Employability in the College Sector: A Comparative Study of England and South Africa

Draft Report – March 2010

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This document is an output from the EPA Project funded by the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) for the benefit of the UK and African Further and Higher Education Sectors. The views expressed are not necessarily those of BIS, nor the British Council.
1. Introduction

Employability is commonly seen as one of the manifestations of the rapid changes associated with the globalisation era of the past two decades (cf. Field 2000). It is essentially a three-act story. First, the decline of industrial production and the rise of a services- (even knowledge-) based economy in the OECD countries necessitate a new form of preparation for the world-of-work. Second, the dominance of Neo-Liberal ideology makes even parties formerly of the left abandon the welfare state and embrace education and work as the ways to end poverty and social exclusion. Third, the related notions of lifelong learning and boundaryless careers portray this new world as one of exciting opportunities for those that embrace it. All of these factors are held to make a focus on an individual's ability to gain initial employment, maintain employment, move between roles within the same organisation, obtain new employment if required and (ideally) secure suitable and sufficiently fulfilling work, in other words- their employability, more important than the simple state of being employed (Hillage and Pollard 1998).

These issues have been given a new imperative in many countries due to the current recession, considered to be the deepest at the global level since the 1930s. This has resulted in increasing levels of unemployment, which are experienced particularly by young people. In the UK, youth unemployment (under 25) reached 20% as compared to 8% in the general population in mid-2009 (Blanchflower 2009) and is forecast to go higher; whilst South African youth unemployment estimates (here meaning for those aged 15-34) are typically double that of the general population, oscillating around 50% youth and 25% general in the period 2005-9 (www.statssa.gov.za; Altman 2008). In this context, the challenge of even gaining initial employment seems particularly serious.

Educational providers across all levels are expected to respond to the employability imperative. Public further and higher education institutions, in particular, have been encouraged to transform their curricula and pedagogies in its service. For FE(T) colleges, the challenge has been especially stark as the rise of employability has been closely intertwined with the demise of apprenticeship and a related collapse of old business partnerships. Instead, the recent past has seen the rise of new, larger and
more diverse clienteles whom colleges are now expected to make employable, and an imperative to include business interests in governance structures, programme planning and joint ventures.

The purpose of this project is to improve understandings of employability in a threefold manner: practically through the experiences and challenges of FE(T) colleges; theoretically within the discipline of education; and comparatively by looking at contexts and experiences in England and South Africa.

The report next provides a brief methodological note before proceeding to a more extended review of the relevant literatures. It considers the existing literature on employability and argues that this needs to be placed alongside other literatures, notably those of institutional change and responsiveness within the college sector. As will become clear on reading this report, the team believe that even expanded notions of employability (see the literature review below) are insufficient as they lack the necessary grounding within the educational institutions in which employability is both made sense of and acted upon. Moreover, the report will stress the importance of further contexts: those of the local area in which colleges remain largely grounded; of the region / province as an administrative / planning unit for development; and of the nation.

After the literature review, the project is then located briefly in the three colleges’ internal and external contexts before going on to look at the key lessons learned under five headings:

- Students
- Staff
- Institutions
- Employers
- Policy

The report then concludes by considering what the implications of the study are for practice, policy and research both in the partner countries and beyond.
2. Methodological Note

These findings emerge from a small project, funded primarily to build practical partnerships rather than to develop a rich research account. It is written by a team that comprises both academic researchers and college managers. Nonetheless, the team sought to make the process as rigorous as possible and have generated what is intended to be a plausible account of what employability means for these three colleges that is also of wider salience. However, it is important to note that these colleges were selected for the project because they were “beacon” colleges: colleges that by virtue of their inspection results, reputation, examination results, size and/or funding could be seen as “leading” colleges that might be expected to display important elements of above average practice with respect to quality, employability and responsiveness. There is no claim being made that they are typical but the team believes that the focus on these colleges allow the emergence of themes that are more widely relevant to the FE(T) sectors in both countries and beyond.

The report is largely very positive about the efforts of these colleges. In large part, this reflects a deliberate choice to work in “leading” colleges but also strong impressions as a team that there were many examples of at least emerging good practice. If the report does focus on the positives, it does not pretend that everything is well in these colleges. They are in a long unfolding process of transformation and the story told here is largely one of the steps forward they have taken. Nonetheless, there is also an attempt to problematise the “good practices” in some of the analysis in sections 5 and 6.

Whilst a wide range of programme areas and support departments were engaged with, there was a deliberate design bias towards the engineering and construction trades. This was done as the team saw the literature on employability as being largely premised on the assumptions of a post-industrial future. On the one hand, it was clear from the international evidence that such a future has yet to come to pass and that manufacturing remains a key component of economic success. On the other, it seemed that there would be merits in exploring how far a discourse of “soft” skills had permeated these “hard” trades.

The core of the methodological approach was the institutional visits by the whole team to each of the three colleges. Prior and subsequent to these visits, the three regional teams met to discuss what data was required and available. This led to the gathering and subsequent analysis of college strategic plans and other internal documents; exploration of college websites; and reading of relevant national and provincial strategy
documents. During the college visits a number of further data sources were accessed. These included: interviews, presentations and focus groups of senior management; interviews and focus groups with teaching staff and administrators with employability-related roles; site visits; student focus groups; and focus groups with employers. Rather than replicating the same tools across the three colleges, the approach was based on what each college identified as the appropriate set of learning opportunities from its context. This reflects the arguments for a “deep comparativism” (King and McGrath 2002) in which context-specificity of research tools can be justified rather than mechanistic application of the same tools to different contexts. Nonetheless, in retrospect it would have been desirable to have gained further data from certain groups or on certain issues. Where possible we made up these deficits after the visits.

Most crucially, the format of spending three weeks visiting colleges as a team within a four week period ensured that there was constant analysis and reanalysis of what the team saw and experienced. Each week ended with a public seminar that provided both an opportunity for the team to present provisional attempts to codify their learning and a chance to receive feedback from external actors.

An additional half-day visit was made to the Good Hope Campus of False Bay College in Cape Town, which provided useful insights into alternative college strategies towards employability and the contrasting visions of even neighbouring colleges as they respond to their own local contexts. The report does not offer an explicit study of False Bay College but the insights gained there infuse the document and explicit mention of False Bay examples are made where this seems appropriate.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The historical evolution of the concept

In spite of widespread assumptions that employability is a concept of the current period, scholars of employability note that the notion did not simply emerge as a way of explaining necessary responses to a radically changed economic and public policy environment since 1990. Instead, somewhat ironically at first sight, it is conventionally dated back to 1909 and the early work of one of the architects of the British welfare state, William Beveridge, in his book: *Unemployment: A Problem of Industry* (1909).

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1 This section is a revised version of McGrath (2009) – a background paper for this project.
Gazier (1998), one of the leading theorists of employability, argues that the concept has gone through seven stages over the past century:

1. **Dichotomic employability**

   This approach emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in Britain and America. It made a distinction between those that are or can be employed and those that cannot be. In important regards, it is a reformulation of the long-standing Anglo-Saxon dichotomy between the “deserving poor” (hard working and morally upright individuals who have fallen on hard time due to misfortune – e.g., illness or widowhood) and the “undeserving” poor (those who are lazy and morally degenerate). The former deserve charity; the latter must be reformed.

2. **Socio-medical employability**

   This theme emerged around the time of World War Two in the USA, Britain and Germany in particular. It focused especially on the social, physical or mental deficits of individuals that made them unfit for employment.

3. **Manpower policy employability**

   This account developed mainly in the USA in the 1960s, and extended the deficit approach of the socio-medical model to other societal groups. Again, the focus was on the gap between their knowledge, skills and attitudes and those required by the labour market.

4. **Flow employability**

   This is a primarily French account, which emerged in the 1960s. It was radically different from the earlier approaches in focusing primarily on the demand side and the accessibility of employment within local and national economies, with employability defined as "the objective expectation, or more or less high probability, that a person looking for a job can have of finding one" (Ledrut 1966, quoted in Gazier 1998: 44).

5. **Labour market performance employability**

   This emerged internationally towards the end of the 1970s. This concept focuses on the measurable labour market outcomes that result from specific policy interventions. These measures typically include period employed, hours worked and wage rates.
6. Initiative employability

This account coalesced in the late 1980s in the North American and European human resource development literature, which was starting to discuss the notion of the end of the “salaryman” who worked for the same large corporation (or state bureaucracy) from leaving school until retirement. With the purported end of “a job for life”, this account argued that successful career development now required the development of skills and attitudes that could make workers both succeed in their current jobs and be able and motivated to get a better job in another organisation. The stress here is firmly on the individual’s initiative and agency.

7. Interactive employability

Following on swiftly from this account, the notion of interactive employability emerged. Whilst accepting the importance of individual agency, this account sought to balance this with a development of some of the insights of the French flow employability school regarding structural factors. Thus, it was argued that that the employability of the individual is partly relative to the employability of others in the labour market, both as competitors but also in the sense that high levels of dispersed employability might attract new employment opportunities to an area. The state of demand locally and nationally is also considered, as are the rules and institutions that govern the labour market, reflecting the rise of institutional economics at this period. Thus, this account implicates employers and policymakers in the employability challenge alongside individuals.

These accounts should not be seen simply as marking an evolution to a current orthodoxy, rather elements of all can be seen as present in popular, practical and policy debates.

3.2. Towards a working definition of employability

The best starting point for a working definition of employability is Hillage and Pollard’s (1998) widely-cited attempt in which employability is understood as an individual’s ability to gain initial employment, maintain employment, move between roles within the same organisation, obtain new employment if required and (ideally) secure suitable and sufficiently fulfilling work. McQuaid, Green and Danson (2005: 191), however, suggest that “employability remains a contested concept in terms of its use in both theory and policy, and throughout the past century has been used as both a predominantly labour
supply and a labour demand concept.” They go on to argue that, nonetheless, the concept is useful in both forms. They suggest that the narrower supply-side focus of the initiative approach is valuable in its generation of a set or sets of skills, and supporting national and institutional policies and practices, which can contribute to improving individual employability. However, they maintain that a broader, interactive approach permits

the additional consideration of vital demand, personal circumstances and other factors that influence the employability of people in a particular labour market, or at a particular time, and so are fundamental to those people gaining or changing employment. (McQuaid, Green and Danson 2005:194)

Over the past decade or so, a large number of authors have sought to develop typologies of employability from a wide range of disciplinary and ideological perspectives (e.g., Hillage and Pollard 1998; de Grip, van Loo and Sanders 2004; Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth 2004). Perhaps the most comprehensive model is provided by McQuaid and Lindsay (see table 1).

