

Agriculture – an opportunity for the African youth

Making agriculture a viable career choice

There is a crisis facing the African agricultural sector that ultimately threatens the food security of the continent and beyond. The world's population is growing extremely fast, putting high demand on the agricultural sector and its ability to produce enough food to feed the growing number of the hungry.

Over two thirds of people in Africa rely on agriculture as their source of income and food supply, yet despite this, the quality of education in the agriculture sector is not where it should be. The shortage of skilled people in the sector is growing, while the number of students enrolling in agriculture-related training continues to decrease.

The reality is that Africa's agricultural education sector is failing to produce a new wave of farmers. Howard Blight, CEO and Founder of AGRICOLLEGES international believes we need to bring back the youth to agriculture by talking in a language they understand.

Where are the people going?

The 2017 unemployment figures released by Stats SA at the beginning of June paint a worrying picture of South Africa's job market. They show that the country's unemployment rate is the highest in nearly 14 years, escalating to 27.7%. Using the expanded unemployment rate – there are now 9.3 million people who were unemployed but wanted to work in the first quarter of 2017.

Young people aged 15-24 remain vulnerable in the labour market, with an unemployment rate of over 54%. The numbers also showed that the less educated are more likely to be unemployed than those with a higher level of education; and that the agriculture sector recorded the highest employment losses quarter on quarter, losing 44 000 jobs. Over the period of a full year, only 6 000 jobs were added.

Bringing back the youth

So how do we attract young people back into agriculture, grow skills, increase employment and improve food security?

"The easy answer is that we need to attract more young people willing to learn new skills and practices to take the agricultural sector forward. But there's a snag: today's youth are image conscious," says Blight.

A nationally representative [survey](#) (by Sujaaz Media of over 2,000 Kenyan young people (15-24 years old), showed that when it comes to considering agriculture as an occupation, they

are avoiding the industry and any association with it. The reason: agriculture does not deliver the money, fun and personal connections that they are looking for. In spite of the massive innovations in agriculture in recent years, young people still see farming as a dirty, labour intensive career that is remote from other (more sophisticated) people and no fun. So much so that even those involved in agriculture avoid calling themselves agricultural workers in order not to damage their self-image and image among their peers.

But perception and reality aren't always equal.

Changing perceptions

"At AGRICOLLEGES international, a newly formed, modern, cloud-based e-learning institution, we aim to change the mindset that farming is a less attractive career option for the youth market," says Blight. "While ploughing the land is still very much needed, agricultural machinery has witnessed a radical makeover from the days of hand-held apparatus like trimmers, ploughs and chainsaws to the modern-day computer-controlled, GPS-monitored and self-steer programmes. From the use of drone farming and the need for water saving irrigation practices, numerous innovations have changed the way farming works – and will continue to do so".

"Contrary to perceptions, agriculture is a very exciting place to be right now, and through AGRICOLLEGES international we aim to put the spotlight back on education in agriculture and attract young talent to create a sustainable future for all," adds Blight.

So, if the image of agriculture can slowly be rebuilt through innovation and technology that allow the youth to remain connected, use technology and shine their image, what else do we need to bring back the youth? The answer lies in skills development.

Mark Hassenkamp, the owner of Red Sun Hortitech, an innovative nursery just outside Tzaneen, was recently quoted saying "The big agricultural debate regarding the utilisation of land is only going to be answered through creating the skills base that is needed to sustain the innovation required to make agriculture itself sustainable."

Finding the best education platform

For young people who can see past the old-fashioned image and look towards the new face of agriculture, attracting them into developing the skills to pursue a career in agriculture is the next step.

Facilities at many agricultural colleges in Africa are old and outdated, and curriculums have not kept up with changes in the industry. The result is that there aren't enough good quality graduates at Diploma level and our farms lack the skills to take agriculture into the future. Sadly, there aren't enough quality agricultural colleges available currently to offer a high number of students access to learn in this field.

However, just as the agriculture industry is changing in favour of a younger tech-hungry generation, so is the use of mobile phones and the internet in Africa is ballooning. E-learning

is a relatively new concept in Africa and AGRICOLLEGES international plans to take it to the next level.

AGRICOLLEGES international is taking traditional ways of learning and using technology, along with new and up to date content, to give young people an opportunity to be involved in an industry where they can be constantly connected; and in which critical skills are needed.

The advantages of eLearning over more traditional bricks and mortar universities and colleges include lower costs; and increased student flexibility that provides them with the opportunity to work and earn an income while they learn. Furthermore, broad scale availability across a wide range of devices with access to the internet; and a blended learning approach that enables them to collaborate and share knowledge both online and at appointed Centres of Excellence and other practical destinations, give them the connections they hold in such high esteem.

Giving hope

“By turning farming back into an attractive industry and offering a modern platform from which to develop skills, we will attract more youth into agricultural education, giving hope to students who want sustainable employment and to the agricultural sector as a whole,” Blight concludes

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