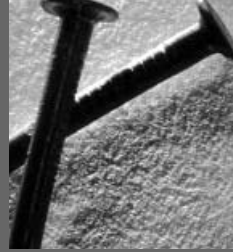


CHAPTER 6: LETTERS FROM TECHNICAL COLLEGE GRADUATES



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Introduction

The contents of this postscript are an unintended consequence of the tracer study, representing as they do the unsolicited letters from tracer study respondents addressed to the HSRC. The objective of this account is, through presenting the human face of some of the difficulties facing technical college graduates in South Africa as articulated in these letters, to reassert the challenges confronting the FET college sector outlined in previous chapters, without undermining the achievements of these colleges.

The number of survey respondents who submitted letters to the HSRC along with their completed questionnaires attests to the seriousness with which many in the sample took the survey. A total of 70 graduates addressed letters to the project manager, only one of them anonymously. While some of the letters simply express gratitude at the HSRC's concern with the situations of technical college graduates and others express a sense of anticipation at the prospect of their writers' being entered into the draw to win the computer prize,¹ many amplify upon information provided in the quantitative survey. Such amplification warrants separate treatment; hence the analysis of the correspondence presented below.

Overview of correspondence

In general terms, the information volunteered in the correspondence supports the findings of the graduate tracer study presented in Chapter 3. Table 6.1 outlines this briefly.

The four areas in this table into which items addressed in the letters have been aggregated resonate with some of the key concerns raised in Chapter 3. As the numbers of letters addressing the various items suggest, however, there is often a disjuncture between a graduate's status *vis-à-vis* an issue and its precise articulation in a letter. Thus, for example, because only seven graduates state that they are unemployed does not mean that only seven are unemployed. Indeed, that twelve graduates make enquiries about apprenticeship opportunities suggests, from the tenor of their letters, that none of them is employed. Nor, on the other hand, does the fact that only four graduates state that they are employed mean that only four are employed.

The quantification of information is not intended to indicate representivity, then, but is designed to focus attention on broad areas of concern for graduates, areas that articulate well with the FET college sector challenges identified in the rest of this book. The nature of such articulation is briefly outlined here.

The issue of employment and employability is far and away the major concern of these technical college graduates. Thirty-four of the 55 substantive letters (that is, those raising issues germane to the focus of the tracer study rather than informing the HSRC of change of address, serving as covering letters to accompany questionnaires, or anticipating winning the computer prize) are either occupied or preoccupied with jobs. Five of the remaining letters are purely requests for bursaries or study loans, while one is from the

¹ The offer of a prize to the winner of a computerised random draw was made to boost the response rate to the survey. Nine respondents apologise for late submission of their questionnaires in relation to this incentive.

Table 6.1: Nature of correspondence from respondents to the graduate tracer study

Item addressed in correspondence	No. of letters addressing item*
Employment	
Employed	4
Submitting <i>curricula vitae</i> and/or certificates	15
Applying for a job with, or through the services of, the HSRC	10
Unemployed	7
Seeking specific information about employers in their field	2
Presently working on a voluntary (unpaid) basis	2
Apprenticeship	
Seeking (information about) an apprenticeship	10
Needing in-service training in a company	2
Undergoing apprenticeship training in a company or training centre	7
Paying off a bursary at a company	2
Practical training	
Complaining about colleges' lack of concurrent theoretical and practical training	5
Further study	
Presently studying at a technical college	6
Presently studying at a technikon	2
Submitting proof of current studies	2
Seeking a bursary/loan for further study	9
Citing financial constraints as the main reason for not studying further	5

* Each letter may address more than one of these items, while some letters address none of them.

brother of a deceased graduate. The high unemployment rate amongst respondents to the survey, then, is mirrored in the prominence of the employment issue in the graduate correspondence. However, it is important to note that those who are unemployed or who are struggling to find funds for further studies may be more likely to have the time and motivation to write letters of the kinds represented here. Thus, it is important to note that the letters are not likely to be representative of the concerns of all graduates surveyed by the study.

