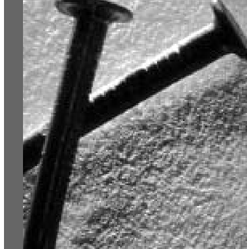
Chapter 1: Being responsive: colleges, communities and 'stakeholders'



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> Colleges must develop the capacity to offer greater support to learners, innovative partnerships with business, industry and communities and an even more responsive and flexible curriculum. Failure to address these imperatives will result in colleges remaining mere aggregations of what existed before (Asmal 2002: 7).

Introduction

Throughout the world, different countries are trying to create closer synergies between the needs and purposes of their education and training systems, their local and regional labour markets, and their national economies. This is largely a result of an international consensus which, though contested, argues that people and organisations need to embrace new skills and knowledge at regular periods in order to meet the challenges of a much more dynamic and unstable economic climate (see, inter alia, Ashton & Green 1996; Brown, Green & Lauder 2001; Field 2000; Nieuwenhuis & Nijhof 2001). In addition, more and more workplaces, including those where manual skills are still dominant, require their employees to use their cognitive and so-called 'key skills' in order to engage in decision-making, problem-solving, and teamwork. Such developments ask important questions of national education systems in terms of curriculum content, teaching and learning processes, assessment and qualification structures, and the expertise of educational professionals. At the centre of most national systems sit institutions which provide vocational education beyond compulsory schooling with a particular emphasis on intermediate level skills. These are pivotal organisations which, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the national context, straddle the worlds of education, work and the wider community. In the United Kingdom (UK), just as in South Africa, policy-makers want their further education providers to be more 'responsive' to the demands of a range of stakeholders including individual learners, employers, local communities, and the national economy. Hence, providers in England are now seeking to become Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), the case for which, according to the government, is as follows:

> … if we are to meet the competitive challenge and overcome the productivity gap that still divides us from our major competitors, we must have a Further Education sector which is flexible and responsive, works effectively with employers and is sharply focused on meeting their skills needs. We need colleges that are fast moving, first to respond to change and that can give both adults and young people access to the enhanced vocational learning they need to succeed in a modern economy (Harwood 2001).

Here we see the shared language of international policy-making, familiar in both the UK and South African contexts: 'flexible and responsive'; 'respond to change'; 'competitive challenge'. In this chapter, I want to question some of the assumptions behind the demand that colleges become more responsive and discuss some of the implications. I also want to argue that despite the considerable differences between national contexts, the issues raised in this book transcend national boundaries and are of concern to policy-makers, educational professionals and researchers throughout the world. The chapter concentrates on how these issues affect those institutions usually called 'colleges of

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further education' which are located in the public sector. It is important to note, however, that in some countries private sector providers can also access public funding to deliver programmes and services to learners and, hence, act in competition with the public sector colleges. The impact of this private sector provision upon the public sector institutions will be discussed in the chapter.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first examines the role and purpose of further education in different countries and provides evidence from the UK and Australia where colleges have been required to become more responsive. The second section examines the implications of responsiveness for the staff who work in colleges and for their 'clients'. The third section addresses issues related to the state's approach to the control and management of the further education sector, and the fourth section offers some concluding remarks.

The role and purpose of the further education sector

The further education sector differs from country to country in terms of its size and mission, for example:

- In Scandinavia, Germany and the Netherlands, colleges (referred to in those countries as 'vocational schools') are similar to those in South Africa in servicing largely young full-time students.
- In the UK, colleges are filled with full- and part-time students ranging from the age of 14 to well past retirement age.
- In the United States (US), 'community' colleges play a major role in providing access to higher education.
- In Canada, 'community' colleges differ as to whether they reflect a more US or UK model according to which state they are in.
- In Japan, technical colleges, along with upper secondary vocational schools, service full-time students.
- In Hong Kong, further education is largely found in private sector colleges with some provision in government-funded technical colleges for young people struggling to find jobs.

