



**Advice to the Minister of Higher Education and
Training on the Status and Location of Public
Colleges**

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**1 Quintin Brand Street, Persequor Technopark 0184; PO Box 94, Persequor Park, 0020,
South Africa
Telephone +27 12 349 3936; Fax +27 12 349 3827**

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In its comment on the Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training the Council indicated that “if the Green Paper’s vision for a single, coherent, differentiated and highly articulated post-school education and training system is to be realised all the existing colleges such as nursing and agricultural colleges must be integrated into the post-school education and training system and brought under the ambit of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). These colleges play a critical role in providing occupational and vocational qualifications and their continued fragmentation is unacceptable, especially as the quality of provision in many of these colleges is weak, as the Green Paper indicates.”
- 1.2 The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) undertook a re-accreditation of the higher education programmes offered by Agricultural Colleges in March 2012 at the request of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The re-accreditation process was a follow-up of the quality assurance of higher education programmes offered by Agricultural Colleges, which was undertaken by the HEQC in 2004/05 at the request of the then Department of Agriculture.
- 1.3 The findings of the re-accreditation process, which are outlined below, indicate that the quality of provision is adversely affected by the lack of clarity on the status and location of agricultural colleges. It is in the light of these findings that the Council has taken the initiative to provide advice to the Minister of Higher Education and Training with regard to the status and location of public colleges.

2. Re-Accreditation of Higher Education Programmes offered by Agricultural Colleges

2.1 Process

- 2.1.1 The re-accreditation process involved two steps, (i) the evaluation of the higher education programmes offered by Agricultural Colleges that conformed to one of the qualification types on the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) via the HEQC-online system; (ii) site visits to all Agricultural Colleges in March 2012 to verify that the infrastructure and facilities to offer higher education programmes were of an acceptable standard as articulated in the HEQC’s Criteria for Programme Accreditation. The following Agricultural Colleges were visited:

- Cedara College of Agriculture.
- Elsenburg College of Agriculture.
- Fort Cox College of Agriculture.
- Glen College of Agriculture.
- Grootfontein College of Agriculture.

- Lowveld College of Agriculture (including the Marapyane Campus).
- Owen Sithole College of Agriculture.
- Potchefstroom College of Agriculture.
- Taung College of Agriculture
- Tsolo College of Agriculture.

2.1.2 The site visits, which were undertaken by panels comprising of three academic peers, focused on, but were not limited to, the following:

- Programme design.
- Assessment policies and practices.
- Staffing.
- Infrastructure and library facilities.
- Administrative systems and support services.

2.1.3 During the site visits, the panels reviewed a range of documents which included, amongst others, learning and teaching materials, enrolment statistics, staff statistics and CVs, budgets, library holdings, policies (such as those on employment equity and health and safety), minutes of meetings held within the institution, samples of student work and assessments, student evaluations of modules, examination question papers and moderation processes. In addition, the panels conducted extensive tours of the facilities, which included visits to the library, the examination and records section, lecture venues, lecturers' offices, laboratories, workshops, hostels, and several other facilities where fieldwork and training is done. The evaluation of the issues also involved the examination of other aspects of accreditation such as staff-workload allocation, lecture loads, types of programmes offered and the suitability of facilities and resources to support the offering of these programmes. This was undertaken with a view to providing a comprehensive overview of the institutions' capacity and preparedness to offer higher education programmes.

2.2 Findings

2.2. The findings of the re-accreditation process must be situated in the context of two key factors:

- Agricultural Colleges are currently administered and managed at the provincial level by provincial Departments of Agriculture. The colleges receive funding from three sources, namely, the national Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF), the relevant Provincial Department of Agriculture and from student fees, which are minimal and cover both tuition and hostel accommodation. The largest portion of the funding comes from the provincial departments.

- The Colleges are diverse in terms of the nature and quality of programmes being offered and the accreditation status of their programmes.

