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The Challenges of Improving the Labour Market Responsiveness of South African FET Institutions[1]

HSRC RESEARCH OUTPUTS
2574

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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 recently 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 monodimensionally, 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.

It is important to note that responsiveness is multifaceted. There is no universal technical definition of responsiveness nor a single route map that can direct colleges to this goal. Nonetheless, this paper will seek to provide 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 explore what we know from a recent HSRC study of college responsiveness (Cosser et al. 2003) and attempt to show its broader salience for the future of colleges.

I will not dwell here on the methodological elements of the study. It was an ambitious attempt to develop a new, multi-pronged approach to researching college responsiveness and there are clear needs for refinement of the approach. However, the study is being used in this paper primarily as a starting point for thinking more critically about the issue of responsiveness.

THE NATURE AND CHALLENGE OF RESPONSIVENESS

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, 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.

[1] This is a revised version of the concluding chapter of Cosser et al. (2003). My thanks go to my co-authors in that book for providing the foundations upon which this paper is constructed and JET Educational Services for their funding of that research. The interpretations are my own.

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. 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 COMPLEXITY OF THE EVIDENCE ON COLLEGE RESPONSIVENESS

It is vital for researchers to insist 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 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 and 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, it is nevertheless important to attempt to make sense of the complexity and, indeed, the apparent contradictions that can emerge when its different facets are studied or when different stakeholders are consulted. For instance, in the HSRC study we find, on the one hand, that graduates and employers report that they are largely positive about the quality and relevance of college education. Yet, 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 strengths and successes

There is considerable evidence of graduate and employer satisfaction in the employer and graduate surveys conducted by the HSRC. 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% 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%), and the competency of college teaching staff (73%). 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 township 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 have been conducted more recently, then it is probable that the story would be even more favourable. The endeavours of the 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.

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, nor to the manifestations of weakness, both in colleges and in their broader interactions.

There seems to be a strong strand of complacency and ignorance in employer, college and graduate accounts of the relationship between education and work. 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 a low skill 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. It is important to remember that employers in other countries have not always reacted enthusiastically to increased college responsiveness, particularly where it has expected them also to become more pro-active 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 targetted 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% of graduates surveyed) or work experience (22% 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. 28% of respondents to the graduate survey reported being in formal wage employment, whilst a further 6% were self-employed or working in an informal enterprise. This 34% total of employment is clearly too low. Through a consideration of unsolicited letters from

some graduates, the HSRC study also 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% unemployment rate. 35% of those surveyed were still studying two years later. How do we understand the motivations of 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? I do not have authoritative answers to these questions, but a better understanding of the dynamics at play is crucial.

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% of the total unemployed. The unemployment rate ranges between 50 to 63% for the 15 to 24 age cohort, with the highest rate, 63%, being recorded for 17 year olds. Between 1995 and 1999, only 29% of new African entrants to the labour market were able to find employment. For those with matriculation, the figure only rose to 36% (all figures are taken from McCord and Bhorat 2004). What this means is that college graduates are just some of more than 1 million annual new entrants to the labour market, in a situation where only about a third are likely to find employment (Kraak 2004).

81% of graduates had already completed schooling up to Grade 12. Therefore, in the logic of the 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 emerge. 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 in this regard paint a complex picture of how colleges are interacting with their local labour environments. In some cases, as in the 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. The study highlights 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 post-graduate not pre-degree level qualifications (Steyn and Daniels 2004). 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 craftworker 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% of female graduates are employed, as opposed to 30% 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 ROLEPLAYERS IN RESPONSIVENESS

Responsiveness is not just about the relationship between colleges and industry. Colleges also 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 recently-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?

There is also danger in 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 FE, is likely to have negative effects on quality, even if it brings apparent efficiency benefits.

