

---

# Conflicting priorities: The dichotomous roles of leadership and management at TVET colleges

Catherine Robertson and Liezel Frick

*University of Stellenbosch*

---

## ABSTRACT

The notions of leadership and management in the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector have become blurred in South Africa. The growing need for responsive and flexible leadership in the TVET sector has resulted in challenges that can only be overcome with the relevant leadership knowledge and skills. Our findings suggest that the demands of leadership and management have created conflicting priorities for leaders at the TVET colleges. Leadership development in the TVET sector may be one way of addressing these issues. Yet, in South Africa, there are no strategically planned, custom-designed leadership development programmes for leaders in public TVET colleges. A curriculum framework for leadership development should be informed by these conflicting priorities in order to reprioritise the focus of TVET leaders in South Africa on their core business: that of vocational education. This article reports on current and future TVET leaders' perceptions of how the notions of leadership and management influence their practice.

## KEYWORDS

*Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges; management; leadership; leadership development*

Research made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation

## **Introduction**

Leaders work in unfamiliar territory, often with a repertoire of largely historical leadership strategies. They have to respond to external demands with business-like efficiency and accountability, while navigating the maze of diverging cultural norms, narratives and work ethos of academic environments (Kligyte & Barrie, 2014:157).

Being a leader is thus no easy task – especially not in the South African technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college sector. Many TVET colleges are regarded as dysfunctional and incapable of meeting the social and economic needs of the country, despite the expectation that they are to play a transformative role in education as required by legislation (RSA, 2013). In order for the colleges to rise to this challenge, their leaders have to be equipped with knowledge, skills, aptitudes and competencies to lead these institutions into the future (RSA, 2013). The growing need for responsiveness and flexibility in the TVET sector has not only increased the workload of leaders in this sector, but has also resulted in a number of leadership challenges. These demands, we argue, have blurred the lines between leadership and management in the South African TVET sector.

Callan, Mitchell, Clayton and Smith (2007:13) define leadership in a vocational institution as the capacity at both the individual and institutional levels to identify and define organisational goals and desired outcomes, to develop strategic plans to achieve these goals and deliver the outcomes, and to guide the organisation and motivate people to reach these goals. Callan (2001:10) suggests that, while management is involved with dealing with ‘complexity and the present’, leadership is concerned with the establishment of a ‘compelling vision, direction and a plan for the future’. Tichy and Devanna (1990) contend that managers maintain the balance of operations in an organisation, while leaders are characterised as individuals who create new approaches and imagine new areas to explore. According to Falk (2003:196), however, those ‘labelled “leaders” are also required to manage’.

In the vocational education and training (VET) sector internationally, leadership and management have been recognised as different but overlapping concepts, mostly without distinguishing between the two concepts in a practical sense (Foley & Conole, 2003). This evident lack of clearly demarcated roles creates competing priorities and has implications for any leadership (or management) development initiative. Before any leadership development can take place, these dichotomous roles need to be clarified.

Leaders at South African TVET colleges hail from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds – ranging from school teaching to artisanal trades. Very few of them have any specific vocational education or context-specific leadership training, yet they are expected to function in a complex and demanding sector marked by regular policy changes and political interference, student unrest, unstable staffing conditions and no clear leadership career pathways or succession planning strategies. Despite these challenges, TVET leaders remain at

the helm of an essential (though often undervalued) component of the South African national education system.

Currently there is a paucity of scholarly work focused on South African vocational education in general, and even less that is focused on leadership development within this sector. This article therefore aims to address this gap by exploring the tensions resulting from competing priorities of leadership and management in the TVET sector. These tensions first need to be understood before any meaningful leadership development can take place. We therefore investigated the dichotomous roles of leadership and management at South African TVET colleges by means of focus-group and individual interviews with current and potential future leaders at public TVET colleges across South Africa.

### **The conflicting priorities of leadership and management**

Context plays an important role in TVET leadership. Today, it is acknowledged that leadership competencies are affected by many contextual factors (Falk, 2003; Eddy, 2010; Coates et al., 2013; Gentry et al., 2014). The South African TVET colleges, like the American community colleges, the Australian TAFE colleges and the further education (FE) colleges in the United Kingdom (UK), are complex, multidimensional organisations, playing a varied educational and training role (Eddy, 2010; Nevarez, Wood & Penrose, 2013). TVET leaders have to maintain a balance between ‘strategic priorities and competing responsibilities’ (Collinson & Collinson, 2009:376). Collinson and Collinson (2009) divide the competing priorities and responsibilities of such leaders into five broad categories, including:

- operating across different sectors;
- dealing with a diverse demography of students;
- balancing internal and external roles;
- dealing with various competing operational pressures; and
- facing external pressures.

