Chapter 2: Researching responsiveness

Simon McGrath

The transition from school to work, or its failure, has been a recurrent theme of political and academic debate internationally for many decades. The problem has been seen as having economic, social and political dimensions and has spawned countless interventions. Whilst much attention has been given to making the school a better preparation for the labour market, the technical college, and its equivalents internationally, has been seen as a major part of both the problem and its solution.

This book seeks to make a new contribution to this debate. It does so in the context of South Africa, with its particular development challenges and its unique history of racially organised further education and training (FET) provision. Crucially, it seeks to make this contribution at the point in time when the old system is beginning to give way to the new, with all the uncertainties that brings. Significantly, it also attempts to revisit this debate through a new methodological approach in which a tracer study of FET graduates is married with an analysis of employers' satisfaction with public providers; with a more qualitative exploration of college-employer relationships through case studies of college clusters; and through the more literary analysis of letters spontaneously sent to the research team by participants in the graduate tracer survey. It is hoped that this blend of methods may provide a richer and more compelling account of the state of technical college responsiveness in South Africa at the dawn of the reconfiguration of the sector. Moreover, it is intended that this exploration will be of value to practitioners and policy-makers in building the new FET college system.

In this chapter, I shall provide some reflections about the nature of responsiveness from the perspective of the African and southern literatures on the topic, building on the previous chapter, before turning to an overview of the varied methodological tools used in the study.

'Responsive' training institutions

We need to locate the notion of responsiveness in a series of contexts. It has come to South African technical colleges relatively late in the day, having spread first in other regions (see Unwin's chapter) and across Africa. It is also a debate that is clearly located in the global dominance of neo-liberal thinking during the 1980s and 1990s.

In South Africa, as elsewhere on the continent, public vocational training institutions emerged under the colonial system to cater for the relatively small numbers of skilled workers needed in the formal sector of the economy. The South African technical college essentially followed the model of its British sister institution, being mainly concerned with theoretical provision for apprentices. However, as Badroodien (2003a) reminds us, there was also a strong racial differentiation within the system and strong concerns with issues of social inclusion and control that often cut across the economic rationale of provision.

Elsewhere in Africa, the rapid growth of schooling after independence was not matched by the expected take-off in formal sector employment. As a result, 'educated unemployment' quickly became a major issue of political debate. This led to the introduction of a range of new post-school institutions and programmes that were

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intended to make school-leavers better able to enter labour markets, whether in rural or urban contexts. Famous examples included the village (later youth) polytechnics of Kenya and the brigades of Botswana. The regular technical college, however, continued to focus on servicing formal industry and expanded in numbers and enrolments, although often exceeding the level of growth of formal employment.

With the coming of structural adjustment in the 1980s, these colleges found themselves faced with a set of new challenges and demands, in keeping with the rest of the public sector. Particularly after the World Bank issued its policy paper on *Vocational and Technical Education and Training* (World Bank 1991), colleges found themselves under pressure to become more responsive. This model of responsiveness has focused on two main themes: a shift from a supply-led to a demand-led system of training; and a focus on training for self-employment (King & McGrath 2002).

Demand-driven training

The World Bank report, and much of the subsequent literature, highlighted the ineffectiveness and inefficiencies of most public providers. Quality of training was seen as poor and colleges were judged to be incapable of meeting the needs of employers and the economy. It was proposed that training markets should be freed up to allow far more private involvement. There would still be a role for public providers but they would have to become more demand-orientated. It was believed that this would enjoin quality. Rather than have curriculum and enrolments centrally determined, it was deemed essential that colleges should be free to respond to labour market needs and should be capable of so doing.

However, this account has increasingly been challenged. Its naïve belief in the market and in institutions becoming demand-led seems particularly problematic. It is necessary to think very carefully about the nature of demand and whose demand is actually meant. Student demand, social demand and employer demand may all be very different from one another. Moreover, there are strong reasons for believing that, in adverse economic circumstances, each of these demands may be ineffective, in the economic sense of there being demand that cannot be marketised (King & McGrath 2002).