From Chapter 3 it is evident that apprenticeship does not feature highly in the learning trajectories of technical college graduates. Only 375 of the 3 503 graduates (or 11 per cent) were apprenticed under an industry training board, while 333 (or ten per cent)

qualified as artisans either during or after their formal studies. Unsurprisingly, then, a number of graduate correspondents (12) seek apprenticeships or in-service training either with the HSRC or other organisations.

Following on from this issue, complaints about the inadequacy of practical training in colleges and its divorce from theoretical instruction, the subject of five letters, throw into sharper relief the rating of the quality of practical instruction in the tracer study, where graduates rate practical instruction 'neither bad nor good' but non-practical instruction between 'good' and 'very good'.

Finally, much of the correspondence is devoted to the issue of further study. In this regard, there are two types of correspondents: those who indicate that they are studying further, and those who would like to, but by dint mostly of lack of financial support are unable to. Opinion about this latter aspect was not canvassed in the tracer study survey. But the citing of impecuniousness as a constraint to further study introduces a new dynamic to the technical college learning pathway: the tension between FET as a stepping-stone to further or higher education (the job market for the most part not being open to graduates with an N3- or NSC-level qualification) and further or higher education as unaffordable. Lack of funds is certainly a major disincentive to Grade 12 learners entering higher education, as the findings of Phase 1 of the Student Choice Behaviour project conducted recently by the HSRC suggest (see Cosser with du Toit 2002).

General observations about the letters

Before an analysis of excerpts from graduate letters is undertaken, some preliminary remarks need to be made about the correspondence.

The first is that many graduates who submitted letters with their questionnaires were clearly ignorant about the nature and function of the HSRC. This may inadvertently be attributable in part to a sentence in the covering letter of the questionnaire stating that the survey was designed to assist the HSRC in providing 'useful information to colleges and employers about the needs of college graduates'. Many graduates, it seems, interpreted this to mean that the HSRC could either itself offer them employment or refer them to potential employers. The large number of telephone calls made to the HSRC during the survey administration period confirms this misunderstanding.

The second is that there is a poor understanding amongst graduates, and seemingly also amongst employers, about the current status of apprenticeships. This is not surprising, given that many employers may be operating in what they consider to be a policy, and consequently an implementation, vacuum as the transition from apprenticeships to learnerships is effected. As one letter puts it:

... the problem is that I am a learner in the other company as you know other company they have cancelled that thing of apprentice and making the people who deserve to be apprentice a learner ... That is why I am confused I don't know whether I am a apprentice or a learner. May be you can help me to know what exactly must I call my self. (Graduate letter 1)

The third, and arguably the most telling, observation is the clear signalling of the desperation of at least this small group of graduates. This comes, variously, from the number of letters mailed to the HSRC, from the breadth of forms of assistance requested in them, and from the styles in which they are couched. Some letters, for example, are broad in their scope of reference, requesting information about apprenticeship opportunities, bursaries, and employment in the same breath. The subject field of one letter, 'Application for a job/bursary/apprenticeship' (Graduate letter 2), epitomises this breadth. Other letters, though less articulate, are perhaps even more desperate in their very brevity. One letter is signed 'From hopeless' (Graduate letter 3), while another ends 'I don't know what is happening to me ... Please help me' (Graduate letter 4). Two other letters sound a similar note:

I do not know if may be your Department can just help me. (Graduate letter 5)

I want any kind of job that can I get and can I take even if is any province in S.A. ... I can be very happy in my life if my appication can be accepted. (Graduate letter 6)

Two other kinds of formulation mask the desperation that seems to simmer just below the surface, one politely formulaic, the other religious. The archaic style of:

I would make myself available for an interview at your convenience.
Do not hesitate to write or call me at the above telephone number and address.
(Graduate letter 7)

and

If I am fortunate in securing the situation, I shall endeavour by care and diligence to give every satisfaction. (Graduate letter 8)

stands in stark contrast to the religious effusion of:

You had sent the forms to me unexpectable and it was great pleasure to me that there other companies that can take a great care about people's life. It was/is as if you know all the time that I'm suffering from finicial to go back to tertiary to end up with my courses ... I belief in God that you are the very best people/company that can afford stand up for its self. You are realiable to keep and preserve ourlives sane. I wish to God to give me the hearts that are full of love to cheer and cherishes your soul ... Please Mr Michael and the staff I really truly and honestly need a help from your company. May God bless these.
(Graduate letter 9)

Contrasting styles aside, both register anxiety in their own ways.