In addition, in the context of a South African TVET college, these leaders also have to negotiate their relatively recent integration into the higher education sector in 2009 that has brought about additional challenges and demands (RSA, 2013). This could be added as a sixth priority. These categories provide a useful basis for considering the dichotomous relationship of competing priorities of leadership and management in the South African TVET sector.

Since the TVET colleges are located as post-school education and training institutions in the South African public higher education system, the leader of a TVET college is first and foremost an educational leader, but with a multifaceted vocational rather than a purely academic focus. This means that TVET colleges, like other VET institutions internationally, operate across sectors other than focusing on a purely educational system. Colleges have to work with business, the community, government and education sectors. Each sector has its own requirements and challenges (Gleeson & Knights, 2008). The ability to balance all these sectors’ diverse needs

may be a unique challenge to the leadership of the colleges, especially given the current financial pressures they face. Colleges therefore require leaders who have a number of different competencies that can be applied in different contexts and complex situations.

According to Robertson (2005:40), educational leadership is about ‘informed actions that influence the continuous improvement of learning and teaching’. The emphasis should thus be placed on actions relating to learning and teaching, and thus be focused on the students. One of the reasons for the complexity of the situation is that, at any stage, a TVET college has a diverse demographic of learners, all at different life stages and with different educational needs and levels. TVET colleges offer a wide range of education and training opportunities to post-school students, providing them with a second chance of finishing the final school-leaving certificate, or by offering bridging programmes providing access to universities. The colleges also offer a range of vocational programmes for school-leavers to enter the job market. In addition, colleges provide upskilling and reskilling for working or adult learners, as well as providing contextually relevant and personally enriching learning possibilities to local communities (HESA PSE, 2011). Furthermore, a significant proportion of the students are from disadvantaged backgrounds (Collinson & Collinson, 2009; RSA, 2013).

Having such a diverse student body complicates education and training at these institutions. Other factors relate to including a variety of teaching methods such as online learning, as well as timetabling that accommodates flexible learning in terms of time and place. The challenge is how to balance these multiple missions and functions in order to meet the needs of the individual, the community and the state. Leaders must therefore be responsive to these multiple needs, as well as college learners’ aspirations and limitations (Eddy, 2010).

Leaders in TVET colleges are also expected to balance the previously mentioned internal with external roles. Dealing with external issues has become part of college leaders’ daily tasks (Quinlan, 2014). The leader must meet government mandates, as well as respond to many demands, and the leader is held more and more accountable while cost pressures create conflict with more altruistic values. College leaders are expected to develop an external presence by becoming the face of the college (Lambert, 2013:27) and present the interests of the college to business and the local community.

Public higher education is increasingly required to provide evidence of its effectiveness during times where educational leaders’ work is dominated by management matters rather than efforts to improve teaching and learning (Dempster, 2009). Foley and Conole (2003) and Callan et al. (2007) have identified similar tensions in the TAFE sector. There is an increased call for accountability at a number of different college levels such as use of resources, human, physical, financial and otherwise. Despite these demands, the external role of the college leader should not be at the cost of internal college matters.

Much has been written about higher education to highlight how academic leadership, particularly in universities, differs from other organisational contexts. South African TVET

colleges were officially included as higher education institutions in 2009. The staff at TVET colleges have thus had to learn how to function in this new sector which they share with other educational institutions such as universities and universities of technology. At universities, decentralisation and the 'culture of collegiality and autonomy underpinning academic work' (Kligyte & Barrie, 2014:157) indicate that higher education needs a different kind of leadership to private organisations. Even though public institutions of higher education (universities as well as TVET colleges) are very much part of the public service, they are rarely treated as such (Kligyte & Barrie, 2014).

The concept of collegiality, which is at the very heart of a university, also distinguishes a university from other higher education institutions (Kligyte & Barrie, 2014). It sets universities apart from TVET colleges even though they share the same higher education system. This offers further challenges to TVET college leaders who have to co-mingle at the same level as leaders from universities, despite the difference in qualifications, experience, working conditions and frames of reference.

