

CURRENT TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND INFLUENCING THE CHOICE OF AGRICULTURAL STUDIES

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The number of students enrolled in agricultural courses at South Africa universities is low compared to other courses. The purpose of this study was therefore to identify factors influencing the choice of agriculture to study by undergraduate agriculture students at an Open and Distance Learning University in South Africa. An interlocked set of social, demographic, economic, technological, environmental and political change forces is bearing down on higher education'. This statement gives credence to the title of this introductory article that higher education in South Africa is facing challenges. The article gives some insight on some specific challenges currently being faced in higher education and some of the trends that are emerging. By nature, higher education teaching, learning and research is always on the cutting edge, meeting new challenges and taking knowledge development to unreached heights. The danger is that sometimes the cost of advancement does not take into consideration the scope of diversity that needs to exist in order to serve the existing multiplicity of people and functions without ending up in over-competitiveness for positions in a steeply stratified higher education system. The study also investigated the impact of the three agricultural curricula taught at school level and how well they prepared students for tertiary education. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. Open distance learning agriculture students and agriculture teachers participated in the study. A structured online questionnaire and an open-ended questionnaire were used. The study revealed that two major composite variables, namely family, friends, and career considerations, were highly significant in students' choice of agriculture at tertiary level. The impact of the agricultural curricula taught in schools in preparation for tertiary education provided learners with basic terminology and concepts related to agriculture. The study also identified challenges faced by agricultural science educators, including learners' negative attitudes towards the subject, inadequate or lack of infrastructure, and lack of proper guidance and counselling in subject choice as factors that could hinder effective teaching and learning of agriculture in South African schools. Students studying through ODL cited convenience, flexibility to study at their own pace and sufficient time for family and work as factors that influenced their decision to study through ODL. Recommendations for the improvement of the agriculture curriculum in South African schools and the encouragement of more students to enroll in agriculture as a subject of study at tertiary level after the completion of Grade 12 are discussed in detail in the study.

Keywords: agricultural curricula, assessment and evaluation, career choice, career guidance, learners' attitude towards farming, parent.