

# Not all agriculture colleges are in a state of collapse

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It is a sunny Wednesday morning and I am visiting the Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute just outside Stellenbosch. As I approach this pristine facility, which was founded in the closing years of the 19th century as the first centre for agricultural training in Africa, I am already impressed by how well kept the campus is.

As I park I'm warmly welcomed by members of management Darryl Jacobs and Hayley Rodkin. We greet and remark on this historic institute's excellent infrastructure and maintenance. Not long after the pleasantries the conversation shifts to the state of agricultural colleges across the country.

The previous weekend the investigative journalism TV programme Carte Blanche aired an episode showcasing the deteriorating condition of SA's agricultural colleges, an indictment in a country where agriculture still occupies an important place in the economy and has a vital role to play in ensuring food security both domestically and across the continent.

Jacobs acknowledges the difficulties faced by agricultural colleges in SA, but tempers my anxiety with a positive tone. He is, like many of us engaged in the sector, frustrated by the declining quality of infrastructure and the neglect. But he is quick to emphasise that there are still hard-working and committed staff and students who are passionate about agriculture.

Jacobs would have preferred Carte Blanche to show both sides and use this moment to assess how the failing colleges could learn from the functioning ones, such as Elsenburg, and even collaborate to exchange lessons on best practices. I nod.

After our absorbing exchange at the threshold of the lecture hall we made our way to where I was to deliver my address on the state of the SA agricultural economy and policy direction. As we entered, we were greeted by a packed hall of third-year students, diverse in their race, gender and backgrounds and united by their hunger for knowledge.

There was a distinct sense of idealism beaming off their faces, which gave me hope that agriculture in SA does indeed have a future. This enthused me to walk this group of final-year students through the challenges they will be required to solve when they enter the world of work in 2023. They were fully engaged.

I left the college feeling optimistic, and at the same time burdened by the vast unevenness in the state of agriculture colleges. This is an area the government has neglected. Yet it is a vital investment in this important sector of the economy. We need to see more agriculture colleges like Elsenburg in other provinces.

The day after my visit to Stellenbosch I landed at the sunny Bloemfontein airport and made my way to Peritum Agri Institute, a private agricultural college. My Agbiz colleagues and I were to meet with agribusinesses to discuss policy matters. The infrastructure was visibly new, though Peritum Agri Institute is far smaller than the historic Elsenburg.

The similarity was in the enthusiasm of its leadership. We arrived just more than an hour before the meeting, and the administration took that opportunity to give us a mini-tour of the facility. The environment was clean and well-organised. The institute is located close to some of the country's most successful agribusinesses, which means the students get theoretical training and then have an opportunity to apply the skills.

Similar to the experience I had at Elsenburg, I left the Peritum facility hoping we can replicate this excellence far and wide in the country. But the question in my head is how one can recruit enthusiastic leadership to turn the failing colleges around, improve spending practices to help modernise infrastructure, and attract high-quality lecturers.

Failing to do this would be failing the young people of this country who are so passionate about agriculture.

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