Juntrasook (2014) came up with four meanings of leadership at higher education institutions which have some relevance to TVET colleges. The first of these meanings is that leadership is a position to which someone is appointed. This appointment legitimises the position. An institution should entrench this notion by being prepared to invest in such a person and leadership development should be available to these leaders exclusively. The second meaning is that leadership is performance for which competency must be demonstrated. This meaning focuses on the work that the person does according to institutional policy. This type of leadership is observable and measurable and, in order to be promoted, the leader must demonstrate the required level of performance which is assessed or appraised. The third meaning is that leadership is practice. It is not always clear what this practice entails, but it could include attending meetings and conferences and serving on committees. The fourth and last meaning is that leadership is being a professional role model, which refers to the way the leader thinks, talks and behaves.

The first two meanings, leadership being a position or a performance, underline the hierarchical nature of educational leadership at a university, as well as at TVET colleges, and how this leadership is recognised publicly. The second two meanings denote leadership as practice and being a professional role model, which underlines the everyday context of a higher education institution, since it relates to what the leader does every day and how the leader acts in a professional context. It would be very difficult to measure the last two meanings. According to Schwella (2008), it should also be borne in mind that decisions in higher education institutions are made in a non-market environment and performance measures cannot be based on notions of profit or productivity. In Juntrasook's (2014) survey of university staff, leaders put more emphasis on the latter two meanings, although only the first two are officially recognised by the institutional policy. There is, therefore, a difference between how an educational institution sees leadership and an individual understanding of leadership at the institution.

The purpose of higher education is constantly being redefined to serve the needs of the market, with the emphasis falling on acquiring employment-related skills. Yet, leaders still tend to see the purpose of their institutions as far nobler (O'Connor, Carvalho & White, 2014). Leaders at universities and colleges recognise the need for change but many feel reluctant and even ill-equipped to bring about change or transformation at their institutions in the way in which it could serve the requirements of legislation. In South Africa, 'transformation' also has a special meaning linked to the need to convert and restructure the previous divided educational system into a single, unified, seamless education and training system with the emphasis on equity and redress. Real transformation is thus dependent on the nature and quality of educational leadership (Bush, 2007).

There are numerous strategic changes facing educational leaders, few of which can be brought about without professional development (Kezar, 2014). Leaders tend to think of change as a linear exercise, namely to develop a goal, expand it into a vision, implement it and then assess and revise it. However, there is no recipe for dealing with change, since the circumstances and environment are never the same; therefore, professional development should be a lifelong process through different stages of a leader's career in order to renew, refresh and redirect leadership practice. All leaders have the responsibility to keep learning throughout their careers (Robertson, 2005).

Since leaders in TVET colleges have to try to deal with various competing operational pressures owing to the complexity of their environment, they have become reactive (rather than proactive), balancing the administrative aspects of their roles with the educational aspects (Robertson, 2005:45). Many leaders feel that they are 'middle managers implementing, at the behest of others, policies for which they feel no ownership' (Robertson, 2005:45). Choices have to be made between 'business strategy and education, national policy and local reality, entrepreneurship and accountability, managerialism and professionalism' (Callan et al., 2007:10) to avoid tension. These leaders lament the fact that they have had to become experts in fiscal and human resource management, public relations, collective bargaining and politics for which few are trained or experienced (Robertson, 2005). Lambert (2013) suggests that it is these practices that are in danger of undermining the purpose of education.

Lambert (2013:39) refers to external pressures such as nationally imposed funding methodology and increases in inspection and audit requiring specialist managers like 'directors of finance, quality and performance to lead these institutions in this new environment'. Collinson and Collinson (2009:374) claim that the FE colleges in the UK have become 'over-regulated' and that the many targets and audits that govern their operations have now become 'excessive and counter-productive', many of the targets being either 'unrealistic, inconsistent and/or contradictory'.