Analysis of selected correspondence

Just as employment and further study are recurring themes in the letters, so too do ignorance of the role of the HSRC, anxiety and confusion about apprenticeships, and a

sense of desperation pervade the correspondence. More than providing trends and patterns, however, the individual case study approach to selected letters both particularises general observations and epitomises the predicaments in which many graduates may find themselves. Though generalisation from these cases is clearly not possible, further research might well be shown to endorse the sentiments expressed so poignantly in the excerpts discussed.

The letters selected for analysis are of three kinds. The first are letters offering constructive suggestions for improvements to the FET college system. The second are letters, which, juxtaposed, demonstrate the bind which confusion about the apprenticeship system creates for learners. And the third are letters conveying deep-seated anxiety about life situations arising out of a combination of experience of technical college education and personal circumstances. Each will be dealt with in turn.

Improvements to the college system

Four letters make suggestions for improvements to the college system. Three of the four are amongst the most articulate letters received.

The first reads as follows:

I read with great interest your form of Technical College Learner Satisfaction Questionnaire, allow me to express my views.

The improvement that would be made at the Technical College, especially the engineering students is that they need seminars on the following topics:

- How to get the job you want.
- Business-orientation skills.
- Negotiations.
- Motivation and confidence restoration.

I have enclosed the complete Technical College Learner Satisfaction Questionnaire.

Thank you for your time and consideration. (Graduate letter 10)

The proposed seminar topics address two of the very practical issues that confront all college graduates entering the labour market: job-seeking skills ('Motivation'; 'How to get the job you want') and job interview and operational skills ('Negotiations'; 'Business orientation skills'). The implications for colleges are both obvious and immediate. More intriguing, however, is the writer's inclusion of 'confidence restoration'. The phrase captures the disheartening effects of apartheid on black people in South Africa, and, in the wake of the country's emergence not just into the world but also into a global village, on all South Africans, laagered as they were for nearly 50 years under isolationist policies. But it simultaneously comprehends the enormous challenge of building the morale variously of learners, at the personal and social levels, and of the nation as a whole.

The second letter addresses a number of issues succinctly, if a little elliptically:

It was a great experience completing the questionnaire. But a lot had to be done to improve or market technical colleges in townships. It seems as if employers are doubtful of the quality of education offered at these institutions, hence again students with NSC qualifications struggle to get jobs because employers fear to pay competitive salaries, hence most of these graduates had to opt for other jobs that they have not studied.

I personally would like the HSRC to conduct the same research at technical employers and would like to hear their response. (Graduate letter 11)

Some of the key challenges facing the college sector are addressed in this letter; but their elliptical articulation masks the import of the argument. First, the writer appears to argue at once for improvement of the quality of education in township colleges and for these colleges to be (better) marketed. A paradox is evident: employers would be 'doubtful of the quality of education offered at these institutions' probably for historical reasons (state colleges having been established in townships under a deliberately inferior Bantu Education dispensation); but while poor quality education is not exportable, some means needs to be found to bring township colleges into the industrial mainstream.

Second, graduate inability to find employment is attributed to employer 'fear to pay' market-related salaries. This 'fear' is really 'refusal': it is not so much that graduates are demanding competitive salaries as that employers are refusing to pay competitive salaries because the qualifications of township college graduates are not perceived to be comparable to those of their state-aided college counterparts. Graduates end up working in positions for which they have not been trained not because they will not accept non-competitive salaries, then, but because they are forced to accept any work they can find, competitively remunerated or not.

Third, the plea for the HSRC to survey employers about the issue of employing township college graduates reflects an understanding of the need to triangulate opinion from both graduate and employer perspectives. The deployment of an Employer Satisfaction Survey discussed in Chapter 4 represents a first attempt at such triangulation, which the HSRC hopes will be appropriated by colleges themselves as their capacity to undertake such surveys is enhanced.

