 2, with the formation of production systems for consistent features of performance, the influence of these factors decreases, and perceptual speed abilities appear as important predictors of performance. While in phase 3, performance is eventually determined by non-cognitive psychomotor abilities.

### **Social-Cognitive Career Theory**

Social cognitive career theory was derived from Albert Bandura's General Social Cognitive Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory by Lent *et al.* (1994). General social cognitive theory assumes that people are the product of a dynamic interaction between external environmental factors, internal subjectivity factors, and past and present behavior (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy depends on personal performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological and affective states (Bandura, 1997). The social cognitive career theory therefore argues that an individual's career path results from the interaction between multiple career elements of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. Self-efficacy and outcome expectations greatly influence one's interests, which in turn influence career choices and achievement performance (Lent *et al.*, 1989). Based on the framework of social cognitive career theory, the instructor summarizes the techniques and methods of career interventions, which mainly include expanding choice options, coping with barriers, building support, goal setting and self-regulation, facilitating work performance, and promoting work satisfaction (Lent, 2013).

### **Chaos Theory of Career**

The chaos theory of career was proposed by Robert Pryor's and Jim Bright's. The theory postulates that change and chance influence our lives and career development as much as stable factors like our ability and personality do. By learning to be adaptable and resilient, we begin to live on what Pryor and Bright call the "edge of chaos." The chaos theory of careers recognizes that factors such as economic conditions and the job market, our own values, family, and culture influence our career development. It also agreed that change is a part of life, certainty about the future is impossible, setbacks are opportunities to learn, and that it is rational to make decisions with limited information.

### **Application of the Theories**

Based on the theories underlined above, the students are expected to conceptualize STEP as beneficial and learnable based on their cognition. This will enable them to choose their desired enterprises and proceed gradually from the procedural stage to the autonomous stage. This is because, at the cognitive stage, the first phase of knowledge is declarative which is characterized by abstract reasoning, next to the procedural phase where students are expected to learn through trial and error, and finally to an autonomous phase where performance is determined greatly by consistency which is a non-cognitive psychomotor ability. Moreover, students' career choices or choice of enterprises can be influenced by their conceptualization of the program and other internal factors like personal interest as well as external factors such as the socioeconomic status of their parents and economic condition as stated in the chaos theory of career.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Study Area

The study was carried out in selected secondary schools in Oyo state, southwest Nigeria. Oyo state covers about 28454 km<sup>2</sup> of land and is bordered in the south by Ogun state, in the north by Kwara state, in the west partly by Ogun state and the Republic of Benin, and in the east by Osun state. The climate of Oyo state is equatorial, with dry and wet seasons and a notable high relative humidity. Also, the average daily temperature ranges between 25<sup>0</sup>C and 35<sup>0</sup>C almost throughout the year, which makes the Oyo state environment conducive to agricultural production (Oyo News, 2020).