This dichotomy, Lambert adds, is a clash between 'student-centred pedagogic culture' and 'the managerial culture of managers'. He thus acknowledges that the role of the vocational college leader has evolved significantly from a 'chief academic officer' to one that combines the academic

responsibility with that of being the business executive (Lambert, 2013:41). TVET college leaders need to think and act differently to overcome new challenges. Traditionally, TVET leaders had previously either taught in or managed schools or worked or managed businesses in an artisanal environment. These leaders seldom had the necessary pedagogy of an academic institution combined with experience in a vocational environment. Currently, leaders need to 'combine educational leadership qualities with both generic organisational leadership qualities and strong business and commercial capabilities' (Foley & Conole, 2003:10). There is now a need for leaders with broader skills, vocational competence and pedagogic knowledge, to replace the traditional educational leaders (Collinson & Collinson, 2009:376; Eddy, 2010:3). These leaders are expected to be flexible on the one hand, but, on the other, they have to deal with 'multiple, shifting and sometimes contradictory (auditing) pressures in which colleges operate'. The way in which these leaders have to negotiate both policy and practice issues with their multiple stakeholders often has to depend on tacit knowledge (Collinson & Collinson, 2009:53) rather than on training as to how to approach these issues effectively.

Competing priorities cause many TVET leaders to become frustrated by the perpetual changes they perceive in national education policies. Leaders are distracted from the core purpose of their work, which is to improve teaching and learning in vocational colleges (Gleeson & Knights, 2008). Countries like Australia, Britain and the United States address all these issues through planned leadership development in their respective vocational sectors, but this has not been the case in South Africa. No specific, custom-designed leadership training programme for TVET college leaders exists in South Africa, even though the need for such a programme has been identified by two Green Papers (RSA, 1998; RSA, 2012). This need, however, has not been actioned in the White Paper for post-school education and training (RSA, 2013).

Callan et al. (2007) advocate leadership development as an investment, since it not only provides necessary knowledge and skills to leaders to assist the organisation with achieving its strategic intentions, but also improved capability and learning on the part of leaders to bring about positive change and innovation. If leaders know the difference between management and leadership, they should be able to avoid micromanaging and concentrate more on leading.

Management and leadership development is ideally a deliberate and planned activity which is driven by strategic and organisational objectives. The reasons why deliberate strategies for leadership development have become necessary are, firstly, succession planning, as it has been reported that many leaders in the VET sector internationally are nearing retirement age (Shults, 2001; Eddy, 2010; Simon & Bonnici, 2011; Sullivan & Palmer, 2014). Secondly, there should be career paths for leaders in the VET sector with specific training programmes aimed at developing leaders at every level. Thirdly, it is imperative to continuously identify the necessary skills and capabilities required by leaders in the complex vocational environment for leadership development programmes to remain current.

Yet, most leadership training programmes in the vocational sector are often fragmentary and of short duration, with considerable duplication, offered on an ad hoc basis and not forming part

of a longer strategic developmental goal or strategy at a policy level, even though the need has been recognised (Callan et al., 2007; Foley & Conole, 2003; Falk, 2003). The consequence is that these courses are ineffective in changing attitudes or behaviours.

## **Methodology and methods**

This article reports on an interpretive study that consisted of four focus-group interviews with 61 current and potential future leaders at public South African TVET colleges, followed with 15 semi-structured individual interviews. The 15 respondents included purposively selected middle-level and executive leaders from three urban and six rural TVET colleges in seven provinces in South Africa. These individual interviews provided the data referred to below. The respondents are numbered 1 to 15 to ensure anonymity.

During the focus-group interviews, a list of competencies (knowledge, skills, attributes and attitudes) TVET college leaders needed to be effective leaders, were clustered into six broad themes which could guide the development of a future curriculum framework for custom-designed leadership development. The purpose of the individual interviews was to clarify the meaning of these themes, guided by the following broad questions:

- How do you understand the meaning of each of the identified themes determined by the group interviews?
- Tell me about your experience with each of the themes.

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed for trends. The data were analysed for categories (coding) and relationships between categories (categorising) by means of content analysis (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). New ways of connecting categories were investigated (axial coding). Categories were integrated and refined (selective coding). The themes that emerged therefore reflect the researched reality. Connections between the categorised data and existing theories were made (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). This article focuses on the findings related to the respondents' perceptions on the roles of leadership and management in the sector, as well as their perceptions about the conflicting priorities of such leaders.