This was also a very narrow view of the world to which colleges needed to respond. Clearly, colleges needed to be more directly responsive to changes in the labour market than did other elements of the education system. However, this view of responsiveness tended to ignore other legitimate elements of college responsiveness in areas such as social policy and community development, as well as the crucial issue of how colleges respond to the range of needs of individual students.

Moreover, the ability of providers to become more responsive tended to be over-assumed. There was very little sense in this account of the internal dynamics either of institutions or of their ability to develop better employer and community linkages. The assumed model appeared to be built upon a social, political and economic environment that was perhaps present in some donor countries such as Germany, but was far from most African realities. Moreover, it did not really address the challenge of developing adequate labour market information systems and outcome indicators for measuring providers' performance (King & McGrath 2002).

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Nonetheless, it seems plausible that responsiveness, as it is widely understood, is an important quality of colleges. Logically, this can be enhanced by better involvement of stakeholders in managing training. Better interaction with, and understanding of, local stakeholders is likely to be of considerable benefit to providers.

A key element of responsiveness is that colleges should better understand their local labour environments. Too many colleges have been producing graduates in trades that are already swamped or where there is no local market. This is a particular problem for some South African colleges given the apartheid-driven logic of their locations. It becomes more important that colleges can respond quickly to new opportunities within their catchment areas and become more adept at training for niches rather than being in a mass production mode. However, it is equally important that colleges are aware of the possibilities of training for provincial, national and regional labour markets where appropriate (King & McGrath 2002). Colleges internationally developed out of a need for theoretical enhancement of on-the-job training of youth workers. However, globalisation and rapid technological change point to the need for reskilling over an individual's working life (ILO 1998). Here again is a challenge and opportunity for colleges, but it is one where there is little sign of progress across Africa.

Providers can only be so responsive on their own. Although national training authorities are yet to have much success in Africa, their performance in East Asia and Latin America points to the advantages of strong tripartite involvement in training systems at the national level. The decision in South Africa to have a sectoral focus to training oversight may well enhance responsiveness, given the positive experiences in this regard in other countries such as Brazil (WGICSD 2000).

At the level of delivery, the trend across Africa towards competency-based modular training is also driven by the logic of greater market responsiveness of training:

> The focus on competencies is far more closely linked to notions of what is useful in the market place and how this is changing over time. Where this induces a closer focus on what skills are really needed, it is clearly a positive development. Nonetheless, there are widespread concerns internationally with the tendency of currently existing competency-based systems to impoverish training and disempower trainees through narrow and cognitively weak provision. In the emerging account of skills development, it is apparent that competencies will need to be seen in a broader sense. A skills development focus can serve to highlight the combined importance of good practical skills development, solid theoretical grounding, positive attitudinal reinforcement, sound general education and meaningful work experience (King & McGrath 2002: 126).

The focus on self-employment

Most public training providers were set up to meet the needs of formal wage employment. Indeed, self-employment promotion was not a policy goal till long after most of these institutions had been established. However, from the late 1980s on, self-employment has increasingly achieved policy prominence and public training providers have come under growing pressure to address this goal (Grierson & McKenzie 1996; King & McGrath 2002; McGrath & King with Leach & Carr-Hill 1995).

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Often, the challenge of becoming more responsive to self-employment has played out in an additional module, such as creation of a business plan, being added to the conventional curriculum. On other occasions, there have been attempts to add extra components after training, such as credit, business incubators and enterprise training, as in the South African technopreneur project. However, evidence of the success of most of these programmes focused on the traditional college clientele remains limited, in spite of the large amounts of donor money that have been invested in them (King & McGrath 2002). There is little likelihood of college graduates entering into successful self-employment immediately from college. Rather, they are more likely to progress to viable self-employment through an initial, perhaps even lengthy, period of wage employment (King & McGrath 2002; McGrath & King 1995).

A more radical approach of addressing a new clientele of existing informal sector workers has also been attempted in a number of countries. At the maximalist end of the spectrum, it has resulted in institutions such as the Malawi Enterprise Development Institute being transformed from a regular training college to an institution with a principal focus on enterprise development for those already in self-employment (Grierson & McKenzie 1996; McGrath & King 1995). A number of other programmes have sought to provide additional training, often theoretical, to those employed in the informal sector, alongside their conventional offerings (King & McGrath 2002). This seems to chime with trends in countries such as Australia to shift to a focus on lifelong learning and the needs for upskilling of those in employment rather than the traditional focus on pre-employment training.