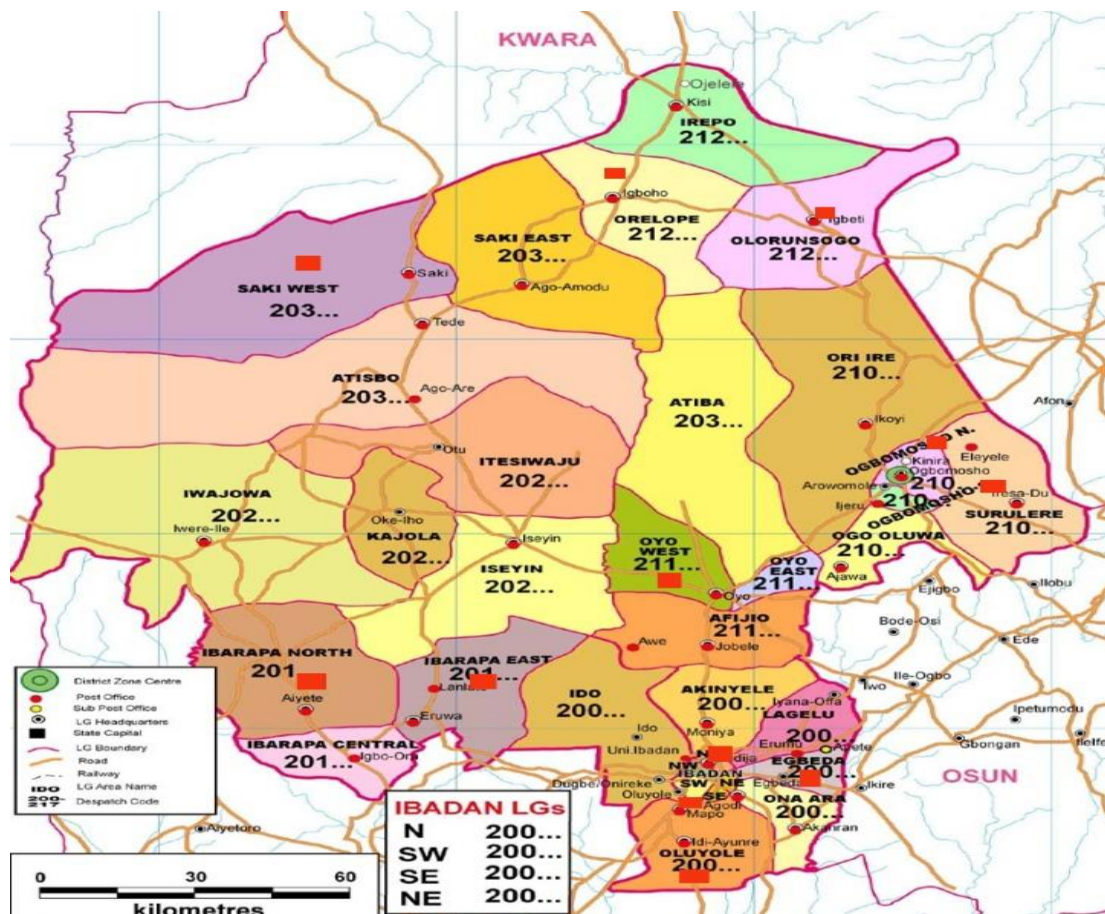


Figure 1: Map of Oyo State Showing Various Local Government Areas of STEP Schools.

Note: ■ represents the location of local government areas of STEP schools

Source: Adapted from nigeriazipcodes.com, 2024

### Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised students and tutors who are engaged in the STEP in ten out of the thirteen



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STEP schools in Oyo state. All the 648 STEP students and 54 tutors that are available at the schools were interviewed in the study. The distribution of respondents per school and class are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

**Table 1 Distribution of Respondents by Schools and Local Government Area**

Schools	LGA	Distribution of Respondents	
		No. of students	No. of tutors
Mount Olivet Grammar School	Ibadan North	52(8.1)	3(5.56)
Bishop Phillip Academy	Egbeda	50(7.8)	5(9.26)
Wesley College	Ibadan South East	87(13.5)	4(7.41)
Methodist High School	Oluyole	28(4.4)	9(16.67)
Christ High School	Oluyole	88(13.7)	2(3.70)
Apode High School	Ibarapa East	93(14.5)	10(18.52)
Adegun Asake Grammar School	Ibarapa North	89(13.8)	0(0.00)
Fasola Grammar School	Oyo West	62(9.6)	7(12.96)
Iresaadu High School	Surulere	49(7.6)	9(16.67)
UCMA Secondary Grammar School	Olorunsogo	45(7.0)	5(9.26)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages

**Table 2 Distribution of Respondents by Level of Education**

Class	Frequency (643)	Percentage
JSS2	23	3.6
JSS3	144	22.4
SS1	111	17.3
SS2	111	17.3
SS3	254	39.5

### **Data Collection**

The data were collected from both the students and the tutors using structured questionnaires. Aside from the demographic information section, the students' questionnaire was divided into four sections, A to D. Section A was designed to elicit information of the students' knowledge of agriculture prior to the introduction of STEP, section B was designed to elicit information on the level of students' engagement in STEP enterprises, section C was structured on a 5-points rating scale of strongly disagree-1, disagree-2, neutral-3, agree-4 and strongly agree-5 and designated to source information about students' perception on STEP, and section D comprised questions used to assess the relationship between STEP and students' willingness to engage in agribusiness in the future which are also structured on a 5-points rating scale of strongly disagree-1, disagree-2, neutral-3, agree-4 and strongly agree-5. The tutors' questionnaire was designed to source information on the objectives guiding each of the STEP enterprise and the relationship between tutors' perception on STEP and students' willingness to engage in agribusiness in the future.

### **Validity of the Research Instrument**

Content validity of the instrument were established using the opinions of two experts in the field of agricultural economics and social sciences. All 54 copies of tutors' questionnaire and 643 copies of out of 648 copies of students' questionnaire distributed were retrieved and used for the analysis.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

Data collected were descriptively analyzed using frequency, percentages, bar charts, pie charts, and Chi-square test. The chi-square test was used to test the null hypothesis at 0.01 level of significance. A significant chi-square value at  $p < 0.01$  implies that the null hypothesis was rejected.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

The socioeconomic characteristics of the STEP students are presented on Table 3 the table shows that more than a half (51.5%) of the students are male and 48.5% are female. About 53.2% of the students reside in urban areas, while 46.8% reside in rural areas. Most (38.6%) of them reported that their fathers' occupation is farming and more than half of them (54.9%) reported that their mothers are traders.

