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THE HISTORY OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION IN HUNGARY AND CURRENT PARTICIPATION TRENDS IN AGRICULTURAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT
The contribution of agriculture to the GDP in Hungary is higher than the European average. Consequently, agriculture plays an important role in the Hungarian economy. However, the overall productivity of this sector is still a fraction of those in some Western European countries. According to some economists, this is due to the inadequate number of skilled manpower and the poor supply of agricultural professionals. It is often said, which has also been shown by a number of research studies, that agricultural credentials are not particularly appealing to young people due to the generally reputed low prestige attached to this field. In this paper, I investigate whether the number of participants in secondary level and higher level agricultural education has indeed been declining and how this trend relates to the demographic characteristics of Hungary. I intend to highlight whether the relatively low productivity of the agricultural sector can be rightfully explained, amongst other factors, by the low number of skilled workers and the insufficient supply of agriculture graduates.

Keywords: agricultural education, demography, productivity, output increase

INTRODUCTION

In Hungary, agriculture contributes approximately 4% to the GDP, which is slightly higher than the European average. When other sectors which depend directly on agriculture are also taken into account, this ratio increases to 10-12%.
Alongside tourism, the only sector that demonstrates a positive financial balance in foreign trade is agriculture, which indicates its importance within the Hungarian economy. In 1999, a total of 275,000 people were employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing together. In 2005, this number dropped to 194,000 and in 2008, employment figures declined further to 174,000 (HANTOS, 2010). The fact that the agricultural society is aging only adds to this problem. A staggering 31% of farmers are over 65 and the average age is 56 years (LACZKA, 2014). Young people's interest in agriculture has been deteriorating year-over-year. A survey conducted among undergraduates suggests that a degree in agricultural studies is simply not popular with this group and the social status and prestige associated with agriculture is considered low. People commonly link agriculture with manual labour, however, the competitiveness of this sector and gaining access to EU funding require profound knowledge in economy and finances while precision farming requires a high degree of technical skills. Consequently, professionals in agriculture need to possess a broad range of knowledge and expertise nowadays.
Arguably, young people ought to learn the basics of these specific areas at school. Hungary has played a pioneering role in the field of agricultural education in Europe. The first elementary school teaching agricultural studies was founded in 1779 by Szorgalmatossági Tessedik Samuel Lutheran pastor under the name of Practical School of Economics in Szarvas.
According to LÁZÁR (2015), non-urban areas are expected to deteriorate and become impoverished if the capacity of agriculture to support the population does not increase. Agricultural education is the key factor for the development of this sector and its main

objective is to equip students with current theoretical and practical knowledge, which are also internationally competitive. Furthermore, it should also provide the agricultural workforce with training opportunities in order to learn about new technology, regulations and gain up-to-date market information (KSH, 2015).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

For all of my analyses and comparisons I have used secondary information and data which I have obtained from publicly available sources. The information about the school-age population and the number of participants in secondary level agricultural studies have been gathered from the databank found on the website of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), while the information about the number of students admitted to higher education in agriculture has been collected from the statistics found on the Education Office`s website (felvi.hu). Having compiled the relevant data, my first step was to create column charts using Excel. Subsequently, I generated trend lines which helped me visualise the general course of the dataset. Finally, I reached my own conclusions on the basis of these results and findings of other prior studies on this topic.

RESULTS

Numerous studies have accounted for the drastic drop in the number of participants in agricultural education in Hungary. This suggests that Hungarian agriculture has virtually no chance to gain on more developed countries where agricultural output is significantly higher. Due to the low prestige associated with this sector, only around 6% of all participants in higher education pursue agricultural studies (MÉSZÁROS, 2014). As a matter of fact, 6% may appear a very low percentage indeed. However, we must also consider whether this rate has ever been any higher in previous years, and if so, then by how much. For this analysis, I have looked at the number of students admitted to higher education in agriculture as opposed to the number of participants in higher education as a whole. This way, I intend to demonstrate the true notion of agriculture and its progress over time. I have obtained the relevant data from the publicly accessible online admission procedure and information databank operated by the Education Office (FELVI.HU).

