

Career and Bursary Fairs promote agricultural career opportunities

The agricultural industry is in need of fresh, young talent. In response to this lack, industry role-players recommended showcasing the industry to young people and raising awareness about career opportunities in the agricultural and food supply chain. As a result, several Career and Bursary Fairs have been held over the past two years at Stellenbosch University (SU) and the University of Pretoria (UP), as part of an initiative of the Produce Marketing Association (PMA), an international organisation for the fresh produce industry.



The objective of the Career Fairs is to entice young people to consider a career in the agricultural industry. At the upcoming Career Fair on 22-23 August 2013 at the University of Pretoria, in conjunction with the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, more than 4000 students and school learners are expected to attend the Career Fair. Yet another successful Career Fair was recently hosted at the Stellenbosch University in April this year, resulting in major press coverage in the Rapport (careers section) and Landbouweekblad.

An important showcase

The issue of young people not entering the horticultural/agricultural industry has already reached a critical stage. Universities, agricultural businesses, input supply companies, commercial farms and service providers continue to report how the unavailability of young people is affecting their businesses. Companies and organisations will therefore have the opportunity to showcase their products, services, career opportunities and bursary & internship programmes. Targeting young people, the focus is on first-year BSc Biological Science students, many of whom have not yet decided on an area of specialisation from their second year onwards, and agricultural students currently registered at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Some students from other disciplines such as BCom and Engineering will also visit the fair. In addition, more than 1000 top performing Grade 11 school children from 250 schools are expected to visit the Career Fair, through the Junior Tukkies programme for prospective students. The Junior Tukkies schools programme is well organised - the Grade 11 learners will be divided in two groups, and they attend a formal information session on the University of Pretoria at the Aula on 22-23 August (two groups of 600 each). They will visit the Career Fair during a specific time slot, allowing companies to plan for the flow of school children through the Fair.

The industry responds positively

The response from the industry to address this challenge is remarkable, as shown by participant companies at previous Career Fairs, which include the following: Afgri, Agbiz, Bakkavor, Bayer, Capespan, Capital Harvest, Chep, Citrus Academy, Colors Fruit, DuPont, Dutoit Group, FPEF, Fruit & Veg City, Gliogrow, GWK, Hortgro, Joburg Market, John Deere, Klein Karoo Seed Marketing, Laastedrif, McCain, MPact, Monsanto, NAMC, Pannar, Pioneer Foods, Potatoes SA, PPECB, Profert, RSA Market Agents, Rugani Carrots, Sakata, SANSOR, SA Table Grape Industry, Santam Agri, Shoprite/Freshmark, Standard Bank, Starke Ayres, SUBTROP, Syngenta, Tru-Cape, Villa Crop Protection, Wenkem, Western Cape Dept of Agric, Westfalia, Woolworths, ZZZ.

With the entire supply chain in fresh produce represented, students are exposed to a variety of career opportunities. Said Johan du Plessis, HR manager from ZZ2, a large commercial farming operation: "I was astonished to see how many students showed an interest in what we do. At ZZ2 we have opportunities across the supply chain; it was therefore an eye-opener for us to speak to so many prospective students." ZZ2 has already booked their stand at the upcoming Career Fairs in April and August. According to Lorraine Coetzee, HR manager from Sakata, she was encouraged by the enthusiasm of the students. "We had a very busy day last year when speaking to numerous students about career opportunities in agriculture. This was a very productive day indeed", said Me Coetzee. She added that Career Fairs could also establish linkages to post-graduate projects.

George Nefdt, manager, Organisational Development at Pannar Seed, said that their company's success at the Career Fair could be attributed to Pannar having qualified agriculturists, and middle to senior management, at the stand to speak to the students. The agriculturists' passion for agriculture, and their energy for the future, contributed to convincing students and school learners to consider a career in agriculture. Pannar has already identified 6 bursary/internship candidates at the Stellenbosch Career Fair earlier this year and will identify another 6 possible candidates at the upcoming Career Fair at University of Pretoria.

An increase in student numbers

Both participating universities reported a significant increase in student numbers in the 'scarce skills' fields of study, such as horticulture, plant production, soil science and plant pathology. A recent discussion with a senior lecturer at the Plant Production and Soil Science department at the University of Pretoria, Dr. Diana Marais, revealed that their department experienced a significant increase in the number of enrolled second-year students selecting plant production and soil science during the past two years. "Most amazing was the significant increase in the number of honours students in plant production and soil science. These increased numbers are a direct result of the Career Fairs," Dr Marais confirmed.

Monika Basson, responsible for marketing at the Faculty of AgriSciences at Stellenbosch University, is excited with the outcome of the Career Fair and commented: "We definitely saw an increase in student numbers since last year, especially within plant and soil sciences." She added that it is important to note that the Agri Career Fair attracts a focused group of school learners. All learners with an interest in the biological sciences should actually attend - learners are very often not aware of the opportunities within the applied sciences and by attending the exhibition they are exposed to careers in the agricultural supply chain - exciting and wonderful opportunities for any student who has a love for science, who is innovative, loves to solve problems and who wants to work in a dynamic environment.

The Faculty also launched a specific schools programme to give an opportunity for previously disadvantaged school learners, who have the ability to study towards a BSc degree, to attend the Career Fair, and be exposed to the industry.

For more information, go to [the PMA website](#), [UP website](#) or [SU website](#).

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>