As we can see above, in some countries vocational education is part of compulsory schooling with young people being divided between academic and vocational 'schools' as early as the age of 12. In other countries, the vocational education pathway begins after compulsory schooling and takes place in colleges dedicated to full-time students. And, different again, are those countries whose colleges provide both academic and vocational programmes for both young people and adults. These differences reflect the way in which education is shaped by, embedded in and contributes to national cultures.

In many countries, notably in the Middle and Far East, the further education sector has been underdeveloped until relatively recently but the global emphasis on lifelong learning and a concern to make provision for young people in danger of being socially excluded has drawn attention to the inadequacy of concentrating educational resources on compulsory schooling and higher education. Finding the most appropriate and realistic mix of provision for the further education sector is a challenge for national governments. The choices include using the sector to:

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- Improve the basic education of young people and adults who have struggled at school.
- Focus on vocational education and skills training at intermediate level.
- Be comprehensive by providing a wide-ranging curriculum from foundation and remedial to sub-degree level which bridges the vocational/non-vocational divide.
- Provide short, 'just in time' courses for business and industry.
- Prepare adults without the required qualifications for entry to higher education.
- Provide specialist courses for people with learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities.
- Be socially inclusive and so widen participation in education and training.

Despite their differences, further education institutions across the world share the fact that they provide for people in some form of transition, with varying educational goals and varied educational experiences and levels of attainment. Writing from their perspective as senior managers in one of the UK's largest further education colleges, Gravatt and Silver (2000: 115) argue:

> Colleges are the adaptive layer in the education system. Shock waves from the worlds of work, politics or the family often rebound off school walls or ivory towers, but frequently permeate further education.

By occupying this middle ground, colleges of further education face an immediate problem of identity. Unlike schools and universities, they have the potential to service a much wider community of learners and to offer a bigger range, type and level of programme. Such diversity can, however, mean that colleges struggle to achieve recognition and/or status for being specialists in particular types of provision. Attempting to service the needs of too many stakeholders also makes colleges subject to constant change and so can weaken their ability to stand firm when stakeholder pressure becomes overly intrusive. In the UK, the further education sector has long been referred to as the 'Cinderella' of the education world, always doing the hard work and never getting to go to the ball. As in the USA, UK colleges are also seen as 'second-chance' institutions as they accept many people who struggled at school, those who decide later in life to improve their qualifications, and those who need to retrain through the loss of a job or a downturn in their local economy. In a seminal book on America's community colleges, Grubb and Associates (1999: 8) record the words of one teacher:

> Community colleges are invisible, right? I mean, many people don't see community colleges. They're not institutions like the university; they're looked on as kind of very low-status. Teachers in community colleges … really need to think about being at a non-prestigious institution where many of the students are underprepared, and they're going to have to think about why they chose that piece of the vineyard.

As the research reported in this book shows, colleges in South Africa have to address a number of difficult questions which resonate with questions being posed by colleges around the world:

- What is the purpose of the college?
- What are its underpinning values?

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- Can the college pursue social justice as well as business goals?
- How does the college sit in relation to the wider further education sector?
- Whose needs should the college serve?
- Will some stakeholders have priority over others?
- Which other organisations/stakeholders should the college form alliances with?
- How should the college be structured in order to act responsively?
- How can the college develop its staff to ensure they have the capabilities required to fulfil its mission?
- How can the college best manage risk and strive for a balance between short-term gains and long-term stability?

How colleges (and policy-makers) answer those questions will depend on: the way in which they conceptualise their mission; how they draw boundaries around the nature and scope of their stakeholder communities; and the tightness of the policy straightjacket they are forced to wear. Trying to be all things to all people can result in a loss of identity and further marginalisation at a time when schools and universities promote themselves as more focused institutions (see Unwin 1999).

In recent years, colleges in the UK and Australia have had to react to their respective governments' demands that they become more responsive. This experience highlights the dangers and rewards of the responsiveness agenda.

The UK experience

Historically, colleges in the UK have differed from schools and universities in six key ways:
- They tend to have more complex histories.
- They are more socially inclusive.
- They are required to adapt more quickly to the changing agendas of governments and their communities.
- Their funding comes from multiple sources.
- They employ a more diverse range of teaching and learning approaches.
- Students pass through at a much faster pace.