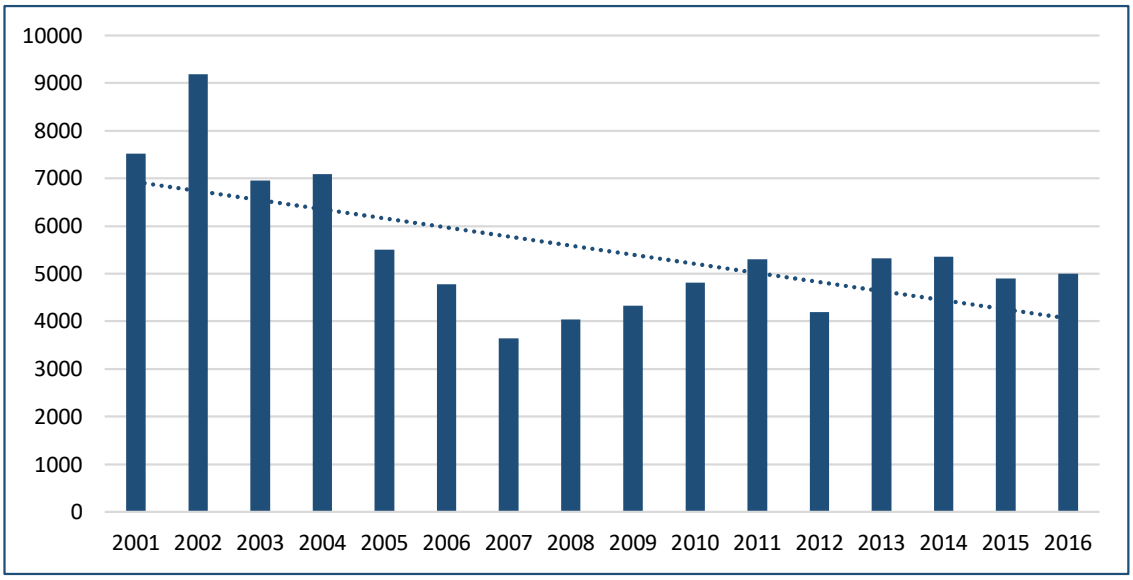

Figure 1. Number of students admitted to agricultural higher education
Source: felvi.hu

The analysis of the annual figures from 2001 and a trend line placed over the dataset clearly indicate a decline in admission numbers over the subject period. A closer examination - without the trend line - shows that the fall has bottomed out and admission numbers have been stagnating since 2010.
In all sectors, including agriculture, there is always a need for lesser qualified personnel. This is perhaps even more typical in agriculture therefore I have investigated the number of participants in secondary-level education. This information has been collected from the database of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH). The dataset includes apprenticeship training in a more traditional sense as well as agricultural training and education provided in vocational schools and other institutions.

