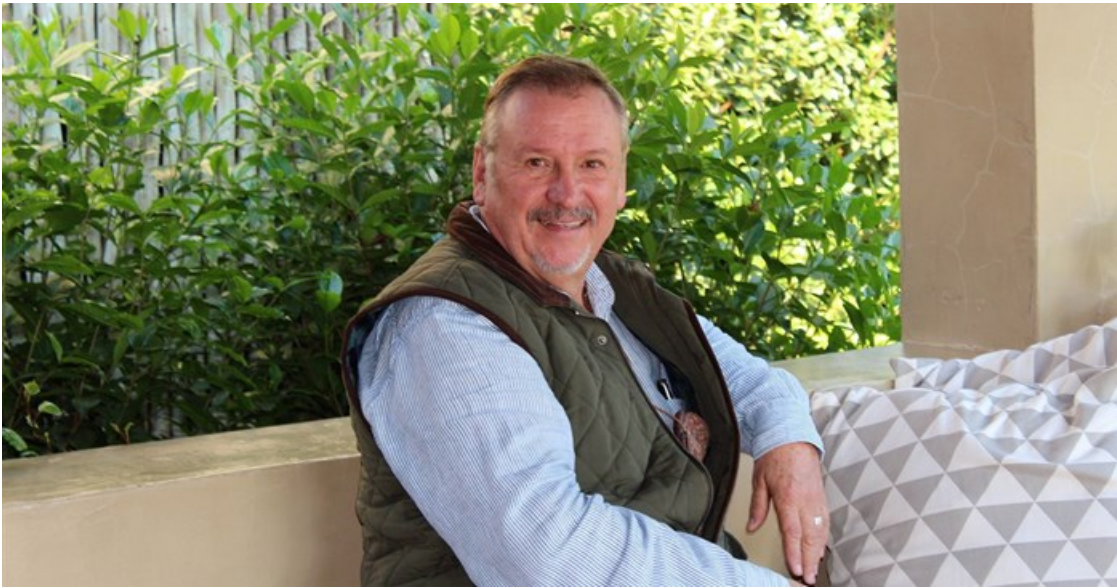


Modernised, scalable agri-education is key in training and feeding the masses

 By [Cari Coetzee](#)

30 Nov 2017

At the recent African Agri Investment Indaba hosted by the African Agri Council at the CTICC in Cape Town, founder and chairman of Agricollges International, Howard Blight chaired a pertinent topic - *Understanding the changing agriculture and soft commodities landscape in South Africa*, with Agri SA CEO, Omri van Zyl delivering the key talk, touching on the importance of agricultural transformation and investing in agri-tech and training as well as megatrends presenting opportunities for innovation.



Howard Blight

We asked Blight for some more insight on the importance of modernising agricultural education, industry transformation and the need for greater investment in these sectors.

How important is modernising agricultural education to the transformation of the industry?

Agri-education and agri-transformation go hand in glove with one another. Without the one you don't have the opportunity to upskill the very people who should be the recipients in the partnership with commercial agriculture in the process of transformation - which is the sharing of information from big commercial organisations with the small-scale farmers and emerging farmers from previously disadvantaged communities who come into the industry with little knowledge.

Agricollges International (ACI) is developing 12-week comprehensive short courses in each specific crop. In this case, adult students in our learn-as-you-earn programme will be taken through step-by-step and integrated into the knowledge field of the first four which is avocado, macadamia nuts, table grapes and citrus. We are busy extending those to all the crops which should be put on the platform by the end of next year.

It's important to modernise existing agricultural education, which is in the form of bricks-and-mortar institutions. Their diplomas and certificates in agriculture are in a state of disintegration not only from an academic perspective but in terms of cost-effectiveness - the institutions are no longer affordable but more importantly, they have no scalability beyond the number of spaces they have in the classrooms. With cloud-based education, scalability is infinite because there is no bricks and mortar. This is the modern focus on how to get coursework to the masses using laptops and tablets and more importantly smartphones, this is the way that the world is beginning to change and it's the way the world is going to become.

■ **How can the industry go about bolstering agri-education and investment therein?**

The universities that we have are producing excellently at the undergraduate, masters and PHD levels, but there's very little coming out of the colleges. ACI has a Learning Management System (LMS) which sits out on the cloud in our headquarters in Canada, Consilience Innovations is building the tool for us and we are in collaboration with Stellenbosch University from whom we are getting the coursework. An institution like ACI - with better-educated functionaries, people, students, and farmers on the ground and by its very nature offering a more efficient understanding of the agri-sciences - will be more attractive for investment.

The drought is going to be testing. At the Agri Indaba, a gentleman spoke about the skills of farming in the desert, efficient water utilisation and the transfer of knowledge in that context to South Africa because the drought situation seems to be perpetuating itself, not only in the Western Cape but elsewhere. Therefore, efficient cognitive understanding of the agri-sciences will bring investment because they will come into an environment with confidence knowing that the people have an intrinsic understanding of how to manipulate the soil to get it to grow things that people can eat.

There's also straightforward evidence that there are people on the ground that don't have sufficient knowledge on how to do some of the most basic functions on the farm and that's where the agri-education opportunity through organisations like ACI will lift the profile, not only of the people that work on the farm or students coming into the industry but the perceived integrity of farming as a career.

As Helen Zille said at the Agri Indaba, we need to be making farming sexy again and that's exactly what we're doing through the use of technology.

“ Farming is no longer about the farmer smoking his pipe on his stoep, it is a young and sexy industry - [@helenzille](#) [#agriindaba](#) [pic.twitter.com/hrF1HGJ9bZ](#)— African Agri Council (@AgriCouncil) [November 21, 2017](#) ”

■ **What are some of the key investment areas, in your opinion, for agriculture and food production?**

Basic foods need to be an area where investment is made. Due to uncertain conditions, we need to invest in irrigation, particularly that of maize and wheat. We need to invest in growing foods that will feed a growing population, in our case maize, wheat, and sorghum, And, of course, the export-orientated crops like avocados, macadamias, apples, table grapes - those are the crops that are going to be exported and bring foreign exchange into the country.

■ **Where can the industry look for such investments?**

We must look for such investments under the umbrella of good government, where there's no perceived risk that the government are going to put plans in place to take away the commercial farms. We heard the new president of Zimbabwe recently warning South Africa against the dismantlement of the commercial sector because the backbone of our industry is commercial agriculture. It brings about food security.

We need political stability and understanding, education and the availability of land, water and technology. Under good governance, farmers securing the right to farm on an ongoing basis will be a natural invitation for investors as they'll be coming into a more secure environment.

▀ ***What would you like to see more of in the years to come regarding education and technology?***

It's all very exciting because what we're going to see is the unfolding and development of massive opportunities and how education and technology can be learned. We need proper stable agricultural research to continue taking place. We need to continue researching new innovative ways to employ technology.

ACI, as an educational platform, can only do so much. I think, in time, we will get involved with organisations within the agricultural sector and through them generate the opportunity for research. Private initiatives and private institutions like ACI will continue to be the driving force which in time we know will secure a better place for all in South Africa. A better place with reasonable political dispensation, food security and social stability.

ABOUT CARI COETZEE

Cari Coetzee is a contributor to Bizcommunity Tourism, Agriculture and Lifestyle.

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