The third letter exemplifies the graduate's dilemma as articulated in the second point in the above letter:

When you asked about my current work situation, I was not sure if you meant work in connection with my studies or just any form of employment. Currently I'm a casual shop assistant at [name of shop] store while I am still trying to find a job or apprenticeship (based on my studies). (Graduate letter 12)

This writer highlights, through personal experience, the question of whether college success is measured by any employment or by particular types. It also suggests the danger that college graduates will fall into the low-skills element of a polarised South

African labour market rather than finding work in the crucial, but underdeveloped, intermediate skills stratum. Moreover, by raising the issue of apprenticeship, it provides indirect commentary on the inadequacy of much college provision for access to this segment as a college education is no longer bundled with an apprenticeship, nor a largely automatic precursor to artisanal employment.

The fourth letter argues for greater industry support for colleges in the form of donations of equipment for practical work:

Our college is around many companies eg. [names of four companies]. But all these companies they donot support this college. If only each company can buy one machinery for those workshops [engineering workshops, computer laboratories], I believe that all of those workshop can be equipted fully and that will make it easy for practical instruction, in this college.

NB This companies are affecting us with smoke and with their blasting material but they donot give back anything to our community. (Graduate letter 13)

The argument for a symbiotic relationship between colleges and industry was taken up in Chapter 5 of this book. Suffice it to say here that a partnership approach towards education and training provision in the FET college sector may make the single biggest contribution towards rendering the sector more responsive to the country's socio-economic needs.

The apprenticeship bind

Two letters are offered here for comparison. Both of them deal with the issue of apprenticeships, but from different positions along the naivety-sophistication continuum.

The first excerpt reads as follows:

As from 1999, I tried by all means to get an apprenticeship to the company where I am employed. The traing Officer always told me that there is no space. And finally he told me that I am 'average'. This words confused me. From then until now, I remained Idle. I don't know if I can continue with my studies or not. (Graduate letter 4)

The essential naivety of this letter can be juxtaposed with the more sophisticated understanding of some of the dynamics at work in the college-industry relationship evident from the following excerpt:

Technical colleges are taking many unguided students for a ride. All companies I have tried getting an apprentice with told me they have frozen them till further notice. There is a lot of Nipotism in the Construction Industry and if you know nobody you are a nobody. Some companies like [name of company] only take technikon students because of the practical training they have when they go looking for an in-service training at S2 level. If technical colleges had effective and productive training we will deffinetly get employment but they do not and that is why we don't have jobs. Building companies work on time limits and teaching you what to do wastes their time so you end up not having a job...

Please Mr Cosser help us to be heard because we (N6 students) are just wispering and searching in the dark. (Graduate letter 3)

Both correspondents are operating 'in the dark'. The first has tried to secure an apprenticeship only in the company in which he/she is employed, but has failed either to understand the training dispensation in the company or to recognise his/her own inadequacies. There is resignation in the writer's language, the training officer's accusation of the graduate's being 'average' having reduced him/her to becoming 'Idle'. The second graduate, on the other hand, has at least approached a number of companies about admission to apprenticeships, and is aware of the training-through-apprenticeship hiatus, if not the reasons for it. This graduate has also, moreover, identified the factors that influence whether students will find employment or not: who you know in the industry; and whether you have undergone practical training. More importantly, however, he/she seems implicitly to appreciate the catch-22 situation (derived from Heller's [1961] book of the same name) in which employers want people with practical experience, but unless they have acquired the requisite skills in college or they have been apprenticed to an employer who does not want them in the first place unless they have practical experience, they cannot get such experience. This also should serve to remind us that colleges are not the authors of this problem but are engaged (albeit often with little success) in strategies to rebuild the connection between the practical and theoretical aspects of vocational learning.

Two portraits of college graduates

This chapter concludes with an analysis of two graduate letters that in their inimitable ways epitomise more poignantly than any statistics could do the possible plights of technical college graduates in South Africa.

The first letter reads as follows:

Mr M. Cosser.

I am writing you this letter because I feel there's a few things you need to know! (That I would like to share with you).