The spread of these ideas to South Africa

South African colleges were effectively insulated from these pressures before the end of apartheid. However, with the coming of democracy and the need to overturn the racial division of colleges, the system was also opened to broader international discourses about training institution reform. Therefore, within the context of becoming merged institutions, South African FET colleges are also being expected to become more responsive, with a demand focus and a self-employment focus being identified by some as the 'dual mandate' (Gamble 2003a; McGrath & King 1995) of these new institutions. This forms a central element of the responsiveness that is being increasingly required of them.
It is apparent that this new agenda of responsiveness is a complex and contested one. Responsiveness of colleges cannot simply be to the economy, even though FET is clearly the most directly labour market-related element of the education and training system. I have already argued that responsiveness must also be thought of in terms of communities and of a social agenda. In South Africa, for instance, this means that public colleges must also be responsive in terms of transformation and equity. However, it is apparent that such notions need far deeper consideration, not least in terms of how finance mechanisms can be developed in resource-poor environments. Economic responsiveness does not simply mean being entirely demand-driven. Colleges should also be able to focus on strategic provision where there is a lack of effective demand for whatever reason.

It is also important to think of responsiveness as a process on which colleges are embarked rather than looking for whether they are or are not responsive. Becoming more responsive is challenging and is constrained not only by college and staff capacities but also by a range of external factors.

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Researching responsiveness: a methodological exploration

The research presented in this book is an attempt to use a new combination of methods to shed light on the responsiveness of one national public training system at a particular moment in time. This combination is important as it seeks to bring very different but complementary lenses into focus on what is a highly complex area. Although it does not engage with all the relevant stakeholders, nonetheless, the project's engagement with the experiences and perceptions of students, employers and providers offers a richness that is not present in mono-dimensional studies.

The project made use of tracer study methodology as a key element of its approach. The choice of such a tool was informed by the lack of such data being generated in the system. Indeed, the choice of this methodology was in a sense also a matter of advocacy – of highlighting the potential importance of tracer methodology to the future of the South African FET college system.

Tracer research in the South African education and training system remains scarce, with Bennell and Monyokolo's (1992) study of matriculants being a rare exception. There has been some tracer work done elsewhere in Africa for the college sector, most recently in Tanzania and Zambia, again under Bennell's leadership, as part of an evaluation of Danish assistance to skills development (Danida 2002). However, these types of surveys are more prevalent in developed countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the USA (NCVER 1997). For example, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) in Australia conducts a national tracer study on Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions called the Graduate Destination survey.

One of the methodological breakthroughs of the NCVER approach has been to include an employer satisfaction component. In this book we present research that uses both the tracer study and employer satisfaction survey tools. However, the dual survey approach has been further refined through a combination with the gathering of richer data through in-depth interviewing of institutional leaders and employers. The research team was also very mindful of the key role played by context, and this is reflected in background research on socio-economic and policy contexts, which draws heavily on the HSRC's capacity in Geographical Information Systems (GIS) analysis. This multi-level project framework is captured in Figure 2.1.

However, this conscious methodological strategy was further adapted in the course of the study. A number of students who completed the tracer questionnaire also wrote unsolicited letters to the survey team. It was decided that this source of unstructured and unmediated qualitative data could provide a valuable further element of the research as reported. Given the unusual power of hearing the unsolicited words of former learners, it has been decided to include a flavour of these letters as a separate chapter.

Whilst the combination of tools, both deliberate and serendipitous, was an advance on previous mono-dimensional approaches, it is clear that the development of a robust multi-dimensional approach is still in its infancy, as the subsequent discussion will illustrate.

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Figure 2.1: The multiple methods for studying technical college responsiveness

The graduate tracer survey

Research design
The tracer study was designed to use a self-completion questionnaire to ascertain the responses of a sample of graduates from technical colleges in all nine provinces of South Africa. Seventy-two questions were distributed across eight areas:

- Study programme/course.
- Present situation.
- Employment experience.
- Work and use of qualifications.
- Unemployment.
- Present studies.
- Personal information.
- Final satisfaction levels.