Table 1: Employability Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDIVIDUAL FACTORS</th>
<th>PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES</th>
<th>EXTERNAL FACTORS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employability skills and attributes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Household circumstances</strong></td>
<td><strong>Demand factors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Essential attributes</em></td>
<td><em>Direct caring responsibilities</em></td>
<td><em>Labour market factors</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic social skills; honesty and integrity; basic personal presentation; reliability; willingness to work; understanding of actions and consequences; positive attitude to work; responsibility; self-discipline</td>
<td>Caring for children, elderly relatives, etc.</td>
<td>Level of local and regional or other demand; nature and changes of local and regional demand (required skill levels; occupational structure of vacancies; sectors where demand is concentrated); location, centrality / remoteness of local labour markets in relation to centres of industry / employment; level of competition for jobs; actions of employers’ competitors; changing customer preferences, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Personal competencies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Other family and caring responsibilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactivity; diligence; self-motivation; judgement; initiative; assertiveness; confidence; act autonomously</td>
<td>Financial commitments to children or other family members outside the individual’s household; emotional and/or time commitments to family members or others</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Basic transferable skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Other household circumstances</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Prose and document literacy; writing; numeracy; verbal presentation</td>
<td>The ability to access safe, secure, affordable and appropriate housing</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key transferable skills</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reasoning; problem solving; adaptability; work-process management; team working; personal task and time management; functional</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Macroeconomic factors</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Macroeconomic stability; medium- to long-term business confidence; level and nature of labour demand within the national economy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vacancy characteristics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Remuneration; conditions of work; working hours and prevalence of shift work;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demographic characteristics</td>
<td>Age, gender, etc.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Work culture</td>
<td>The existence of a culture in which work is encouraged and supported within the family, among peers or other personal relationships and the wider community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment policy factors</td>
<td>Accessibility of public services and job-matching technology (such as job search / counselling); penetration of public services (for example, use and credibility among employers / job seekers); incentives within tax benefits system; existence of ‘welfare to work’ / activation and pressure to accept jobs; accessibility and limitations on training; extent of local / regional development policies; measures to ease the school-work transition and address employability issues at school and university</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other enabling policy factors</td>
<td>Accessibility and affordability of public transport, child care and other support services</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Health and well-being</strong></td>
<td><strong>Access to resources</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Health</strong></td>
<td><strong>Access to transport</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Current physical health; current mental health; medical history; psychological wellbeing</td>
<td>Access to own or readily available private transport; ability to walk appropriate distances</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Disability</strong></td>
<td><strong>Access to financial capital</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature and extent of: physical disability; mental disability; learning disability</td>
<td>Level of household income; extent and duration of any financial hardship; access to formal and informal sources of financial support; management of income and debt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Access to social capital</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to personal and family support networks; access to formal and informal community support networks; number, range and status of informal social network contacts</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Job seeking</strong></th>
<th><strong>Adaptability and mobility</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effective use of formal search services / information resources (including ICT); awareness and effective use of informal social networks; ability to complete CVs / application forms; interview skills / presentation; access to references; awareness of strengths and weaknesses; awareness of location and type of opportunities in the labour market; realistic approach to job targeting</td>
<td>Geographical mobility; wage flexibility and reservation wage; occupational flexibility (working hours, occupations, sectors)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: McQuaid and Lindsay (2005: 209-10)

It can be seen that the top left cell (employability skills and attributes) is where much of the education-for-employability debate has been located. A consideration of the detail of these skills and attributes and what is known about educational institutions’ ability to implement employability skills programmes will be returned to in the next sub-section. Before that discussion, however, other aspects of employability as outlined by McQuaid and Lindsay will be considered.
Even in the column of individual factors, this model makes clear that this is not just a simple matter of building skills and attitudes within the educational system. As is typical in many policy responses to employability, such skills need to be supported by job seeking skills, often developed by careers and employment services. More broadly, there is a need to consider the impact of health factors (reflecting the socio-medical model of employability); by age and gender; and by mobility.

Indeed, with McQuaid and Lindsay’s personal factors, these latter elements are important aspects of a sociological literature that identifies a series of employability traps.

From a youth transitions / lifecourse perspective, Côté and Bynner argue that there is a hiatus in the life-course, which is increasingly referred to as emerging adulthood, can be better explained in terms of changing economic conditions leading to a lowering of the social status of the young that is contributing to increasingly precarious trajectories, and in terms of the decline in the social markers of adulthood associated with the individualisation process. (Côté and Bynner 2008: 251)

Thus, more precarious transitions to work interact with challenges in the transitions to adulthood. Drawing on Côté’s work on identity capital, defined as comprising educational, social, and psychological resources, Bynner and Parsons (2002) argue that this capital is at a premium in entering and maintaining employment. They suggest that certain groups of youth have weak identity capital. For instance, they highlight the persistence of disadvantage for those who are neither in employment nor education and training in their late teens. They highlight the particular disadvantage experienced by young women within this category, often linked to early motherhood. As other authors (e.g., Baker 1998; Neysmith and Reitsma-Street 2005; Gazso 2007) note, across Anglophone developed countries, young women with children face particular challenges in getting (back) into the labour market. Family background also appears as a factor (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Weller 2007; Glayniann and Grima 2008), particularly where this is characterised by abusive or disinterested behaviour and attitudes from parents / carers. More generally, Cieslik and Simpson (2006) suggest that low levels of employability tend to mutually reinforce poor attitudes to education to prevent successful remediation of early failure. Clearly such accounts resonate with older accounts of class- and race-based disadvantage and discrimination (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 1976; Kallaway 1984) and more recent accounts based in social and cultural capital (beginning with Bourdieu 1986 and Coleman 1988).
Across Europe, a literature has emerged that notes that young people are particularly prone to finding temporary and precarious employment that often does not lead inevitably to more permanent and decent forms of work over time (Groot and van den Brink 2000; Montchatre 2007; Grayniann and Grima 2008). Rather, Forrier and Sels (2003) find empirically that temporary workers with lower levels of skills and qualifications are less likely to invest in their own training or have employers invest in them either. Globally, such concerns are seen in the ILO’s work on youth employability (e.g., ILO 2005) and the World Bank’s World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation (World Bank 2006). However, in the current recession, there are increasing fears that large numbers of young people are not even able to access temporary and precarious employment.

As the McQuaid and Lindsay framework also notes, issues of geographic location can be of great importance. This problem is seen as particularly prevalent in old industrial regions (including in coalfields such as those of Nottinghamshire and KwaZulu-Natal) (Peck and Theodore 2000; Danson 2005). As Danson notes, such areas have undergone painful economic change and many would-be workers remain trapped in these areas with the wrong skills and too little spatial mobility, leading to a spatial-skills mismatch problem (McQuaid 2006). Whilst this is often seen as particularly a problem of older men, formally employed in heavy industry or extraction, the above point about young women with children should alert us to a more complex gender picture.

Urban and regional geographers also highlight the importance of young people’s mental maps of jobs and mobility in contributing to an employability trap. Green, Shuttleworth and Lavery (2005) point to the need to understand social space as perceived by young adults and suggest that young people have very restricted mental maps of where they can look for work (or attend further education and training). Whilst their account is specifically on the highly segregated city of Belfast, it appears to have wider salience. Indeed, it may be particularly adaptable to the South African urban landscape and young people’s perceptions thereof. It is argued further that segmented housing markets, poor public transport links and lack of access to private transport exacerbate unwillingness or inability to travel to employment (Green, Shuttleworth and Lavery 2005; McQuaid, Green and Danson 2005). Thus, spatial mismatch may compound skills mismatch, as a decline of local low-skill jobs leads to greater spatial and skills mismatches for residents with limited education, generating greater competition for low skilled jobs remaining (Green, Shuttleworth and Lavery 2005). This leads Green, Shuttleworth and Lavery to conclude that “Spatial behaviour and local social capital shape life-chances and involvement in employment” (2005: 302).
The typology also heightens the importance of broader economic and policy factors (Berntson, Sverke and Marklund 2006). Indeed, it is argued that there is a need also to consider sectoral dynamics (de Grip, van Loo and Sanders 2004; Gore 2005). Thus, Marock argues in the South African context that

the willingness and capacity to participate and invest time, money and energy in training to support the development of their human capital will depend on the expected return on this investment. This return relates to both a direct increase in earnings and to an improved labour market position. (Marock 2008: 8)

Therefore, the overall stance of the economy and sector towards high or low skills are crucially relevant. As the sociology of education and work literature on Britain and South Africa of the past decade has argued, neither country is particularly strong at promoting individual returns on education and training investment, despite the considerable policy rhetoric in both (e.g., Keep 1999; Brown, Green and Lauder 2001; Wolf 2002; McGrath et al. 2004). Moreover, it is clear that both countries see huge variances both within and between sectors regarding approaches to skills development and utilisation (e.g., Mason 2001; Paterson and du Toit 2005).

3.3. **The role of public further education (and training) colleges in supporting employability**

In spite of the theoretical nuancing provided by interactive employability accounts, policy pronouncements still are largely stuck in initiative understandings or, as Peck and Theodore (2000) put it more strongly: “supply-side fundamentalism”. This narrower approach makes it clear that the individual has the primary duty and responsibility to improve their own employability. However, from an educationalist’s point of view, it is apparent that the sins of the “unemployable” are very quickly visited on the public education and training provider.

This takes the debate back to the top-left cell of table 1. It is widely argued that the job of the educational system is to identify a list of employability skills (or, rather, these should be read off what organised business says are its needs) and then providers should teach these. Such lists have proliferated (e.g., Harvey and Green 1994; Coopers and Lybrand 1998; Lees 2002; Hartshorn and Sear 2005; Yorke 2006; Griesel and Parker 2009). Some authors, such as Hartshorn and Sear, have identified employability skills with enterprising skills, as defined by Gibb (1993).
However, other authors have become increasingly concerned about the reductionism of such lists (e.g., Yorke 2006). There is general acceptance that some such set of characteristics can be defined at a very abstract level. Nonetheless, Lanning, Martin and Villeneuve-Smith (2008: 2) caution that:

we have come to question whether the term Employability Skills is now unhelpful. While it has been a useful shorthand term, we suggest that it has come to imply that there is a discrete standard set of skills and behaviours, often packaged into a qualification that can be taught and assessed.

We don’t think that this is the case. Such an approach constrains and formalises something that needs to be flexible and responsive to employer and learner needs and their context. Rather, we would advocate a conceptual shift towards developing skills, knowledge and attitudes that enhance employability.

On the same page of their report for the Learning and Skills Network, it emerges that the skills actually most valued by English employers are good literacy and numeracy skills, enthusiasm, commitment and timekeeping. This is a far cry from Reich’s (1991) skills for knowledge workers.

