

The Farmers' Chronicles

BLOG

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Minister Steenhuisen Kickstarts National Dialogue to Transform Agricultural Training

As South Africa commemorates Youth Month, The Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen, kickstarted the National Dialogues to Transform Agricultural Training Institutes at Elsenburg Agricultural College in the Western Cape, on 19 June 2025. This symbolic start signals a nationwide effort to reshape agricultural education while affirming youth as being central to the sector's future. But beyond policy frameworks, this dialogue was about something much more human, listening to those who live the system daily.

The atmosphere at Elsenburg was vibrant and electric. Students and principals from agricultural colleges across the country gathered under one roof, ready to engage, question, and contribute. The students arrived not only with notebooks, but with deep concerns about joblessness, funding challenges, transport issues, and the lack of structured post-graduation support programmes.

This was not a photo opportunity; it was a genuine platform for young people to speak and be heard. "I want to farm, but I also need to eat,"

one student shared during an open discussion, a powerful expression of the balancing act many young people in agriculture face. Minister Steenhuisen responded with clarity and candour, "All of you here today are important stakeholders in the agricultural sector. Our job as a department is to create an enabling environment for all the working parts within the sector to be able to flourish and do well.

And we obviously want the agricultural sector to prosper. Why is this important? Well, it is important because anybody who looks at the last GDP figures would see that it was agriculture that prevented us from going into negative growth. It was agriculture's growth that ensured that we had some form of economic growth. Obviously, it is not nearly enough, but it was certainly growth rather than regression."

His message hit home, agriculture is not just a career option, it is a national priority. This dialogue marks the first in a series of round-table engagements bringing together students, represented by the Association of Students of



agriculture

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A NATION
THAT WORKS FOR ALL



Minister Steenhuisen



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Agricultural Training Institutes (ASATI); principals, represented by the Association of Principals of Agricultural Colleges (APAC); and government, through the Department of Agriculture (DoA). These ongoing engagements are designed to strengthen collaboration, foster open communication, and address institutional challenges early. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that agricultural education remains agile, inclusive, and responsive to the evolving needs of the sector and society.

This initiative comes at a time of significant structural transition. Agricultural colleges are in the process of being transferred from provincial departments of agriculture to the Department of Higher Education and Training, in alignment with national skills development strategies.

However, administrative functions and programme support will remain with the Department of Agriculture, ensuring sectoral alignment and continuity. This move aims to elevate these institutions to centres of excellence, enhancing their capacity to deliver high-quality, industry-relevant training. The transfer process, long discussed, has strong support from organisations like AgriSETA, the Sector Education and Training Authority for agriculture. The goal is to formally designate these institutions as colleges of higher education, a shift that could unlock greater resources, modernised infrastructure, and expanded opportunities for students and staff alike.

The Elsenburg Agricultural College, established in 1898, is the oldest institution of its kind in South Africa and holds a proud legacy of producing skilled graduates in animal science, crop production, and agribusiness. It was a fitting venue for the inaugural dialogue, not just because of its heritage, but because of its readiness to evolve.

With a blend of academic and vocational offerings, including training in livestock production, viticulture, and agri-tech, Elsenburg is well-positioned to serve as a pilot site for future-focused reform. Minister Steenhuisen emphasised that transforming agricultural training is not simply about modernising the curriculum, it is about preparing young people for opportunity and ownership in a sector vital to the country's food security, job creation, and economic resilience.

Key themes that emerged from the dialogues include the need for digital transformation and the implementation of traceability systems, which are essential for modern, transparent supply chains.

There is also a strong emphasis on biosecurity and export readiness, ensuring that South Africa's agricultural products meet international standards and remain competitive in global markets. Another focus area is climate-smart agriculture, equipping students with the knowledge and skills to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change.

In addition, the dialogues highlight the importance of enhanced youth support and entrepreneurship pathways to empower young people to actively participate in and lead within the sector. Collectively, these efforts aim to bridge the gap between education and employment, ensuring that graduates are job-ready, aligned with market demands, and equipped for the future.

This national kick-off could not have come at a more relevant time. As the country reflects on the power and potential of its youth, this dialogue signifies more than policy, it represents a commitment to action rooted in inclusion, transparency, and accountability.



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“We do not just want to study agriculture, we want to be part of shaping it,” said one student leader, summing up the sentiment in the room. With Minister Steenhuisen at the helm, the message is clear, the future of farming starts in the classroom, but it must be shaped by the voices in it, and as the minister concluded,

“Investing in students and those who are studying agriculture, I believe, is an investment in the future of South Africa.” Stakeholders and alumni are encouraged to participate in upcoming sessions, as the national dialogues will continue at agricultural colleges across the country.

-Prince Mtsweni-