Through these questions, the questionnaire sought to elicit information on the responsiveness of technical colleges as seen through the lens of graduate perceptions of their college education and its relationship to the world of work.

Sample
The target population for the study comprised all learners of technical colleges in South Africa who achieved an N2, N3 or National Senior Certificate (NSC) qualification in any of the six Department of Education (DoE) fields[1] in 1999. This particular cohort of graduates was chosen for two reasons.

First, the study focuses on the FET band as defined by the National Standards Bodies Regulations: Levels 2 to 4 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), equivalent to

1 The six fields are business studies, engineering studies, art & music, general education, utility studies, and educare & social services.

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Grades 10 to 12 in the schooling system and accommodating the N1, N2 and N3/NSC certificates in the technical college system. Second, the study is intent on investigating the extent to which learners achieving N2, N3 and NSC certificates are considered employable by companies/organisations as measured by employment rates. As will become clear in the study, this choice is significant in what it both shows and hides in ways that are profoundly significant for debates about the permeability of the boundary between further and higher education and training (HET).

A limitation of the sampling process is that the sample population, while stratified by programme type (DoE-provided programmes) and qualification type (N2, N3 or NSC), is not random. Because the project team had to rely on colleges themselves to furnish the HSRC with the names and addresses of 1999 graduates, the sample frame is as representative as the willingness and capacity of colleges to respond to requests for information. The investigation of college responsiveness begins, then, with the extent to which colleges were prepared, or able, to co-operate with the HSRC in populating the sample frame.

Table 2.1: Sample frame for the tracer study component of the Technical College Responsiveness project

Province	No. of colleges in province	No. of colleges responding	College response rate (percentage)	No. of students who received an N2, N3 or NSC in 1999	No. of usable graduate addresses	Graduates surveyable from college information (percentage)
Eastern Cape	26	8	31	1 489	207	14
Free State	11	9	82	988	766	78
Gauteng	33	30	91	7 583	4 776	63
KwaZulu-Natal	24	18	75	3 670	1 516	41
Mpumalanga	10	8	80	1 312	574	44
Northern Cape	5	4	80	445	80	18
Limpopo	14	9	64	1 487	388	26
North West	11	8	73	699	214	31
Western Cape	17	10	59	1 721	1 260	73
TOTAL	**151**	**104**	**69**	**19 394**	**9 781**	**50**

Attempts were made by the project team to contact colleges across the country over an extended period. The poor response rates in Table 2.1 are attributable to a variety of factors:

- The inherent difficulty in contacting colleges (no response from the college switchboard, telephone and/or facsimile number discontinued, or e-mail address incorrect).

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- The unwillingness of colleges to participate in the survey.
- Inadequate Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) in colleges.
- Lack of capacity in colleges to return information (in the format) requested.

Two major points are apparent from Table 2.1. First, the college response rates in all provinces except the Eastern Cape (31 per cent) and the Western Cape (59 per cent) were sufficiently favourable notionally to allow for a reasonable sample of learner information to be obtained. However, the colleges that did respond in the Western Cape accounted for almost three-quarters of the 1999 cohort of graduates in terms of the province's response profile. Unfortunately, the Eastern Cape respondents only accounted for 14 per cent of the province's 1999 graduate cohort. Second, only three of the nine provinces – the Free State, Gauteng, and the Western Cape – provided usable names and addresses for more than 50 per cent of their 1999 graduates. In other words, two-thirds of the provinces were not in a position, for whatever reason, to respond to the HSRC's request for information to the extent expected.

Piloting of the questionnaire

The questionnaire for the tracer study was piloted amongst students of two technical colleges in Gauteng in June 2001: one historically black and one historically white. In both colleges, respondents ranged from the N3 to the N6 level. The response profile was representative of the three major categories of 'employed', 'unemployed' and 'studying' foregrounded in the survey.

The objective of the pilot phase was to assess, amongst a representative sample of past students of technical colleges, the accessibility and appropriateness of the questionnaire ahead of the main study. Though the questionnaire had undergone extensive iterative development by members of the HSRC project team with support from two international partners – the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Australia) and the Universität Gesamthochschule, Kassel (Germany) – it was substantially revised in the light of pilot phase student comments.