2.2.1 The main finding is that the continued location of Agricultural Colleges within the jurisdiction of the provincial Departments of Agriculture adversely impacts on the quality of academic provision as the colleges are managed as extensions of the provincial departments and do not have the management autonomy to determine their overall academic and operational requirements. This lack of management autonomy is further exacerbated by the perceived tension between the provincial departments and the national department, and there seems to be a blurring of lines with regard to reporting and responsibility, with the colleges having to account to both the provincial and national departments. This tension is in part due to the national Department interpreting the Constitutional stipulation that tertiary education is a national competence to mean that the governance of Agricultural Colleges falls within its authority.

2.2.2 The specific findings in relation to the impact of the current status of Agricultural Colleges on the quality of provision are as follows:

- (i) The mission and vision of the colleges are poorly aligned with the focus and purpose of the programmes offered and require reviewing and refinement.
- (ii) There is no shared or common governance structure across the colleges and the structures that are in place function in an ad-hoc manner and have little or no influence on operational and academic matters, as decision-making powers continue to reside in the provincial departments.
- (iii) The absence of academic governance structures such as Academic Boards and Programme Advisory Committee's is especially problematic and the problem is further compounded by the lack of academic leadership. The consequence of the latter is, amongst others, lack of support for academic staff, inadequate and inappropriate programme conceptualisation, design and assessment systems and a non-alignment of programme needs with the available infrastructure.
- (iv) There are inadequate policies, systems and procedures to ensure and support quality assurance, including a lack of understanding of the HEQSF and associated accreditation requirements.
- (v) The integration of work-integrated learning is ineffective, it is inconsistent within and across colleges, and is often ad-hoc and poorly structured, assessed and moderated.

- (vi) The colleges have staff who are qualified and experienced to offer programmes at the diploma level. However, in the absence of academic leadership and structures, there is no uniformity in workload models, resulting in some staff being overloaded. This is further exacerbated by long and drawn-out recruitment processes for filling vacant posts.
- (vii) There is inadequate provision of student support services, including academic support, counselling services and recreational services, which impact on the overall learning experience and well-being of students and contributes to high drop-out rates.
- (viii) Agricultural colleges appear to be generally well-equipped with basic infrastructure for the programmes offered, although there are some cases where there is a mismatch between the available facilities and programme requirements. However, the infrastructure and equipment is not well-maintained and is often non-functional in part due to protracted provincial procurement systems. The teaching spaces are not always conducive to the introduction of appropriate and alternative methodologies, including the use of educational technologies and the library and holdings are not always up to date. Finally, many of the residences are in need of refurbishment, modernisation and general maintenance.

3. Agricultural Colleges vis-à-vis Other Public Colleges

- 3.1 The governance status of Agricultural Colleges is not peculiar to the agricultural sector. Nursing Colleges are also governed at the provincial level with similar implications for the quality of provision. An audit of Nursing Colleges undertaken by the Department of Health in 2009 argued that if nursing colleges were to successfully contribute to the training of nurses to meet the requirements of the national health system, they would have to be established as “discrete entities for education and training with specific mandates and certain distinct characteristics in terms of minimum standards” in relation to governance and management, resourcing and funding, enrolment planning and programme offering and reporting and management information systems.
- 3.2 Similar conditions existed in the Colleges of Education prior to their incorporation into higher education in 2000.

4. Public Colleges: Constitutional, Legal and Policy Context

- 4.1 The impact of the governance status of agricultural and nursing colleges on the quality of provision is the result of an underlying tension between the competing and contradictory mandates of the relevant provincial departments. The primary mandate of the provincial

Departments of Agriculture and Health is the delivery of agricultural and health services and the training of agricultural and health workers to support service delivery is a secondary mandate. The provincial departments require skilled personnel in order to fulfil their mandate but have no direct interest in the underlying ethos and philosophy that informs and underpins the education and training of the personnel. The effect of this is that the education and training mandate is subsumed by the primary mandate, which adversely impacts minimum standards, resource allocation and so on.