To understand the way a college functions and the background to its character demands a knowledge of: its history; the socio-economic make-up of its local/regional community; the spread of expertise of its teachers; the aspirations and values of its managers/teachers; the demands placed on it by government (local/regional/national); and the nature and requirements of its student community. In the UK, colleges were initially established in the nineteenth century to meet the needs of specific sectors, notably mining, engineering and construction (see Huddleston & Unwin 2002). They expanded this sectoral role, whilst, at the same time, developing courses in general and liberal adult education programmes for the unemployed, and short courses tailor-made for employers.

Colleges had, then, a strong history of 'responsiveness'. Yet when, as a result of the worldwide oil crisis in the mid-1970s, rising inflation, unemployment and a collapse in manufacturing hit the UK, colleges, along with schools and universities, were blamed by politicians and employer lobby groups as being part of the problem. This led to what Ball (1990) has called a 'discourse of derision', which attacked teachers and educational researchers for being too left-wing, against capitalism, for using and advocating 'trendy'

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teaching methods and for generally failing both the country's children and its economic imperative. It also attacked the unemployed and school-leavers for not having the right attitudes to or skills for work and, hence, it was their fault if they failed to find jobs. This discourse was a key driving force behind the development of competence-based vocational qualifications, which sought to put the learner as opposed to the provider in control (see Jessup 1990). Esland (1991: v) has argued that:

> The displacement of responsibility for economic failure and decline from the political and economic arenas to the educational and training institutions (and the individuals within them) has had the effect of distorting public policy debate about the relationship between economic change, education and employment. The concentration on changing the content of education and attitudes of teachers and learners has led to the neglect of the part played by political and economic factors (such as the nature of Britain's industrial policy) in determining the shape and quality of the national workforce.

Politicians always need scapegoats. One of the major dangers in attempting to be responsive to the state as well as a diverse client group at local and regional level is that educational institutions are very vulnerable when the clients need someone to blame. The letters from college graduates in South Africa, in Chapter 6, are strong reminders of the limited impact which educational institutions can have on the economic problems of their surrounding areas.

In 1992, and as part of a wider plan to make the UK's public services more 'business-like', colleges were freed from the control of democratically elected Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and encouraged to take their wares to the marketplace. Whilst some colleges approached this transition with caution, many rushed into adopting the language, behaviour and ethos of the private sector. Hence, students became 'customers' or 'clients', teaching became 'facilitation', 'guiding' or 'mentoring'; and, where once a college was run by a 'principal', he or she was now called 'chief executive' or 'director'. The physical environments of colleges also reflected change; thus thick carpets and better furniture would be seen in departments benefiting from direct investment from employers. Student dress has also been affected. For example, in one college in the English West Midlands, a car manufacturer insists that its apprentices attend the college wearing boiler suits emblazoned with the company logo.

The two examples in Box 1 illustrate the different ways in which colleges responded to the new climate, whilst also highlighting the considerable amount of work and resources (financial and human) involved.

For nearly ten years, colleges competed with each other and with schools and other providers of post-compulsory education and training for business. Whilst this led to some innovation in terms of course design, delivery and promotion, there were also disadvantages. In order to respond more flexibly to 'customer' demand, colleges replaced many of their full-time teachers with people on part-time, temporary contracts, and all staff experienced considerable work intensification. Industrial relations reached an all time low in the late 1990s as teachers saw the gap between their pay and that of college managers grow increasingly larger, causing some to equate conditions in colleges with those of the worst Fordist-style enterprises (see Taubman 2000).