However, it is not enough for educational providers simply to build a set of employability skills, albeit in a less reductionist way than a decade ago. Arguments about employability are closely bound up with those about higher education quality, not least through the presence of key authors, such as Harvey, who straddle both debates. Lanning, Martin and Villeneuve-Smith claim that delivering employability skills is just about good teaching (cf. Lees 2002); which for them comprises largely of experiential learning, personalisation and embedding skills across curriculum. However, it is clear that this is but one very particular vision of good teaching that is located in an implicit (and questionable) set of assumptions about knowledge, skills, learning and teaching, education-economy linkages and economic structure. Both debates have had a tendency towards abstraction and a process fixation (an “ISO understanding of quality”) and towards a checklist of quality characteristics or core employability skills / competencies that seems to run counter to evidence that skills, knowledges, attitudes and practices are always context-laden, as are notions of good practice and quality. Nonetheless, these twin forces have swept across further and higher education internationally. In England, for instance, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) has a clear view of what constitutes good quality teaching and learning and good quality educational management that colleges need to internalise if they are to be judged successful.

At the FE(T) level there is an international drive that moves away from old views of vocational education content, as a combination of trade theory and practical skills
development, towards one that highlights core skills and attitudes, job seeking skills and a repackaged set of vocational skills and occupational / sectoral knowledge (cf. Table 1). As Griesel and Parker (2009) note, the rise of the discourse of employability has gone hand-in-hand with the rise of competency-based practices in the more developed Anglophone countries.

As well as intersecting with the quality and competency discourses, employability also overlaps with responsiveness (cf. Cosser et al. 2003). There is a long-standing account of the failings of the vocational education and training system both North and South that centres on a lack of relevance in terms of skills developed and a divorce of providers and their staff from industrial realities and interactions, which has been exacerbated by rapid changes in industrial structure. In Africa this became increasingly the orthodox view after the World Bank report on vocational and technical education and training of 1991 (World Bank 1991) and remains largely in place (cf. Johanson and Adams 2004; Akoojee, Gewer and McGrath 2005). In South Africa, this account has clearly influenced the post-Apartheid emergence of the public FET college, although the power of equity and redress are also clearly apparent in policy developments. In England, this reading of the failures of technical colleges was enshrined in the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992.

In both countries, there has been a drive to improve colleges’ responsiveness to the needs of industry through reformed governance, business linkages and improved work placement possibilities for staff and students, although these are currently far better developed in England (e.g. Ainley and Bailey 1997; Gleeson 1999; Gleeson and Keep 2004) than in South Africa (e.g. Cosser et al. 2003; Adams, Mabunda and McGrath 2006; McGrath and Akoojee 2007). It is clearly assumed by most policymakers that better working relationships between colleges and employers will inevitably improve learner employability. In this vein, it is argued that “every opportunity to get employer contact needs to be exploited.” (Lanning, Martin and Villeneuve-Smith 2008: 6).

As the generic employability skills are often actually attitudes and attributes, there is also some connection made between employability and emotional intelligence or labour (Lees 2002). These remain highly controversial issues, not least when it comes to questions of how learners can be prepared for emotional labour and at what cost (e.g., Unwin 2004; Ecclestone 2007). Lanning, Martin and Villeneuve-Smith (2008) suggest that there needs to be more consideration of the relative importance of personal tutors in building learner employability, whilst Robson and Bailey (2004 and 2009) explore more critically the emergence of learning support workers in English FE colleges.
In considering responses to the employability imperative, it is also important that the distinction between short-term and long-term employability approaches is considered. Some of the concerns that are common amongst continental European authors regarding the dangers of young workers getting trapped in temporary and precarious employment were noted earlier. Whilst generic skills may be vital for accessing the labour market in most cases, they may not be of much use in accessing and maintaining decent work (Currie, Tempest and Starkey 2006) – part of the broad definition of individual employability of Hillage and Pollard.

According to Winch and Clarke (2003) the problem with short-termist views of employability lies in the failure to make a distinction between the task, firm and occupational understandings of skill.

Skill at a task is the ability to carry out that particular task. Skill in the context of a firm is the ability to do a particular job as specified by the employer or by a contract to carry out a commission. Skill at the level of an occupation, on the other hand, concerns that ability or potential ability to fulfil all the tasks associated with or negotiated for an occupation. ... skill in an occupational sense entails significant transferability between different jobs. It is also generally skill in this sense that is propagated by employees, it being in their interest to acquire skills of a more long-term nature, to equip them over a working life, Employers on the other hand, are more interested in skills in the task sense, for the immediate job in hand. (Winch and Clarke 2003: 240)

Finally, it is important that the drive to employability does not lead to a naïve view that employers necessarily know best. There is considerable literature about employers’ narrow interests and understandings as being part of the problem. Rather, what is needed is a dialogue based on a thoughtful reading of the challenges of employability, as both Kruss (2004) and Griesel and Parker (2009) have argued for the South African higher education sector, or, as McQuaid, Green and Danson (2005: 192-3) put it:

There is a need for improved communication between training providers and employers to ensure that the training being provided is relevant to both employers and employees, but also to challenge some of the attitudes and practices of employers.

If learners, providers and employers all believe in a high skills solution, and government facilitates this, then there is real potential for fruitful partnerships on employability. However, if this is not the case, then there are very real limitations to what providers can do to make a real difference here.
4. The College Contexts

In this section brief overviews of each college and its context are presented.

4.1. Coastal KZN College

Coastal KZN FET College is located in south Durban and is the second largest of the 50 public FET Colleges in South Africa. It was established in 2004 as a result of a merger between the former Durban, Swinton Road and Umlazi Technical Colleges. The merger also included a number of skill centres situated between Durban and Port Shepstone such as Adams, Ubuhele Bogu, As Salaam and the Mathematics and Science Centre based at Mangosuthu University of Technology. Its formal catchment area spans from Durban to Port Shepstone (some 150 square kilometers) which includes the heavy industry of the South Durban basin, the Durban port (which is the largest port in the southern hemisphere) and the city, and the rural coastal areas. The premises of the former Umbumbulu College of Education were included in the merger and today host the Umbumbulu Campus as well as the Central Administrative Offices of Coastal KZN FET College.

Coastal KZN FET College’s student body comes from a wide catchment area which includes urban areas such as Durban, Umlazi and Amanzimtoti, semi-urban areas such as Chatsworth, Lamontville, KwaMakhutha and Illovo, industrial areas such as Prospecton and rural areas such as Breamer and Ubuhele Bogu. Three of the campuses have residence facilities and this results in students from all over South Africa and from some neighbouring states enrolling at the college.

The majority of the students are Zulu-speaking with the Durban campus being the only site that attracts a fair number of Indian and white students who have English as first language. The reason why Durban Campus attracts more Indian students is both historical and due to the proximity of the campus to the traditional Indian suburbs.

The number of students for 2009 exceeded 21 000 in a number of programmes comprising amongst others the National Certificate (Vocational) (in Engineering, Management, Business, Marketing), the old Nated programmes, Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) and various other skills programmes. The staff component is currently 750. The diversity of programmes presented at Coastal KZN FET College contributes to a wide age distribution among the students. In the NCV Programmes learners as young as 16 register while ABET caters for students even after retirement.
age. The majority of the students at Coastal KZN FET College come from the previously disadvantaged communities of South Africa and therefore funding of academic support interventions has to be prioritised. Funding received from the Department of Higher Education and Training’s (DHET) programme-based funding formula covers 80% of the costs of the National Certificate (Vocational) (NCV) programmes. The DHET also makes available bursaries through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme for those students who cannot afford to pay the remaining 20% of the fees. The allocation of these bursaries is based on the application of a means test, taking into consideration such factors as household income, number of students in the household and the economic context of the area of residence. Students who are enrolled for non-funded programmes are expected to pay their own study fees although some of the programmes are partly sponsored by the College. Coastal KZN FET College also runs various programmes for industry and government through their Training Academy and Enterprise Development Unit, which create an income stream for the College. Other sources of income include commercial operations in the manufacturing and training fields such as Nongalo and Hammarsdale Industrial Parks as well as a Tooling Centre at the Durban Campus.

Strategically, Coastal KZN FET College is currently positioning itself to deliver education as an integral part of the economic centre of industry, government and research institutes, rather than to stay in the traditional position of training institutions at the periphery of economic activities. Coastal KZN FET College believes that this will increase the employability of their learners as well as the productivity of possible employers. This repositioning towards the economic centre will be achieved mainly through expanding business opportunities, participation in new markets, consultancies and action research, and through knowledge brokerage.

Coastal KZN FET College has entered into a number of strategic partnerships and interventions with Governmental departments as well as major role-players from industry. The college provides training for government linked to the 2010 FIFA World Cup; capacity building for government officials, educators, adult and early childhood facilitators and community development workers; training for infrastructure development; and the reskilling of soldiers. There is also a strong focus on the training of artisans, including a trade testing centre and a sectoral focus on Construction, Manufacturing, Engineering and Food Security. The college also runs a graduate development programme and a large entrepreneurship development unit. Partnerships with organised industry are particularly valued, including with the Tooling Association of South Africa, the National Business Initiative and the South African Federation of Civil Engineering Contractors.
The college also places much emphasis on curricular and staff development; and on influencing national processes and encouraging autonomy. As the college’s vision statement states, Coastal KZN FET College aims to be a “Pioneering Centre of Excellence”, serving the socio-economic needs of a diverse community, with world class education and training, leading to lifelong learning.

4.2. Northlink College

Northlink College was created in 2002 following the merger of four colleges in the northern suburbs of the greater Cape Town metropole. The colleges were Wingfield Technical College (three campuses: Wingfield, Goodwood and Table Bay), Protea College, Tygerberg College and Parow and Bellville Technical College. In 2005 Northlink bought Belhar College, a private institution, which now is the civil and construction engineering campus.

At the time of the 2001 Census, Cape Town had a population of approximately 3 million, of whom 48% were classified as coloured, 32% African; 19% white; and 1% Indian. Afrikaans was the main first language (41%), with English and isiXhosa evenly distributed amongst the rest of the population. 61% of the adult population had less than a level 4 equivalent certificate. In spite of Cape Town’s external reputation for affluence, its unemployment rate stood at 29%.

Northlink’s campuses are largely based in a series of predominantly white or coloured suburbs in the North of the metropolitan area. The area has significant industrial and retail infrastructure and a new industrial park is currently under development, supported by all four universities in the province. In the predominantly white suburbs, English is most the common home language and levels of education are much higher and unemployment much lower than the average for the whole metropolitan area. The predominantly coloured areas are largely Afrikaans-speaking and their levels of education and unemployment cluster either side of the average values for the city as a whole. The college has also seen an increasing enrolment of students from a number of the predominantly African and isiXhosa-speaking townships on the Cape Flats, where unemployment is over 40% across all sub-councils.

