



AGRICOLLEGES

International Cultivates New Crop of South African Farmers with D2L's Brightspace Platform

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Founded in 2015 by long-term colleagues and lifelong farmers Howard Blight and Wynand Espach, AGRICOLLEGES International's mission is to offer affordable hope and opportunity to students in South Africa, Africa and across the globe through cloud-based and shared e-learning of agricultural content that promotes the principles of sustainable production to further food security around the world.

AT A GLANCE

Client: AGRICOLLEGES International
Industry: Higher Education—
Agriculture Studies
Interviewee: Wynand Espach, Chief
Operating Office, Educational
Technologist and Founder

Challenge:

- To tackle the challenges prevalent in traditional brick-and-mortar agricultural colleges: poor infrastructure, lack of funding and limited scalability
- To keep costs low enough to make enrolment for students from poorer backgrounds affordable
- To provide easy access and remote cloud-based learning
- Computer literacy is relatively low amongst the student-base, AGRICOLLEGES International required a platform that was simple and easy to use

Solution:

- D2L's Brightspace platform provided intuitive, mobile-friendly learning platform that supports rich content
- Key elements of the course are performed remotely, as theory is complemented by a two week on-site practical

The Challenge

In 2015, Blight was invited to the World Avocado Congress in Peru to present Espach and his work in establishing successful avocado farms in Mozambique, a venture that employed around 350 people and took a whole Mozambican village out of absolute poverty. It was during this trip, whilst chatting with other farmers from across the globe, that they were inspired to start their own agricultural college.

However, upon their return to South Africa, it quickly dawned on them that their new venture would have to take a very different form to traditional bricks and mortar agricultural colleges in South Africa.

The traditional government-funded agricultural college system, is in disarray. “There is not enough funding and lecturers, and the facilities and buildings are not being maintained. If we followed the same model as these colleges we would come up against similar problems that agricultural colleges are facing across the world” said Espach.

In South Africa, many of the problems faced by traditional agricultural colleges, were the result of poor infrastructure. Agricultural colleges could not expand past a certain size, due to limits in availability of electricity, water supplies and the capital cost of investing in bricks and mortar.

The question they faced, was how to keep fees low enough to make enrolment for students from poorer backgrounds possible, yet still have the money to maintain facilities and expand over time without hitting the limits imposed by a lack of infrastructure.

The answer was something rarely attempted in agricultural education—cloud-based online learning.

AGRICOLLEGES International was born!

WHY D2L?

Espach and Blight had no experience with online learning platforms of any kind, so they began investigating several education technology providers.

“We were not happy with what we could do with the various platforms we had spoken to thus far. We felt we needed a platform that could facilitate the practical elements we envisioned (it being agri-based) and a company willing to work with us to develop those practical elements. A friend knew that we had not spoken to D2L yet and said we should not make any decisions without first doing so. That is how the introduction to D2L was made,” said Espach.

D2L had recently partnered with Visions Consulting in South Africa to extend its services into Africa, so the timing was perfect.

“When it comes to the **implementation**, D2L was brilliant. We would never have achieved our **goals** to that point as quickly, without their help. Whenever we had a problem, it would be **resolved** within 24 hours. I cannot say enough about how grateful we are to their team.”

Wynand Espach, Chief Operating Officer, AGRICOLLEGES

What attracted Espach and Blight to D2L was the ease of use. The pair felt that the other solutions they had enquired about were too complicated for the African environment and the market place that AGRICOLLEGES International was going to cater to. With computer literacy so low amongst the student-base, this ease of use was essential.

For the demographic that Blight and Espach were targeting, only 5 percent have access to a laptop or PC, whilst 70 percent have access to a smartphone, so the Brightspace platform's mobile functionality, was also key to fulfilling Espach and Blight's vision for AGRICOLLEGES International.

When it came to implementation of the Brightspace platform, Espach explains the important role that D2L played in helping them get up and running:

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THE COURSES

AGRICOLLEGES International now runs eight courses on the Brightspace platform, which are split into short courses and one year certificates.

The first one year course AGRICOLLEGES International has deployed is the National Certificate in General Agriculture, which launched in April 2018. It is comprised of six modules consisting of either six or eight units.

In order to overcome the infrastructure and funding limitations that have dogged traditional agricultural colleges, key practical elements of the course are performed remotely.