THE ON-GOING 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. Trust, collegiality and common identity are processes to be worked out, not outcomes to be immediately achieved on the publication of a new policy. Leadership will need to play a key role in making merged colleges succeed, as will 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

There is 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 National Qualifications Framework 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, given the limited employer interest in NQF awards. This scenario will necessarily become more pertinent if colleges do begin to focus more on the specific skills needs of SMMEs. However, it is evident that the vast majority of such enterprises are unlikely ever to want or be able to follow NQF-related training. Thus, meaningful responsiveness to this constituency would not be primarily NQF-aligned. However, such responsiveness would run contrary to national policy visions.

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 SETAs; and what might emerge from the DoE as the college version of the FET Certificate. Responsiveness to industry would appear to push colleges towards learnerships and other SETA-related awards for the current, largely post-matric clientele. However, the NQF Response (DoE and DoL 2003) appears to envisage colleges' priority as delivering "general vocational" qualifications to learners who have come to them from GET. 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 on-going rangé 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" 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, helped by the emergence of Umalusi.

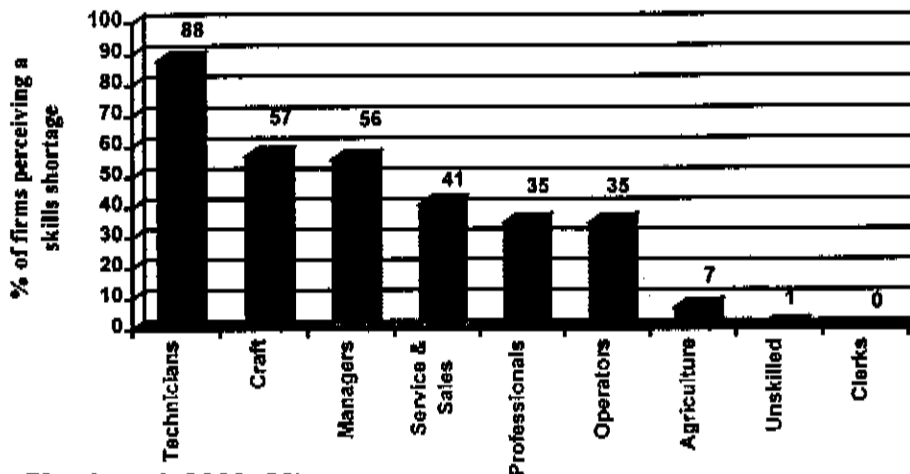
However, there is a need for caution around the largely technical debate about new programmes, revised curricula and strengthened quality assurance procedures. More responsive, more flexible programmes will bring new burdens on colleges and their staff. Viable strategies need to be developed for meeting 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 2004). 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 2004). 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 skill areas, the following figure on perceived skills shortages, from the 2000 National Industrial Training Survey, suggests that the highest demand is for intermediate skills.

Figure 1: Perceived Skills Shortages by Occupational Category



(Kraak et al. 2000: 80)

There are long-standing complaints that the South African economy has tended towards an under-development 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 intermediate skills is also indicated by the clustering of 47% of learnership awards at NQF levels 4 and 5 (DoL 2002: 13).

If colleges are to be further discouraged from continuing their current levels of provision in the upper, N4-6 (NQF5) 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.

Worryingly, there was a significant decline over the 1990s in the number of technikon engineering graduates at diplomate and BTech levels (Kraak 2004: 27). This is crucial as these are the qualifications that, alongside N4-6, 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. A clear challenge remains in finding the right balance between technikons and colleges in NQF 5 provision.

THE CHALLENGE OF LEARNER DEMOGRAPHICS

I have already stated the imperative that colleges must be responsive to their learners. The HSRC's college 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 are 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.

CONCLUSION

College level education's special nature means that it is expected to be the most responsive of all education's segments to the world-of-work. It also makes the college sector the most sensitive to the overall performance of the economy and trends within it. South African colleges are faced with a harsh external environment characterised by massive youth unemployment; a tendency by many employers to neglect intermediate skills; and a breakdown of many of colleges' traditional

relationships with employers. They also face the continuing challenge of not getting the best learners, whilst at the same time being expected to raise the quality of the education they provide.