Survey response rate

The questionnaire was mailed to 9 781 N2, N3 and NSC graduates between September and November 2001. A postcard reminder of the closing date for the survey was mailed to survey participants.

The graduate response rate to the survey is outlined in Table 2.2.

As is evident from Table 2.2, there is a reasonably high response rate for a mail survey from all provinces, although findings based upon fewer than 100 responses from any province should be treated with caution. Thus the findings for the Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Limpopo and the North West cannot be extrapolated to the general population of graduates in those provinces with any confidence. Nationally, however, a response rate of 36 per cent – or 3 503 questionnaires – in principle allows generalisation to the population of technical college graduates in South Africa.

However, in talking about the generalisability of the data, it is important to flag two important characteristics of the sample. First, through the conscious focus of sampling on

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Table 2.2: Graduate response rate to tracer study survey

Province	No. of questionnaires mailed	No. of questionnaires returned	Response rate (percentage)
Eastern Cape	207	73	35
Free State	766	315	41
Gauteng	4 776	1 874	39
KwaZulu-Natal	1 516	547	36
Mpumalanga	574	194	34
Northern Cape	80	25	31
Limpopo	388	99	25
North West	214	86	40
Western Cape	1 260	290	23
TOTAL	**9 781**	**3 503**	**36**

a specific range of national programmes the data show a higher percentage of engineering students than would be the case if a sample of students on all programmes in public FET colleges were made. This is because both non-DoE programmes and N4 and above programmes are less engineering-dominated. Second, a further implication of this sample design is that there is a preponderance of male students, given the gendered nature of course enrolments. It is crucial, therefore, that the data and analysis are read in the light of these concerns.

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Employer survey methodology

Background
The employer satisfaction survey was intended to complement the information collected through the tracer study, with the aim of providing more information about the college-to-work transition. Its overall aim was to ascertain the levels of satisfaction employers had with technical college graduates in their employ. To achieve this aim the study looked at employer familiarity and satisfaction with:

- Technical colleges themselves.
- Technical college graduates.
- Technical college graduate courses.
- Graduate work skills.

Broad target population
From the 3 503 responses received from the traced graduates, 34 per cent of graduates classified themselves as employed (including self-employed). It was decided to follow up those who claimed to be employed in the formal sector. This gave a total of 966 graduates. Of these, only 858 graduates provided specific employer details that could be followed up. Checking these details for duplications produced a total population of 753 employers.

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Rationale for choice of employers to be surveyed
As the population to be studied was readily identifiable, and as resources permitted, the intention was to survey all of these employers. This approach nullified any sampling decisions that would have had to be made. However, the team undertook a data-cleansing and verification process with the intention of confirming the employer contact details provided by the graduates whilst at the same time priming employers about the impending survey. This was done in an attempt to raise awareness and thus improve the questionnaire response rate. Employers were contacted with the following key aims:

- Verifying the existence and contact details of the identified employers.
- Establishing and verifying contact with the responsible employer representative who would be responding to the survey.
- Establishing with the employer contact person the nature of instrument administration most suitable.
- Booking an appointment for the follow-up administration of the survey instrument.

The employers were informed about the study and why they were contacted. They were then advised of the impending survey and their co-operation was solicited. Finally, they were requested to advise the research team about the most convenient form of instrument administration and the weekdays and times most suitable to them.

The results of the verification and data-cleansing process informed decisions on the form of instrument administration to be undertaken, and reduced the original population of contactable and willing employers/respondents to 329. This was because 64 employer numbers had been discontinued, 313 employers indicated that they did not have any college graduates in their employ and 47 employers indicated their reluctance to provide information or respond to the survey.

Of these 329 employers, 39 per cent indicated that their preferred medium of instrument administration would be e-mail, while 38 per cent of them indicated a preference for fax. Twenty-two per cent of employers were non-committal in this regard. This represented a balanced preference between the two media of instrument administration, adding up to almost 80 per cent preference. On the basis of such information, it was decided to administer the questionnaire through the three media of fax, telephone, and e-mail.