## **Findings and discussion**

### *The dichotomous relationship of leadership and management*

The data in this study corroborate the findings of other international studies (Callan, 2001; Foley & Conole, 2003; Callan et al., 2007; Collinson & Collinson, 2009) that the lines between leadership and management have become blurred in vocational education. Part of the reason for this phenomenon (at least in the South African context) may be that many leaders of TVET colleges came from a teaching background and were not always adequately prepared for the role of leader, as one of the respondents who was interviewed in this study suggested:



*People coming from the school sector ... cannot cope in the TVET colleges because they don't know the dynamics and they don't understand the influence of the different stakeholders ... [and] the legislation itself. [Respondent 7]*

Another respondent similarly stated that management and leadership roles were closely related as a result of coming through the teaching ranks to become leaders at colleges. However, it was frowned upon if a leader tried to be a manager as well. This would be like succumbing to operational pressures.

*There's a difference, a bit of an overlap [between] whether you're a manager or whether [you're] a leader. But I think, because most of us came through the system, the majority are managers and not leaders. Deputy principals can be more on the management side but you can't have the principal that is the manager [wanting] to manage the leave, the hours that people are teaching. It doesn't work. [Respondent 3]*

Management was believed to be an overarching term that referred to all the support functions in the college and management skills were the tools needed to manage these functions. Managers were process owners of the various functions at the college.

*Management skills [are] an overarching theme ... [to] make sure that we deliver effective service. [Respondent 5]*

The support functions had thus become a daunting task, as highlighted by many of the respondents.

*Incorporate all the various departments you might have within an institution or your units. And that includes your functional management ... of an institution, which could include your Human Resource Management, Corporate Services, your Corporate Communication, Marketing and Public Relations, Financial Management, Quality Management. [Respondent 1]*

*Things like our HR, the finances, asset management, the infrastructure – all those strategic functions in the college need to be managed [; and] Supply Chain Management. [Respondent 2]*

*HR, for example, is a huge portfolio. [Respondent 4]*

The respondents indicated that managers needed to be trained to fulfil the support functions, as they were not always qualified. This state of affairs might cause serious problems, as indicated by Respondents 1, 2 and 10:

*We need to train the people [in those positions]. [Respondent 1]*

*We know sometimes they get appointed and they don't have the proper qualifications. Supply Chain Management, the whole procurement function, is a management function and, if people are not trained, ... you find that people get suspended or go to jail; all those things, tender fraud and things. So, all those things are critical for me to be trained [in] and the managers are then equipped to manage things. [Respondent 2]*

*We don't have qualified and experienced managers at the moment. You find that people are not trained; then you find that people get suspended or go to jail. These facets are critical; that drives the sector. [Respondent 10]*

The respondents expressed the need to know something about all these managerial functions in order to make informed decisions, but had to take care not to become involved in operational functions in view of the danger of micromanaging. The respondents' views are highlighted below:

*So you are part of all these facets of management, although you are not the process owner driving that as a management function, but you are feeding into it because they are our support functions. So it is not just for the HR Manager or the Finance Manager. It is for the whole management team, because we are all featuring at any one point on these decision-making bodies. [Respondent 2]*

*Leaders need to know a little bit about the different areas. [Respondent 6]*

*You don't need to do the books but you must be able to interpret the financial data presented to you in order for you to make the correct decision, because you are accountable. [Respondent 7]*

Respondents recognised the need for leaders to be visionary, to be able to identify opportunities for the institution and to make things happen. Leaders had to remain current with new developments, remain in tune with the community and be informed about national and international trends in changing times. In order for them to be able to do this, they needed to free themselves from managing the various operational departments.

This also alludes to having to operate across different sectors and having to balance the internal and external roles of the college principal.

*The leader has got to be a visionary not only in the South African context, but also needs to know what is going on in the rest of the world ... to develop relationships, to identify good practice, to be able to communicate with other people in order to identify benefits for his or her institution ... We cannot be locked up in our offices. We need to engage with the rest of the world ... [be] up to date with current developments. The college has to be sensitive with regard to what's going on in the community. [Respondent 10]*

The respondents were clear about leadership skills, and inspiring and motivating followers to share the vision, thereby getting the best out of them:

*[A leader] sees the much bigger picture. The leader should be out there to say, 'let's go for that', and then the managers must make that happen.* [Respondent 3]

However, leaders at TVET colleges were involving themselves with 'mak[ing] it happen' as well. Although they understood the difference between leadership and management, it was not always possible to distinguish between the two roles at the colleges. They also acknowledged that, through leadership development, they could become better leaders in a complex situation.

Leaders needed to learn to be team players, surrounding themselves with expertise and people with complementary leadership styles, since they could not be expected to know everything. Leaders should thus be aware of different leadership styles and that certain styles were suitable in certain situations, and to adapt them accordingly.

