

New e-learning institution to help create Africa's next generation of farmers

The agriculture sector in Africa delivers a [productivity rate](#) of 36%, one of the least productive in the world. While technological advances have begun to transform the agriculture industry, few youngsters are being drawn to study and pursue agriculture as a career. Africa's agricultural education sector is failing to produce a new wave of farmers and agriculturalists.



Kate HoltAusAID via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The ongoing and severe shortage of well-trained personnel entering the agri-sector and agri-related industries, including farm managers, section managers, and sales personnel, poses a significant risk to food security on the continent.

Dynamic learning environment

[Agricolleges International](#) is a new, modern, cloud-based e-learning institution that is using Desire2Learn's (D2L) Brightspace learning management system (LMS) to provide students with affordable, accessible and industry-relevant agricultural course content. Brightspace is a digital learning platform that helps schools and institutions deliver personalised learning experiences in a classroom or online to people anywhere in the world. The platform makes it easy to design courses, create content, and grade assignments, giving instructors more time to focus on what's most important – greater teaching and learning.

Speaking at the press launch in Johannesburg, Howard Blight, chairperson and founder of Agricolleges International says, "We will offer students from all walks of life, starting in South Africa, the opportunity to access or continue their education in the Agri-Sciences. Agricolleges International has established a cloud-based e-learning platform, where students can study on computers and mobile devices from anywhere in the world with internet access, providing a dynamic learning environment without the added costs of being 'on campus'. From 2018, we will venture north into the sub-continent, offering the same programmes to students from other African countries."

“There is a dire need for quality and affordable, tertiary, agri-education in South Africa, Africa and the rest of the developing world. While some universities throughout the country are turning away thousands of student applicants each year, due to a lack of facilities for students looking for some form of tertiary education, it is equally true that our universities are being asked to accommodate more and more poorly prepared and poorly resourced students with fewer and fewer resources to do so. Diploma level courses studied through Agricolleges International, will meet both the needs of the industry to gain young, skilled agricultural talent, but also at a price-point that is affordable – under R29,000 per year,” says Blight.

In addition, various ‘Centres of Excellence’ are being identified and will be established all around South Africa, to provide students with the practical and experiential component of the Agri-Sciences curriculum. Several of these centres will be established at agricultural schools and colleges, to make effective use of existing available infrastructure and to reduce the capital investment required. Others will be in collaboration with certain mega-farmers, irrigation companies, agri-chemical companies, pack-houses and the like. The practical component will balance the theory – creating a blended learning solution for students.

“There is a significant demand for farming short-courses in the agri-related and allied industries. Agricolleges International short courses will be offered to existing farmers and others from within the industry,” adds Blight.

Colleges, universities, farming industry needs to work together to address the skills shortage

Agricolleges International has forged a strategic alliance, through a formal Collaboration Agreement, with Stellenbosch University that will serve as a portal for the establishment of an e-learning curriculum at Diploma level. All final coursework will be approved by the University. Professor Danie Brink, dean of the Agri-Sciences Faculty at the University of Stellenbosch says, “Colleges, universities and the farming industry need to work together to address the skills shortage in agriculture. Agriculture training and education in South Africa appears unbalanced with significant outputs on higher compared to lower tiers, whilst practical experienced agricultural job candidates are also lacking.

The lack of training among unskilled and semi-skilled workers is also preventing the sector from building from the bottom up. Incubators in the form of agricultural colleges and schools are not meeting the demands of the growing agricultural sector. Agricolleges International, therefore, fills a much-needed gap in agriculture education.”

Agricolleges International has signed with the Mumbai-based Innovations Consultancy, Consilience, who will design and build the courses on-line. Consilience has created academies that offer courses accredited by the State University of New York in the USA. The Consilience team has decades of experience in higher education and strategic innovation.

D2L’s Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K-12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. D2L is in partnership on this project with Visions Consulting, a South African based company, with more than 20 years of experience in providing solutions for student administration and enterprise resource planning.

The importance of skills development in agriculture

Understanding the importance of skills development in the agriculture industry, key industry players including farmers and agriculture associations have shown their support of this initiative. Justin Chadwick CEO the Citrus Growers Association says, “The citrus industry is enjoying a fruitful period, contributing R14.2 billion to South Africa’s GDP and has a strong export market of over 1.7 million tonnes (the second-biggest citrus exporter in the world). The South Africa citrus industry will continue to grow if we maintain our competitive edge.

To maintain our competitive edge, we need to keep abreast of the latest technologies in the industry to better our production, but we also need to make sure we have the right qualified personnel within the industry to continue to grow. We applaud Agricolleges International for helping to create the next generation of farmers and managers thereby ensuring the sustainable development of food in Africa”.

Blight adds: “The fact is, farming is unfortunately seen as a less attractive career option for the youth market. We need to change this mindset. 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 and chainsaws to the modern-day computer-controlled, GPS-monitored and self-steer programmes. There is an evolution of agricultural practices 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.”

Finally speaking on accreditation, Blight comments, “The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 and it’s regulations prescribe that we may not ‘offer or pretend to offer’ any higher education programmes leading to a qualification that meets the requirements of the Higher Education Quality Framework as determined by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, as referred to in the National Qualifications Framework Act, unless we are registered. As mentioned we are in the process of applying for registration and, therefore, we are unable to offer any such courses until we are registered. We will only provide such courses, once we are registered.”

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