

Cultivating skills for growth

By Laura du Plessis, bursary co-ordinator, L&L Agricultural Services

South Africa is renowned for being a key driver of economic growth and development, and skills development in agriculture should be considered an investment. The social and economic responsibility of the agricultural sector continues to increase, and this situation has compelled the sector to investigate reforms and economic diversification to re-awaken optimism about potential growth prospects.

The population from which agriculture will draw the next generations of employees will be under 30 years old, and South Africa's youth must have the skills needed to build a resilient agricultural sector. Policies aimed at stimulating growth will be successful only if the supply of skills is adequately addressed. It is therefore vital that the youth are given the opportunity to acquire the skills the industry needs to build a global, competitive and resilient agricultural sector.

At present, the grain and oilseeds industry receive a cumulative amount of approximately 200 bursary applications annually. More than half of these applicants are individuals under 30 years of age. There is consequently an urgent need for agriculture to proactively address the skills shortage and help build capacity to serve the aspirations of the sector and the country's economy.

Investing in human capital

Agriculture's strength lies in its human capital. Maize Trust doctoral student, Lucia Zinzi Ndlala, supports the narrative, stating that "the key to success and improving the economy and the livelihoods of our farmers is through empowering and investing in students and their education," making the issue of skilled human capital a valid concern.

L&L Agricultural Services and our clients are committed to skills development and skills upliftment within the grain and oilseeds industry. As part of our contribution to skills development in the

sector, we have investigated improved methods for the grain and oilseeds bursary schemes. L&L Agricultural Services has created a new bursary website, with an algorithm that has been structured in such a way as to allow applicants and their supervisors to securely apply/register to the respective bursary schemes.

These bursary schemes invest directly in the education of deserving South African youth and provide students with the opportunity to build a personal and professional relationship with their benefactors. Building relationships is a precondition to student learning. Our clients therefore endeavour to continue interacting with successful applicants throughout the duration of their studies, and to introduce them to potential networking systems and influential role-players within the industry.

A one stop portal

In addition to the funding benefits, bursars can enjoy access to the L&L Agricultural Services website and subsequently any agricultural sector job advertisements. This way, clients are directly supporting the process of attracting talented equity candidates into partner enterprises.

Furthermore, L&L Agricultural Services and our clients have taken the liberty of creating a free entry-level, industry-specific job board on the website www.agrimanage.co.za. This platform is intended to create opportunities for qualified agricultural students to gain practical work experience that will complement their studies and/or improve their competence and employability.

Nevertheless, its purpose is also to serve the industry in fulfilling available industry-specific job opportunities by recruiting the best possible job-ready candidates. Although the process is still in its infancy, it is our intention to build a platform that will

solidify our position as one of the leading agricultural job boards in South Africa.

L&L Agricultural Services has also added an Alumni tab to the website, where published theses and dissertations of previous bursars are being made available to all industry stakeholders. The website will be further enhanced over time to address the requirements of the sectors concerned.

Pivotal role of bursary schemes

The bursary schemes, aimed at boosting agricultural research and administered by L&L Agricultural Services, are currently benefitting 31 postgraduate students from several South African universities – students from major tertiary institutions in South Africa can apply. These bursaries play a key part in encouraging participation, but when used effectively, can also help to drive attainment and encourage the retention of agricultural students.

These bursary schemes help us in addressing the concerns of some students who feel they may not be able to finance their years of study. There should be no limitation placed on young graduates and their chance to gain valuable skills and experience to drive agriculture forward.

The bane of employment bias

The single biggest change in higher education over the last decade is somewhat related to the reason why students enrol in the first place. Today's students enrol for very practical reasons: to improve employment opportunities, to make more money and to get a good job. While studies continue to show terrific premiums for tertiary-educated employees, the data in question invariably comes from cohorts who have been out of the stream of education for at least ten, and often twenty or thirty, years.

Unprecedented unemployment and underemployment rates for new graduates

have changed student behaviour – likely unalterably due to the affordability crisis. As a result, traditional arguments that ‘university prepares you for your fifth job, not your first job’ increasingly fall on deaf ears since students know that if they do not get a great first job, they are much less likely to get a great fifth job. This means that universities, colleges and technikons need to do more than just increase career services budgets; they must ensure students are equipped with the technical skills employers require for entry-level positions.

If students are having increasing difficulty ‘launching’ into the world of employment and self-sufficiency, then employers are as much to blame as any South African tertiary institution. Employers have blithely and blindly driven credential inflation, insisting on master’s and doctor’s degrees as requirements for professional positions. Employment systems have turned into a ‘rigged’ game, particularly for new graduates with little to no work experience. And while employers have put up technological walls to employment, they have been content to continue campus-based recruitment at a select number of

tertiary institutions because that is the way it has always been done.

In contrast, utilising new methods to identify competencies that are predictive of success, by incorporating these skills into job descriptions and by proactively searching among passive job seekers and current students, will become a competitive advantage for farsighted employers. This will assist in facilitating a shift from degree- and pedigree-based hiring to competency-based hiring, which will go some way to ameliorating a lot of the current issues while also increasing workforce diversity.

Skills development workshops

Most students use online ads when it is finally time to look for their first professional job. They compete with dozens or hundreds of other successful students for every position, while having no industry experience and not much negotiation power. Then there are those students who build relationships in their industry and let industry decision-makers get to know them before they need a job. When one of these managers needs to fill the type of position these students

are looking for – or if the manager hears of someone who does – it is quite possible these students will get the job without much, if any, competition.

For this reason, the clients of L&L Agricultural Services, together with representatives from Cereal Science and Technology SA, the Protein Research Foundation and Winter Cereal Trust, host bi-annual soft skills Graduand Career Skills Development Workshops.

These workshops are aimed at providing an opportunity for invited agricultural bursary recipients (including but not limited to the Winter Cereal Trust, Protein Research Foundation,

Oil and Protein Seeds Development Trust, Oilseeds Advisory Committee, Maize Trust, Sasol Agriculture Trust, Sorghum Trust and South African Cultivar and Technology Agency) as well as privately funded students and industry representatives to network and discuss career opportunities, options and developments within the agricultural sector in a relaxed environment. These workshops aim to give students an opportunity to build their professional network.

Enhancing important skills

At the workshops we aim to offer the following soft skills:

- Make our students aware of ways in which they can prepare themselves for entering the job market.
- Bring students and potential employers into contact with one another to contribute to the optimal placement of graduate students.
- Keep our career and corporate resources relevant and up to date.
- Advertise job vacancies on the L&L Agrimanage website.
- Equip our students with job-seeking skills.

The workshops are specifically geared towards preparing students for the labour market, which is also our core initiative. This task is carried out by exposing students to workshops and sessions on:

- CV writing.
- Interviewing skills.
- Cover letter compilation.
- Personal branding.
- Presentations and information sessions by agricultural organisations on industry structures and operations.

Skills development in agriculture should be seen as an investment to serve the strategic aspirations of the sector. It is imperative that the industry continues to develop a deliberate strategy to address skills development to not only maximise the value added to the sector, but also to transfer skills to coming generations. 🌱

For more information on the Graduand Career Skills Development Workshops or the various bursary schemes, send an email to laura@llagric.co.za or visit www.agrimanage.co.za.