Equivalences between England and South Africa are not absolute, but it is best to view this as equivalent to a level 3 award in England.

All these statistics are taken from the City of Cape Town webpage but are derived from StatsSA data - http://www.capetown.gov.za/en/stats/Pages/default.aspx
Northlink has a number of international partnerships with educational institutions and businesses. These include SAAB; Swan TAFE in Australia; South Birmingham College, the National College of School Leadership and Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK; the Bavarian Handwerk Kammer in Germany; and the MOT Organisation in Norway. National partnerships include work with the South African Oil and Gas Association in the training and assessment of pipefitters, machiners and fitters; with the building and civil construction industry in training black contractors; and with the Western Cape Tooling Initiative.

In 2009 there were approximately 13 000 learners or 8 500 FTEs. Only about 4 000 learners were studying programmes at further education and training level (NQF levels 2-4); with almost 9 000 studying at higher education levels. Over 3 000 students were on learnership or (short) skills programmes under the auspices of the Sector Education and Training Authorities.

Learners are distributed across a range of programmes, including:

- Business Studies
- Drama
- Early Childhood Development
- Hospitality
- Sport
- Cosmetology
- Fashion
- Information Technology
- Engineering
- Construction
- Motor Maintenance
- Maritime
- Languages
Only approximately 1 300 learners are 18 or under, with 6 000 19-22 year olds comprising the largest age concentration. In spite of the presumption that South African colleges are for young people, over 3 000 Northlink learners are older than 25.

Key innovations at Northlink include its simulated enterprises (SEs), which it pioneered in 1999. Northlink’s first SE was created on the Parow campus following the donation of furniture from Sanlam. This created a workplace mirroring that of a courier company with Skynet WorldWide Express as the mentor. In 2006, with a grant from the Western Cape government’s Ikapa Ilihlumayo Development Fund, Northlink launched a soft drink SE.

Other firsts include the establishment, in 2000, of the Northlink Golf School, which aims both to prepare top players to play professional golf and to train golf coaches. In 2004, three students won the World Student Golf Championship. A Language School was established for foreign learners, with a mandate to promote transitions to higher education programmes in the college. Another first was the creation of a Customer Information Services component in 2009 with a call centre and an unusually sophisticated electronic capturing and tracking of pre-registration processes.

Northlink also has a small number of business units, for example: the Clothing Factory, a Restaurant and Conference Centre and cafeterias – where students get exposed as part of their training to the full circle of production. The College is also involved in a wide range of community outreach activities including participation in a number of health, education and heritage initiatives.

Total income in 2009 was R91 million (approximately £7.5m), of which R80m was fees income (including R12m from national and provincial bursaries). The business units contributed 5% of the College’s total income.

4.3. West Nottinghamshire College

West Nottinghamshire College is located in the Mansfield and Ashfield districts of Nottinghamshire in the East Midlands region of England, serving a population of
c.200,000 people. The area developed as an important coal mining district during the Industrial Revolution. At its peak in 1961 coal mining directly employed 56,000 people in Nottinghamshire and accounted for more than 20% of male employment county-wide and a far higher percentage in the Mansfield and Ashfield districts. By 1992, the total number of pits stood at 13 (down from 39), and the workforce at 12,300. Then, in October 1992, the Government announced that seven of these pits were to be closed with immediate effect. By April 1994, three-quarters of miners’ jobs in the county had gone, with only 3,100 remaining at five collieries. A decade later there were less than 1,000 jobs. It is estimated that as a result of the mine closures, three other jobs were lost for every one mining job (Nottinghamshire County Council 2003).

The collapse of the mining industry devastated the Mansfield and Ashfield districts. In spite of large scale national and European regeneration investment, particularly along the Mansfield and Ashfield Regeneration Route, which links the area to the major A1 and M1 North-South roads, the area continues to have well above average levels of unemployment and poverty and significantly below average levels of educational attainment and progression to higher education. The most striking statistic is that in the most recent census Mansfield ranked 363rd out of 376 districts and Ashfield 375th in England and Wales on percentage of population with degree level qualifications (Office for National Statistics 2001). They are also in the bottom quintile of districts in terms of the percentage of the population with level 2 awards. Unlike many of the other poorest areas in England, Mansfield and Ashfield have very low levels of ethnic minority population at 4% of the total.

West Nottinghamshire College, thus, has a challenge of working with its local communities to improve educational attainment and employability. In so doing it has identified the key issue of aspirations: aspirations to further learning and better work in communities where such aspirations are highly depressed across generations.

The college has its main campus in Mansfield and a further nine smaller sites within the Mansfield and Ashfield area and four community learning centres. It has invested heavily in new campuses over recent years with the Construction and Logistics Academy, opened in 2009 at the cost of £7.2m as the largest of these new investments. The college has Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) status for engineering and is a partner in CoVEs in construction, logistics and care.

__________________________________________________________

4 Approximately a Level 2-3 award in South Africa.
The college has approximately 20 000 learners or 6 500 FTEs. Programme levels vary from pre-entry to higher education. The former includes a centre in Ashfield for disengaged learners; whilst the latter includes both foundation and top-up degrees and higher national diplomas for full-time students and programmes for local employers such as the Centre Parcs holiday village chain.

Learners are spread across all learning fields with the exception of agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Programmes include academic A levels, apprenticeships (for which it is the largest provider in the region) and a large number of work-based learning programmes. The latter reach 12 000 learners nationally. Part-time courses are currently offered to approximately 600 14-16 year olds in collaboration with 28 local schools.

The college has a diverse age profile. 14-16 year old learners make up 2% of the college population and 16-19 year olds 17%. Approximately 80% of learners are adults, predominantly on part-time programmes.

For the past four years the college has been in the top 10% of all colleges nationally on success rates. In 2007/08, over 60% of students went on to further study with 30% moving into employment.

Annual turnover for 2009 was £48m (approximately R575m), the vast majority of which came from various government funds. Only 1% of income was from full cost income generation. In May 2008 the college was inspected by OFSTED and received an outstanding grade across all areas of assessment. This made it the only college in the region with this highest grading and led it to be awarded “Beacon status”.

The college is also the market leader in initial assessment software and materials through its wholly-owned subsidiary bksb. These were initially developed for the college’s own purposes but are now used by over 1,500 customers including 70% of FE colleges and, increasingly, by providers in other countries, most notably Australia and New Zealand.

The College is also a member of the Sherwood Growth Zone Partnership, a sub-regional development initiative of organisations with a strategic interest in and statutory responsibility for the economic development of North and West Nottinghamshire.

5. Colleges and Employability

Colleges’ role in employability can be viewed through five lenses:
Figure 1: Five Lenses on Employability

Any of the five can be placed at the centre of the picture, giving a different dynamic to the account. Shifting the metaphor, they can also be seen as gears that sometimes mesh with each other but sometimes work antagonistically. Inevitably, this complexity cannot be represented easily in a narrative form. Whilst all five themes overlap with others, each of them will be discussed in turn, starting with students: those who are charged with becoming employable.

5.1. Students
One of the striking features of all three colleges that were part of this study is that their student body was not comprised solely or even predominantly of the category of students that official policy envisaged. Indeed all three colleges had extensive programmes on offer that catered for a wide range of students from as young as 14 (West Nottinghamshire) to various retraining or bespoke courses for particular companies. In many cases these students were already employed and thus the concept of employability for such learners needs to be viewed in terms of professional growth and mobility within the workplace as opposed to first entry. This section will focus primarily on the category of students who are not yet employed as the retraining and bespoke programmes are discussed in the institution section below.

In the South African colleges there had been a fairly significant change in the student demographics within the college. While the colleges had historically catered for students from specific race groups and there was a general alignment between the culture of the college and the students' home background, this had changed and the students in the college were often very diverse. The degree to which the colleges actually understood who their students were and where they came from was not very well developed, and was recognised as a key area for improvement.

Our interviews with students generated interesting responses about what they regarded as key to their own employability. These have been clustered into six themes in the table below. The concepts are captured with little interpretation from the student responses and recurring themes are highlighted in bold. There could be some debate about the clustering, as some themes are cross cutting, and so the boundaries should not be viewed as significant.

Table 2: Learners’ Perspectives on Employability
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>General Skills</th>
<th>Job Seeking Skills</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Occupation Specific Skills</th>
<th>Social Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>Team work</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Matric/A-level</td>
<td>Specialising in an area</td>
<td>Fitting in work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>College qualification</td>
<td>Ability to adapt</td>
<td>Willing to travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self discipline</td>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>Word of mouth</td>
<td>Good pass</td>
<td>Electrical, motor and diesel</td>
<td>Connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Physical strength</td>
<td>Knowing where to look</td>
<td>Further studies</td>
<td>Practical experience</td>
<td>Accepting of authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Mental strength</td>
<td>CV skills</td>
<td>Visiting businesses</td>
<td>CNC</td>
<td>Willing to relocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self confidence</td>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>Logical thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Available for standby work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work ethic</td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Punctuality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Knowing yourself</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Logical thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diligence</td>
<td>Punctuality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to learn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is general overlap between the students’ sense of what makes them employable and the conceptual schema discussed above and summarised in Table 1. There is a general recognition that getting the qualification is but one aspect of the process of finding work. The strong emphasis on soft skills and dispositions suggests that students are more aware of the complex social process that is part of getting employed than is often suggested in the public discourse on youth employment. Certainly, many of the students the team interacted with demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the multiple levels required to get into employment.

While the students generated fairly extensive lists of knowledge, skills and values that they saw as key to enhancing their chances of employment, when asked to prioritise two from the list there was a strong common thread of **key skills** and **character** being the two most important attributes. Without proper training that provides concrete skills, there is little chance of getting work, but if you are competing with other suitably qualified people, then a range of other factors come into play.

What is striking is that there is very little emphasis on social networks or structural aspects of the economy such as the availability of jobs. In this respect, the students had an individualised notion of employability where the key factors lay within themselves and the types of skills they would develop. Much of the emphasis in their themes lies in conformity to certain norms that are perceived to be valued in the workplace. Whether
the students did in fact learn these skills was not as clear in all instances, but as will be seen below, we found ample evidence that good lecturers and the institution as a whole did often provide learning opportunities around these broader skills.

There also is recognition that the individual student needs to be suited to a particular type of occupation. Having a fear of heights or not wanting to work outdoors might constrain certain career choices and thus initial assessment and placement are key for ensuring student success. This is discussed further in the institutional section below.

