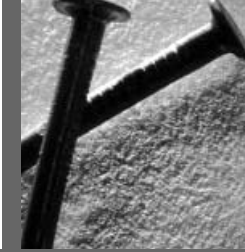# Chapter 7: Building college responsiveness in South Africa

Simon McGrath

It is common to denigrate the quality of public further education and training colleges as part of the call for greater responsiveness, or efficiency, or placement rates. However, there is a danger that the concentration of past failures and new challenges can serve to obscure the achievements that colleges have made and the progress that they are showing in meeting both old and new challenges. My personal experience of research visits to colleges is of meeting staff with a pride in their work and a desire to improve their practice.

Nonetheless, the newly merged colleges clearly do have to turn part of their attention to responsiveness. Whilst the notion of responsiveness should not be understood either uncritically or mono-dimensionally, improved responsiveness to a range of stakeholders and national priorities inevitably will be a major measure of the quality and success of the new colleges and system.

This book has sought to show the multifaceted nature of responsiveness through the lenses of multiple methodologies and perspectives on the issue. Inevitably the contested and complex nature of the terrain of FET reform has meant that a simple triangulation of findings across the chapters has not been possible. This is important, as there is no universal technical definition of responsiveness or a single route map that can direct colleges to this goal. Nonetheless, what the various chapters do display is a sense of the complex challenges that colleges will continue to face in this area. Some of these relate strongly to the history of colleges, within a broader and deeply problematic history of South African education, training and labour market practices. Others relate to still contested or challenging areas of the post-1994 policy settlement. Still others relate to the imperative of being responsive to disparate stakeholders. In the next few pages, I will briefly recap the main issues that have emerged in the previous chapters, and I will attempt to show their broader salience for the future of colleges and their responsiveness.

The nature and challenge of responsiveness

As both my earlier chapter and Unwin's make clear, responsiveness cannot be seen in simple technical or value-neutral terms. The discourse of responsiveness clearly emerged, in large part, out of a crisis of businesses, not colleges. However, colleges were not simply scapegoats for the failure of business. Rather, as Unwin suggests, the international economic crisis of the 1970s was accompanied by rapid technological change that significantly impacted on the traditional work of technical colleges. Moreover, the resultant mass levels of youth unemployment inevitably did lead to a further set of new challenges for colleges.

Whilst the manner in which the discourse of responsiveness emerged and has been utilised should warn us against a simplistic acceptance of the new imperative, it is equally untenable simply to reject the new challenge as ideologically motivated. Throughout this book, but most powerfully in Chapter 6, there is a strand that talks to the human cost of the weak articulation between colleges and the labour market. Colleges would be failing in their duty to their students and the nation if they were not to strive to become more responsive.

Making sense of the complex findings of this book regarding responsiveness

One of the strengths of the analysis presented in this book is its insistence on the complexity of such responsiveness. Whilst all public colleges have a duty to respond to national imperatives, it is clear that they must also begin to address systematically the challenges and possibilities of their local labour environments. There is an urgent need for new research and experimentation, in South Africa and elsewhere, to develop better models of skills development for local labour markets. However, this does not need to limit colleges to looking just at their immediate environments. As I have argued elsewhere (King & McGrath 2002), there is also a need and an opportunity to see where colleges can be regional, national and even international centres of excellence.

Having said that responsiveness is complex, and having looked at it through four different lenses, it is time to attempt to make sense of the complexity and, indeed, the apparent contradictions in the evidence. On the one hand, we have evidence that the graduates and employers who responded to the survey are largely positive about the quality and relevance of college education. On the other, we have evidence that the linkages between colleges and employers are poor; we have the powerfully negative experiences of some graduates, expressed in their letters; and we have the low level of graduate employment.

Signs of strength and success

There is considerable evidence of graduate and employer satisfaction in the two surveys. On a five-point Likert scale, graduates rated 8 out of 15 college characteristics at 4 or more; with the rest all being above 3, with staff quality rated highest of all. On a similar scale, 83 per cent of employers rated their overall satisfaction with colleges in the highest two categories. The majority also rated as satisfactory or very satisfactory the relevance of course content to industry/business needs (78 per cent), and the competency of college teaching staff (73 per cent). Moreover, the positive elements of the system do not lie simply in the former white colleges. Instead, some of the best facilities are to be found in urban black colleges, which are typically much younger than white institutions and which have often had considerable corporate support.

