

Embedding entrepreneurship in agribusiness teaching in African Universities to enhance competitiveness of the agribusiness sector

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Abstract

In recent times, there has been changes taking place in agriculture requiring smallholder farmers to shift their focus from subsistence farming to commercialisation. This can be enhanced by connecting agricultural education and research to the needs of the farmers and food industry. An integrated approach, collaborating the efforts of universities, research institutions and the industry should be adopted for this vision of agriculture to be achieved. Universities should be at the centre of this change but agricultural science graduates are often criticised for lack of creativity to deal with emerging challenges in the farmers' situation. Thus, the need for reforms in university teaching to equip students with the necessary skills for problem solving. From a review of literature, the paper proposes re-orienting agribusiness teaching in universities towards entrepreneurship in order to improve on the quality of agricultural science graduates so as to catalyze development and social transformation.

Key words: Collaboration, higher education institutions, integrated approach

Résumé

Ces derniers temps, il y a eu des changements qui ont lieu dans l'agriculture demandant aux petits agriculteurs de réorienter leurs activités de l'agriculture de subsistance vers la commercialisation. Ceci peut être amélioré en connectant l'enseignement agricole et la recherche pour les besoins des agriculteurs et de l'industrie alimentaire. Une approche intégrée, en collaborant les efforts des universités, des institutions de recherche et l'industrie devrait être adoptée pour que cette vision de l'agriculture soit atteinte. Les universités devraient être au centre de ce changement, mais les diplômés en sciences agricoles sont souvent critiqués pour leurs manques de créativité pour faire face aux défis émergents dans la situation des agriculteurs. Ainsi, la nécessité de réformes dans l'enseignement universitaire à donner aux étudiants les compétences nécessaires pour la résolution de problèmes se fait

sentir. D'après une revue de la littérature, le document propose de réorienter l'enseignement de l'agro-industrie dans les universités vers l'entrepreneuriat afin d'améliorer la qualité des diplômés en sciences agricoles de manière à stimuler le développement et la transformation sociale.

Mots clés: collaboration, les institutions d'enseignement supérieur, l'approche intégrée

Introduction

The vast majority of the world's poor live in rural areas with their source of employment and livelihood stemming from agricultural activities. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 60% of the economically active population works in the agricultural sector (WDI, 2006) and the sector still holds the key to reducing poverty and increasing the security of livelihoods (Collette and Gale, 2009). Consequently, many developing countries' governments and development partners have emphasized the importance of agricultural productivity and competitiveness in achieving the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (Larsen *et al.*, 2009).

As much as this is the case, agricultural productivity has been decreasing in recent times due to several challenges including effects of climate change, poor access to markets and limited entrepreneurial skills for value addition. The trends in global agribusiness are changing at a rapid pace and the traditional practices in agriculture seem obsolete today. Agricultural sector is now more concerned with delivering customer value and diversification rather than increasing the quantity of production only. Currently, there is a changing landscape in agriculture in the so-called new agriculture where private entrepreneurs, including many smallholders, are linking producers to consumers and are finding new markets for agricultural commodities. It has been said that embracing market oriented agriculture may help reduce poverty among smallholders in the world (Larsen *et al.*, 2009). The changing face of agriculture requires smallholder farmers to shift their focus from subsistence farming to commercialization of agriculture. For farmers to be able to run their farms as a business venture requires special skills and competencies to adapt their farming systems, diversify their production and respond to changes in the agricultural environment. This requires a shift from emphasis on provision of technical agricultural production knowledge only to understanding of functioning of markets and how markets can work for the poor as well as linking different stakeholders along the value chain.

To be able to meet the challenges of the 21st century, there is need to change the mindset of the farmers from production to value addition to enable agro enterprise development hence creating more wealth for the rural households as proposed by the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) which advocated for an economic growth rate of at least 6% per annum. The program states that larger investments in agricultural research, extension and education systems are required to achieve the targeted increase in agricultural output. In March 2005, the Commission for Africa argued that greater attention should be paid to the economic growth agenda in Africa and recommended higher investments in human capacities linked to agriculture, science and technology, and in tertiary education.

Smallholder agricultural commercialization may be enhanced meaningfully by connecting agricultural education and research more closely to the needs of the farmers and food industry. However, the role of agricultural education and training in fostering agribusiness growth in developing countries is relatively underexplored. An integrated approach, collaborating the efforts of universities, research institutions and the industry should be adopted. This vision of agriculture calls for rethinking the roles of producers, the private sector and training institutions. In the absence of agricultural students with entrepreneurship skills, it becomes a little difficult to yield results from this sector.