5.2. Staff

The overriding and recurring characteristic of the staff in the three colleges that were seen to be effective in making their students employable related to the degree that they facilitated access and modelled behaviour. The access can be understood to operate at two levels: epistemological and relational. The modeling focused on the practice of work and the wider dispositional factors.

Epistemological access

In many respects epistemological access implies the obvious category of good teaching. Providing access to the knowledge and the disciplinary foundations underpinning particular career work at a theoretical and practical level is one of the primary functions of a good teacher, and those staff members in the colleges who were able to demonstrate success in making their students employable were also recognised as being good teachers and taking the teaching and learning process seriously. For example, at Coastal KZN one of the most sought after programmes, training draughtsmen, was run by a passionate teacher who had won a number of teaching awards in the college and produced outstanding national results. Similarly at West Nottinghamshire the computer studies section had developed a highly successful programme with a strong emphasis on innovative teaching that ensured that the students were highly sought after by industry.

There is a growing recognition at a policy level in both countries that vocational educators should be qualified as teachers and not just be taken from the workplace into the classroom without support. In England this process is more advanced and the staff are all on various tracks to achieve qualified teacher status. In South Africa this policy is still being finalised but there was recognition by college managers that staff development
around teaching and learning was key. The need for training was further reinforced by the fact that the curricula had changed and that the type of learner had also changed, making “tried and tested” ways of teaching no longer so reliable.

Both countries were at various stages of introducing performance management and developmental appraisal systems. The Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) in South Africa was viewed as having been a failure, and the colleges were looking at introducing their own systems of accountability and staff development. In the UK this was already in place and lecturers are regularly reviewed.

There is however a potential problem with the emphasis on teaching. While educational qualifications and training can have a positive effect on the learning outcomes, there is also international recognition that teacher foundational knowledge is a key prerequisite to good teaching. In vocational education the foundational knowledge includes the theoretical bases in the various disciplines, but crucially also includes the often uncodified practical knowledge learned through experience and practice. Increasingly the experience in the workplace that the staff member has is becoming secondary to the education qualification, and concern was expressed at the growing proportion of lecturers who were moving directly from their training into teaching positions without first gaining work-based experience. Furthermore, given the speed at which the technologies in the workplace (both social and material) are changing, there was concern expressed at the ability of staff to remain in touch with the workplace.

In some sections there were attempts to release staff for block periods into the workplace in order to ensure that the lecturers remained in touch, but this was dependent on positive connections to industry and a willingness on the part of industry to accommodate a lecturer, and willingness on the part of a lecturer to forgo their normal work routines and hours and adjust to life on the shopfloor. From a management perspective too there were challenges to overcome, specifically if staff members were away from work during this work-based experience. This type of programme requires resources, which were forthcoming in specific instances. For example, at West Nottinghamshire the New Engineering Foundation provided £12 000 for staff to go into industry for three weeks.

In both countries lecturers individually or as a group decided to go beyond the national curriculum in order to ensure that the students received knowledge that remained “cutting edge” in the specific field. A number of lecturers reported that they added sections to the required curriculum or added technologies not yet included so that
students would be better prepared than contemporaries at other institutions. Examples of this included computer programming languages not in the curriculum and more advanced work on CNC machines or production lines. This issue is returned to in the institutional section below.

Relational Access

By relational access we refer to those aspects of employability that are dependent on social capital or networks of relationships that many young people do not have from their home background. This proves to be a significant barrier to employment that is not related to curriculum, knowledge or teaching, but rather to opening doors for students. Staff in the colleges who were successful at helping students made the necessary connections and used their own networks in the industry to recommend particular people to each other.

In all three institutions we came across examples of staff members who “went the extra mile” in acting as a network broker. Often their own experience in the field and the ongoing contacts they had with companies meant that vacancies that arose were communicated to the staff member, and s/he would alert students to it, encourage them to apply and coach them through the interview. At times lecturers were faced with the dilemma of recommending a student before they had completed their training, and placing the formal qualification at risk, versus ensuring that a student grasped an opportunity for a job when it arose.

There are of course risks associated with this informal networking. Lecturers may favour certain individuals and so some students could be marginalised. There may be a tendency to recommend those students who best match the lecturer’s notion of an ideal rather than an open process where all students are in the pool. The reality of the world of employment opportunities, particularly with small and medium sized companies, is that employers are quite specific about a set of skills and dispositions and will want to find someone who fits that profile. A well-connected lecturer is able to assess the students’ strengths and weaknesses and make judgments about their suitability for a specific employer and guide both parties to a satisfactory employment outcome.

We also were made aware of instances where lecturers assisted individual students so that they would be able to access employment. Examples included providing transport to get to interviews, and providing personal counselling and guidance, loans and other
forms of support in order to ensure that students were successful. Obviously this cannot be an expectation and must be left to the individual. However, a number of lecturers we interviewed spoke with pride about the achievements of their students, and mentioned that they retained contact with them. This meant that the lecturers’ networks were constantly refreshed and these past students became a resource for teaching and remaining in touch with the field. For example, a Coastal KZN lecturer in motor mechanics described how he was being updated periodically on new technologies by a former student whom he had placed at Toyota, and how he brought the ex-student in to talk to the current students on new developments.

In many respects the lecturer acts as a form of proxy social capital on behalf of the students and provides the contacts that previously may have been assumed in the students’ family networks but cannot be assumed in the context of societal change and a new college clientele.

**Modelling**

Many of the social skills that differentiate between an employable student with skills and an unemployable student with skills are not easily taught through theory. Rather, many of the lecturers try to demonstrate these social skills and engage their students about them through practice. The modelling takes two forms: modelling the employer and modelling the employee.

A number of lecturers we spoke to emphasised that they “practiced what they preached” in their own behaviour. They had to set the example in relation to dress code, occupational health and safety issues, punctuality, language use and other social skills. Not taking a strong line on these matters would mean that students would move into the world of work expecting a different set of rules to the ones that actually applied. Some of the lecturers explicitly used the rules laid down for their classroom or workshop to stress the expectations in the workplace. This was referred to by one lecturer as “getting them ready for work”.

In many instances lecturers would create an environment in which they would play the role of the employer in terms of the expectations they placed on the students. Monitoring attendance was presented as though absenteeism from class was the equivalent of absenteeism from work with similar controls and consequences. Lecturers often dressed more formally than required and expected students to conduct their
interactions as though the lecturer were their ‘boss’. Language use was monitored by lecturers in terms of what might be appropriate in front of management or clients. Dress codes were enforced such as banning caps or hoodies, whilst codes of conduct or safety codes were prominently displayed. In these ways lecturers try to compensate for what earlier has been referred to as weak identity capital.

Conclusion

In much the same way as the curriculum incorporated simulation (see below) to teach practical work-based skills, so lecturers simulated the interactional dimensions of the workplace through modelling. This section has emphasised the ways in which individual staff members provide access to and modelling of the world of work. In the next section some of these themes are reiterated in terms of how the institution as a whole supports the development of skills for employment through its wider more formal processes.

Having highlighted good practice it is necessary to also comment briefly about poor practice. While we did not see direct evidence of much of the following, management and lecturer interviews did include references to the frustrations of dealing with staff who were not committed to their teaching, were unreliable and therefore set poor examples, or adopted what was referred to as a civil servant mentality. The latter referred to lecturers who did the very minimum required but were not willing to go beyond their formal conditions of service. This meant that after hours teaching, block periods in industry and working during the holiday periods were not regarded as part of their job. It was reported, primarily in the South African colleges, that this approach was a major constraint to innovative new ways of delivery and making the curriculum more relevant. Such practices may be less prevalent in England due to the radical overhaul of conditions of service in the second half of the 1990s.

The explanation for the lack of commitment amongst some of the staff was attributed in part to the extensive change that the college sector had undergone. One official described the system as being in a mess and needing time to settle. This “mess” had left the lecturers demoralised and confused. The poor remuneration in South African colleges, particularly when compared with the salaries artisans command in industry, had further undermined the morale of lecturers and resulted in an outflow of qualified staff. This left the remaining staff to carry heavier loads with ever increasing pressures.
Overall, however, there was impressive evidence across all three colleges that many lecturers were highly committed to both the institution and their students and were willing to invest time and energy in ensuring that students received more than the formal requirements of the programme. This and several other issues from this section will be revisited in the next when we consider the role of the institution.

5.3. Institutions

The Employable College

In section 3 some of the intersections of the literatures on colleges’ role in supporting employability, quality and responsiveness were noted. What came out very strongly from the visits to the three colleges and from the wider interactions with their staff and policies was a sense that many of the same qualities that are believed to characterise an employable learner can also be applied at the institutional level.

Part of what appears to make these colleges successful is that they demonstrated corporately many of the qualities that are included in table 1 under the headings of essential attributes, personal competencies and transferable skills. There was a strong sense expressed that the institution and its staff have a duty to learners to model such attributes as reliability, willingness to work and appropriate presentation, although it was also evident that these high aspirations are not always matched in terms of matters such as cleanliness of college facilities.

A culture that combined being business-like with a social focus was widespread across the colleges. A number of staff spoke with real pride regarding how they had taken learners forward and of learners with whom they were still in touch now that they had successfully found employment.

The importance of an institutional culture was also evident in much of the evidence gathered. The head of one campus spoke of his routine of standing at the main entrance at the start of the day for the first week of the new academic year in order to greet students; and for the second week to enforce standards of dress and punctuality.

As was noted in the previous section, a number of staff appeared to demonstrate other core competencies such as assertiveness, confidence and acting autonomously in the ways that they sought to advance the agendas of their campuses or subject areas and tried to inculturate their learners.
At West Nottinghamshire, it was evident that the English system’s attention to staff development had resulted in an internal stress on trying to ensure staff excellence through the close integration of staff development and quality assurance functions. Given the much greater development of the external and internal inspection regimes in England compared to South Africa, it was unsurprising that the South African colleges were still much weaker in this area, although new developments in South Africa regarding a qualifications framework for FET lecturers and instructors is indicative of national concerns in this area, as was noted in the previous section.

Each of the colleges reflected the responsiveness agenda in important ways. Indeed, there was a clear sense that a central role of the CEO/principal/rector was to lead the institution in being proactive (one of the personal competences). This was seen in multiple ways, such as the refusal of the West Nottinghamshire principal to accept the consequences of the funding crisis of the Learning and Skill Council (see section 5.5) that had resulted in the expected funding for the college’s major rebuilding programme being lost. Instead, she had committed herself to keeping as much of the building plan in place as possible. Another example was that of the Coastal KZN rector who had negotiated a major new partnership with the Chemical Industry Education and Training Authority. At lower levels too, many college staff were going beyond what was contractually required of them to respond proactively to the challenges and opportunities that faced them, the college and their students.

All three principals were active on the national stage, knowing that their participation in national structures and debates brought important advantages to their colleges in interpreting their environments.

