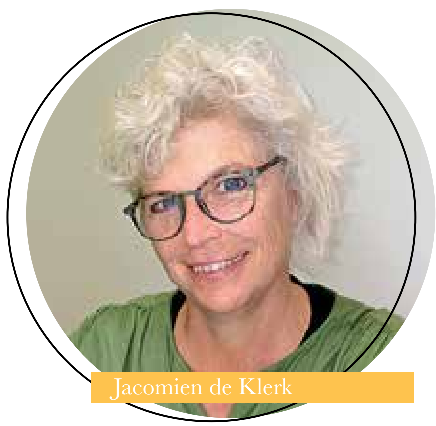
A critical time to invest in citrus knowledge and skills

The need to invest in the growth, sustainability and innovation of South African agriculture has never been more critical.

By Jacomien de Klerk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Often a focus is placed on infrastructure and production investment, e.g., in roads, rail, ports, farm-level innovation, and technological advancements. While these investments are indeed important, so is the significance of developing high-level agricultural skills and industry-specific knowledge. The truth is, without intellectual capital, there can be no sustainable growth in agriculture.

The growth potential of the South African citrus industry is immense. The industry already provides on-farm employment to over 140 000 South Africans and generates R30 billion in annual revenue. Current projections indicate that citrus exports will increase by about 60% over the next nine years, resulting in the creation of a further 100 000 jobs and an additional R20 billion in revenue.

Achieving this growth depends on several factors, from adequate logistics to expanded markets. However, an overriding necessity and a true driver of change remains knowledge. Skills, expertise, research, the ability to innovate and adapt are factors as essential to agricultural success as soil or the weather. Investment in knowledge remains a sure strategy to develop an industry. Bigger and broader support for bursaries, workplace experience and other Citrus Academy activities are vital.

Since 2006, the Academy has awarded more than 1 000 bursaries to the value of almost R33 million. There is a significant focus on formal qualifications, from diplomas, degrees, and honours degrees to PhDs. Support for postgraduate studies is particularly critical, because there is a lack of alternative funding sources in SA. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) only provides funding for first qualifications, so it is up to the Citrus Academy and CRI to fulfil the need for sector-specific postgraduate expertise.

The Citrus Academy Bursary Fund has a strong focus on advancing transformation in the industry. It gives students from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to not only study in fields relevant to citrus, but also to build careers in the industry. In fact, of those who have been supported by the Academy and have completed their studies, almost 40% are still employed in the citrus industry. The bulk of other scholarship holders are employed in other agricultural fields, government, and academia.

If we, as the South African agricultural sector, neglect to invest in knowledge, we will pay a price as steep as if we were to neglect investing in production or transport. It is the intention of the Citrus Academy to grow its Bursary Fund, despite prevailing funding pressures in the current economic climate, and due to a lack of support from funding agencies such as the AgriSETA. Just as the citrus industry needs trees, water, market access and better logistics, it also needs talent and expertise to realise its massive growth potential.

Citrus Academy Bursary Fund Applications open 1 June - 15 September

Any person studying at a registered tertiary education institution in SA, in a field related to citrus production or research, may apply for a tertiary education support bursary.

If you meet the criteria below, you may apply for a Citrus Academy bursary

- a citizen of SA, Eswatini or Zimbabwe
- studying full-time or part-time at a registered tertiary academic institution in SA
- studying in a field related to citrus production or research
- going into your second year of study, or beyond
- interested in a career in the citrus industry.

Visit www.citrusacademy.org.za and apply online. You will need to upload your ID and academic record.

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