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Box 1: Examples of technical college responsiveness in the UK

> A college in one area has been successful in promoting courses for the Sikh community at a local community centre, the local hospital and an Asian women's group. As part of this programme, the college offers open learning workshops and a home-study service. The provision was effectively marketed in the local Punjabi-speaking community as a result of a bilingual advertising campaign on local radio. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds attending the college is actually higher than represented in the local population.
>
> One agricultural college conducted market research and held interviews with 12 local poultry producers in preparation for developing poultry provision. The research identified a range of training needs, including management, marketing and personnel skills as well as stockmanship. Poultry provision began in 1991 with six part-time students. Good links with industry enabled the college to use practical facilities owned by major companies. However, the lack of such facilities on site was a limiting factor, and the college corporation decided to build a specialist poultry unit using industrial sponsorship. Over the next three years, a total of 45 industrial sponsors provided cash or equipment, allowing the college to build a modern facility … The unit is run as a business partnership with industry, and now provides central training for large poultry firms.

Source: Huddleston & Unwin (2002)

Since it came to power in 1997, the labour government has signalled a move away from competition between institutions and has established local learning and skills councils to plan and manage publicly-funded further education and training provision at regional and sub-regional level (see Huddleston & Unwin 2002). At the same time, however, colleges are still expected to have the capacity to respond in as flexible a way as possible to the various demands of individuals, employers, and communities. Being responsive in the new climate also means being proactive; hence, colleges need to have up-to-date labour market information and the creative flair to develop new programmes using the latest teaching and learning technologies.

The Australian experience

The Australian experience in making its further education sector more responsive is of particular relevance to South Africa because of national similarities in terms of geographical distances, significant needs of rural communities, and equity issues. The Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector in Australia, which encompasses some 80 institutions spread across over 300 campuses, underwent marketisation in the 1990s with colleges reconstituted as 'largely autonomous VET enterprises' competing with other public and private sector providers of vocational education and training (VET) for public and private funds (Seddon & Malley 1999: 478). In their study of how TAFE colleges were responding to this change, Noble, Hill, Smith and Smith (1999: 15) point to:

> … the need to get the balance right between empowering the consumer (employer and apprentice or trainee), meeting the needs of industry for relevant,

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applicable or accessible training; maintaining economies of scale and avoiding destructive effects of undiluted competition.

In their survey of providers, Noble et al. (1999) found that whilst some saw serving the needs of marginalised groups (for example non-English speakers; people with learning difficulties) as a potential 'niche' market, others were very wary because of concerns about the continuity and level of funding for such groups. From the client's point of view, whether that is an individual learner, an employer or a community, he or she too may lose out on market-based provision as providers decide to abandon non-viable programmes or if the travelling distance to the desired programme is impractical.

Noble et al. (1999) remind us that demand is likely to be at its highest in metropolitan areas where there are large numbers of providers and buyers. There are clearly problems for colleges serving 'thin' or 'at risk' markets where: employers may be restricted to a small number of specialist sectors; employers may operate at the low-skill end of the product market; or the population may be spread across a wide geographical area. In all countries, the rhetoric of change (for example a shift to a knowledge economy) may be slow to impact on regional economies and labour markets, so traditional courses in craft and trade-specific skills may still be needed.

Seddon and Malley (1999: 489) explain how TAFE colleges have had to develop a 'market sensitive, self-reflective organisational capacity' in order to 'monitor their own work practices, their position in the market, and the scope for innovation and development'. As shown in Table 1.1, they have identified three ways in which providers (including those in both the TAFE and private sectors) are making use of research and intelligence.

Table 1.1: Ways in which TAFE and private training providers use market research

Informal model	Strategic-planning model	Capacity-building model
Research and organisational operations are compartmentalised and separate.	Research used instrumentally to meet system and enterprise priorities.	Research integral to the organisation. Seen as a means of building longer-term enterprise capacity.
Individual research not absorbed by organisation.	Individual research used on a limited fit basis.	Individual research integrated productively with organisational operations.

Source: Seddon & Malley (1999)

Seddon and Malley (1999) argue that movement towards the capacity-building model depends on the extent to which providers recognise research (broadly defined) as a 'fundamental to their core business'. They add that, where this happens, opportunities are created for teachers as well as managers to participate in research and, in turn, for that research to legitimise their innovative and reflective practices.