Universities are at the centre of this change. However, the major criticism is that university training in agricultural sciences has remained focused on theoretical subject matter yet the market demands more integrated skills and entrepreneurial abilities. Hence, agricultural science graduates are often criticized for lack of creativity to deal with emerging challenges in the farmers' situation. The need for reforms in the university teaching is eminent to equip students with the necessary skills for problem solving. However, this is further limited by lack of facilities in the universities to facilitate entrepreneurship training in agriculture as well as lack of institutional acknowledgement of the importance of entrepreneurship skills. Specific resident capacities (knowledge, skills mix and attitudes) are required of agricultural research for rural development. Therefore, there is need to reorient agribusiness teaching in universities towards entrepreneurship. If embraced, the effect on quality of agribusiness graduates would be immense, catalyzing development and social transformation.

Mabaya *et al.* (2010) contend that while significant progress has been made in integrating agribusiness management into university curricula, the current offerings are far from comprehensive. Moreover, entrepreneurship education is not yet mainstreamed throughout the curriculum of agribusiness training in higher education institutions.

Current model of Agribusiness training in Higher Education Institutions. The current approach to agribusiness capacity building points out to the mix of the basic agricultural science courses and the business management courses as indicated in Figure 1. As much as this has led to the development of the agribusiness discipline, it needs to be taken a notch further. This maybe realized through mainstreaming the entrepreneurship discipline and culture in the agribusiness training as well as training of the other agri-based courses. Universities should thus evolve processes that genuinely 'unleash entrepreneurship' skills through appropriate education.

Developing new approaches to agribusiness education require a focus on role modeling and experiential learning. This can be enhanced through embracing the concept of *Integrated Entrepreneurship Education* (IEE) (Kaijage and Wheeler, 2013). This concept involves teaching of knowledge and skills that enable individual students to plan, start and run their own businesses in the formal or informal sector. Since entrepreneurship is embedded in relationships that people maintain within social networks, agribusiness training needs to adopt this phenomenon. This can be realized by helping students to create value by organising themselves and supporting each other within social networks where learning can occur alongside existing networks with other business linkages taking place simultaneously (Kaijage and Wheeler, 2013).

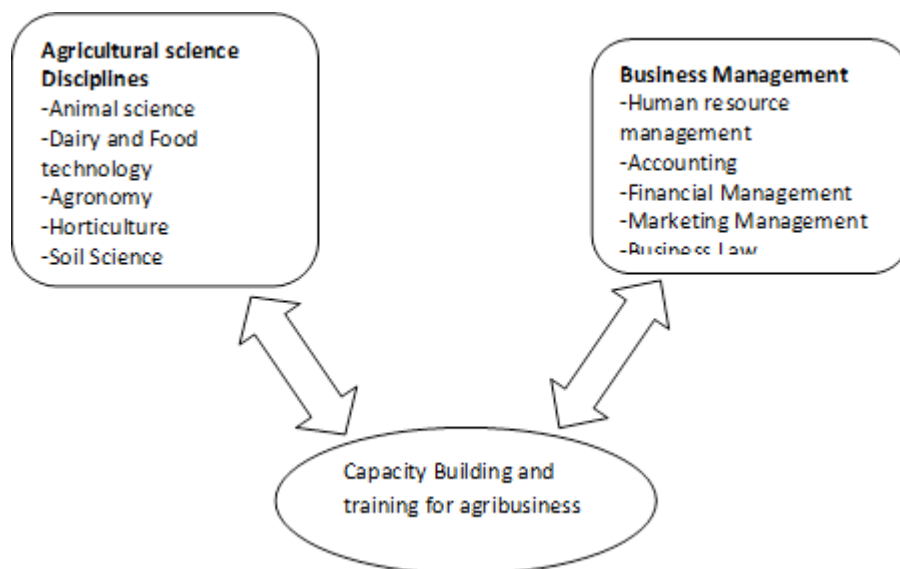


Figure 1. Current approach for University Capacity building in agribusiness (Adapted from Mabaya *et al.*, 2010).

Conclusion

Realizing the vision of embedding entrepreneurship into agribusiness training will go a long way in tackling the complex challenges such as the transformation of subsistence agriculture into productive agribusiness. However, this requires the involvement of different stakeholders such as governments, development partners, business and research institutions so as leverage their core competencies, share knowledge and harmonize efforts.

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