*You don't have to be an expert in everything to be a leader, but then at least surround yourself with the best people in the field, and don't feel threatened by those people and push them away because they know more than you.* [Respondent 3]

Leaders of TVET colleges needed to develop extensive sector knowledge of teaching and learning so that they could keep up to date with developments and trends in order to make the right decisions and steer the college in the right direction. This includes catering for a diverse demography of students.

*Critical in terms of understanding what [it is] that you offer [is:] are you addressing what is the need of this specific business or industry in your environment ... what does the community want from you? Do you have partnerships and linkages with who you have to go to? Do you understand that there must be work-integrated learning? ... [Is] what must be taught ... really taught?* [Respondent 6]

Respondents also supported the idea that leaders could be developed to be better leaders. They stated that there were many aspects of leadership that could be developed.

*We really need that dynamic – business leadership with a more modern style. ... We need a person who can really be business-wise, otherwise we are not going to survive.* [Respondent 3]

*You're not born with skills.* [Respondent 7]

*[Leaders] can be developed to be better leaders.* [Respondent 8]

The respondents clearly recognised the qualities of a good manager or leader as well as the need for leadership development. However, there were conflicting priorities that blurred the roles of leadership and management and possibly deflected leaders from focusing on their core business.

### *The five conflicting priorities of vocational leaders*

Both middle-level and executive leaders at the TVET colleges indicated in their interviews that they tended to lose sight of their core business, which they identified as teaching and learning. This loss of focus was summed up by Respondent 15:

*Your business is education. We tend to forget [that].*

One of the reasons for this loss of focus seems to be that there were a number of conflicting priorities that distracted them from their core business. This is similar to the experiences of leaders at Australian TAFE and FE institutions in the UK (Callan et al., 2007; Foley & Conole, 2003; Gleeson & Knights, 2008; Collinson & Collinson, 2009). Firstly, leaders at these colleges have to operate across different sectors. According to Respondent 4:

*We are responsible to parents and students and companies and other stakeholders.*

Leaders now had to consult with important stakeholders such as the student representatives, the unions, the community, business and industry. A new skill that needed to be acquired was that of consultation with all stakeholders. Trade unions had become major challengers of operations at colleges. These consultations were taking up so much time that respondents in this study acknowledged that there had been a loss of leadership focus with regard to the core business of the college. If teaching and learning were not taking place, it would be like ‘missing the bus’ (Respondent 4), as failure would have an impact on the finances and human resources at the college. So, leaders needed to ‘look after your core business’ (Respondent 5) to ensure that the colleges operated effectively.

Secondly, there was a diverse demographic of students at the colleges. Middle-level and executive leaders experienced teaching and learning differently. Executive leaders were clear that the leader needed an ‘overview of what is happening because you must know ... not the detail’ (Respondent 3), while middle-level leaders saw that their responsibility for teaching and learning at a vocational level was because the ‘parent must pay ... [so] we must treat that student with respect ... [and teach with] passion ... [and not simply because it was a] way of earning a salary’ (Respondent 11). Respondent 11 continued with:

*[Leaders should] make sure that things happen as they should; [teaching and learning are] ‘why we’re here ... [but] we tend to forget this.*

The literature suggests that concepts of management and leadership at vocational institutions have become blurred, but it does not mention that leaders tend to forget the

main focus of their positions, as suggested in the previous respondent's statement, which is teaching and learning.

The emphasis seemed to change once leaders moved away from the classroom. For example, Respondent 15 said that teachers were regarded as being at a 'lower level', and once some of these teachers moved from the 'ranks of the educator' into a 'management position', they tended to forget what they had had to deal with at the 'lower level'. This respondent added that, as a leader, you were 'removed from the situation' so that it was not 'so much at the forefront of your thinking anymore'.

Thirdly, leaders had to balance their internal and external roles. Since industry plays such an essential role in a TVET college, respondents indicated that the TVET college leader could not be deskbound, but had to build collaborative relationships that could influence the curriculum and have a positive effect on classroom practice. Two respondents had the following to say about how the colleges could ensure that the students were employable, since that was the mandate:

*As a leader, you have to make sure that you encourage collaboration with industry to ensure that what you're producing is actually what's wanted out there. [Respondent 7]*

*Our mandate is to make people employable for the workplace. [Respondent 8]*

The challenge for leaders was to be the face of the college outside of the college, while meeting internal obligations as academic head of the college.