Colleges were largely immune from the political contestations of the 1970s and 1980s, although some saw more contested internal politics in the mid-1990s. For the most part, their culture of learning and teaching is far more intact than in large segments of schooling and higher education. Crucially, for many communities, especially in small towns, technical colleges were a vital and highly respected resource for local socio-economic development and one of the strongest functioning of all state institutions.

Moreover, if the surveys had been conducted more recently, then it is probable that the story would be even more favourable. The endeavours of the Department of Education (DoE), colleges, and other stakeholders around the establishment of the 50 new FET colleges has resulted in a strengthening of governance, management and teaching, although this progress remains rather new and fragile. Colleges are being strongly encouraged to be more responsive and seem, for the most part, to be enthusiastically responding to the new challenges they face.

CHAPTER 7

Signs of weakness and failure

However, signs of present hope and of past quality should not blind us to the serious challenges that the college sector faces and the manifestations of weakness, both in colleges and in their broader interactions.

There seems to be a strong strand of complacency and ignorance running through our multiple stories. This goes some way to explaining why employers and graduates are so positive about colleges regardless of the poor labour market outcomes that appear to issue from the system.

The longer-term story of low-skills equilibrium in South Africa appears to be central to this. Too many employers have preferred to poach skilled workers rather than train and have taken a largely passive attitude towards skills development. Too few of them have seen their local college as a vital partner and have taken a proactive stance in supporting these institutions. Local chambers of business remain relatively weak and SETAs have not taken on enough of a local or regional feel to provide a close collaborator for the college system. Unwin also reminds us that employers in Britain have not always reacted enthusiastically to increased college responsiveness, particularly where it has expected them also to become more proactive with regard to their staff's skills development. Colleges have often appeared to be too ready to bemoan this state of affairs than to go out and market themselves to local employers. In part, this has been because of their limited autonomy (especially in the case of state colleges). Colleges have not always exploited their ability to be responsive to its full extent in the area of short courses targeted at local employers. With the decline of apprenticeship, colleges find it difficult to place students in any form of meaningful work experience. They have also done little to find resources for adequate career guidance.

Learners show little sense of where they are going after college and little concern about taking control of either their learning or their transition to work. Without much exposure to career guidance (17 per cent of graduates surveyed) or work experience (22 per cent of graduates surveyed), the majority have a poor understanding of the world into which they are soon to enter after their short stay in college.

The most simplistic but also the most powerful indicator of college success is the employment rate of graduates. Twenty-eight per cent of the respondents to the graduate survey reported being in formal wage employment, whilst a further six per cent were self-employed or working in an informal enterprise. This 34 per cent total of employment is clearly too low. Chapter 6 paints a dramatic picture of the individual cost to some of those who have not gained work.

However, the situation is not as stark or simple as it seems. It is important to note that the above figures do not mean a 66 per cent unemployment rate. Thirty-five per cent of those surveyed were still studying two years later. How do we understand the motivations of a large percentage of graduates who are going on to further studies? It is quite probable that many are continuing in their studies because their certificates are not seen as good enough. They may perceive, correctly, that their life chances are improved by a higher qualification. However, we need to ask whether being in a college, technikon or university is simply a more congenial alternative to sitting on a street corner waiting for

employment. Is it simply putting off that inevitable and undesired day? The survey cannot get to the full complexity of learner motivations in these areas, but it does serve to highlight their importance for policy-makers and practitioners.

We also need to see the employment rate of college graduates in the context of the dynamics of the youth labour market. Youth unemployment is a massive problem in South Africa. Individuals of 30 years or younger constitute 56 per cent of the total unemployed. The unemployment rate ranges between 50 to 63 per cent for the 15 to 24 age cohort, with the highest rate, 63 per cent, being recorded for 17-year-olds. Between 1995 and 1999, only 29 per cent of new African entrants to the labour market were able to find employment. For those with matriculation, the figure only rose to 36 per cent (all figures are taken from McCord & Bhorat 2003). What this means is that college graduates are just some of more than one million annual new entrants to the labour market, in a situation where only about a third are likely to find employment (Kraak 2003a).

