

Chair in Crop Health initiative to upskill students and qualified agriculturalists

Thanks to funding of R10.5m provided by Villa Crop Protection - one of South Africa's leading suppliers of crop protection solutions - the new year rang in with the establishment of a Chair in Crop Health at Stellenbosch University (SU). The initiative, led by Professor Nick Kotza, chair of the SU Department of Agronomy, seeks to focus on research which is driven by the needs of industry, the education and financial support of students and the provision of further skills training for employees in the agricultural sector.



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At an event signalling the signing of a three-year contract between SU and Villa Crop Protection, Professor Eugene Cloete, SU Vice-Rector: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies, said that such industry support helps to create an environment of hope and excellence for students and for South Africa alike.

"Such private sector support helps to ensure that our university does research that is relevant, and in turn helps to strengthen industry," he added.

"This is a major collaborative effort, and will see the integration of industry needs, industry partners and industry grower bodies with the work that our researchers and postgraduate students do," adds Kotze.

Key functions earmarked for this agreement include:

- Identifying and prioritising specific farm level grower research needs, and addressing it through targeted scientific research done by postgraduate students and their academic supervisors;
- The provision of relevant postgraduate bursaries to the tune of R1 million per year, to support the training of future agriculturalists who are equipped with the necessary knowledge tools needed by the local agricultural sector; and
- The roll-out of accredited short courses by Stellenbosch University to expand the skill levels of agriculturalists already working in the local industry.

"The education leg of this endeavour strives not only to augment formal qualifications, but also to ensure continuous training options for agriculturalists and others already working in the local industry," says Dr Andre Schreuder, on behalf of Villa Crop Protection.

The envisaged accredited short courses to be presented through the Chair in Crop Health will build on short courses, certificate and diploma courses previously developed by the Villa Academy. Lecturers from Stellenbosch University will be supported by others previously contracted by Villa Academy, as well as international colleagues from leading universities overseas.

Kotze hopes to be able to facilitate the set up a Crop Protection Diagnostics hub in the near future, which will see the pool of resources by plant pathologists, entomologists, virologists, and weed experts in the SU Faculty of AgriSciences and beyond.

The initiative will be supported by an advisory board.

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