As this model shows, shifting to a responsive mode clearly makes demands at every level of the further education sector. In the next section of this chapter, I examine the implications for college staff and for learners.

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Implications of resposiveness for staff competence, job design and 'client' behaviour

The vignette in Box 1.2 from the USA indicates how responsiveness requires a shift in attitude and behaviour from both providers and their clients.

Box 1.2: Examples of technical college responsiveness in the USA

> The Bay de Noc Community College in Michigan has established the Michigan Technical Education Center (M-TEC) to train workers in the state's rural Upper Peninsula. M-TEC is not a building but a 'concept' in that training programmes are established where and when the learners need them. The range of partners, including trade unions, means that M-TEC is not dependent on any single customer or sector. The Director of Customised Training at the college explains: 'With attention to the bottom-line, and an eye for resource acquisition and diverse revenue development, the M-TEC established partnerships with business and industry, receiving financial commitments and equipment donations in exchange for training and facility discounts, 24-hour/7-day access and a seat on the M-TEC oversight board.'

Source: Russell (2002: 47)

The significant point here is that the college is no longer the exclusive site for learning. Instead, programmes are delivered on clients' premises, in community centres, and wherever and whenever best suits the learners. Provision also extends beyond formal courses to include, for example, assessment for workplace learning and training needs analysis. The development of new technologies and the potential of e-learning will clearly benefit providers like this Michigan college who want to deliver their programmes in as flexible a way as possible. All of which means considerable attention needs to be paid to how college managers, teachers and support staff are trained and developed. Young, Lucas, Sharp and Cunningham (1995) have argued that the knowledge base of professional practice is shifting from an 'insular' to a 'connective' model. This implies developing knowledge beyond one's specialism so that managers, teachers and support staff: understand the connections between different parts of the curriculum; can manage learning rather than just teach; can work in teams; and can help learners make connections between the current topic under study, their work and personal lives. In addition, some college staff are increasingly likely to have to combine a teaching and/or support role with entrepreneurial activity such as consulting with potential clients and generally promoting the college's provision. This means that teachers and support staff have to cross professional boundaries, work within more than one community of practice, and possibly spend time out on secondment to client organisations.

In their study of staff satisfaction in 80 colleges in England, Davies and Owen (2001: 8) found that staff were much more likely to feel valued within a college that had 'an embedded culture of continuous improvement – rather than one of blame – which encouraged bottom-up initiatives within a clearly understood framework'. Robson (1998:

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588) argues that 'the very diversity of entry routes into further education (FE) teaching … creates, in sociological terms, a weak professional boundary' and, thus, weakens the profession's overall standing. She adds that most FE teachers who deliver technical and vocational subjects retain strong allegiances to their first occupational identity (as formed in industry or commerce). Moving into a college can, therefore, be a stressful experience if those preformed occupational identities are threatened or disregarded. A shift to 'facilitation', as opposed to didactic teaching or instruction, and hybrid job design can lead to a sense of de-skilling and de-professionalisation for new and also experienced teachers. Time and space for reflection need to be found for new college teachers to get to grips with their core pedagogical role before they are launched into more hybrid and entrepreneurial activities. Support and staff development also need to be in place for their more experienced colleagues.

The rhetoric of responsiveness places a positive spin on change, particularly in relation to the 'customers' of education and training. Policy-makers and other advocates of a demand-led or market-led system take it as axiomatic that the customers will delight in having their demands met. Yet research evidence shows that individual learners and employers can be less than thrilled if the flip side of flexibility means that too many demands are made on them. In the UK, for example, employers have been less than keen to take up competence-based qualifications when they discover they might have to use some of their more experienced (and productive) employees as workplace assessors: much easier to return to college-based courses where assessment is carried out by teachers (see, inter alia, Raggatt & Williams 1999). And when flexible learning actually means being left alone in front of a computer screen or simply being shown where the library is, most learners will crave time with a knowledgeable teacher. In their study of 16 to 19 year olds in colleges in England, Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) found that they wanted a mix of teaching and learning approaches and that this desire for variability was rooted in their life histories and the fact that their dispositions to learning shifted over time as a consequence of changes in their personal, social and working lives.