"Students are given the theory and a task on the platform, like taking a soil sample. They then have to perform the task within the area around them. This can be in their own back garden. They do not need to go to a farm or a practical destination. They then record a video or take photos of the steps they took in performing the task which they upload to Brightspace. This is called a Remote Practical," explained Espach.





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This remote practical is complemented by a two-week on-site practical, in which students travel to one of AGRICOLLEGES International’s practical destinations to learn a number of skills, such as servicing farming machinery, working with animals and visiting nurseries. They see everything they have learned in theory, translated into practice.

The short courses offered by AGRICOLLEGES International are split into three different bands: introductory, fundamentals, and applications.

The introductory courses cover the basics of agribusiness, animal production, and crop production. Fundamentals courses are crop or product-specific, such as dairy production or avocado farming. Applications is the practical element, where students attend a farm for a week-long practical course.

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to submit and when. This has been life-changing for agricultural education in South Africa” said Espach.

“Even the accreditation body AgriSETA, when they came for the first inspection of our facility, said ‘but you can never teach agriculture online’. When we showed them a demo of how using ePortfolios we can make a video clip and submit it on the platform, and in seconds the two are matched, they could not believe the functionality. They had never seen anything like it,” Espach continued.

THE RESULTS

When AGRICOLLEGES International rolled out their first short course in 2018, they ran into issues common with engaging students through online learning.

“To begin with there were challenges. At first, we did not really have anything to cover engagement metrics. We saw students log in and read materials, but very quickly disappear for a week or two. We realised that this had to change and we would have to engage them all the time,” explained Espach.



Now, all of the students are linked to a course consultant online who speaks with them daily. This has proved to be a lot of work for these consultants, and very recently D2L has helped AGRICOLLEGES International deploy intelligent agents to automate many of the student engagement tasks.

These intelligent agents are automated emails that seemingly come from the course consultant, reminding students of upcoming deadlines. It saves course consultants a great deal of time and allows them to focus on helping students who are struggling.

AGRICOLLEGES International also increased engagement by using Brightspace's discussion forums and rolling these into the course grading criteria. Course consultants raise 10 topics online throughout the course, and students are graded on their participation.

Over their inaugural year in 2018, AGRICOLLEGES International had more than 300 students logging into the platform, with 140 of these students having completed their courses to date. "What we are achieving here is important because every year in Africa there are 50 million school leavers and only 5 million university or college places. That is 45 million people who cannot get tertiary education. As we expand we are hoping to provide even more people with the skills needed to thrive in the farming industry," continued Espach.

THE FUTURE

AGRICOLLEGES International is currently in the process of being officially accredited as a higher education institute and is hopeful to become accredited in the coming months.

"With our current accreditation we offer NQF4 courses, which is equivalent to a school leaver qualification. We have a database of 18,000 students looking to study an NQF5 course in agriculture, which we will be able to provide once the government approves it and we become accredited. It is very important for our expansion plans that we become accredited," said Espach. The first NQF 5 course has been completed and awaits accreditation soon.

To further extend the philanthropic elements of their work, Blight and Espach are working with the Universities in Gauteng to teach residents in Soweto to plant vegetable gardens so that these communities might become more self-sufficient. They have also established a non-profit company called Educate To Grow NPC. This company is independent and is the channel through which funds flow for the thousands of students that cannot afford further education. All funds are controlled and audited by independent directors and 100% of the funds are used for students.



GOING GLOBAL

The courses however, are not only limited to engaging students within South Africa. Students from 16 different countries have completed AGRICOLLEGES International short courses so far.

Blight and Espach are also working on creating partnerships outside of the African continent, with India as one of the first targets.

AGRICOLLEGES International now offers hope to the millions of young people who have and will continue to complete their matric (Grade 12) between the ages of 17 and 21. For students far from city universities or colleges, the AGRICOLLEGES International platform offers study opportunities at a quarter of the price of the standard institutions that can be accessed anywhere and anytime.

“It is **amazing** how far we have come in just a few years. We were just farmers who knew nothing about educational **technology**, but now we are **teaching** farming, not only to students across South Africa, but across Africa. We are using Brightspace to provide valuable **life-skills** and give people a better chance in life. It has been a very exciting few years for us.”

Wynand Espach, Chief Operating Officer, AGRICOLLEGES