Taking these characteristics together, it may make sense to think of the “employable college”, which is better able to support its learners’ employability through its embodying of much of the same set of values. However, as with individual employability, it is important to remember that this is not just about the agency of the institution but also the environment within which it operates. Both Northlink and Coastal KZN have certain advantages over many other South African colleges through their location in and around major cities, where there are a range of employers with which to engage, and in relatively well-capacitated provinces where interaction with provincial government at least has the potential of being beneficial. On the other hand, West Nottinghamshire’s location in one of the poorest parts of England also brings with it certain advantages, not least the accessibility of large-scale funding both from national and European governmental sources. Moreover, as is noted in section 5.5. below, policy environments
in both countries have not always been as enabling of colleges as might have been expected. Where such environments are conducive, then it is naturally easier for colleges to demonstrate positive characteristics.

**Colleges as Spaces**

Colleges’ espoused theories about whom they are and what they do inevitably are refracted through their spatial realities. All three colleges (and False Bay) were clearly concerned with the messages that their buildings send about the value and values of colleges. All have elements of their building stock that was well past its prime or that had been intended to be used as a short term solution to space issues. Each had embarked on an ambitious programme of rebuilding that is tempered by the realities of funding possibilities. All three had been able to access state funding for new constructions but all had to rein in their building programmes in the face of funding constraints. As was noted above, this is currently affecting West Nottinghamshire most dramatically. The South African colleges also faced major challenges as the result of their merger process in the early 2000s. Even in these metropolitan colleges, there were significant distances between sites and very different cultures that were still being harmonised. The multiple legacies of Apartheid mean that there were still limits in what can be done to move staff and students around between campuses, particularly where sites are in townships as at Coastal KZN, whilst there are also political limitations on closing certain campuses and consolidating sites.

Nonetheless in their attempts to upgrade facilities it is clear that there was some concern within colleges for the messages that are sent by the spatial organisation of learning. In a number of college sites, e.g., the motor vehicle facilities at Northlink’s Bellville campus or the new Construction and Logistics Academy at West Nottinghamshire, there was a deliberate clustering of theory classrooms and practical workshops together for one trade area. This was seen as important in building a trade identity between staff and students but also for sending messages about the need to integrate theory and practice in new qualifications in both countries.

The most striking example of the messages being sent and impacts of a new spatial organisation was in the Construction and Logistics Academy. Here the proximity of “lecturettes”, small study areas clustered around an interactive whiteboard and teaching
station, adjacent and open to the main workshop area in painting and decorating, for instance, was seen by staff as having allowed a greater flexibility of teaching organisation that enabled staff to move far more seamlessly between theory and practice that had hitherto been the case. Given ongoing negative attitudes amongst college learners to anything akin to schooling, this was seen as being an important advance in building learner engagement and, thus, retention and success.

There was also a clear message inscribed in the buildings of the Construction and Logistics Academy. The building’s high ceilings made it very easy to limit dust. The most striking feature of the building was a coffee bar with a wall the height of the building that separated it from workshops. On this bright, white wall were stylised representations of some of the tools of the trades. The overall impression given by the site was that building trades were clean and respectable.

Spatial organisation was also seen in attempts to simulate workplace environments. As is noted below, the whole issue of simulation is a highly important one in college level responses to the challenges of employability. This was reflected in the spatial layout of certain parts of colleges. All three colleges had restaurants that sought to replicate the organisational layout of real world facilities. Equally, motor vehicle paint and body shops also mimicked typical industrial layouts. In a somewhat different way, the business simulators found in all three colleges provided a more stylised spatial reflection of the division of businesses into different functional departments.

**Negotiating Colleges’ Boundaries**

All three colleges demonstrated an interesting tension regarding their local groundedness. West Nottinghamshire is clearly located in two districts and has a catchment area that is largely well-defined and externally well-understood. Although inevitably in closer proximity to its metropolitan neighbours, Coastal KZN serves a well-defined part of the Durban / Thekwini metropolis and can interact with established development fora in the South Basin zone. Equally, Northlink is located in a particular part of the Cape Town suburbs with significant retail and industrial activity. Inevitably, however, the two metropolitan colleges have more potential for student in-migration from the catchment areas of neighbouring colleges. There was talk of an attempt to manage this through non-competition in certain specialist areas although both colleges inevitably had many programmes in common with their neighbours. In all three, but most strikingly in West Nottinghamshire, there was a sense that there were local
communities that the college had a particular duty to work with. Therefore, it can be argued that each college had a strong sense of its spatial boundaries, which were congruent with its core catchment area and its notional partner communities.

Nonetheless, it was clear that all of the colleges also undermined their spatial boundaries in different ways. West Nottinghamshire had more learners off-site than it did on-site. Whilst many of these off-site learners were still within the Mansfield and Ashfield region, there were large numbers elsewhere. These included a large rail track maintenance cohort in Doncaster and plans for similar activities in London. The other colleges were still to develop such reach, although Coastal KZN's Enterprise Development Unit and its Training Academy for the public sector had a provincial remit. What the South African colleges had been developing more strongly was their links to industry and the placement of students and staff into enterprises, although this remained less developed than they would have wished (see section 5.4 below).

Whilst internationalisation efforts are still very underdeveloped in all three colleges, there are small international student cohorts in each, although the data suggests that few of these entered the country specifically to follow an FE(T) course. Nonetheless, this is another way in which colleges’ spatial boundaries are becoming more blurred.

There has been a historic tension for colleges in both countries regarding the boundaries of what counts as their legitimate areas of work. Several times over the past century, the more advanced parts of colleges’ activities have been redesignated as higher education and hived off to new institutions. In South Africa, in spite of the intentions stated in the initial design of the National Qualifications Framework, colleges have been discouraged by government from working outside the FET band of the framework. Yet, South African colleges often have had large programmes that have fallen outside of the FET band. At Northlink, for instance, the hotel school offered programmes that were on level 5 of the initial NQF and, thus, were designated as HE. At the other end of the NQF, much of Coastal KZN’s entrepreneurship development work was often with adults with less than level 1 qualifications.

Keeping within the “right” NQF levels has been less of an issue in England. Provision at West Nottinghamshire, however, as is the case across the English sector, was characterised by a wide range of programme levels. Thus, there were offerings at entry levels (i.e., below level 1) for both young people (as young as 14) and adults. At the other end of spectrum, there had been a significant growth in the involvement of colleges in higher education, and West Nottinghamshire was offering 16 foundation
degrees, 2 top-up degrees and 6 Higher National Certificates or Diplomas for 2009/10 entry.

Colleges were also straddling the academic-vocational boundary within the FE(T) level. Thus West Nottinghamshire had a large academic A level programme, whilst False Bay College had a specialist mathematics and science school on its Good Hope Campus in Khayelitsha. Academic success rates and progression to higher education are low in both Mansfield and Khayelitsha but the colleges were outperforming local schools. Thus, they can be argued to be serving as academic beacons within their communities, promoting attainment and aspirations.

Where colleges appeared to be less successful (although the English environment is somewhat more conducive here than the South African) was in breaking the boundaries between the worlds of learning and work in terms of their employer engagement. This is an issue that will be taken up in greater detail in the subsequent two sections from first and employer and then a policy perspective. However, here it can be noted that nearly two decades of encouragement to English colleges to become more responsive has still led only to partial progress in this area, whilst South African colleges have come to this policy arena later and are even further behind.

Clearly, there is not a simple right answer regarding the extent to which colleges should have a core focus on a particular range of fields, set of qualification levels or type of learner. There was a strong sense across the colleges that diversification across all these characteristics offered advantages in bringing in new income streams and making the institution more resilient in the face of changes in state funding. Nonetheless, there may be dangers too in colleges losing sight of what is their core business.

Simulating Work Experience

Whilst some learners, including the majority in West Nottinghamshire, had access to real workplace experience, this remained a major challenge for the colleges and large numbers of their learners, particularly the younger ones. There was a widespread concern, mirrored in policy debates and academic literature, that many students did not gain a sufficient grasp of working to industry standards, either in terms of quality or pace.

Colleges have sought to address this deficit in a number of ways. There have been some attempts in the colleges to use training with production, both as a means of income
generation and as a way of exposing learners to workplace discipline. However, there was considerable concern that such operations tended to result in production taking primacy over training, with learners becoming stuck on repetitive tasks if orders needed filling urgently.

Whilst training with production was largely unpopular, across the colleges, there were small scale examples of students working in short-term placements within administrative departments. This was seen as one way that colleges could make up for the severely limited numbers of external work experience opportunities, at least for a few learners. Additionally, colleges were also increasingly encouraging learners to volunteer, partly for work experience reasons. At the most fleeting end of work orientation, there were also cases of students getting visits to workplaces, such as visiting the sites for World Cup 2010 stadia.

As noted above, there has been some attempt in certain subject areas to mimic industry working environments as far as possible. This was particularly strong in certain vocational fields, some of which have had a long tradition of exposing students to serving the public. Examples here included hotel and catering and hairdressing. In others such as motor vehicle, there has been a more limited element of opening up to the public, but it was more common for students to get experience in servicing staff members’ cars. In West Nottinghamshire, for instance, automechanical students were expected to use job cards, as in industry, to record their work and to complete jobs against industry norms. Both of the South African colleges had the status of trade testing centres, which meant that they had staff with a clear understanding of what the industry standards were, which could then be disseminated to learners. The far larger workplace-based learning portfolio of West Nottinghamshire, including apprenticeships, also meant that it had a strong sense of what industry required.

In a number of fields, recent developments in technologies have allowed far more sophisticated simulation of real life problems, such as in mechatronics where faults can be programmed into car systems in order for students to diagnose and correct them. Simulation was also a widespread tool in learning about both entrepreneurship and office practice across these colleges. In the South African colleges learners were grouped into teams to run different parts of a simulated business and then rotated around different areas of the business. In a variation of this, at the Ashfield College campus of West Nottinghamshire formerly disengaged learners on an entry level business programme were given the responsibility of managing the administration of the campus, under the supervision of their programme leader.
Finally, as has been discussed earlier, there was also a widespread drive to develop a vocational learning culture in which industry values such as punctuality, hard work and an aversion to waste were inculcated.

There are great potential benefits for vocational learners in getting significant exposure to workplace experience. Such experience can help in the building of networks, in socialisation, in developing real practical skills and in signalling to prospective employers that this is a potentially good recruit. Thus, it can have multiple positive impacts on employability. However, it is evident that the numbers of college learners in both countries far outstrip the potential sites for work experience. Moreover, this is likely to continue indefinitely in spite of the planned expansion of apprenticeships in both countries. Therefore, colleges have sought to use a range of approaches to try to bridge this gap, as noted in the previous paragraphs. However, it appears that there is still considerable uncertainty as to how far these various approaches are viable as even partial substitutes for proper work placements. However, it must also be noted before leaving this theme, that there was also some concern noted by college staff that some work placements were neither good learning nor good working experiences as some employers continued to see young workers as ripe for exploitation.

