



## Impact stories

### RECRUITAGRI: PAVING THE WAY FOR YOUNG WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICAN AGRICULTURE

"I was unemployed, and most importantly I was a graduate without experience, so I was looking for a place where I could gain experience with the end goal of securing a job and that was what RecruitAgri offered."

Now, almost two years after completing the RecruitAgri programme, the 26-year-old Vuthlari Ncube is proud to hold the position as assistant nursery manager at Ezigo Seedlings in White River.

According to Ncube she knew that she wanted to pursue a career in agriculture from quite a young age. "I've always had a passion for agriculture. When I was a small girl, I loved growing vegetables in our backyard garden at home. Seeing the plants mature and finally bringing in the harvest and enjoying the fruits of our labour was always a source of great joy for me."

To ensure that she could pursue her dream she made sure to take the correct combination of subjects during her high school years to allow her to apply for and complete a BSc Agricultural degree at the University of Mpumalanga. But she soon found out that having a degree was not enough to secure employment.

"I had the theoretical knowledge, but the degree did not give me

all the practical skills I needed to be employable, and that's where RecruitAgri came in."

According to Ncube the ten-month-long, RecruitAgri programme which aims to expose graduates, who already have a diploma or degree in agriculture, to both theoretical classes and practical experience, was one of the most valuable investments she made in her personal and professional growth.

Ncube says that the team of educators and mentors at RecruitAgri played a significant role in her personal and professional development by ensuring that she, along with her classmates, were properly prepared for employment in the South African agricultural sector.

"During my ten months with RecruitAgri I had the privilege to spend time on different farms, and to work alongside a range of mentors. This gave me the exposure and opportunity to really understand the various aspects of farming and really helped me to decide what exactly it was that I wanted to do as a career in agriculture."



According to Ncube, it was not only the hard skills that she was taught and the practical experience she gained that made the journey with RecruitAgri so valuable. "It was also the wide range of soft skills which I didn't even consider I needed to master before I started the programme which helped to grow as a professional."

"Throughout the training, I was able to learn a lot of skills through RecruitAgri, particularly leadership and management skills, which grew my confidence and enabled me to manage my team at the nursery."

But it was not only the skills transfer and professional growth which she gained through her time at RecruitAgri which she is grateful for.

"There's a lot of men in the industry, and us as young black women, it's very difficult for us to get into the industry and RecruitAgri paved the way for us. So RecruitAgri really did play a significant role in putting us out there as examples of what young black women can be in South African agriculture."

An additional aspect of the RecruitAgri programme is to link successful graduates to an existing and ever-growing network of past graduates and industry partners to bolster the South African agricultural sector. This to ensure a sustainable transfer of skills and the development of latent talent among agricultural graduates with the aim of transforming the demographics of the South African agricultural landscape.

Ncube says that she is excited about this and considers herself as an ambassador for both RecruitAgri and young black women who wish to follow a career in agriculture.

"The experience I gained has served as such a solid foundation for me and prepared me to now take ownership of my career as a woman in agriculture. I would recommend RecruitAgri to any graduate, but most especially women who are willing to work hard to achieve the kind of successes I have. It truly is such a wonderful experience to be part of the RecruitAgri programme and graduate family."



## RECRUITAGRI: DRIVING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE LOCAL AGRICULTURAL SECTOR.

"I think if we look at employment equity and the demographics of the South African labour market it's clear that there are a lot of people that are finishing school and graduating from university, and they all require jobs. But they don't necessarily have the required skills to enter the labour market," says Herman Schultz, director at RecruitAgri.

According to Schultz, it was this lack of skilled labour, in specifically the Macadamia industry in the Lowveld, which prompted the creation of RecruitAgri in 2018. Due to the rapid growth of the local macadamia industry the founders of RecruitAgri (Guy More, Duncan MacGregor and Kasper van Rooyen) found themselves in a position where they were struggling to find and employ competent mid-level managers on their respective farms.

This apparent lack of suitable talent is what led them to design and implement a one-of-a-kind training model which aims to produce graduates that have a high level of managerial capacity and can add value to farming and processing operations.

To ensure that they recruit and train only the best students, applicants are selected following a rigorous sifting process which is determined by stringent entry requirements.

All applicants are required to have graduated with a degree or at least a diploma in agriculture.

In addition, RecruitAgri seeks to identify, through the sifting process, students that have a strong theoretical background, but that are unemployed and lack established networks in the larger agricultural sector.

Once approved and accepted into the programme, recruits are exposed to an intensive 10-month programme of structured practical experience in farming and processing by exposing them to a diverse range of crops and processing practices.

In addition, students are required to bolster their practical experience with theory-based coursework which is administered via online classes and followed by practical assessment.

This process, which is designed to fast-track the personal and professional development of each recruit, also emphasises management and leadership skills.

"To us it's crucial that each graduate that finishes the RecruitAgri programme enters the job market as a capable, trustworthy employee that is equipped with the necessary practical and theoretical knowledge," says Schultz.

Each intern is provided with a stipend and an accommodation allowance to ensure that they can concentrate wholly on their 10-month training programme. The financial support is provided on an obligation free basis by RecruitAgri to all interns.

For the first two years following the inception of the programme, the founders funded the programme and students out of their own pockets. "But as the programme grew and we got to a point where we had graduates on farms, and people that we could build our success story and reputation around, we approached industry bodies, like SAMAC to come on board. This as

we had a specific focus on training recruits to enter the macadamia nut industry."



According to Schultz, it was a perfect fit, "I think the alignment is there. I mean SAMAC has got very specific KPIs specifically regarding transformation and development that they have got to achieve, and what we're doing is very much aligned with what those KPIs are."