Implications of responsiveness for state policy and system management

A shift towards a more demand-led system poses challenges for the state bureaucracy and for partnership arrangements at local and regional levels. The state has to decide on the extent to which responsive institutions need to be and can be controlled. Whilst it continues to fund colleges, the state will demand a return in terms of the need for its own national objectives for education and training to be met. Yet this may bring the state into conflict with its colleges if the latter find that in seeking to serve local clients, national objectives fly out of the window. For example, there may be a large local demand for courses in hairdressing, whereas the state may want the colleges to put more effort into higher-level occupations in order to raise the area's skills levels. Local people, in areas where jobs are scarce or concentrated in low-grade occupations, might demand courses in a more liberal adult education tradition in order to extend their knowledge rather than train for skills they may never use. Demand, then, can go in a different direction to the state's priorities.

The state can, of course, choose to play a very centralist role and manipulate demand. It has four powerful weapons at its disposal: funding; audit; inspection; and targets. It might

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decide to allocate funding for courses it believes to be important and restrict the number of courses colleges can run for which clients pay full costs. In contrast, the state can take a middle path and use funding to incentivise responsiveness by steering colleges in a particular direction whilst still allowing plenty of freedom to respond to the market. Alternatively, the state could take a *laissez-faire* approach, placing no restrictions on funding and allowing colleges to follow market demand. The state can also keep a close eye on colleges through audit and inspection regimes, and can set targets (for example for student retention and attainment; employer engagement; social inclusion and so on) to put pressure on performance.

Whichever type of role the state decides to play will have an impact on the nature of the partnerships colleges can forge with their client communities. Gravatt and Silver (2000) stress that the best partnerships evolve from shared aims, desires and intentions as shown in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: State and college partnerships: what works and what doesn't

What works	What doesn't work
Shared purpose and values	Forced purely for geographic reasons
Trust between partners	No trust
Voluntary	Mandatory
Different agendas respected	Own agendas forced to top
Outward looking	Resistant to necessary change
Time and freedom to evolve	Over-control by external audit
Transparent procedures and lines of responsibility	Hidden agendas

Source: Gravatt & Silver (2000)

They also stress, however, that colleges need to challenge the responsiveness rhetoric by remembering they are nothing without their students and that those students are part of families and communities 'which define their experience, education and identity' (Gravatt & Silver 2000: 127). To this end, colleges need to look inward as well as outward to the groups of staff and students that form its existence.

As the opening quotation to this chapter indicates, colleges in South Africa have been assigned a significant role in the country's development and, therefore, the people who manage the colleges will face considerable challenges. An evaluation of the Colleges Collaboration Fund in South Africa, established in 1999 to help transform colleges into more efficient and responsive institutions, has highlighted the need for 'significant leadership ability among senior managers, combined with the strong guidance of a governing council' (Gewer 2002: 61). Research in the UK has shown that governing bodies can only do so much and that governments need to put much more resources into the training and continued support for and development of college principals and senior managers (see Shattock 2000).

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Concluding remarks

Given the enormous economic and social challenges in South Africa, the newly emerging Further Education and Training (FET) colleges have a vital role to play. They will need to work in partnership rather than in competition to make the most of their opportunities and to best serve their country's needs. This will demand a new type of infrastructure to enable college principals and staff at different levels to form networks to share good practice and provide mutual support. Such networks will also enable the colleges to forge a significant presence in order to fight their corner *vis-à-vis* schools, universities and the private sector providers.

In the midst of the attitudinal revolution created by responsiveness, however, the colleges will need to hold on to their educational values. People still want to learn and be intellectually stretched. Colleges also have an important role to play in terms of the creation of vocational knowledge and its implementation in practice. They have to be able to juggle the competing demands of and handle the possible frictions caused by being, all at the same time, academies, consultancies and educational supermarkets. South African colleges can, however, take some comfort from the knowledge that most countries in the world are grappling with the complexities involved in extending and improving their further education sectors.

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