The Entrepreneurial College

The tendency to equate employability and entrepreneurship that was noted in the literature review can also be seen mirrored at the institutional level. The employable institution also shows a tendency to be entrepreneurial. Whilst clear about their public sector identity and mandate, each college was also concerned with being business-like. Moreover, the limitations of core funding had encouraged all of them to explore ways of generating further income. Examples included West Nottinghamshire’s marketing of initial assessment through its bksb subsidiary, Northlink’s restaurant / conference venue and Coastal KZN’s conference centre and roof truss business. In the South African colleges (and others located near World Cup venues) opportunities were being taken to earn extra income from the event, often through agreements to rent out facilities during the tournament. However, in all three colleges, there were tensions regarding the management of income generation. Some of these were born out of success and a worry that the college was becoming too dependent on income from such activities, which could be seen as an indicator that the core business was not as financially viable as it
should have been. Others related back to the challenges of combining training and production, as noted above.

Specialist versus Generalist Colleges

The public FE(T) college as we know it in both countries is a generalist institution, although there are also specialist providers that operate in parallel, most typically in the areas of land-based industries and the arts. However, there does appear to be a degree of tension as to what extent each college should be a generalist. Whilst limits to student mobility appear to require that a large range of programmes should be available across a large number of sites, there may be a case for a degree of specialism, where colleges can be regional or national centres of excellence. This was seen in examples such as oil and gas engineering at Northlink, training for the public sector at Coastal KZN or public transport at West Nottinghamshire. It may be argued that such specialisation is likely to enhance learner employability as colleges become closer partners with employers and more attuned to real industry requirements. Whilst the Coastal KZN and West Nottinghamshire examples above relate to programmes for existing staff, there are clearly enhanced possibilities for new entrants to these industries to come through colleges that are closely linked to key employers and industry bodies.

The Data Problem

One of the most striking findings of this project was the paucity of decent data or management information systems regarding student destinations. This appears to be far less developed in both countries than is the case for higher education, although it was getting growing attention in all of the colleges. College data was more reliable on showing that students had moved onto further courses than it was on whether they had gained and maintained employment. Where limited destination surveying was taking place, it was typically only at the start of the next academic year, that is, a few months after course completion. Even then, the response rates were very low.

College managers were concerned about this weakness and were clearly looking at ways of addressing it. However, there was also some sense that the practical and financial challenges involved were such that there was unlikely to be major developments in the near future in this area. A national study funded by the Department of Labour is currently underway to track a cohort of students and this will provide some insight into
the system as a whole, but the specifics of each colleges' student destinations remain opaque.

Of course, while it is difficult for colleges to have a systematic approach to supporting employability when they are not in a good position to judge how well they are doing in this area, it may be that one characteristic of good tutors/lecturers is that they have a strong sense of where their former students and have gone.

*Going Beyond the Ordinary*

A theme that appears to encapsulate much of what stood out across the colleges was that of “going beyond”, as already captured by several of the findings in this section and the previous two. As “employable colleges” these institutions were characterised by leaders and staff who went beyond the ordinary level of expectations to engage with industry and with learners. They increasingly looked beyond their own walls to provide training opportunities and actively sought to work across age and qualification levels. Whilst they largely thought in terms of local labour markets and communities, they also demonstrated some interest in regional, national and even international niches.

Furthermore, these colleges looked to enhance the official curriculum to make learners more employable. In different ways the colleges sought to provide elements of an extra-curricular offering that was far more extensive than traditionally experienced in colleges. Thus, computing students at West Nottinghamshire had visited Euro Disney to explore the role of computers in operating such a large tourist attraction; whilst Coastal KZN rewarded outstanding students with an expedition to the Drakensberg Mountains. A number of staff made explicit a view that many of their learners lacked social and cultural capital and that it was the job of the college to enhance these in order to develop better citizens and improve employability.

There was evidence of an increased focus on developing the wider range of employability skills. Although this largely mirrored the introduction of such aspects into the formal curriculum, there were also examples of practices that went beyond this, such as False Bay’s development of a placement services programme through which students were supported in developing CVs and preparing for interviews, and contacts were made with employers both to place students post-qualification and to monitor the employers’ satisfaction with these graduates. False Bay management noted that some of the
feedback received from employers had enabled them to adjust curricula to make them better attuned to industry needs.

There were several cases where college staff, supported by their managers, had identified that the official curriculum was lacking key content or skills that were highly prized by employers. In computing, for instance, it was common across the colleges to find that there had been an investment in getting accreditation to offer industry standard programmes from major companies such as Cisco and Microsoft.  West Nottinghamshire staff spoke of the importance of a culture in which students learnt as many programming languages as possible.

Much of this meant that colleges also went far beyond the budgets that they should have normally received. As well as diversifying programmes and developing income generating units, it was clear that college staff, leaders and governors also had expended considerable effort in generating additional funding from a variety of sources because they could see that the college could not support learners sufficiently without extra resources.

5.4. **Employers**

*The Context*

This research was conducted in the latter half of 2009 and most employers interviewed alluded to the ongoing recession in both the engineering and construction sectors. While the 2010 FIFA World Cup has contributed to extensive construction projects in South Africa, these were thought to be of a temporary nature. The effects of the recession not only meant that fewer companies were employing college graduates, but that the employment offered was often on short contracts. Placements for students were often proving harder to acquire and, in some cases, the mix between apprenticed and private candidates had shifted towards the latter.

*Specific Work Skills*

Employers expressed the need for specific skills in a workplace, although this varied across sectors. Automotive engineering employers, for instance, were more concerned
about this than those in construction. Strikingly, it was typical for these skills to be couched in terms of traditional trades and qualifications in spite of the major changes in both in recent years. Indeed, some South African employers appeared to have a nostalgia for the NATED artisan qualifications (currently being phased out and replaced by National Certificate Vocational (NCV) qualifications), as these skills were still recognised by industry. Not only were these employers suspicious of newer qualifications, they were also looking for qualifications that they themselves possessed. This was in spite of widespread employer criticisms of NATED over many years.

Some South African employers did express support for the NCV programmes as facilitating the longer-term employability of college graduates as they would be better equipped for further learning. Others, however, had a more “oven-ready” view of employability, bemoaning the fact that NCV graduates would need two years of work experience after graduating from the college before they would be able to take the construction industry trade tests. There was also widely reported reluctance amongst employers to take in young students (15-17 year olds) for placement.

Generic Skills

Many employers stated the need for employees to possess generic life skills and strong personal attributes in line with McQuaid and Lindsay’s (2005) analysis of individual factors affecting employment. An automotive engineering firm stressed the need for employees who demonstrated discipline, obedience and time management as well as a passion for their profession as a panel beater or spray painter. This was echoed in West Nottinghamshire across both the construction and engineering training programmes, where issues of time management and discipline would be inculcated as if students were already in employment. Employer emphasis on passion and motivation for a specific career was mentioned frequently, in part because of the high levels of investment placed in new employees and the consequent loss of income should learners decide this was not their field of interest. Colleges were urged to provide training and orientation in each of these skills areas so that learners could make informed decisions as to their career progression.

‘Soft’ skills were also emphasised, such as an awareness of health and personal safety. An employer described an incident whereby forklift operators would sit next to their running machines during their breaks. Mathematical Literacy was seen as an important skills within the South African construction industry as construction managers needed to
keep a “cash register in the mind” while working. A representative of an employer body for the Oil and Gas sector in South Africa explained their development of a generic engineering course that would enable graduates to develop key skills required for a number of engineering career paths, rather than specific trade qualifications.

Within the construction industry, employers stressed the importance of physical attributes to work effectively in this environment, but noted that women were increasingly hired within the construction industry, particularly in painting and plastering. Within automotive engineering firms, an employer gave an example of employing a college graduate for spray-painting, but the graduate was colour blind and therefore unable to perform effectively in the workplace.

*College Engagement with Employers*

Engagement with employers remains a major challenge for colleges, although important steps were being taken in this regard. One such strategy was the growing use of placement officers to secure employment for learners and graduates. False Bay College used placement officers extensively to interact with employers. The college had set an employment target rate of 65% for their graduates and was offering employers a service whereby specific skills and attributes were identified amongst the student cohort and matched to employer demand. Graduates were being monitored for up to six months within the workplace by college staff who liaised extensively with employers. A key advantage for employers here is that they did not have to use recruitment agencies and pay additional fees to identify appropriate employees. The other South African colleges had similar protocols in place to interface with employers albeit on a less formalised basis. In West Nottinghamshire College, an Employer Engagement department had been established with 25 advisors who dealt primarily with apprenticeships and employment of college graduates.

Nonetheless, several college tutors and managers bemoaned the difficulties that they perceived in getting adequate level of employer engagement, whilst some were wary of “rogue” employers, whom they felt were exploiting students on placement.

*Employer Engagement with Colleges*

It is clear from the above that employer engagement with colleges is patchy. Nonetheless, there were signs of good practices in our research at all three colleges in this area. The national Department of Education (as it was still called at the time) had
brought together the largest five construction firms in South Africa to help it co-design the NCV curriculum for Civil Engineering and Building Construction. This was being piloted in two FET colleges, one of which was Northlink. From an employability perspective, the hope was expressed that with industry involvement graduates would gain easier access to employment. However, placement of NCV students in industry for the practical components of the training proved to be difficult, especially as health insurance cover currently cannot be extended to student placements in the workplace, as this only applies to full time employees. This made construction firms reluctant to take responsibility for students in the workplace.

Industry made significant use of college infrastructure across the three colleges interviewed for this project. This was most marked in areas such as Computer Numerical Control (CNC) where college facilities would be used by larger employers for short-term training of their own staff and even for production when their own facilities were being serviced or faced excess demand. There were also some cases of making such capital intensive college facilities available for use of smaller manufacturers out of hours.

The College as an Employer

As was noted in the sub-section “The entrepreneurial college” above, all three colleges also owned businesses that employed staff. Whilst these businesses were key income generation sources for the college, very few of them employed college graduates. Whilst colleges were prepared to use some of these businesses as workplace training sites for college students, in most cases these businesses were run by full-time professional staff who were not necessarily college graduates. The one area where colleges are employing their graduates is as lecturers or in other support functions.