Chapter 3 shows that 81 per cent of graduates had already completed schooling up to Grade 12. Therefore, in the logic of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), they were repeating their education up to NQF level 4. Whilst it would be unreasonable to view all decisions to enter technical college and all subsequent decisions to study beyond N3 as motivated by the high levels of youth unemployment, it is possible to see a trend in which learners keep adding further educational qualifications to their CVs in the (often desperate) hope that they will eventually find employment.

In the light of the low placement rates across the youth labour market it is important to ask what would be a good placement rate in the context of jobless growth and massive youth unemployment. A series of further questions emerges. How long should it take graduates to find employment? Does it matter that many graduates seem then to have failed to stay employed? Is 'being employed' a particularly useful notion, or is it more important to talk about the quality of that employment? Is that to be measured in terms of wage; of relevance to qualification; or of duration of contract? Should we be seeking to measure the contribution that colleges, through graduates, make to the productivity and competitiveness of enterprises and the national economy?

It is important also to relate these issues to local and regional labour markets. The three case studies presented by Badroodien paint a complex picture of how colleges are interacting with their local labour environments. In some cases, as in his North West example, there is a strong sense of college embeddedness in local economic development strategies. However, in many other locations there is a sense of colleges still stuck in provision for a labour market that is no longer there or abandoning the field of intermediate skills development. This chapter does highlight the difficulties faced by colleges when their traditional partners are in decline, but it also offers a strong sense that some colleges are more proactive in their responses to such challenges. The bulk of provision still remains locked into the engineering sector, which is not likely to be a major economic growth sector and where demand is increasingly for postgraduate not pre-degree level qualifications (Steyn & Daniels 2003). However, there is a strong sense in some colleges of a focus on new niches. It is to be hoped that policy developments around the proposed FET certificate will support a diversification of college provision. This is an issue that I will return to later when I turn to the role of the state in promoting college responsiveness.

Colleges' performance in getting their graduates into employment also has to be understood in the context of labour market segmentation on both racial and gender grounds. In the graduate survey, whites were almost three times as likely to be employed as Africans. There is also a racial differential in the type of occupation in which such employment takes place. Whilst whites are most likely to be employed as technicians, Africans are most likely to fill less senior craft worker roles. Female learners are still far less likely to enter into engineering courses than males. Strikingly, gender emerges as the strongest predictor of a graduate's occupation. Moreover, there is a clear gender imbalance in terms of securing employment. Only 21 per cent of female graduates are employed, as opposed to 30 per cent for their male counterparts. These statistics suggest major challenges ahead for colleges as they increasingly commit themselves to equity in the face of a still profoundly inequitable labour market.

Broader role-players in responsiveness

Across the chapters there is a sense that responsiveness is not just about the relationship between colleges and industry. Unwin, in particular, stresses the responsibility that colleges have to respond to the needs of staff, students and communities. Balancing the interests of all the relevant stakeholders will clearly be a challenge for the newly-merged colleges.

Again, there is an important practical and research challenge here. What can and should responsiveness to communities mean? Would this take us back into the realms of the community college, which was largely abandoned as a notion by the late 1990s? Would it see colleges being much more strongly rewarded for contributing to community development activities than they are presently?

Unwin also points to the danger of an uncritical and ideological shift towards responsiveness to learners as consumers. It is also crucial that a sensible model of how to include learners in decision-making is developed. Inevitably, this cannot simply take imported notions of learner as consumer for granted but must connect this with the particular history of learner engagement and protest in South African schools and colleges.

Finally, the rights and responsibilities of teaching (and other) staff do need to be thought about in a systematic way. Customer- and market-orientedness need to be balanced in practical terms with decent work. Unhappy lecturers are likely to be ineffective lecturers. Equally, the trend towards part-time lecturers, seen clearly in British further education, is likely to have negative effects on quality, even if it brings apparent efficiency benefits.