The implication of consulting employers about their preferred mode of response was that the survey instrument had to be substantially simplified and reduced, covering only key issues and themes core to the project. This would enable the instrument to be administered in less than 20 minutes telephonically, completed at once electronically and e-mailed back, and completed on paper and faxed back without consuming too much fax time and paper.

The research team also had to address the high number of employers who indicated that they did not have technical college graduates in their employ. The assumption and possible explanation was that some, if not most, of these employers might employ such graduates whilst not being aware that they were graduates of technical colleges. The team decided that they would contact all employers for whom they had contact details, as long as they had not declined to participate. This meant an actual population of 642 employers. Specific graduate information was provided to all employers in an attempt to

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increase the accuracy of information provided whilst similarly linking an employer to a graduate to resolve the concern of the 313 employers who indicated that they did not have such graduates in their employ.

In total, 130 employers participated in the survey. This response rate is low in the light of the rigour of the approach to this part of the data collection. Indeed, it seems to stand as an important research finding in its own right. However, its interpretation is more difficult. It is possible that this reflects the limits to employers' information systems. It may reflect the extent to which the employment that graduates were reporting is highly casualised. If this were true, it would also add to a picture of employers as showing little interest in issues of ongoing skills development. As such, it would serve to raise issues about the extent to which responsiveness is meaningful to employers if employers themselves are unresponsive in the area of skills. However, such interpretations are largely speculative, and indicative of ways where research on responsiveness might be developed in the future.

One particular way in which further research might wish to develop is in moving away from this approach to sampling employers. Whilst this book reports on research that deliberately tried to have a close link between employer and graduate data, the limited employer response rate requires us to question whether this was in fact the best strategy to follow. Whether there would be merits in a national sample of all employers, or of employers in key graduate employing sectors, warrants further consideration in any future attempt to link surveys in this way.

Local labour environments methodology

Background

The decision to link these two survey instruments to a study of the local labour environments of South African technical colleges is an important methodological development. Responsiveness is a notion that relies on the assumption that colleges should be embedded in the realities of their local labour environments. As the response rate for the employer satisfaction surveys hints, it is not enough simply to go to employers to ask them questions about colleges. Therefore, this section of the methodology sought to do two other important things. First, a richer understanding of specific to-be-merged colleges' constraints and opportunities could be understood through the development of geographical and economic data about their environments. Second, a deeper appreciation of the understandings of college staff and managers about industry linkages could be developed through a more qualitative exploration in case study locations. A number of local employers were also interviewed to provide a potentially different perspective on the nature of college-industry relationships.

Originally it was planned to have four case study merged colleges to illuminate particular and localised local labour environment challenges for this component. However, late in the planning phase, one of these had to be abandoned because of low levels of institutional responsiveness to the research. As a result, the final number of case studies was three.

The selection of these merged institutions was subsequent to the collection of tracer data, and the response rates from that survey were considered. However, the primary driving

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force for selection was a desire to choose colleges with potentially different labour market environments. A basic three-part typology was developed to reflect this. One merged college was selected from a metropolitan setting. Another was selected which reflected a cluster around a smaller provincial capital and its satellite townships. The third setting included town and township-based colleges, with one in a more rural setting. All three reflected a different mix of local economic opportunities.

The three case study FET colleges

Given the research need to respect the anonymity of profiled colleges, this project uses the definition of technical colleges before 1994 as a way of framing their context and the complex relationships and challenges that inform their development in the contemporary environment. The colleges profiled in the study will be referred to simply as state or state-aided colleges. This tool of college identification is employed specifically to conceal college identities. In all other instances in the report, the legislative description of FET college is used. The study is not concerned so much with the particular development possibilities of specific colleges but rather with making the point that the local labour environments of colleges need to be better understood analytically and responded to in practice.

Research focus for institutional profiling

The institutional profiling component of the project adopted a qualitative approach to explore the unique challenges and dilemmas that confront individual FET colleges in South Africa. The adopted research methodology informed the project in a number of critical ways. Importantly, the availability of nine provincial FET situational analyses (Kraak & Hall 1999; NBI 1999a and b; NBI 2000a-f) meant that the gathering of certain types of data was unnecessary. These studies, which included detailed labour environment situational analyses, captured key data about individual colleges. The focus of the institutional profiles could thus raise particular questions about the individual college sites that make up FET colleges, specifying the links with industry and the world of work. It was argued that interviews with influential college staff and labour partners would develop an understanding of specific aspects of college activity and flesh out certain taken-for-granted assumptions about the college-industry linkage.