These challenges should not be minimised. Colleges do need to respond to economic, social and education imperatives and to improve their responsiveness continuously. There are signs that the recently merged colleges are increasingly seeking to address this challenge, but there is much still to be done. In striving towards better responsiveness, it is vital that a more sophisticated understanding of what responsiveness means is developed. It is also essential that the colleges find willing collaborators in government and business. Together, they can build better quality FET and so contribute to the building of better lives for the hundreds of thousands of college learners.

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The Challenges of Improving the Responsiveness of South African Public FET Institutions

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What does responsiveness mean?

- Often seen as
  "Better serving the needs of employers, thus increasing the employment and employability of learners"
- This is only a partial definition, ignoring the complexity of the notion

Why do colleges need to be responsive?

- **The FET College sector is the most responsive layer of the education system, most powerfully influenced by economic and development agendas**
- **Rationale for colleges, in part, has always been about preparation for the world-of-work**
- **This becomes more acute when economy is malfunctioning**

The need to address multiple dimensions of responsiveness

- Responsiveness to development
- Responsiveness to business
- Responsiveness to SMME development
- Responsiveness to community needs
- Responsiveness to educational imperatives

Responsiveness to development

- Colleges are among the limited range of relatively well-established tools the state has for delivering on its development objectives, especially in more rural areas
- Colleges are seen as crucial to the challenge of youth unemployment and addressing skills shortages
- Colleges have a key role in formation of new citizens and members of communities

Challenges in being a "development college'

- **Danger that colleges are expected to do too much with too few resources**
- **Danger of confused and inadequate vision**
- **Weakness of the "development state" in South Africa**
- **Danger of colleges being blamed for the failures of others**

Responsiveness to business

- Colleges have a crucial role in developing new intermediately skilled workers and in upskilling existing ones
- Technological changes highlight the need for better and more frequent formal knowledge acquisition for workers
- Colleges need to augment learning programmes with shorter inputs, often tailor-made and delivered in workplaces

Challenges in business responsiveness

- **Apprenticeship-based linkages have withered away but have not been replaced yet by those based in learnerships**
- **Curriculum change has been too slow and college-SETA relationships are still problematic**
- **Many South African businesses have a continuing tendency to under-train**

Responsiveness to SMME development

- Colleges are increasingly expected to meet the skills needs of the SMME sector, particularly at the VSME level
- Need to better support the transition to employment in VSMEs
- Need to enhance skills in existing VSMEs

The challenges of colleges÷ interventions in VSME skills

- Very limited international success
- Experience, networks and capital are all important in enterprise success and cannot easily be gained by youth
- Conventional programmes are typically not suitable for either those in VSMEs or those expecting to enter them
- Public interventions in VSMEs often distort the sector

Responsiveness to community needs

- In many settings, colleges are the only significant point of access for post-school learning
- Colleges are increasingly seen as having multiple roles in lifelong learning
- Colleges need to develop further their role in supporting skills development for community development

Challenges to community responsiveness

- Newly merged colleges are faced with multiple and divergent community interests and demands
- Challenge of making colleges fully owned by wide range of communities
- Challenge of overcoming multiple legacies of the past in public perceptions of colleges

Responsiveness to educational imperatives

- Colleges have a responsibility to provide quality education
- Colleges have a duty of pastoral care and of promoting personal and social development
- Colleges need to improve equity of educational access and achievement

Challenges to the provision of quality learning

- Ongoing need for staff development
- Need for infrastructural rehabilitation and development
- Need for curricular overhaul
- Need for massively enhanced systems of learner support

The challenge of managing multiple responsiveness demands

- Colleges also must be responsive to the needs and rights of staff
- Colleges' values and visions need to address the relative weight they place on different aspects of responsiveness
- Colleges' leaders need to manage this balance in practice

Responsiveness is not the sole responsibility of colleges

- Employers need to become more serious about training, and how they can build their local providers
- The state needs to provide a more enabling environment
- Communities need to take a more active role in building their local colleges
- Learners need to take greater responsibility for their learning