A fourth priority for leaders at these colleges was to deal with various competing operational pressures at the college. There had been significant changes to legislation governing the colleges and, if leaders did not 'stay abreast', they were in danger of 'losing it' (Respondent 10). These changes resulted in various management functions having to be complied with first even though they were really subsidiary to teaching and learning. As one respondent cautioned:

*You have a responsibility to make sure that that student [moves] through the system and gets a qualification. That is why you are there. You are supposed to give the support to this person, make sure he gets financial support and academic support, holistic support, whatever. [Respondent 9]*

It was clear that leaders needed to know something about all the different managerial functions in order to make informed decisions, but they had to take care not to become involved in operational functions in view of the danger of micromanaging. Respondents pointed out:

*Leaders need to know a little bit about the different areas. [Respondent 6]*

*One can fall into the trap of micromanaging your institution. [Respondent 10]*

The fifth priority was facing external pressure, and the role of the principal had to evolve to respond to the competing requirements of education and business.

*You cannot just manage a college [from] a prescription in a textbook ... you will have to be open to other people's opinions.* [Respondent 10]

At TVET colleges, all these tensions were manifested in the way in which internal and external communication took place. There was a prevailing sense of isolation and miscommunication between the colleges and the employer, on the one hand, and the college management and staff, on the other. In the former case, colleges were no longer clear about with whom they had to communicate officially. Communication between the employer and the colleges was either not happening timeously or effectively, negatively influencing communication between top and middle management, or the approach was top-down, which caused frustration and a feeling of rejection. In the words of Respondent 3:

*You just get instructions [from the DHET] that you will do this or you will do that by tomorrow or the day after that ... and if you don't want to, then we will suspend you ... you really get that feeling they feel absolutely nothing for you ... there is no support ... we feel as though we have been thrown to the lions at this level ... it is really just a feeling of they're hunting us down.*

According to the same respondent, leaders of the colleges believed that they 'are the last people to hear about the legislation'. Most of them had come from a teaching background and felt that they were inadequately trained for the potentially explosive situation in which they now found themselves. External bodies such as trade unions had been involved in staff deliberations at the bargaining councils and so had a better grasp of the implications which they passed on to the staff.

*[W]e have got unions here that are threatening me and I cannot produce anything because I haven't got the signed legislation.* [Respondent 3]

These unions thus appeared to have the upper hand at the colleges, causing disruptions at staff and student level and holding this group of leaders to ransom.

## **Conclusion**

This study found that leaders at South African TVET colleges have lost sight of reforming and transforming the colleges in order to conform. The data presented in this article suggest that, even though the respondents had specific views on how leaders were supposed to be and what they were supposed to do – other than manage – the distinction became blurred in practice owing to competing priorities between leadership and management demands. Leadership at the TVET colleges had become a balancing act.

A surprising finding in the South African context, which deviates from international findings, is that the focus of these respondents in this study should have been on teaching and learning, yet the focus had shifted to attending to operational matters and conforming to legislation. Current and aspiring leaders of South African TVET colleges tended to micromanage the various support functions instead of focusing on the major purpose of their work, and that was to improve teaching and learning at TVET colleges.

The need for leadership development in the VET sector has been recognised worldwide and given priority focus since ‘multi-dimensional leadership is necessary in complex organisations’ (Eddy, 2010:33–34). Leadership development should also be prioritised in South Africa’s TVET sector, but it is important that legislators, practitioners (including current and future TVET leaders) and researchers take cognisance of the perceived loss of focus on teaching and learning by leaders and managers, as it has implications for policy, practice and any leadership development initiative within the sector. A custom-made training programme for vocational college leaders, incorporating the skills and knowledge needed by these leaders such as ‘business skills, management skills, financial planning, budgets, people skills’, would be preferable (Simon & Bonnici, 2011:3). If TVET colleges in South Africa are to rid themselves of the stigma of dysfunctionality (RSA, 2013) and become the public’s first-choice post-school institution, they will need focused and well-prepared leaders to do so.