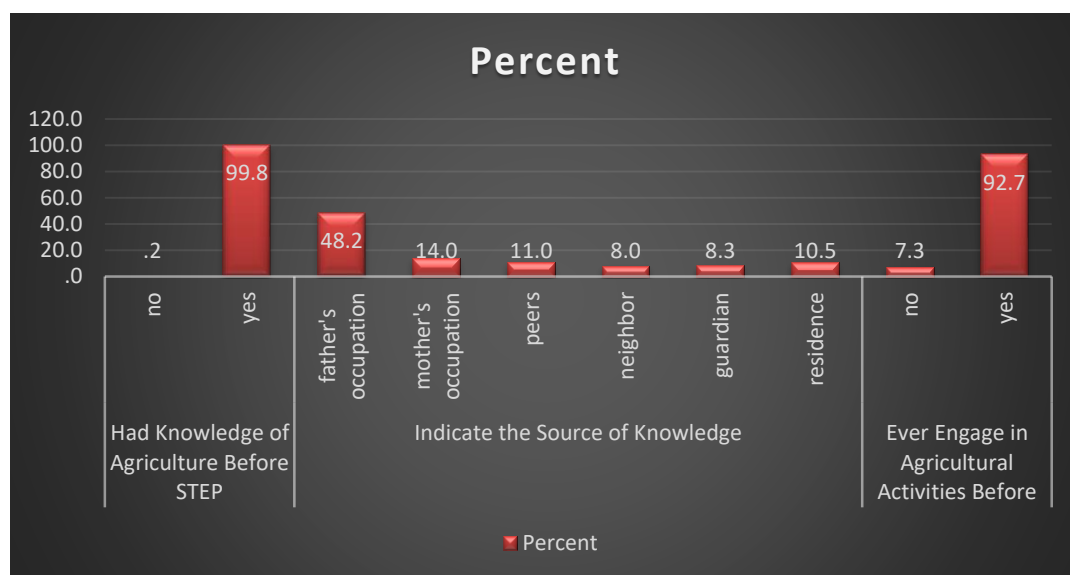
**Table 3: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

Variables	Frequency (n=643)	Percent
Sex		
Male	331	51.5
Female	312	48.5
Residence		
Urban	342	53.2
Rural	301	46.8
Father's Occupation		
Farmer	248	38.6
Civil servant	140	21.8
Trader	108	16.8
Service provider	93	14.5
Other	54	8.4
Mother's Occupation		
Farmer	84	13.1
Civil servant	116	18.0
Trader	353	54.9
Service provider	60	9.3
Other	30	4.7

Source: Field Survey, 2024

**Students’ Knowledge of Agriculture Prior to STEP Introduction to their Schools**

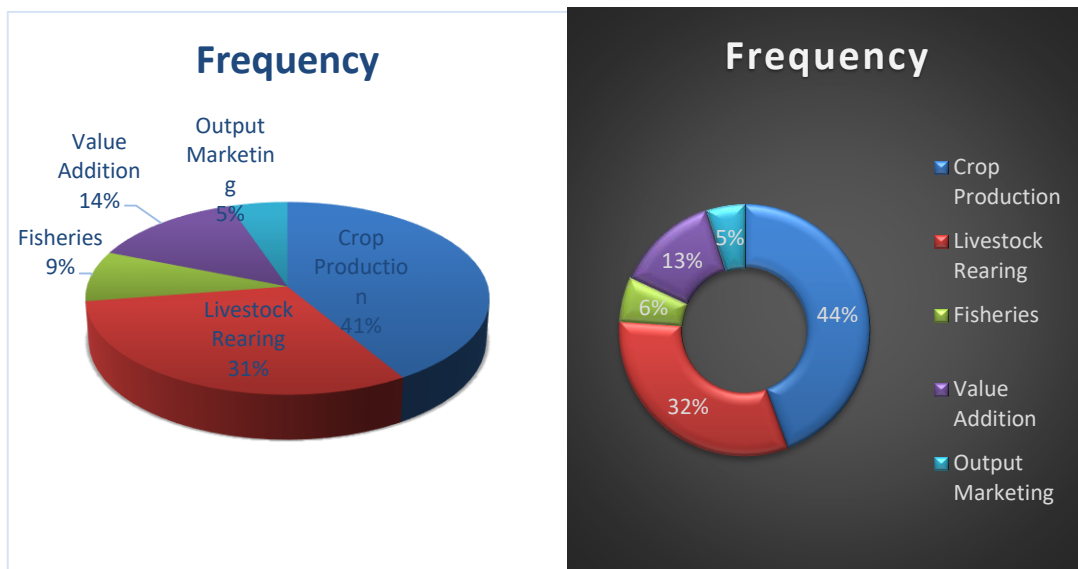
Figure 2 shows the students’ knowledge of agriculture prior to introduction of STEP to their schools. It depicts that nearly all (99.8%) the students had prior knowledge of agriculture before the STEP was introduced to their schools and that about 48.3% sourced of the knowledge through their fathers’ occupation, with the majority (86.6%) of them having engaged in agricultural activities before.