The ongoing challenge of mergers

The Department of Education has successfully outlined a vision for a new institutional landscape for the college sector. However, it is clear that the merger process will continue to bring challenges for the foreseeable future. Unwin's chapter provides a useful table of what does and does not work in partnerships, and several of these points are also salient to the process of mergers. Trust, collegiality and common identity are processes to be worked out, not outcomes to be immediately achieved on the publication of a new

policy. Unwin also highlights the key role that leadership will need to play in making merged colleges succeed, whilst Badroodien points to some of the main challenges for staff development, which cannot be divorced from the racialised legacy of the colleges. These too are areas that will be of crucial importance for the college merger process, particularly as the merged colleges are also being expected to take on new teaching and learning ideas and responsibilities.

The challenge for the national and provincial Departments of Education in managing the system

Unwin identifies a major challenge for national governments in managing 'responsive' FET systems. The process of privileging responsiveness leads to the growth of college autonomy and the encouragement of erstwhile civil service-oriented principals to understand themselves more as private sector-style chief executive officers. The entrepreneurial and flexible spirit of the new college internationally, however, potentially can lead to the abandonment of national strategies in favour of short-term and local competitive advantage. Elements of the national vision for FET colleges include a strong sense of the primacy of educational values; an imperative towards equity; and a close alignment with the NQF and the principle of whole, award-bearing programmes. In all of these areas, autonomy and responsiveness could point in other directions.

Let me give two examples here. First, one potentially attractive responsiveness strategy for colleges is to provide short courses for employers, without much regard for their NQF-alignment. College short-termism could come to compound industry short-termism. Second, there is an emerging curricular tension between the types of NQF level 4 awards beginning to be offered in colleges as a result of collaboration with Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and what it is expected that the Department of Education (DoE) will want included in the college version of the FET certificate, when this is finally developed. It seems likely that a gap will emerge between the two types of awards (even though they should be notionally identical) regarding the general educational content of the awards. A 'responsive' college might be tempted to see the SETA-accredited course as the more 'relevant'. However, this might run contrary to the college's financial interest in delivering DoE-accredited courses and the Department's authority over, and vision for, the sector.

The national Department of Education, thus, is faced with a challenge regarding how much autonomy and what kind of responsiveness it should legislate for, as well as the need to have capacity to enforce its strategy in this regard. The situation in South Africa is complicated by the ongoing range of interpretations of the practical role of the national Department, as opposed to provincial departments, in managing the day-to-day running of the college sector.

The relationship between the provincial departments and the new colleges is also an issue for the playing out of the notion of responsiveness. The new college heads are not only 'Chief Executive Officers' (CEOs) but have been given the bureaucratic rank of director. This means that they are now at the same rank as those with provincial responsibility for their oversight. How provincial directors of FET colleges manage their relationship with the new CEOs will be a major practical test for the thrust towards responsiveness.

The challenge of making college programmes more responsive

Becoming more responsive requires serious reworking of the courses provided by colleges. The Department of Education is, of course, in the process of revising its own range of courses. The SETAs are also developing a wide range of learnership programmes for which colleges are increasingly seeking to become accredited providers. In these processes, colleges will be forced to address the issue of quality assurance far more seriously than previously. In this they should be strongly assisted by the launch of Umalusi as the GET and FET Education and Training Quality Assurance agency (ETQA) in April 2003.

However, there is a need for caution around the largely technical debate about new programmes, revised curricula and strengthened quality assurance procedures. More responsive, more flexible programmes will bring new burdens on colleges and their staff. Viable strategies need to be developed for meeting these. The existing N programmes are already very lean and it is difficult to see where there might be space for new concerns about generic skills or improving English, Mathematics and Science competencies. Moreover, many of the skills and much of the knowledge that the new FET system is intended to develop are conceptually very different from the forms of skills and knowledge privileged under the old technical college model (Gamble 2003b). The implications of this for learning under the new programmes have not been addressed sufficiently.