The State as an Employer

Within South Africa, the state is a significant employer of college graduates. This was clearly demonstrated by Coastal KZN College who had obtained a significant contract to train existing members of the South African National Defence Force as artisans, and its role in continuous professional development of provincial government staff. This is less common in England, although the local health trust is a significant partner of West Nottinghamshire College.
5.5. Policy

In the cog metaphor introduced earlier in this paper, national policies should be working in synchronicity with institutional practices. Clearly this has happened to a large extent in recent years. The transformation of the college sector in both countries was initiated largely from the national policy level. Mergers were encouraged and approved (England) or mandated (South Africa) and new funding regimes, governance structures and curricular offerings all arose from national policy decisions. The new funding regime in England, for instance, has increasingly privileged retention and achievement over recruitment in ways that are complementary to improved employability. Equally, the shift of relative power in college governing bodies in both countries away from public officials or politicians to business leaders was also predicated on the assumption that this would make colleges more responsive to business and, hence, improve employability. Thus, in so far as the new colleges provide better quality, are more responsive and more skilled at promoting employability, national government can in both cases plausibly take much of the credit.

However, it is also evident that the transformation process is not complete. Moreover, there appear to be important ways in which policies have not been sufficient help to colleges in their quest for improved employability.

Funding Regimes

Public sector institutions are likely to complain about the extent and nature of state funding. Nonetheless, there were serious financial concerns in the colleges that we visited that the funding situation was undermining elements of their work. Since the fieldwork visit to West Nottinghamshire College, a major national programme of budgetary cuts for the English FE sector has been announced that is likely to put further pressures on the sector.

Whilst, there was no sign of unhappiness at West Nottinghamshire regarding the general funding regime at the time of our fieldwork, a very major financial issue had emerged as the result of the Learning and Skills Council’s mismanagement of its college rebuilding programme. In early 2009 it emerged that there was a £3 billion shortfall between what the LSC was able to finance for new capital programmes in colleges and what colleges had been encouraged to bid for. West Nottinghamshire College was one of the worst
affected with a plan for a complete rebuild of the main site at a cost of over £90 million being due to go to the next approval committee when the crisis broke. Whilst the Principal remains committed to funding the project, it is unclear how far the college can go towards meeting its plans. It is also unclear what impact this might have on morale.

In South Africa, there has been a more modest recapitalisation programme from which both colleges had benefited in very visible ways. Nonetheless, both Coastal KZN and Northlink management still saw a range of ways in which infrastructure was inadequate for colleges to meet their missions. There was a real concern in particular regarding the difficulties of employer engagement when facilities were not likely to impress potential partners.

Of more concern, however, in South Africa was the way in which the funding regime for colleges contained major tensions that challenged the ability to be relevant. One major tension arose from the different funding regimes of the Departments of Education and Labour, which were in the process of reconfiguration at the time of the fieldwork visits (the DoE-DoL split will be examined more closely in the next sub-section). The public colleges belonged to the provincial Departments of Education and were being told that their primary function was to deliver the new National Certificate (Vocational) courses. However, there were two major concerns about the advisability of concentrating solely on NCV delivery. First, the colleges believed that NCV funding was inadequate and that reliance on this source of funding alone would result in much smaller colleges with less staff and students. Indeed, it appears that student numbers in the sector have declined somewhat since the introduction of NCV. Second, colleges also had strong concerns about the extent to which NCV promoted employability and, particularly, regarding employers’ perceptions of NCV’s value.

Thus, both colleges saw the need to have diversified income streams, including their business units (noted earlier); a range of NATED and other “old” awards that brought in fees income; and programmes funded through the DoL system. However, it was evident that there were tensions here between colleges and government, a major recurrent theme of college-state interactions since merger. At times, colleges had been warned off from “double-dipping”: using Education-funded staff and facilities to deliver Labour-funded courses.

Region Policy
The constitutional settlement in South Africa that gives considerable powers to the nine provinces provides a very different backdrop for regional policies than does the far more centralised English case. Since the first FET Act, South African colleges have been owned by their provincial governments and our fieldwork confirmed that their institutional policies were heavily aligned with provincial strategies for economic growth and job creation. In this way, colleges were reasonably well-positioned to address the demand side of employability. Therefore, it will be important to see how plans to move colleges to a national competence can ensure the continuation of this strong local embeddedness.

However, for West Nottinghamshire, regional policy was less developed, although the college did seek to participate in the various levels of district, county and regional processes. The resultant alignment with policy was seen here too as a way of improving employability through a better fit with the economic opportunities in the region.

**The Limits of Joined-up Policy**

Both countries have stressed the rhetoric of joined-up government, particularly in the Blair and Mbeki eras. Whilst FE colleges in England have increasingly been located within a mesh of wider policy concerns and initiatives, there have been concerns that policy overload has resulted. In South Africa, however, there has been ongoing concerns that education and skills policies have been disarticulated. In spite of national and provincial HRD Strategies and the National Qualifications Framework, articulation between the activities of the two departments remained unsatisfactory across the 15 years of democracy and resulted in the past year in the decision to move both FET and skills development into a new Ministry of Higher Education and Training.

This new Ministry is still grappling with key policy disharmonies. These include the lack of equivalence between level 4 awards in academic, vocational and occupational strands, which has undermined both vertical progression and horizontal portability within the system. They also include the fact that colleges have been unable to be individually accredited by sector education and training authorities (SETAs) as they are seen as collectively forming a provincial college system, which was deemed by the education system to be the appropriate unit for recognition. Although more dynamic colleges, such as Coastal KZN and Northlink, have worked round this issue through developing institutional relationships with some SETAs, this issue does appear to have limited the take up of learnerships in colleges. In so far as learnerships are the key industry-
accredited awards on offer in South Africa, this has inevitably had a negative effect on employability. Overall, policy support for employer engagement has not been consistent enough.

Curriculum for Employability

Clearly an employability focus implies changes in curriculum (and pedagogy). Although colleges have been encouraged to respond to this challenge, it needs to be remembered that much of curriculum design in both countries is highly centralised. Whilst, new curricula introduced in both countries in recent years are supposed to be more employability enhancing, there remain real questions regarding the extent to which this has been successful, with the new NCV awards in South Africa, in particular, still struggling for widespread acceptance.

6. Beyond Employability

Employability Reconsidered

The current economic crisis has led to a renewed stress on the importance of employability for young people in England, South Africa and globally. However, this heightened profile for the issue builds upon three decades of a journey for public educational providers as they have sought to respond to wider economic, political and social transformations. Moreover, it is evident that any discussion of employability is closely intertwined with other major themes of the international debate about further education and training reform, such as quality, responsiveness and inclusion.

Although we have noted the widespread criticism of the individualised, deficit-model approach to employability that has dominated Anglo-Saxon approaches of the past three decades, it is important to reiterate that a focus on the knowledge, skills and attitudes required by individuals is an important element of any meaningful consideration of the employability issue. As the literature review above shows, however, this individual account needs to be put together with accounts that also include considerations of factors such as personal circumstances and external factors.

Our most original and important message, however, is that an educational account of employability needs to go further and stress the positive role that educational institutions can play in facilitating employability, whilst seeking to move away from
approaches that bully or blame institutions regarding their contribution to employability. Whilst the further education and training colleges we are considering have supported learner employability, they have done so in an environment that ensures that their efforts are only a small part of the overall story.

It is important to remember also that colleges should not be thought of simply in terms of their ability to support youth employability. All three colleges studied here have very diverse learner age and employment profiles. They need to be thought of as much as providers of lifelong learning that are supportive of employability at all stages of adolescent and adult life.

It is also important to stress the importance of context. The policies and priorities shaping colleges in the two countries are inextricably linked to complex historical processes that are nationally specific, whilst the merger processes shaping institutions in both countries are also unique. Whilst England may seem to be ahead in a number of ways, there are other dimensions for which South African colleges are more responsive to their own environments.

Employability and Colleges

In this report, we have used five lenses through which to examine employability in the case study colleges. Using a different metaphor of gears, we have suggested that these five dimensions are most impactful when they are synchronised.

Our research suggests that younger students in these colleges have largely internalised the standard argument that there are a key set of knowledges, skills and attitudes that promote individual employability. Strikingly, they appear to have little sense of the social capital dimension of their employability.

In contrast, staff are far more conscious of the need to balance the human and social capital aspects of employability promotion. Good staff act as brokers or facilitators of social capital networks. They link their students with former students, now in the workplace, and with local employers. With this social capital building role of the staff, however, comes the challenge of ensuring that staff do not simply reproduce themselves or their ideal types of the good learner / worker but are able to promote equity and inclusion. In other words, there is a danger that college staff and their employer contacts may promote Putnam’s (1995) bonding capital (that which strengthens homogeneity) over bridging capital (that which expands beyond the existing community).
We have already pointed to the link between employability and quality and our evidence suggests that good teaching improves employability. However, this finding is made more complicated by the differences between vocational and academic knowledges, which mean that caution is required in importing strategies to improve teaching and learning from the school system. For instance, good teaching staff also act as modellers of practices and dispositions that are appropriate for the workplace and stress the importance of constructing an employable habitus for their learners in ways that are significantly different than those that pertain in general schooling and require a different learning biography from the college lecturer than from the school teacher.

At the heart of our reflection on the fieldwork data is the notion of the employable college: an institution that itself demonstrates a similar set of knowledges, skills and attitudes as those with which it wishes to inculcate its learners. Our research also highlights the importance of the college as a learning space and the ways in which this contributes to the development of individuals’ employable dispositions. Moreover, the employable college “goes beyond” what is normally expected and takes it staff and students with it along this path. Inevitably, such institutions require good leadership and these three colleges all have leaders that have a significant presence in their own institutions, in their localities and on the national stage.

Whilst these first three lenses reflect a largely positive story of colleges that are becoming more pro-employability, our fourth dimension of employer engagement demonstrates far more of the limitations that still remain in building genuine partnerships between employers and colleges, particularly when it comes to promoting the employability of younger learners in a context of large-scale youth unemployment.

Although we can point to some important policy developments that have encouraged and supported colleges in their efforts to become more employability focused, our account of policy is also more cautious, reflecting some of the real challenges of making joined-up policy work. Perhaps this reflects in part a continued weakness of understanding amongst many policymakers of the college sector. Whilst colleges may have become of more interest to policymakers in the recent past, precisely because of their potential to address major issues of competitiveness, inclusion and employability, the long-term structuring of education prestige means that few college graduates or staff are likely to become policymakers or shapers of public opinion.

Nonetheless, we are largely positive about what we have seen at the institutional level as these colleges and their staff and students presented us with wide-ranging evidence
of ongoing efforts to promote employability. Whilst employability should never be the sole target of colleges, nor understood in exclusively individualised terms, it is an important element of the mission of colleges and our findings point to a range of issues that merit further consideration in promoting employability at institutional and policy levels.
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