**Figure 2: Bar Chart for Students’ Priori Knowledge of Agriculture before STEP**

Source: Data Analysis, 2024

Various agricultural practices of which the students are knowledgeable and are engaged in prior to the STEP's introduction are shown in Figure 3. It was shown that most (41%) of students had prior knowledge of crop production, 31% had prior knowledge of livestock rearing, and a few (5%) had prior knowledge of output marketing. The chart further shows further that about 44% engaged in crop production, while just 5% and 6% engaged in output marketing and fisheries, respectively.



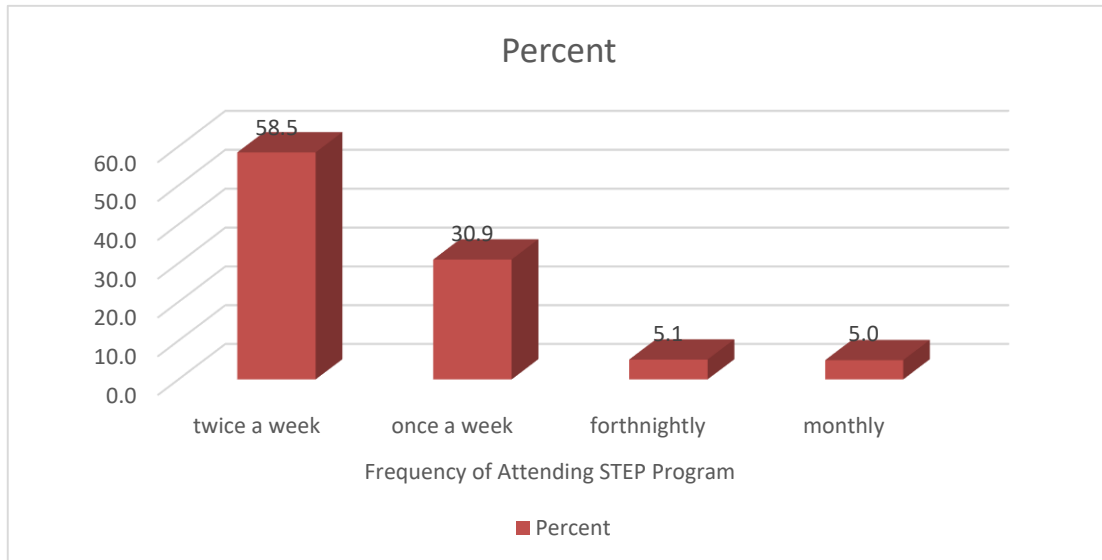
**Figure 3: Pie Chart for some Agricultural Practices**

Source: Data Analysis, 2024

### Level of Students' Engagement in Start Them Early Program in the Selected Secondary Schools

#### Frequency of Attending STEP by the Students

On figure 4, the frequencies of attending STEP by the students are presented. The chart depicts that more than half of the respondents (58.5%) give attention to the program twice a week, about 30.9% give attention to the program once a week, and 5% attend the program once a month.

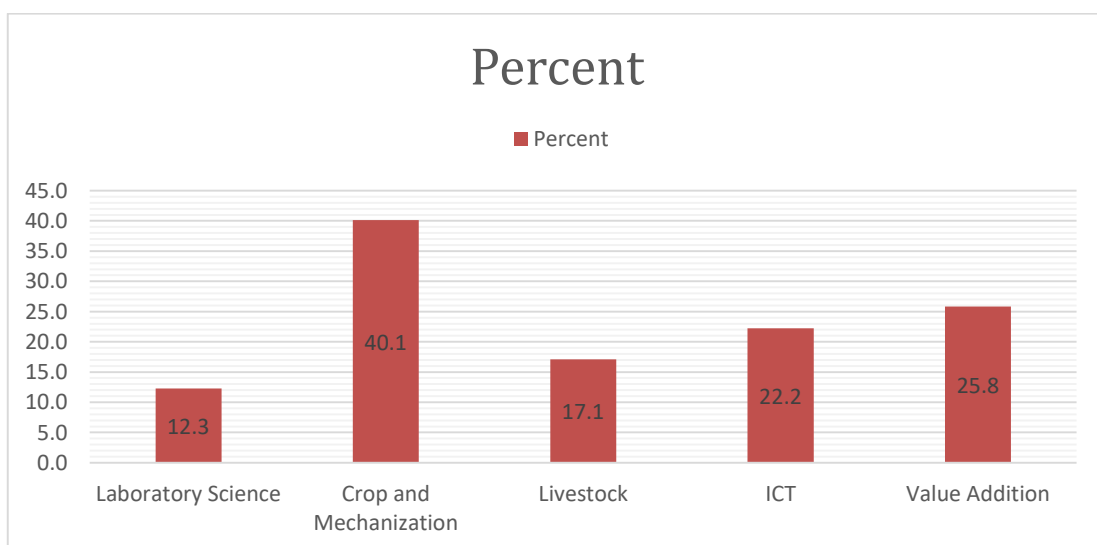


**Figure 4: Bar Chart for Frequency of Attending STEP**

Source: Data Analysis, 2024

#### Preferred STEP Enterprises by the Students

The preferred enterprises by the students are presented in Figure 4. The figure conveys that most (40.1%) of the students actively engaged in crop and mechanization, more than a quarter (25.8%) participated in value addition, many (22.2%) participated in ICT and about 17.1% and 12.3% engaged in livestock management and laboratory science respectively.



