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the way to prosperity

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NATIONAL LIST OF OCCUPATIONS IN HIGH DEMAND: WHAT IT MEANS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN AGRICULTURE

South African agriculture is evolving, with changing production needs, shifting labour-market demands and growing pressure to ensure that the right skills are available across the sector. Against this backdrop, an important question arises: does the country's official list of occupations in high demand adequately reflect the skills needed across the agricultural value chain?

The Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) National List of Occupations in High Demand is an important starting point. It helps guide education and training, informs career planning and highlights occupations for which labour-market demand is expected to continue. Yet, for agriculture, an important question remains: does the list capture the full range of skills the sector needs?

Behind the list: How does an occupation make the cut?

DHET does not simply ask employers which skills are difficult to find and add them to a list. The process combines labour-market evidence with employer expectations to identify occupations showing signs of demand.

The list is updated every two years. The latest edition was gazetted on 16 April 2024 and identifies 350 occupations. The next edition would fall due in 2026, although the department has not yet announced a publication date. The 2024 list and its technical report are available on the South African Government website.

To develop the 2024 list, the department assessed occupations classified under the Organising Framework for Occupations (OFO). It drew on information from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Labour Market Dynamics in South Africa and online recruitment platforms, including PNet and Career Junction.

Each occupation was assessed against ten indicators across three areas:

- **Employment:** Is employment growing? Are average weekly hours and employment duration changing?
- **Wages:** Are mean and median wages increasing, including wage growth after accounting for relevant factors?
- **Vacancies:** How many vacancies are advertised, how quickly are they growing, and how often are vacancies renewed?

Employers were also surveyed about the occupations they expected to recruit for over the following three years. They rated their recruitment expectations on a four-point scale, ranging from possible to definite. The department combined these responses with the labour-market data, prepared a preliminary list, undertook further consultation and published the final selection.

The result? The 350 occupations selected represented roughly a quarter of those assessed. Being included is therefore about meeting an evidence threshold, not simply being identified by employers as difficult to recruit for. But there is a catch. Labour-market statistics and online recruitment platforms do not capture every occupation or recruitment channel equally. This is particularly relevant in agriculture, where recruitment may be seasonal, geographically dispersed or managed through informal and industry networks.

A list of occupations in demand is not a list of everything agriculture needs

Before looking at agriculture's representation, it is worth understanding what the list is designed to do and what it cannot do. The National List of Occupations in High Demand helps education and training institutions plan programmes, guides qualification development, supports the allocation of skills-development resources, informs skills planning and assists learners and jobseekers with career choices. Its value lies in connecting labour-market evidence to education and training. However, it should not be mistaken for a comprehensive register of every occupation that matters to an industry.

- **It is not a work-visa list.** Eligibility for work visas is governed by the separate Critical Skills List. Appearing on the National List of Occupations in High Demand does not, by itself, qualify someone for a work visa.
- **Absence does not mean an occupation is unimportant.** An occupation may be missing because it did not meet the evidence threshold or because demand was not adequately reflected in the available data. Its absence does not, on its own, prove that there is no shortage.
- **It does not determine hiring requirements.** The qualifications and experience required for a position depend on the job and any applicable professional or legal requirements.
- **Some recruitment patterns may be harder to capture.** Seasonal employment and recruitment through industry networks may be under-represented in the available data.

These distinctions matter in agriculture, where skills requirements vary considerably by commodity, region, production system, season and level of technology.

Agriculture on the list: Who is represented and who is missing?

The 2024 list includes 13 occupations relevant to agriculture and food production. These include agricultural scientists, consultants, engineers, veterinarians and farm managers. That is an important recognition of several specialised occupations across the agricultural and food value chains. However, some occupations of interest to agricultural employers do not appear under their specific titles. These include agronomists, horticulturists, viticulturists, animal health technicians and sheep shearers. Crop and livestock farm workers and forestry occupations are also not represented under those titles in the list.

Does that automatically mean these occupations are in short supply? No. Related roles may be captured under other occupational classifications, and absence from the list is not proof of a shortage. Nevertheless, their absence raises a legitimate question: does the methodology adequately capture the diversity of agricultural skills needs?

Agriculture is not a single, uniform workplace. The skills required in a vineyard may differ from those needed on a grain farm, in livestock production, in forestry or in a technologically advanced agricultural enterprise. Recruitment patterns also differ by location and production cycle. A list

intended to guide national skills planning needs to account for these differences as effectively as the available evidence allows.

More jobs do not automatically mean a skills shortage

The DHET's technical report provides useful context. It shows that agricultural employment was higher in 2023 than in 2019, while employment in skilled agricultural occupations continued to increase after 2022.

These trends matter, but they do not tell the whole story. Growing employment does not, by itself, establish that employers cannot find suitably qualified workers. The more important question is whether the available workforce has the qualifications, practical experience and technical capabilities that employers require. This becomes increasingly relevant as agricultural businesses adopt new technologies and production methods, while continuing to depend on a range of specialised, practical and seasonal skills.

The National List should therefore be considered alongside employers' recruitment experiences and other credible industry evidence. Labour-market statistics provide an important foundation, but they need to be interpreted in the context of how agriculture operates.

The next review is an opportunity for agriculture to speak up

The next edition will present an opportunity for the agricultural sector to research that will be evidence base. When the DHET consults employers, agricultural businesses should provide specific information about their recruitment needs, persistent skills gaps, regional and seasonal demand, changing technology requirements and shortcomings in existing training.

Industry bodies can play an important role by consolidating employer feedback, identifying occupations that may be incorrectly classified and presenting evidence that reflects the diversity of the agricultural value chain. The stronger and more representative the evidence, the better positioned the department and training institutions will be to understand where skills-development efforts need greater attention. This is not about ensuring that every occupation automatically appears on the list. It is about ensuring that agriculture's skills need is properly understood and assessed against credible evidence.

The bottom line: Better skills planning starts with better evidence

The National List of Occupations in High Demand provides an important link between labour-market demand and South Africa's education and training system. However, it is not a complete picture of every skill required across agriculture. Its usefulness depends on the quality of the data, the methodology used and the extent to which employers participate in the process.

For agriculture, the priority is clear: the next consultation must reflect the sector's diversity, from specialised professionals to practical and seasonal occupations. Agbiz will engage the department when the process starts. Stronger employer evidence will help align skills development with the needs of a changing sector, so that the skills pipeline reflects the realities of the people who produce, process and move South Africa's food and fibre

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