

# Horticulture grows its own

Industry advancement depends on a constant inflow of skilled and knowledgeable people. Thanks to the efforts of the PMA Foundation for Industry Talent, the fresh produce sector's talent pipeline is growing.



To achieve its goals, the PMA hosted career fairs at Stellenbosch University and the University of Pretoria, to link prospective students to companies and organisations in the industry.

**OVER RECENT YEARS**, the inflow of qualified people entering the South African fresh produce industry has slowed significantly. Leaders in the industry and at South African universities have noticed a marked decline in the number of BSc students specialising in the fields of horticulture and agriculture. The result was fewer trained people in these fields and the amalgamation of university departments to ensure survival in the current economic climate. It was clear that the shortage of horticulture and post-harvest technology professionals was putting the country's economically important



agriculture and export industries at risk. Small wonder then, that the fresh produce industry identified human capital development as its main priority. The PMA is an important partner in this quest.

#### WHO IS THE PMA?

The Produce Marketing Association (PMA) is a global trade association based in the USA. One of its prime tasks is to connect people across the international fruit and vegetable supply chain to network and share knowledge. It also creates marketing opportunities and facilitates opportunities for businesses the world over. Through its affiliate, the PMA Foundation for Industry Talent, the PMA supports industry-specific skills development.

The PMA became involved in South Africa in 2010, when Marianne van der Laarse was appointed PMA Country Representative. A country council, consisting of prominent business leaders and industry role-players, namely fruit and vegetable producers, marketers and retailers, was established to direct PMA activities in South Africa.

According to Ms Van der Laarse, the local branch of the PMA Foundation has three focus areas. The first is to address declining student numbers in the fields of horticulture, agronomy, soil science, plant pathology and entomology at universities. The second is capacity-building for students, teachers and lecturers in the post-harvest field of study. Finally, the PMA facilitates industry discussions on bursaries, internships and workplace experience programmes in the fresh produce industry. A future goal is to make more bursaries and internships available.

#### PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION

To achieve its goals, the PMA hosted career fairs at Stellenbosch University and the University of Pretoria

during the past two years, to link prospective students with companies and organisations in the industry. "We have seen a remarkable increase in student numbers in agricultural sciences as a direct result of these fairs," says Ms Van der Laarse. "The next step is to encourage students to specialise in post-harvest disciplines."

The PMA Foundation found that short courses in post-harvest technology at the two universities play an important role in building capacity among lecturers, pre- and post-graduate students and private companies. To make the most of this resource, lecturers and post-graduate students from previously disadvantaged universities were invited to participate in a three-month post-harvest study visit to a hosting university. One of the lecturers, for example, visited the Stellenbosch University Food Science Department, while two students attended the Stellenbosch University Post-harvest Short Course in June 2013.

The PMA also presented industry-specific workshops. On 13 August 2013, about 40 people attended a workshop on industry internships. On 20 and 21 August 2013, a post-harvest technology workshop was held at the University of Pretoria to explore fresh produce and food safety, post-harvest technology and fresh produce packaging technology. Presented by local and international specialists, the workshop sessions have contributed to an increased focus on post-harvest technology and stimulated students' interest in the field. "The first post-harvest technology workshop took place in 2012," says Ms Van der Laarse, "and since then there has been a significant increase in the participation of students, lecturers and private sector companies in these events. Our workshops are important and effective vehicles of capacity-building in the post-harvest fields of academic study."

Communication with the South African fresh produce industry is a further priority for the PMA



**PROJECT TITLE**  
Building post-harvest capacity in the supply chain

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**  
Marianne van der Laarse

**CONTACT DETAILS**  
+27 82 388 1000  
mvanderlaarse@pma.com  
Skype: agrijob

**DURATION**  
Two years

**PHI-2 CONTRIBUTION**  
R600 000

**LEAD INSTITUTION**  
PMA Foundation for Industry Talent

**BENEFICIARY**  
The entire fresh fruit industry

**FOCUS AREA**  
Human capital development

**PRESENTATIONS AND PAPERS DELIVERED**  
Three



- 1 Marianne van der Laarse.
- 2 Students and staff members at Potatoes SA's stand at the University of Pretoria Career Fair, which included a potato field!

“With the initiatives that have been launched during the past two years, we have raised awareness of how ‘alive with possibility’ the agricultural industry is with careers for young people.”

Marianne van der Laarse

Foundation presented the results of an initiative funded by the Post-Harvest Innovation (PHI) Programme, which examined current employment trends in the South African agricultural sector. The study also identified the skills and training needed to address gaps in the fresh produce supply chain.

In the course of the past two years, the PMA Foundation has been consulting with the South African fresh produce industry to determine the current status of bursaries and internship programmes. “Our aim was to determine the available bursaries, how companies view internship programmes and which companies offer these programmes,” says Ms Van der Laarse. “One of our aims is to create an easily accessible database of all the available bursaries.”

The industry internships workshop, held on 13 August 2013, provided valuable insights on how the industry can increase the number of bursaries, internships and work experience opportunities available

to students. Recent research has shown that these experiences influence the jobs students choose after they have completed their studies.

**FRUITS OF THE PMA'S EFFORTS**

The work done by the PMA Foundation and its affiliate in South Africa, has increased the awareness of human capital development issues in the agricultural industry since 2011. Exposure in the media (agricultural as well as mainstream media) has contributed to an understanding of the young, professional talent required in the agricultural field.

Companies and organisations have indicated that the career fairs have resulted in better bursary candidate recruitment. They were also finding it easier to identify bursary and internship candidates and potential employees.

There has been an increase in student enrolment numbers in the ‘scarce fields’ of study at the University



of Pretoria and Stellenbosch University. Importantly, the career fairs and information sessions have opened teachers’ eyes to agriculture as a career option for learners.

The work done by the PMA Foundation in South Africa has established a successful platform for industry discussions on topics related to human capital development in the local fresh produce industry, and will continue to do so.

**WHAT STILL NEEDS TO BE DONE**

The initiatives and projects that were launched at the universities of Pretoria and Stellenbosch have drawn

positive responses from the industry, the participating universities, students and school learners. These initiatives need to be extended to other tertiary training institutions, including previously disadvantaged universities. Schools programmes must also be expanded to reach school children before they make career choices. This is not a short-term approach, and will require substantial investment from industry, government and tertiary training institutions to help attract young people to the agricultural sector. In addition to attracting talent, comprehensive resources will be required to train, develop and retain young people for the industry.



1-2 Curious students gather at the Dutoit Group stand, while staff members from Westfalia share their enthusiasm for careers in agriculture at the career fair, held at Stellenbosch University.  
3 Delegates and speakers at the successful Post-Harvest Workshop, held at the University of Pretoria in August 2013.  
4-5 The career fairs provide opportunity for students, lecturers and industry representatives to network, and to learn more about each other’s worlds.  
6 Cheerful students enjoy apples and tomatoes at the University of Pretoria Career Fair.