**Figure 5: Chart for Preferred STEP Enterprises in which Students Engaged**

Source: Data Analysis, 2024

**Relationship between Students' Preferred STEP Enterprises and Sections**

The chi square result in Table 4 presents the relationship between STEP enterprises preferred by the students and the program's sections. The result conveys that there is a perfectly significant relationship between students' preferred enterprise and STEP sections [Pearson Chi-Square = 71.399, df = 8, Sig<0.05]. Attending both the practical and the theoretical sections of the program was responsible for the preference of the majority of the students for ICT (70.4%), and value addition (79.6%). Most (60.6%) and more than a half (53.3%) who preferred crop production and mechanization and livestock management respectively are motivated by the sections. The table also shows that attending only the practical section influences the preference of about 47.4% of the students for laboratory science.

**Table 4: Chi-square Test between Preferred Enterprises and Sections in STEP Program**

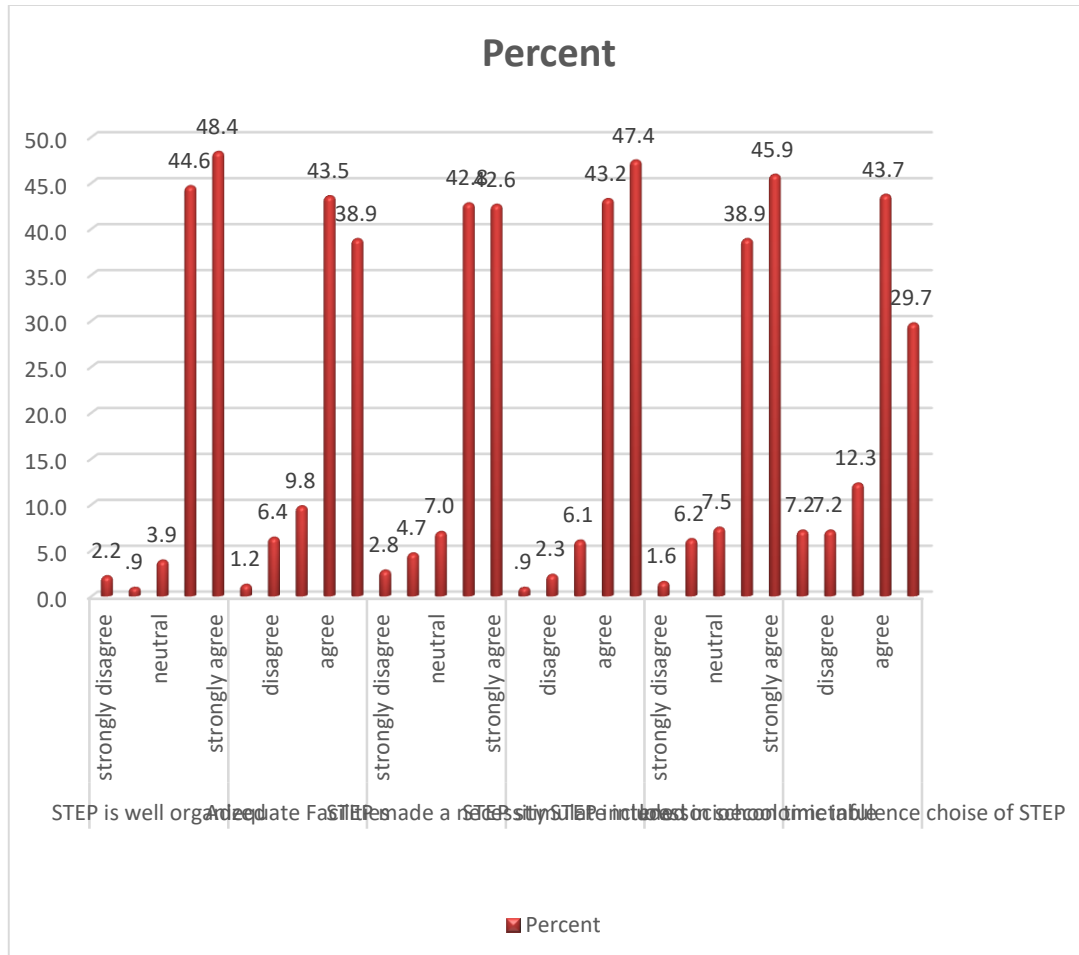
Section	Preferred Enterprises					
	Lab. science	Crop/Far m Mech.	Livestock	ICT	Value addition	Total
Practical	37 (47.4)	71 (31.4)	20 (21.3)	26 (26.5)	19 (12.9)	173 (26.9)
Theoretical	11 (14.1)	18 (8.0)	24 (25.5)	3 (3.1)	11 (7.5)	67 (10.4)
Both	30 (38.5)	137 (60.6)	50 (53.2)	69 (70.4)	117 (79.6)	403 (62.7)
Total	78	226	94	98	147	643
Pearson chi2 (8) = 71.399 P-value = 0.000						