## REFERENCES

- Bush, T. 2007. Educational leadership and management: Theory, policy and practice. *South African Journal of Education*, 27(3):391–406.
- Callan, VJ. 2001. *What are the essential capabilities for those who manage training organisations?* Adelaide: NCVER.
- Callan, V, Mitchell, J, Clayton, B & Smith, L. 2007. *Approaches for sustaining and building management and leadership capability in VET providers*. Adelaide: NCVER.
- Coates, H, Meek, L, Brown, J, Friedman, T, Noonan, P & Mitchell, J. 2013. VET leadership for the future – characteristics, contexts and capabilities. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 37(6):819–843.
- Collinson, D & Collinson, M. 2009. ‘Blended leadership’: Employee perspectives on effective leadership in the UK further education sector. *Leadership*, 5(3):365–380.
- Dempster, N. 2009. *Leadership for learning: A framework synthesising recent research*. Canberra: The Australian College of Educators (EdVentures).
- Eddy, P. 2010. *Community college leadership: A multi-dimensional model for leading change*. Virginia, USA: Stylus.
- Falk, I. 2003. Designing effective leadership interventions: A case study of vocational education and training. *Leadership and Organisation Development Journal*, 24(4):193–203.
- Foley, J & Conole, L. 2003. *A draft leadership capability framework to assist leadership development in the Victorian TAFE sector*. Melbourne: Wheeler & Strobel.

- Gentry, WA, Eckert, RH, Munuamy, VP, Stawiski, SA & Martin, JL. 2014. The needs of participants in leadership development programs: A qualitative and quantitative cross-country investigation. *Journal of Leadership and Organisational Studies*, 21:83–101.
- Gleeson, D, & Knights, D. 2008. Reluctant leaders: An analysis of middle managers' perceptions of leadership in further education in England. *Leadership*, 4(1):49–72. Available: <<http://lea.sagepub.com>> [Accessed: 6 April 2014].
- Henning, E, Van Rensburg, W & Smit, B. 2004. *Finding your way in qualitative research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- HESA Post-School Education Task Team (PSE). 2011. An expanded post-school education system: report and discussion document. Pretoria: HESA.
- Juntrasook, A. 2014. 'You do not have to be the boss to be a leader': Contested meanings of leadership in higher education. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 33(1):19–31.
- Kezar, A. 2014. How colleges change: Proven tools for academic leaders to successfully lead change. *Academic Leader*, 30(2):5–6.
- Kligyte, G & Barrie, S. 2014. Collegiality: Leading us into fantasy – the paradoxical resilience of collegiality in academic life. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 33(1):457–169.
- Lambert, S. 2013. Defining a tri-dimensional role for leadership in further education colleges. *Management in Education*, 27(1):39–42.
- Nevarez, C, Wood, JL & Penrose, R. 2013. *Leadership theory and the community college*. Virginia USA: Stylus.
- Northcutt, N & McCoy, D. 2004. *Interactive qualitative analysis: A systems method for qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- O'Connor, P, Carvalho, T & White, L. 2014. The experience of senior professional leaders in Australian, Irish and Portuguese universities: Universal or contingent? *Higher Education Research and Development*, 33(1):5–18.
- Quinlan, KM. 2014. Leadership of teaching for student learning in higher education: What is needed? *Higher Education Research and Development*, 33(1):32–45.
- Republic of South Africa (RSA). Department of Education. 1998. *Green Paper on Further Education and Training: Preparing for the 21st century through education, training and work*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Republic of South Africa (RSA). Department of Higher Education and Training. 2012. *Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training: The doors of learning and culture shall be opened*. [Draft legislation, April 2012]. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Republic of South Africa (RSA). Department of Higher Education and Training. 2013. *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training: Building an expanded, effective and integrated post-school system*. Government Gazette No. 41226, 2 November 2017. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Robertson, I. 2005. *Coaching leadership: Building educational leadership capacity through coaching partnerships*. Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER Press.
- Schwella, E. 2008. Administrative reform as adaptive challenge: selected public leadership implications. *Politeia*, 27(2): 25–50.



- Shults, C. 2001. The critical impact of impending retirements on community college leadership. *American Association of Community Colleges*, 1:1–12.
- Simon, L, & Bonnici, A. 2011. Paths to promotion. 14th Annual Conference of the Australian VET Research Association (AVETRA), Melbourne, Australia. Available: <<http://voced.edu.au/10707/4335>> [Accessed: 12 August 2014].
- Sullivan, LG & Palmer, S. 2014. Preparing reflective community college leaders in a graduate leadership course. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 38:512–522.
- Tichy, NM & Devanna, MA. 1990. *The transformational leader*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.