- 4.2 In the Council's view the continued status of Agricultural and Nursing Colleges as provincial entities is contrary to the prescripts of the Constitution (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Act No 108 of 1996), the Higher Education Act (Act No 101 of 1997), as amended, and the policy framework for the transformation of the higher education system as outlined in Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education and the Green Paper's vision for post-school education and training.
 - 4.2.1 In terms of the Constitution (Schedule 4) tertiary education is a national competence. In line with this, the White Paper states that the advice received by the Ministry indicates that "all higher education colleges fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education" (#2.49).
 - 4.2.2 The Higher Education Act defines higher education as all learning programmes leading to a qualification that meets the requirements of the HEQSF and includes tertiary education as contemplated in Schedule 4 of the Constitution. This encompasses many of the programmes offered by agricultural and nursing colleges.
 - 4.2.3 The White Paper, in line with the advice that the Ministry of Education received has jurisdiction over all higher education colleges, states that these colleges will be "planned, governed and funded as part of the single co-ordinated higher education system as envisaged in the White Paper.
 - 4.2.4 The Green Paper goes a step further. On the basis of the separation of basic (i.e. school) from post-school education, including the incorporation of the training mandate previously located in the Department of Labour, the Green Paper proposes a vision for a "single, coherent, differentiated and highly articulated post-school education and training system".
 - 4.2.5 The Green Paper recognises the importance of "developing a coherent framework that allows these colleges [i.e. public colleges under the jurisdiction of other government departments] to fit into the post-school system to ensure greater coherence and articulation possibilities", including that this may best be done through shifting these colleges to the jurisdiction of the DHET, as it would "enable a more rational use of resources". However, it stops short of a firm recommendation in this

regard and keeps open the option of not changing the jurisdictional authority of the colleges but putting in place mechanisms to improve co-ordination between the DHET and the relevant government departments.

4.2.6 The Council is mindful of the fact that the reluctance in the Green Paper to propose the incorporation of public colleges into the ambit of the DHET is likely to be due to:

- (i) Differing interpretations of schedule 4 of the Constitution. Although the White Paper indicates, as outlined in 4.2.1 above, that the advice received by the Ministry indicates that “all higher education colleges fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education” (#2.49), it could be argued that the fact that tertiary education is a national competence does not mean that all tertiary education necessarily falls under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Higher Education and Training. The Constitutional imperative is to ensure that tertiary education is a national competence. In this context, the assigning of a specific function to an executive portfolio in the Cabinet is the prerogative of the President.
- (ii) The complexities associated with the unique role of agricultural and nursing colleges as single purpose institutions, which include, amongst others, the dual status of trainee nurses, that is, they are both trainee students and employees.

4.2.7 The Council is aware that since the release of the White Paper in 1997, there have been a number of processes involving the then Department of Education and the Departments of Agriculture and Health respectively to investigate and advise on the status and location of Agricultural and Nursing colleges taking into account the complexities associated with their unique role, as well as the need not to compromise the service delivery needs of the respective provincial departments. However, despite these investigations, the location and status of agricultural and nursing colleges remains unresolved.

4.2.8 In the Council’s view, the lack of progress in resolving the status of agricultural and nursing colleges, is likely to further weaken the quality of provision in these colleges. The continued marginalisation and fragmentation of these colleges from the mainstream of the education and training system, in particular, in the light of the post-2005 integration of the education and training system is unacceptable, especially as it impacts negatively on the quality of provision. As the Green Paper states, although these colleges have to “comply with quality assurance institutions and the NQF”, this has “not always been straightforward”.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 The Council recommends that the Minister of Higher Education and Training in line with the Constitutional provision that tertiary education is a national competence and the Green Paper's vision for a single, coherent, differentiated and highly articulated post-school education and training, put in place the steps necessary to resolve the status and location of agricultural and nursing colleges. This requires, in the Council's view, the Minister of Higher Education and Training and the Minister of Health and the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries jointly establishing a technical task team to investigate the implications of incorporating agricultural and nursing colleges into higher education in the context of schedule 4 of the Constitution. The investigation should include the identification of the models to be considered given the proposed institutional framework for the post-school education and training system, the mechanisms to be established to ensure collaboration between the colleges and the relevant line ministries in terms of skills and curriculum requirements and the appropriate quality assurance arrangements.
- 5.2 The Council's recommendation is specific to agricultural and nursing colleges and any other public colleges that provide general public access to education and training opportunities. The Council recognises that there are colleges operated by government departments, which are specific to their internal needs and which are not open to general public access. These colleges should remain within the jurisdiction of the relevant government department subject to meeting the requirements of the NQF.