Crucially, the provided reports from the individual college sites did not attempt to duplicate and reproduce already available data and perspectives on colleges. Rather, the reports used the available secondary material as the foundational basis from which to ask very specific questions about institutional processes in particular college sites.

A series of topic guides were developed for the interviewing of college staff (principals and heads of departments), employers and industry role-players. Importantly, researchers were encouraged to adapt these to given situations and contexts.

The purpose of the fieldwork conducted at the three FET colleges in May 2002 was to understand recent college innovations in responding to the changed environment and to interpret the established cultures of individual colleges that either inhibit or facilitate change. By focusing on the college-employer linkage in local labour environments, the idea was to chart trends from the kinds of relationships and partnerships developed in individual localities.

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Three teams of researchers visited the designated FET colleges in the three chosen provinces. All in all, the teams visited ten institutions that had been designated technical colleges, colleges of education and manpower centres before 2001. Researchers were briefed to focus specifically on the issue of college-industry partnership as a way of understanding distinct local labour environments. Researchers were provided with four overarching questions that needed to frame the interviews with college staff and various related employers. The interviews explored:

- Partnerships that existed between the college and industry, business, government and small to medium enterprises.
- How these partnerships were established and how learner and employer needs were aligned.
- How the partnerships corresponded with college programmes and their operationalisation.
- The marketing strategies that individual colleges developed.

Each college visited for the study was also asked about the number and nature of partnerships with employers and industries and the kinds of innovations that were particular to that college. The employers mentioned were then consulted not only to verify the stated partnerships but also to elaborate on the kinds of issues that informed their relationships with FET colleges. The information and observations collected during the various visits and interviews were then analysed and compared across each FET college. These collective insights were used to frame an understanding of respective local labour environments and the prospective role of FET colleges in given economic localities.

Graduate letters methodology

As noted above, the letters that were sent to the project team by graduates were not solicited and were not part of the research design. However, the team decided that the existence of 70 such letters required reading, analysis and presentation in this book, although without making any spurious claims about their generalisability. Serendipitously, the leader of the graduate survey component has an academic background in discourse analysis, and this encouraged a decision to approach these letters from a narrative analysis perspective. Whilst the number and length of the letters does not argue for them receiving a major place in this book, they are nonetheless a valuable and often powerful addition to the reading that the other chapters present. It is here, albeit briefly, that we can read the hopes and fears of graduates expressed in their own words. This chapter also raises two interesting methodological points. First, if such an analysis is considered valuable, then should it be explicitly added into the design of such graduate surveys? However, what impact on such letters would soliciting for them have? This links to the second point: is it inevitable that those with the strongest, and, in this case, most negative, views are most likely to respond? If so, does such a tool, when used more rigorously, threaten the overall balance of the account?

Conclusion

This study should be seen as a step in a process of understanding college responsiveness in South Africa. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the challenge of responsiveness is still new. Second, the reconfiguration of colleges into merged

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institutions was still ongoing at the time of the research. Third, research on this topic in South Africa is in its infancy as a result. This study has increased our understanding of the dynamics of responsiveness and how to study it. It has illustrated some of the powerful advantages to be gained by a multifaceted approach to this issue. Particularly, it has highlighted the need to think more coherently about the nature of the local labour environments in which providers are located. However, further refinement is needed of such a methodology, including how to increase response rates, how to prevent biases therein, and how to carry out sequential sampling across instruments. In building richer understandings of local labour environments, there will also need to be more thought given to the regional, national and even international dimensions of particular colleges' possible hinterlands. Moreover, there is a need to think further about how such an approach can explore some of the less economic elements of responsiveness in more depth.

South African experience in this sector is, of course, unique but it does share much with experiences elsewhere. It will be important to build up an awareness of comparative experiences, as outlined in this chapter and Unwin's, whilst remaining mindful of the importance of context.

In spite of such health warnings, the following chapters provide a range of valuable insights into a system undergoing great changes. There will be much of interest for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers as you read on.

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