WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING IN AGRICULTURAL MANAGEMENT EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT FOR WORK-READINESS AND EMPLOYABILITY IN THE AGRICULTURAL VALUE CHAIN

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Abstract

The agricultural landscape is globally being shaped by trends such as changing consumer demands, environmental pressures, changing trade relationships, new technologies and the onset of the 4th industrial revolution, amongst many others. This demands a new set of knowledge, skills and attitudes from those involved in the value chain of the agricultural sector. It is up to education institutions to assist in preparing new entrants to the sector who can effectively function within this evolving environment. A new generation of graduates, with the capabilities to engage innovatively within a changing agricultural context, need to be developed. Universities are often openly criticized for being too academic, having lost touch with practice and producing graduates who find it difficult to get employment due to a mismatch between graduate skills and industry expectations. Those who do find employment or conduct their own business also need to be flexible and adaptable in order to remain employable amidst fast-paced change.

The challenge for higher education institutions is to embrace emerging opportunities, implying a need for innovation in improving their products, processes and systems. In this context, this paper presents one such innovation to improve the education of students. The paper focuses on the incorporation of a work-integrated experiential learning (WIL) component in the Agricultural Management curriculum offered by the George Campus of the Nelson Mandela University in South Africa. A description of the WIL programme is provided, with some reference to management competencies that are increasingly being recognized as important for modern agriculture. Results of a survey amongst consecutive year groups of students are presented. The analysis deals with students’ survey responses to structured 5-point Likert-type questions, supported with narratives from open-ended questions. Preliminary findings reveal that the WIL program enhances experiential learning, contributes to professional/academic competency development in Agricultural Management and contribute to embedding the SAQA critical cross-field outcomes in teaching and learning. Overall the findings support WIL as a useful and necessary program at university level and support the inclusion thereof in an Agricultural Management qualification in order to assist in work-readiness and employability of students.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, experiential learning, agricultural management.