

GLOCAL AGE 2020

2016 SHORT-TERM EXCHANGE PROGRAM REPORT

Host University: Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Period: February 16 – 25, 2017

Program: Global Agriculture and Food Science Program (Short-Term)

Reported by Akira Kanomata, Program Coordinator, Fukushima University

It was a great pleasure for me to witness that a group of more than twenty-five participants from diverse backgrounds were learning agriculture together during the nine-day program in Chiang Mai, Thailand, sharing not only their knowledge of their fields of study, but also different perspectives they had. The participants were from five different universities in three different countries, namely Niigata University and Fukushima University from Japan, Ankara University and Ege University from Turkey, and as the host university, Chiang Mai University (CMU) from Thailand. Their diverse majors include soil science, business management, education, international relation, aquaculture, horticulture, microbiology and bioscience.

This report focuses on two points, which I was impressed to observe in the Chiang Mai program: (1) dynamic group learning of the participants; (2) importance of this agricultural program for students with non-agricultural backgrounds.

(1) Dynamic Group Learning

Most of the participants were learning very actively during the program, asking questions to lecturers, sharing their knowledge on the subjects with peers, seeking background information from faculty members and other participants who were more familiar with the subjects as needed.

When the group visited Khun Chang Kian Coffee Plantation, one of the CMU facilities, on February 20, the manager took us to a short field tour in the coffee farm for one and half hours. During this study tour, participants were very eager to learn the coffee production process in depth that the lecturer was always answering questions from many participants of the group. Beside him, Associate Professor Harada from Niigata University and Associate Professor Turgay from Ankara University were also discussing related topics with students throughout the tour. This conversation continued even after we left the plantation while we were travelling to the next facility. In one of the vans, two of the Niigata University students studying bioscience as well as I started sharing our impressions on the visit to the coffee farm, then Associate Professor Turgay joined and gave us a brief lecture on some of the reasons that Thailand was promoting organic farming. He also taught us possible damages of chemical use for soil. Our discussion covered desertification in Turkey, university's role in the society, and

the Niigata University students' research topics in Niigata. Getting off the van at the next site, one of the two students said "It's so fun to exchange knowledge with people from different backgrounds."

A question here is why there were this kind of animate discussion among the learners, while this kind of phenomenon is not very common in Japanese classrooms, unfortunately. One possible reason behind was difficulties of understanding lectures given in English during the program. For some students, many of the topics covered in Chiang Mai were quite new, in another word, they had never studied them before in Japan. Even if they were familiar with the field, lectures with a lot of technical terminologies in English were still challenging for the students. This condition forced the them to ask questions directly to lecturer in English and seek explanations from peers who understood the subject better.

In addition, participating professors and Turkish students may have given good influence to Japanese students. They were, from the first day in Thailand, showing eagerness for learning. This encouraging atmosphere could have helped Japanese students to express themselves more.

This experience was quite beneficial for the students in various ways. In regard to English learning, it certainly helped one student in the group. The Japanese student told me during the program that he used to think that he had to understand all the contents of a lecture at once, even it was taught in English. However, he learned, from his experiences in Thailand, that learning was a process, and he could always ask questions and clarifications if he needed. This awareness must have expanded his capacity for learning, especially in overseas, and will help him improve his English communication skills.

(2) Values of Agricultural Studies for Non-Agricultural Students

Before participating in the program, I had one question in my mind: how much Fukushima University students, with non-agricultural backgrounds, can learn from this agricultural-based study program. Unlike Niigata University and Turkish students, most of the participants from Fukushima University had never studied agriculture before. Their majors are business management, economics, education, international relations and environmental systems.

However, it appeared that most of the lectures as well as sites we visited in Chiang Mai had non-agricultural aspects. As an example, in Thailand, opium production used to be a major problem in the country, especially in the north part. Thailand government and the royal family initiated various projects in the efforts to replace opium production with other healthier crops such as vegetables, coffee and flowers. Some of the project sites we visited during the program started originally with such purpose. This problem was a social issue involving not just about agriculture, but also national security, nation's stability, health, business, economy, education, government policy and various other fields. Also, Opium production could not be eliminated just by agricultural approaches.

Speaking of a current trend, promotion of organic products, in Thailand agriculture, one can see the connection

between different fields of study. In the country, overuse of chemicals for farming as fertilizers and pesticides are growing concerns. CMU as well as the government are trying to reduce chemical use for farming. This problem is also related to different fields, namely potential desertification of the area as well as relatively high price of organic products in the market. This case also can be approached from various fields of study, in another word, experts with different backgrounds are needed to solve the problem.

Though the participating students could greatly benefit from finding these connections, I, as a supervisor, could not quite successfully assist students in this regard during the trip. For the next year, this is a point to be worked on. If students can see the connections, they will be more encouraged to learn from the program and communicate in English with lecturers.

Special Thanks

It was a blessing for me to be a part of the wonderful learning group in Chiang Mai. I am grateful for all the efforts by and supports from faculty members, administrative staff as well as students at Chiang Mai University. I also would like to thank faculty members and administrative staff at Niigata University, Fukushima University, Ankara University, Ege University for working very hard to make this program possible. For all the students from Niigata University, Fukushima University, Ankara University, Ege University and Chiang Mai University, I would like thank for being my students, teachers and good friends.