Boundary disputes between FET and HET, and the position of the colleges

The boundary area between the FET and HET levels is perhaps the most significant part of the qualifications system when it comes to meeting the challenge of economic and social development in South Africa at present. It is at these levels that intermediate skills are developed, and these skills have been crucial to economic and industrial development internationally (Kraak 2003a). Moreover, the greater spread of these intermediate skills can play an important role in reducing the polarisation of the South African labour market into high-skills and low-skills segments, a polarisation that was set in motion by the development path of the apartheid state.

Whereas demand has been stagnant or even declining in many high-skills areas, Figure 7.1 on perceived skills shortages, from the 2000 national industrial training survey, suggests that the highest demand is for intermediate skills.

There are long-standing complaints that the South African economy has tended towards an underdevelopment of crucial intermediate level skills. Whilst there has been a radical shift towards black employment at these levels in the past 25 years, it appears that the South African economy may face serious constraints in successfully expanding production for domestic and international markets in areas such as manufacturing because of the weak skills base. The problem in the formal economy is also mirrored in the informal economy, where South Africa is far weaker in terms of technical and craft skills than the majority of other African countries. The importance of this area is also indicated by the clustering of 47 per cent of learnership awards at NQF levels 4 and 5 (DoL 2002: 13).

Figure 7.1: Perceived skills shortages by occupational category
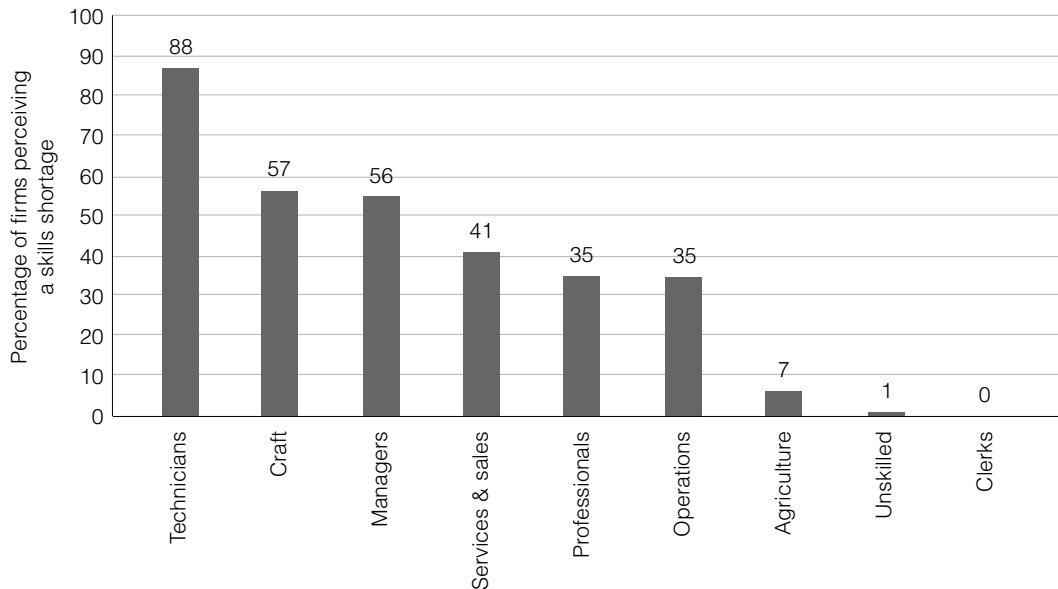
Source: Kraak et al. (2000: 80)

If colleges were to be discouraged from continuing their current levels of provision in the upper, N4 to N6 (NQF 5) segment of the intermediate skills area, then it is important to consider where public provision of such skills will lie. The superficial answer is with technikons. However, this answer only serves to raise more problems.

Crucially, there was a significant decline over the 1990s in the number of technikon engineering graduates at diplomate and BTech levels (Kraak 2003a: 27). This is crucial as these are the qualifications that, alongside N4 to N6, play the key role in delivering technician level training. It appears that technikons may be suffering from a form of academic drift that is taking them into higher status academic qualifications and away from technician preparation. This is ironic as their initial rationale, as they came to be differentiated from technical colleges, was that they were to offer programmes that went beyond the artisanal level into the realm of technician preparation. The DoE appears to be stepping back from limiting higher-level programmes in colleges but a clear challenge remains of finding the right balance between technikons and colleges in NQF 5 provision.

