

South Africa is failing its future

The agricultural education system is in jeopardy, with numerous colleges suffering from outdated programmes and deteriorating infrastructure.

Important stakeholders will meet this week at AgriSETA's Agri-Edu Symposium to address the urgent need for reform, writes Ivor Price.

South Africa's agricultural education system is teetering on the brink. Most of the nation's 11 agricultural colleges, once hubs of innovation and excellence, are now shadows of their former selves. They are plagued by crumbling infrastructure, outdated curricula and neglect.

The challenges in agricultural education have reached a tipping point, prompting stakeholders to convene for the Agri-Edu Symposium on Tuesday at Unisa in Pretoria. This event, hosted by the Agricultural Sector Education and Training Authority AgriSETA, aims to bring together up to 400 key players to confront the pressing issues head-on. The symposium comes at a critical moment when there is little room left to delay substantive reform.

THE NEGLECTED PILLARS OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION

Recent site visits to agricultural colleges led by AgriSeta CEO Innocent Sirovha and board chairperson Sharon Sepeng revealed a system gasping for air. This is an indictment not just of policy, but of a deeper neglect that runs to the soul of who we are as a nation. What lies beneath the reports of crumbling walls and abandoned programmes is a quiet, slow collapse, compounded by the cruel indifference of bureaucracy and the apathy of power.

Taung Agricultural College in the West is a shell of what it should be. Young minds that arrive seeking knowledge and purpose are instead met with decay. Outdated equipment stands like relics of a dream deferred. The farm, meant to be a living laboratory, struggles to function.

Students at the Taung College are being prepared for a world that no longer exists, tethered to a curriculum unable to address the complexities of modern farming. The dysfunction is not accidental. It is what happens when a system is left to fend for itself, starved of the resources it needs to thrive. The Owen Sithole Agricultural College in Empangeni, KwaZulu-Natal, fares no better. Here, the cracks are not just in the infrastructure but in the very fabric of its operations.

At least 50% of the staff positions are vacant and those who remain work under "acting" titles, symbols of impermanence and uncertainty.

Programmes such as the Recognition of Prior Learning have been outsourced out of not choice, but necessity. Meanwhile, the students watch, disillusioned, as the animals meant to teach them suffer from neglect, themselves victims of a budget so threadbare it feels more like a punishment than an allocation.

A SYMPTOM OF BROADER APATHY

At the Tompi Seleka College in Marble Hall in Limpopo, the echoes of abandonment resonate. Farming equipment, critical to teaching the mechanics of agriculture, lies unused. Students are unable to participate in the hands-on work their profession demands.

A similar story unfolds at the Tsolo Agriculture and Rural Development Institute in the Eastern Cape, where bureaucracy ensures that progress is not just slow but practically immobile. Promising leadership and modern facilities cannot overcome the inertia of delayed budgets and stalled programmes. Institutions such as the Glen College of Agriculture in Bloemfontein in the Free State and Fort Cox College near Middledrift in the Eastern Cape suffer from delayed projects, unutilised land and inconsistent funding all hallmarks of a system that has yet to grasp the urgency of its role in securing the nation's future.

THE SHADOW OF SYSTEMIC NEGLECT

These agricultural colleges were not designed to fail, but they have been allowed to deteriorate through inaction. Bureaucracy stifles progress; procurement processes drag on endlessly.

Vacancies remain unfilled. Infrastructure deteriorates not in months but in years, leaving behind a generation of students whose education is little more than a patchwork of missed opportunities.

We must confront an uncomfortable question: Is this neglect incidental, or does it reflect a deeper indifference to the importance of agricultural education? To ignore these colleges is to ignore the critical role they play in our food security, economic development and environmental stewardship. It is to ignore the farmers and agronomists who will one day feed the nation.

Yet, amid this decay, there are pockets of resilience. The Cedara College of Agriculture in Hilton in KwaZulu-Natal is crafting a narrative of innovation, threading sustainability into its programmes and building partnerships with local farmers. The Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute in Stellenbosch in the Western Cape also stands as a testament to what dedication can achieve.

Its well maintained infrastructure and global collaborations prepare students for an evolving world. With AgriSETA's support in student services and work integrated learning, the college steadily strengthens its foundation, embodying a quiet but resolute promise of excellence in agricultural education.

THE RESPONSIBILITY WE CANNOT ESCAPE

While the ultimate responsibility for addressing the decline of agricultural colleges rests with the department of higher education and training, the role of the Seta as a key player in driving change cannot be overlooked. Since Sirovha's appointment in December 2020, AgriSETA has emerged as a beacon of strong leadership and sound governance. While many SETAs falter, AgriSETA has achieved four consecutive unqualified audits, including a clean audit, and consistently delivered performance above 90%. This is not a declaration of flawlessness, but it sets a benchmark of excellence that others would do well to follow.

Agricultural education in the country is at a crossroads, a stark choice between decline and reinvention. AgriSETA's findings on the state of our agricultural colleges have laid bare the grim reality: crumbling infrastructure, outdated curricula and institutions neglected to the brink of irrelevance.

These challenges demand more than piecemeal solutions. They demand a revolution. This is not simply about saving institutions, it is about shaping the future. Agricultural colleges must become vibrant hubs of innovation, where students master the tools of modern agriculture drones, climate analytics, regenerative techniques and precision technologies. Farms must once again thrive as dynamic training grounds, preparing a new generation of agricultural leaders. The financial support system must be overhauled too. Students cannot be left at the mercy of opaque processes and unreliable aid. Accessibility and transparency are necessities for unlocking potential and nurturing ambition.

But the most profound transformation must occur in how we value agricultural education itself. These colleges are not vestiges of the past; they are the heart of rural economies and the guardians of national food security. To neglect them is to weaken the very foundation of our nation's resilience.

The ANC's resolutions at its 53rd national conference were clear: agricultural colleges must be brought under national governance, integrated into the higher education system and given the tools to thrive. Yet, these resolutions remain unfulfilled. The Agri-Edu symposium, called by AgriSETA, therefore represents more than a moment of dialogue it is a clarion call to action. We cannot continue to allow agricultural education to operate in silos. The system must be unified and strengthened to serve the next generation of farmers who will feed this nation.

This is our opportunity, perhaps our last, to act with the urgency and boldness that the moment demands. To rebuild, reimagine and reinvest in agricultural education is to secure not just the survival of these institutions but the future of South Africa itself.

The choice is clear: neglect leads to hunger and despair, but reinvention leads to hope, innovation and a thriving nation. The time to choose is now.

Price is the co-founder of Food For Mzansi and the author of For the Love of the Land.