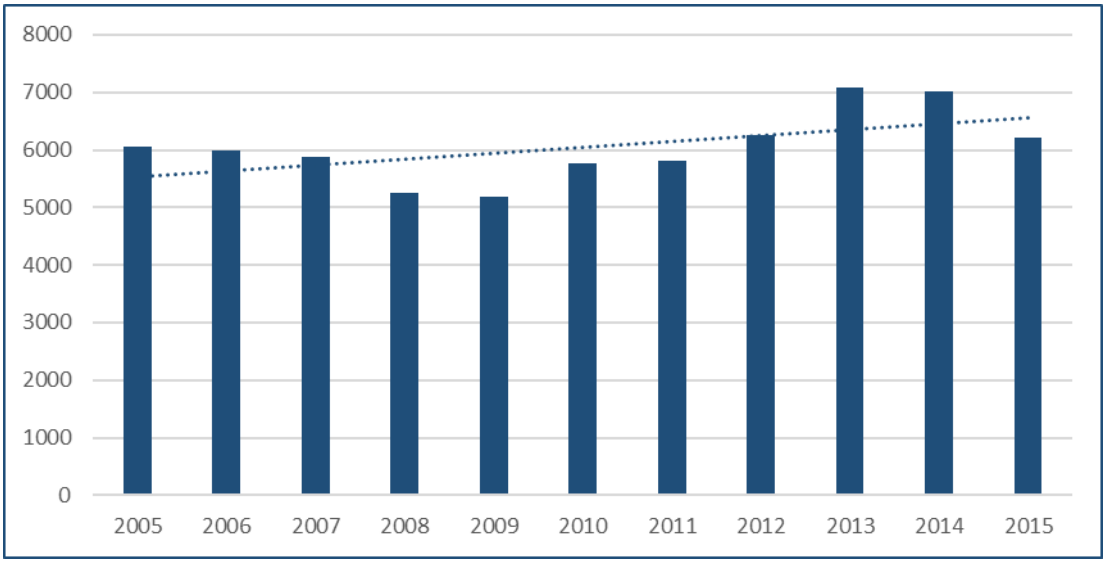

Figure 2. Number of students in secondary education
Source: KSH

The above chart illustrates that despite smaller fluctuations, the number of participants in secondary-level education in agriculture has been more or less constant over the past ten years. On closer inspection of the trend line, one might suggest that these numbers are showing an upward movement. However, considering the demographic characteristics of Hungary this conclusion would be inaccurate and short-lived at best.

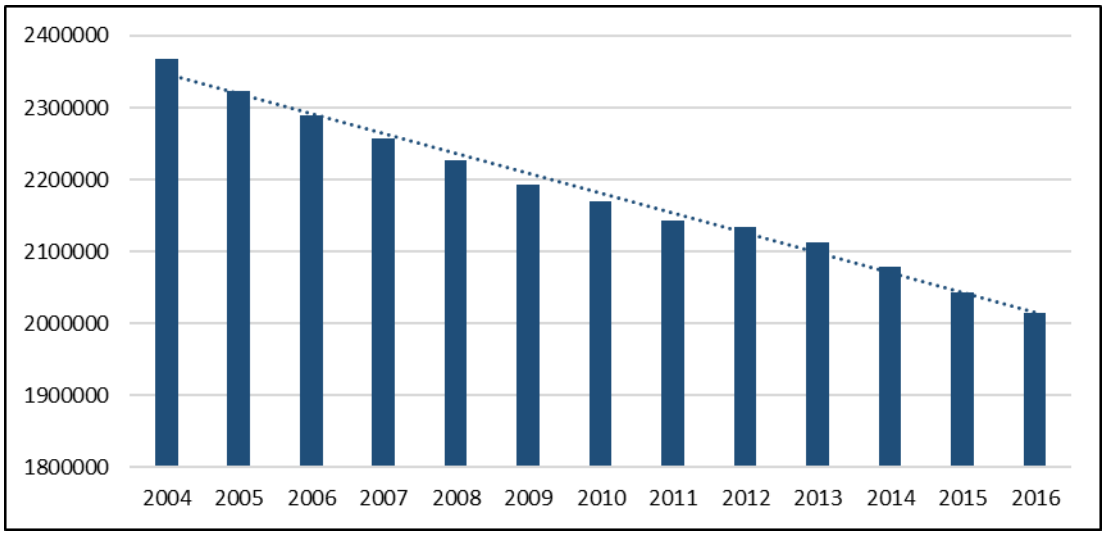

Figure 3. School-age population
Source: KSH

Demographic data has been gathered from the KSH database in order to evaluate the changes in the school-age population in Hungary. On the basis that the number of school-age residents has been falling, it would not be reasonable to expect the number of participants in secondary-level education to rise. It would be a spectacular result if the latter stagnated in future periods. Arguably, this could only be achieved with the detriment to other sectors.

CONCLUSIONS

Understanding the demographic characteristics of Hungary, even if the level of prestige associated with this sector improves, the number of participants in agricultural education cannot be expected to increase. Some people believe that working in agriculture provides them with a good earning potential and there is always a need for well-educated and skilled professionals both in Hungary and abroad, which suggests promising future employment opportunities (TRESÓ, 2015). This aspect should be communicated to students so that application numbers for higher education does not continue to fall. It is important to remember that graduating from agricultural studies does not necessarily lead to a long-term career choice in this sector. The government should subsidise the purchase of new machinery and equipment while facilitating the spread of more modern technology. This could be achieved by offering free of charge or subsidised training opportunities for agricultural workers. I believe that one way to revitalise the aging agricultural sector is to encourage the passion of young farmers together with the implementation of an effective, thoughtful and step-by-step generation change. In order for this to be successful, we need to reconsider the environmental aspects of the region, revisit traditional practices in agriculture and establish a suitable incentive system.

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