The issue of short courses

Badroodien also raises the issue of short courses as a form of responsiveness, noted above. Such courses can be argued to be an important element of responsiveness, being related to the expressed needs of local industry, community and learners rather than the aggregated and more distant reasoning of policy-makers. Moreover, there is much potential merit in short courses, as a way of meeting the practical and strategic needs of poor and ill-educated individuals and communities. For those working in rural subsistence agriculture or the urban informal sector, short courses are likely to be far more accessible than longer programmes. However, there is a danger in taking this logic too far.

Badroodien cautions that a dualistic practice might grow up within merged colleges with historically white and urban campuses focusing on longer, accredited programmes and township and rural campuses being ghettoised as the providers of short, community-focused courses.

The challenge of learner demographics

I have already stated the imperative that colleges must be responsive to their learners. Cosser's analysis of the graduate survey makes clear a number of challenges in this regard that are linked to the characteristics of the learner body.

The racial profile of learners in the college sector has changed dramatically in the past 20 years and especially since 1994. This means that colleges are faced with a greater challenge than previously in responding to the apartheid legacy of weaknesses in school education, most notably in English, Mathematics and Science teaching and learning in historically African schools. Whilst there are signs of school improvement in these areas, the legacy of the past will be slow to evaporate. In the meantime, colleges will face an important challenge of remedial work in key areas of skills and knowledge.

The success of colleges in promoting responsiveness and employment is also strongly shaped by the continuing playing out of race issues in the labour market. Placement of learners for both work experience and employment will continue to be shaped in part by racialised notions of learner suitability. At the same time, the promotion of employment equity necessarily will impact on the placement rates of students into the labour market and remuneration on offer there. By no means all of the labour market failure of graduates can be placed at the door of the colleges.

Notions of the unsuitability of female learners for work in technical trades also continue to be a particular challenge for college efforts at securing employment for graduates. Colleges can play a part in overcoming this through their policies and practices but it is clear that broader efforts to change employer and societal views will also be necessary. Here colleges are enjoined to be responsive to national goals that are not necessarily in line with the expressed needs of employers and communities.

Colleges are also being pulled in two ways on the issue of the age profile of learners. On the one hand, they are being encouraged to play a leading role in addressing the issue of youth unemployment. On the other, they are called to address the needs of adult learners, both those in need of skills upgrading to access the labour market and those who need to retrain as a result of technological changes in the firms within which they are already employed. Colleges will need to balance these responsiveness pressures if they are to meet the diverse expectations made of them, but they will also need the right economic and policy signals to assist their decision-making.

The challenge of building understanding of responsiveness

This study is an important step towards a better understanding of the challenge of responsiveness in the new FET college sector. It attempts to show the interactions between four sets of players or systems in shaping the issue of responsiveness, namely: learners, employers, colleges and labour markets.

Crucially, it notes that all of these are differentiated and cannot be understood monolithically. This four-part understanding of the dynamics of responsiveness is an important step forward in analysis of the issue. However, it points to the need for ongoing research in this field. In particular, there is a pressing need to develop the concept of responsiveness further and to address other perspectives such as those of communities and college staff.

The research reported in this book makes a compelling case for a multifaceted research strategy for understanding responsiveness. Given the concerns we have raised about the perspectives of particular stakeholder groups, it is important to look at this complex issue from a number of viewpoints. Moreover, much of the argument has been about the need to locate the issue of responsiveness in multiple debates and contexts. However, it is clear that such an approach needs to be refined further. In particular, the flow of the research between different phases needs more attention, as does the low response rate of employers.

This study is part of a growing body of research on the FET college sector in South Africa. This is to be welcomed given the traditionally low status and attention given to such research (McGrath 2001). Colleges will struggle to move beyond the legacy of the past but it is clear that policy-makers, practitioners and researchers are strongly committed to making the new system work. It is to be hoped that research such as this can play a role in furthering this process and in building better bridges of understanding amongst these constituencies and with learners, communities and employers.