Schultz says that over and above the need to fill the ever-growing skills gap in the macadamia industry, a big driving force behind the initial establishment of RecruitAgri was to address the need for transformation in the South African agricultural sector and the local macadamia nut industry.

"We were compelled to do something to protect our industry in the long run," says Schultz about the need to drive transformation from within the industry, as opposed to waiting on the government to impose certain requirements due to a lack of action on the part of the private sector.

According to Schultz, the wider effects of not transforming the agricultural sector and specifically the local macadamia industry poses a threat not only to the amount of available human capital in the industry but also the potential for further growth and expansion of the burgeoning industry.



"In the long run there would be an impact on land reform, an impact on export, licences and the way producers and processors are able to do business locally and internationally, which ultimately would impact the industry itself and potentially limit growth."

But according to Schultz, driving transformation and getting more growers and processors on board has not always been an easy task.

"The first time we would approach a new grower, or processor with a request to get involved as a partner in our programme, we would usually be met with a certain degree of scepticism."

Partners are required to pay a certain fee for each student which they host for two of the 10-month training process. This while RecruitAgri takes on board all responsibilities regarding the management of the everyday needs of the students, including the theoretical training.

"Initially most partners are a little wary of what to do, with farm managers coming to us and saying, 'I'm not convinced this approach is going to work.' And then six months later, you have the same farmer or farm manager that comes back to you saying that they cannot believe the quality of the students that we are able to produce."

In addition to the skills training programme, RecruitAgri also actively seeks to place graduates in formal employment in the industry.

"The idea is to develop graduates that our partners and the wider industry know come from a well-managed, trusted source which in this case is RecruitAgri. We do all the work of vetting, training and moulding our graduates to the point where they are as close to a finished product, which industry partners can employ, with confidence."

Now in its sixth year of operations and having placed 70 graduates in a wider range of roles, RecruitAgri has proven both the quality of its training programme and its graduates. And judging by these successes and the feedback from their partners, it is clear that RecruitAgri is wholly committed to empowering the next generation of agricultural leaders, while playing an active role in the development and transformation of our local agricultural industry.



## RECRUITAGRI: DRIVING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSFORMATION THROUGH INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

In keeping with the mission and vision of the RecruitAgri, which is to train and develop skilled and employable South African agriculturists, the partnerships it has fostered within the industry is of crucial importance.

This to ensure an integrated approach to both practical and theoretical training, which forms the backbone of the RecruitAgri programme and sets it apart from other agricultural internship and skills development initiatives.

According to Roy Porritt, RecruitAgri lecturer and assessor, the RecruitAgri approach to skills development is unique because it has been tailor-made to furnish the needs and requirements of the local agricultural sector.

"I think it's important that the students, by the time they finish this course, have a wide range of exposure to the various problems and challenges that they might face when they are employed," says Porritt, speaking to the importance of both theoretical and practical training and the application of these skills.

"I think farmers need help, and working closely with both the students and the grower partners that offer the practical training to the students, I can confidently say that the graduates that have gone off to work on different farms and processing facilities are appreciated by the people who employ them," says Porritt, an accomplished agronomist with more than six decades worth of experience.

One such employer and RecruitAgri grower partner is Danroc, an established and large-scale macadamia producer situated in the Lowveld.

Danroc, through its established partnership with RecruitAgri, offers students an opportunity to gain valuable on-the-job, practical experience as part of the ten-month long training programme. Anthon Wessels, nursery and senior farm manager at Danroc who works closely with RecruitAgri students as a grower partner, stated the great value the RecruitAgri programme and graduates have added to his farming operations:

"Working side by side with specific individuals, allows you to groom them and prepare them for employment and I think all the different skills training opportunities that RecruitAgri students get throughout the programme plays a crucial role in preparing the graduates to easily step into junior management roles when they enter the job market."

According to Wessels, RecruitAgri has been at the forefront of creating and growing a pool of junior farm managers that stand to benefit the macadamia nut industry as well as the larger agricultural sector in the country.



"As a farm manager, I know that RecruitAgri graduates, when they enter the job market have a solid foundation in practical and theoretical knowledge and the application thereof, and due to the rigorous filtering process, I know as manager that when I employ a RecruitAgri graduate I will get the best of the best – the cream of the crop."

This is evident as Danroc currently employs three RecruitAgri graduates, and according to Wessels he looks forward to working with the next cohort of students that he will be mentoring in 2024.

Ongezwa Roto, the production manager at Mayo Macs, a Lowveld-based macadamia nut processing and marketing company says he too has seen the value which the RecruitAgri programme has brought to the local industry.

To Roto, one of the key areas of impact that the RecruitAgri programme has had, has been its ability to drive sustainable and responsible transformation in the industry.

"If you look at the demographics of the RecruitAgri students, many of them are young black women. There's a 90% chance that many of these women have never been on a farm before. They might have theoretical knowledge due to having a degree, but generally they don't have practical skills or industry networks to be competitive in the job market," says Roto.

"So, what RecruitAgri is doing, alongside us, the industry partners who spend time teaching the students practical skills as part of their 10-month training programme is to bridge a gap. Not only a gap in skills, but also a gap in who is able to enter the local agricultural sector."

Roto says he has first-hand experience of the ways in which the RecruitAgri programme has benefitted the industry and graduates.

"What RecruitAgri is doing is phenomenal, they are taking already competent people and giving them an opportunity to become the next generation of skilled and capable agricultural employees. And the results are tangible, it can be measured by the amount of people that have been placed in permanent employment. At Mayo Macs we have three RecruitAgri graduates that have joined our team."

The success of this approach is clear as RecruitAgri has been able to place most of graduates in permanent employment in the South African agricultural sector.