Source: Data Analysis, 2024

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages

**Students' Perception of the STEP Enterprises**

Figure 6 presents the students' perception of the STEP enterprises. From the figure, exactly 48.4% of the students strongly agreed that the STEP is well organized, and many (43.5%) agreed that there are adequate facilities. About 42.8% are of the opinion that STEP should be made a necessity for the youth by agreeing to it. As perceived by many of the student, 47.4% and 45.9% strongly agreed that STEP stimulates youth's interest in agriculture and that STEP should be included in the school timetable respectively. Lastly, many (43.7%) of the students have the perception that the low socioeconomic status of the influences choice of STEP enterprises as they agreed to it.

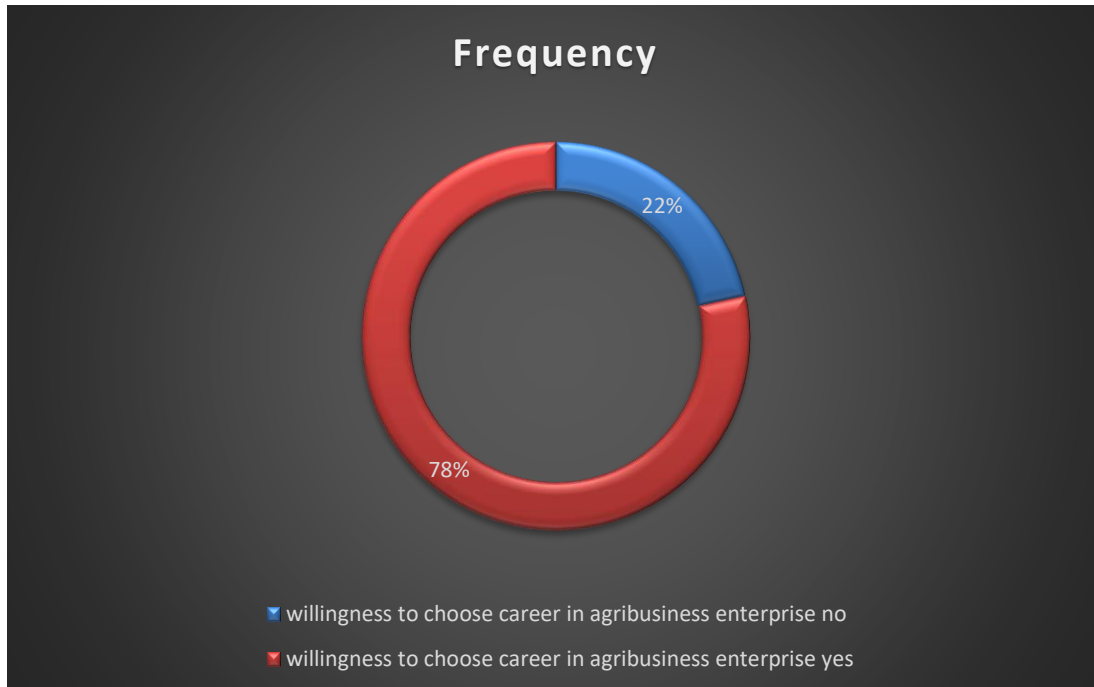


**Figure 6: Chart of Students’ Perception on STEP Agribusiness Enterprises**

Source: Data Analysis, 2024

**Students’ Willingness to Engage in Agribusiness Enterprises in the Future**

On figure 7 which presents the students’ willingness to engage in agribusiness enterprises in the future, it was found that the majority (78%) of the STEP students are willing to choose their future career in agribusiness enterprises and a few (22%) are not.



**Figure 7: Pie Chart of Students' Willingness to Choose career in Agribusiness Enterprises**

Source: Data Analysis, 2024

### **Relationship between STEP and Students' Willingness to Engage in Agribusiness Enterprises from Students and Tutors' Perspectives**

