

# Farming initiative allows young farmers to earn as they learn

A farming education initiative in KwaZulu-Natal, Future Farmers, backed by the KZN agricultural union, Kwanalu, is providing a unique work-integrated learning programme for young farmers. This social programme aims to cultivate the skills and ignite a passion for farming in young aspiring farmers between the ages 18 and 26 years old and provides them with real job experience in a field of agriculture of their choice. Designed to give young people the opportunity to "learn as they earn", the programme finds apprentice positions on local and international farms.



Future Farmer, Njabulo Gumede at La Salle dairy, near Fresno in California, during his internship abroad. - Photo by Frank Robinson

The brainchild of Howick dairy farmer Judy Stuart, Future Farmers was founded in 2005 after she identified a two-fold void in the agricultural sector. One being that of training and experience for potential young farmers and secondly, thanks to her international travels, the demand for hard-working and passionate youngsters on international farms.

## Bringing the agricultural generation to life

Now 10 years later, with many successful placements of eager young South African farmers on farms in New Zealand, Australia, America and Denmark, Future Farmers has become a recognised role-player in the future of KZN farming. To this end, Kwanalu has secured funding for investment in the Future Farmers programme to bring to fruition a joint vision of a skilled, motivated and dedicated "agricultural generation" to life.

The programme relies on local farmers to employ these young people at apprenticeship level to teach them the skills, knowledge and experience needed in farming. They are required to work for an agreed period of time on this farm before qualifying for a second apprenticeship abroad. Stuart explains why, irrespective of education or experience, each candidate must start at ground level.

“They may have to wash the dairy, clean calf pens, sweep floors and clean windows, and although it may seem that this has nothing farming management, they are given the opportunity for dedication to farming. One day when they are a manager, they will need to be able to delegate these tasks to staff and they must be able to do these jobs and do them well. This is the way you earn respect,” she said.

The second part of the programme places these young farmers, with the necessary criteria, on international farms where they work for a period of one year, gaining further invaluable experience before returning to SA to secure employment in the agricultural sector of their choice. “Our young men and women are encouraged to bring back to South Africa all that they have learnt and to invest their time into the future of others. They are able to set an example by showing their communities what can be achieved with passion and a good work ethic,” said Stuart.

## **Taking farming to heart**

Future Farmers receives hundreds of applicants monthly from all over the province and further afield who undergo a rigorous selection process that ensures that only the most passionate, hardworking candidates with a real heart and enthusiasm for farming are selected. “We are grooming a farming generation with outstanding work ethics, morals and personal responsibility. If they are not serious about their futures, they can hardly expect others, and their future employers to be,” Stuart said.

Kwanulu has secured funding and identified the Future Farmers programme as a key partner in implementing in order to initiate, drive and support job creation and youth development in the province. “This funding will expand Future Farmers’ capacity to employ mentors and allow more young people into the programme. We are delighted to have found a way to help nurture and shape the future of agriculture in such a positive way” said CEO of Kwanalu Sandy La Marque.

## **Get involved**

La Marque stressed that what Future Farmers and the future of farming really needs are open-minded, local farmers to come forward and participate in the programme, either as mentors or as employers. “As a union it is imperative that we are at the forefront of initiatives that promote and create new opportunities in our field, but it is especially important that our members are positively and actively involved in the processes that will uplift the future of agriculture,” she said.

“It is time for farmers to open their minds to ways in which they can personally and significantly add to the development of youth. We need our members to actively participate in job creation by offering up their knowledge and time to develop the skills of our young people,” La Marque said.

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