I did St 9 in a normal school in 1997. In that year my family and I had to go threw some changes. For 1 my father passed away; and 2, my mom was without a job. I then failed the year: the 1 teacher of mine starting been nasty to me, right after the funeral, and made things very difficult for me. In 1998 I went to college, where they were very friendly and helpful to my mother and I and I enrolled. I went back in 1999 to do Secreterial Catering and economics for I couldn't find a job This (catering + Economics) was also done on a NIC level. I passed that. Since then I have been in and out of jobs. I would like to go back to college to do my Matric. But unfortunately neither my mother or I have the money to do so. The job I have now is just about enough for me to buy groceries. But it is a job and hopefully will be permanent.

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Can you perhaps assist me with any options that I can take for me to become more educated. Can I apply for a study loan and where can I do something like that?

Thank you for your time and good work.

[Name and cell-phone number]. (Graduate letter 14)

The second reads:

Dear Michael Cosser my name is [name]. I went to [Name of college] to go into the field I wanted to study and complete my Technical Matric. At the time I was interested in the field I was going to study, but like every teenager you never really sure what you want to do. I studied Mechanical Engineering Fitting & Maching. I completed N1, N2, N3/NSC – at the time I did N4 but I failed some of the subjects – I only passed Drawing. I wanted to go up to N6 but nothing is always as easy as it seems. I was always good in drawing It was my best subject so I done AutoCad R14 I wanted to go into Draughting. After I failed N4 I left the College. The Teachers new I wasn't doing well but they didnt even try to help me or speak to me about anything. I tried to apply for work but they said that I dont have any practical experience, but if the companys are not willing to give working experience how do they expect me to get any experience. I went to employment agencies but they dont even want to know me with just a N3/NSC with bad marks and no working experience. The years have gone buy with just doing partime jobs and some casual jobs nothing to do with what I have studied. My life is a mess. I have no Career ahead of me and no goals. Ive even thought of Suicide. I would like to start my own business but I dont have any capital. I came up with some ideas which I asked some people to help me with but no one was interested to help. It is the beginning of the New Year and I dont know what Iam going to do with my self. I have no Job. Iam not even interested in the field I studied any more. Maybe what I need is to start all over again. I must be the most Comfused 21 year old around. Maybe the best thing is for me to end of life – I have nothing else. Not much of a college Graduate more like a College screw up. (Graduate letter 15)

The writers of these letters have at least two things in common: they are both young white South Africans seemingly from low socio-economic backgrounds; and they have both been 'in and out of jobs', as the first letter puts it, unable to fund either further study or business start-up. But the differences between the two are stark. While the first writer appears to have a job that may offer some permanence, the second does not; his jobs having been part time and/or casual. While the first has an essentially positive outlook on life despite the hardships she has endured, the outlook of the second is unremittingly negative. The first acknowledges the friendliness of college personnel (which seems to have been the reason for her enrolling in the college), stoically accepts that a job 'is a job' that 'hopefully' will last, and takes the initiative in asking for help. The second, however, paints the gloomiest picture imaginable of his learning-come-living trajectory, which not even his ideas for starting his own business or his tentative musing that he should 'start all over again' can redeem.

A discourse analysis of the second letter confirms, indeed, what is almost a pathological negativity. The word 'not' (either on its own or in contracted form) features nine times in the piece, 'no' four times, and 'never' once. The words 'failed' and 'nothing' each occur twice, while 'bad', 'mess', '[confused]' and 'screw up' occur once each. There are two references to suicide ('suicide' and 'end my life'). The worldview that emerges is one of absolute hopelessness. It is not clear from the piece what the relationship between college education and personal pathology is: did a string of adverse circumstances issue in a pathological negativity; or was an already depressive personality merely further depressed by these experiences? Perhaps both, in a mutually reinforcing way.

Conclusion

The last two letters analysed relate learning stories that personify the image of the college graduate that emerges from the statistics presented in Chapter 3. Neither is statistically typical of the technical college graduate of 1999 with an N2, N3 or NSC: a 21-year-old African male electrical engineering graduate, who is roughly as likely to be in employment, unemployed or in further studies two years after graduation. But both correspondents are, in different ways, victims of neglect at the hands of a broader education and training system that has failed to channel them into appropriate career paths. The issues raised by both recur in different forms in all the correspondence and bear out, albeit in exaggerated ways, some of the findings of the graduate tracer study.

There are no new conclusions to draw or challenges to pose from the foregoing analysis. But there are more than 50 technical college graduates whose voices are clamouring to be heard.