#### **Students' Perception on Step and Willingness to Engage in Agribusiness Enterprises in the Future**

The results in Table 5 present the chi-square test of the relationship between the students' perception of STEP and willingness to engage in agribusiness in the future. Based on students' perception, it was found that valuable knowledge gained from STEP is significantly related to their willingness to choose a career in an agribusiness enterprise ( $X^2 = 24.176$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) as the majority (80.3%) of them who see the possibility of gaining valuable knowledge in the program are willing to choose a career in an agribusiness enterprise. Acquiring the required knowledge in the chosen career significantly influenced students' willingness to choose a career in an agribusiness enterprise ( $X^2 = 53.033$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Additionally, choosing an agribusiness related career was influenced the possibility of the program to reduce unemployment in the future ( $X^2 = 21.332$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and the majority (80.3%) of the students are of this perception. The students' perception of the possibility of the program creating small-scale enterprises is significantly related to



their willingness to choose a career in agribusiness enterprises ( $X^2 = 8.912$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). These results are similar to the findings of Asodike (2007), where skill acquisition programs reduced the joblessness of school leavers and enhanced the establishment of small-scale enterprises. Also, their perception of the ability of the STEP program to stimulate their interest in agribusiness was found to be another factor influencing their willingness to choose a career in agribusiness enterprises ( $X^2 = 76.073$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Since students' perceptions of STEP influenced their willingness to engage in agribusiness enterprises in the future, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

**Table 5: Chi-square Relationship between Students' Perception of STEP Program and Willingness to Choose Career in Agriculture**

Variables	Responses	Frequency	$X^2(df)$	P-value	Remark
Valuable knowledge gained	Not True	8(57.1)	24.176(2)	0.000	Significant
	Not Sure	10(41.7)			
	Very True	486(80.3)			
Required knowledge in chosen career gained	Not True	25(44.6)	53.033(2)	0.000	Significant
	Not Sure	24(60.0)			
	Very True	455(83.2)			
Future reduction in unemployment rate	Not True	47(78.3)	21.332(2)	0.000	Significant
	Not Sure	14(45.2)			
	Very True	443(80.3)			
Bring about small scale enterprise	Not True	21(67.7)	8.912(2)	0.012	Significant
	Not Sure	28(63.6)			
	Very True	455(80.2)			
Stimulate interest in Agribusiness	Not True	20(37.0)	76.073(2)	0.000	Significant
	Not Sure	34(60.7)			
	Very True	449(84.4)			

Source: Data Analysis, 2024

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages

### Tutors' Perception on Step Program and Willingness of Beneficiaries to Choose Career in Agriculture

The chi-square results of the tutors' perception on STEP and students willingness to engage in agribusiness enterprises in the future are presented in Table 6. The results indicated that the perception of the tutors on valuable knowledge to be gained from STEP alone is significantly related to the students' willingness to choose a career in agribusiness enterprises ( $X^2 = 4.483$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) while other variables are found to be insignificant. The insignificance of other perceptions from the tutors' perspective may result from the tutors' believe that the students have not had sufficient required knowledge within the timeframe of the program.

**Table 6: Chi-square Relationship between Tutors' Perception of Step and Student's Willingness to Choose Career in Agriculture**

Variables	Responses	Frequency	X <sup>2</sup> (df)	P-value	Remark
Valuable knowledge gained	Agree	9(90.0)	4.483 (1)	0.034	Significant
	Strongly disagree	44(100.0)			
Required knowledge in chosen career gained	Disagree	1(100.0)	1.182 (3)	0.757	Not Significant
	Neutral	5(100.0)			
	Agree	24(96.0)			
	Strongly disagree	23(100.0)			
Future reduction in unemployment rate	Agree	20(95.2)	1.601 (1)	0.206	Not Significant
	Strongly disagree	33(100.0)			
Bring about small scale enterprise	Agree	20(95.2)	1.601 (1)	0.206	Not Significant
	Strongly disagree	33(100.0)			
Stimulate interest in Agribusiness	Agree	27(86.4)	0.946 (1)	0.331	Not Significant
	Strongly disagree	26(100.0)			

Source: Data Analysis, 2024

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages

### DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This paper assessed the Start Them Early Program (STEP) and Willingness to Engage in Agribusiness Enterprises among Secondary School Students in Oyo state, Nigeria. The study conveyed that the father of the majority of the students are farmers and that

nearly all the students had the knowledge of agriculture especially in crop production before STEP was introduced in their schools. More than half of the respondents attend to the program twice a week, this reflect high level of participation in the program. Most of the students were actively engaged in crop production and mechanization and more than a quarter participated in value addition.

The findings showed further that attending both the practical and theoretical sections in the STEP was responsible for the majority of the students' preference of ICT and value addition and more than half of the students indicated that attending the two sections stimulates their preference of crop production and mechanization as well as livestock management (specifically poultry). This result contradicts the findings of Machief and Magavin (2023) that most vocational subjects are been taught theoretically without practical lesson in Jos South LGA of Plateau State. Also, most of the students strongly agreed that STEP is well organized, stimulates students' interest in agribusiness and that it should be included in the school time-table. It was also agreed upon by most of the students that there are adequate facilities for smooth running of the program and that the STEP should be made a necessity for the youths. The majority of STEP's beneficiaries are willing to choose their career in agribusiness enterprises. Additionally, the perceptions of the valuable knowledge to be gained from the STEP, the required knowledge in chosen career gained, the future reduction in unemployment rate, STEP encouraging the establishment of small scale enterprises and stimulating students' interest in agribusiness are significantly related to students' willingness to choose career in agribusiness enterprises.

Finally, it was found that there was no specific objective guiding the activities of the STEP enterprises and that only the valuable knowledge gained from STEP significantly influenced the students' willingness to choose a career in agribusiness enterprises based on tutors' perception while other variables are insignificant. There is divergent view on the possibility of the program reducing unemployment among students and tutors. The contrasting perceptions of the students and tutors on the relationship between STEP and some variables may be attributed to the lack of continuity of the program and the death of some of the program's enterprises in some selected schools. It may result from the tutors' perception that the students have not had sufficient required agribusiness knowledge within the timeframe of the program. It may also be attributed to the fact that not all the students were engaged and they were not given equal chances of being participants.

### **Field Observations**

Though all the selected secondary schools were reached with the Start Them Early Program, two (Adegun Asake Grammar School, Igangan and Apode High School, Eruwa) of the schools were not provided with the required equipment and gadgets to effectively execute the program. Teachers in these schools reported that the tutors only sensitize the students and teachers about the program, selected the student to be engaged and promised to bring the equipment needed to fully embark on the program anytime soon but they are yet to come back ever since then. The program is ongoing in the

remaining eight schools, but not all the five enterprises were functioning till date. For instance, in Mount Olivet Grammar School, value addition and laboratory science units are functioning of the five enterprises, it was only ICT unit and laboratory science unit that are functioning in Bishop Philips Academy and Wesley College of Science respectively while other units are nothing to write about.

Similarly, at Methodist High School, livestock management and ICT units are the main surviving enterprises. One of the tutors buttressed that the two enterprises are still in existence mainly because the students were mandated to engage in the enterprises regardless of the unit they belong to. There are also three surviving enterprises in Christ High School, Oleyo and the enterprises includes laboratory science, value addition and information communication technology. The enterprises tutors lamented that they were given no orientation on any of the enterprises but the program's coordinators supplied the required equipment and that they seek guidance on how to effectively run the program from some tutors in Methodist High School.

Moreover, the program is running smoothly in Fashola Grammar School, Oyo, Iresaadu High School, Iresaadu and UMCA Secondary Grammar School, Igbeti but not all the enterprises are functional. The surviving enterprises in Fashola Grammar School are ICT, livestock management and value addition. Value addition and livestock unit are also functioning in Iresaadu High School while value addition, livestock, laboratory science and ICT are the enterprises running smoothly in UMCA Secondary Grammar School but their laboratory are not properly constructed as the wall of the lab have started cracking and ceiling are falling gradually. These may inform the reasons why the perception of tutors and that of students on relationship between STEP and students' willingness to engage in agribusiness enterprises differs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Start Them Early Program in secondary school was introduced to equip students with useful skills to prepare them for agricultural related employment and further training/education. The program stimulates students' interest in agribusiness enterprises in the future, but it is no longer running smoothly in about half of the selected secondary schools in Oyo state that are engaged. The STEP is so laudable but half-baked due to the fact that the implementation is no longer encouraging, because there is no specific objective guiding the direction of each enterprise, there are inadequate STEP tutors, facilities and equipment at some secondary schools and inadequate funding.

## **Recommendations**

In light of the findings of this research, the following recommendations are suggested to improve STEP in secondary schools in Oyo state:

- i. Government should ensure the continuity of STEP in the selected secondary schools.
- ii. There should be well defined and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound) objectives to guide the direction of activities of each enterprise.

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- iii. Establishment of coordinating bodies to monitor and evaluate STEP as it relate to the defined objectives and agribusiness development.
- iv. There should be an enlightenment program on the full benefits of the program in the present and in the future.
- v. Renovation of STEP buildings in some schools and the provision of adequate facilities and equipment for each enterprise to motivate the tutors as well as the students.
- vi. STEP should be incorporated in the educational curriculum to cut across all secondary schools in Oyo state in order to position the future youths in effective business operation acts.
- vii. Reformation of the STEP and reorientation of the tutors to see the program as a standardized agricultural transformational program.
- viii. Recruitment of permanent qualified tutors to train and guide the students on each enterprise
- ix. Annual reinforcement of the best students in each enterprise irrespective of the residence or location to motivate them to put in their possible best.

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### Appendix: Field Pictures



**Figure 1: Value Addition Unit, Iresaadu High School, Iresaadu.**



**Figure 2: Livestock Unit (poultry), UMCA Secondary Grammar School, Igbeti.**



**Figure 3: Information Communication Technology Unit, Bishop Philips Academy, Iwo-Road.**



**Figure 4: Laboratory Science Unit, Christ High School, Oleyo.**



**Figure 5: Livestock Unit, Fashola Grammar School, Oyo Town.**