

Expressing Organisational Autonomy: A Case Study of South African Further Education and Training Colleges

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Abstract

The organisational governance of further education and training colleges in South Africa has been cited as an obstacle to the institutions' ability to contribute to the developmental needs of the country. In response, the government has instituted major policy reforms since 1996, including a move towards granting greater organisational autonomy to these colleges, with limited success. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the causes of these governance issues by examining the effect of the organisational environment, with specific focus on the power dynamics that characterised that environment between 2010 and 2012. A qualitative research approach was adopted to answer two research questions: (i) How did the concentration of power in the external environment affect the expression of autonomy of further education and training colleges between 2010 and 2012? and (ii) How did the colleges respond to the power dynamics in the external environment? The analysis of data from case studies of two further education and training colleges revealed that the government had applied external control over the institutions, thereby constraining the overt expression of autonomy. However, the colleges were not without agency and were able to respond strategically to demands from the policy environment. Thus, this study offers a counter-narrative in South African literature on governance in vocational colleges, and the authors of this article assert that the failing governance in respect of the case studies was a result of external forces (power dynamics) rather than the internal characteristics of the colleges.

Keywords: governance; organisational analysis; vocational education; autonomy; policy environment; further education and training colleges



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Introduction¹

Education and skills development policy reforms in South Africa have attempted to address the twin imperatives of consolidating a fledgling democracy and driving the development of the country. In particular, further education and training (FET) colleges² are viewed by the government as crucial to the production of a skilled and semi-skilled labour force (Department of Education 1997, 1). The development of such a labour force features prominently in the government's growth and development goals as set out in the National Development Plan (National Planning Commission 2012). However, the FET system that was inherited by the government in 1994 was unable to meet these goals. The system was characterised as fragmented and unequal in nature, and was thus unable to contribute effectively to the labour market (McGrath and Akoojee 2009, 150). The numerous policy interventions for promoting skills development failed to lead to the required increase in the number of skilled workers. In addition, students leaving the FET system were not equipped with the skills that were needed by the South African labour market (Reddy et al. 2016, 80).

The government attempted to repair the FET sector through a number of full-scale policy overhauls. One issue that received attention was the organisational governance of FET colleges, which was cited as an obstacle to the sector's effective contribution to the developmental needs of the country (McGrath 2006, 49). The premise of the study on which this article is based was that governance was an integral aspect of the FET sector in South Africa (Juan 2015). Any weak points within the governing systems might therefore impact negatively on the functioning of the system as a whole.

Informed by the notions of organisational autonomy, accountability and power dynamics, the study employed a qualitative method for the analysis of the data that was obtained between 2010 and 2012 from two South African FET colleges located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. This period was decided on for this study as it was characterised as a fairly stable policy period (significant amendments to the legislative framework were promulgated in 2013). The study took the view that the policy environment allowed for the devolution of specific powers to the colleges; however, due to the power dynamics present in this environment, in particular the concentration of power in the state, the colleges could not make effective use of the policy provisions. This article critically explores how these colleges responded to such conditions and systematically created their own spaces of power. The specific questions guiding this article are:

1 This article is largely based on the PhD thesis completed by Andrea Juan at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2015 (Juan 2015).

2 In 2014, these colleges were renamed technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges.

- i. How did the concentration of power in the external environment affect the expression of autonomy of the FET colleges in question between 2010 and 2012?
- ii. How did the colleges respond to the power dynamics in the external environment between 2010 and 2012?

Although the FET sector has changed since the completion of the study, the results obtained provide a view of the power dynamics evident in these colleges during this relatively stable time period. The following section presents the policy context of FET colleges in South Africa at the time of the study, which formed the background of the research. The two chosen case studies are then explored, followed by the presentation of the conceptual framework and the methodology employed in the research. Thereafter, the article presents a discussion of the key findings of the research and reports on the conclusion reached.

Policy Context: Governance Structures and Organisational Autonomy

Mr Jacob Zuma ascended to the South African presidency in 2009. The new administration decided to split the then Department of Education into two distinct departments: the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). In terms of Presidential Minute No. 690 of 2009 and under Proclamation No. 44 of 2009 (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 2009), the administration of the Adult Basic Education and Training Act 52 of 2000 (RSA 2000) and the Further Education and Training Colleges Act 16 of 2006³ (hereafter referred to as the FET Colleges Act) (RSA 2006) was transferred from the Minister of Basic Education to the Minister of Higher Education and Training. As a result, FET colleges fell under the DHET and its (former) minister, Dr Blade Nzimande. During his term as Minister of Higher Education and Training (2009 to 2017), Mr Nzimande emphasised the key role that FET colleges should play in the country.

Section 9 of the FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006) stipulated that a college council was the primary governance structure at any FET college. All relevant stakeholders, including an academic board and representatives of a students' council, were, therefore, responsible for collective decision-making. Each college council had to be composed of the following: the principal; five external persons appointed by the Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Education in the relevant province; one member of the academic board, who was elected by the academic board; one external member who represented donors; one lecturer from the college, who was elected by the lecturers; one member of the support staff; and two students who were on the Students' Representative Council (RSA 2006). The college councils therefore consisted of both internal and

3 This Act has since been amended and renamed the Continuing Education and Training Act.

external members. As stipulated in Section 10 of the FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006), college councils were responsible for: developing a strategic plan for the college; making rules for the college; establishing committees, where necessary providing student support services; ensuring the college met the country's accreditation requirements; approving annual budgets; and employing all staff at the college, except for the college principal.

Colleges⁴ were expected to formulate a strategic plan that outlined their planned major activities for the forthcoming financial year. In addition, each college had to generate an annual report that documented its performance, as well as the use of its resources. These plans and reports were to be submitted annually to the MEC for Education in the relevant province (RSA 2006, Section 10).

The FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006) stipulated that all colleges had to develop a college statute. Colleges that did not do this, had to make use of the generic college statute (i.e. the Standard College Statute), which was contained in Schedule 1 of the FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006). This statute specified the composition and functions of the managing and governing structures of the colleges.

The strategic plan of a FET college had to be submitted to the MEC in question at least 30 days before the commencement of the financial year. As mentioned previously, colleges had to also submit an annual report to the MEC on their performance and their use of resources (financial and infrastructural). Failure to submit this documentation, or reports which revealed inadequacies, could result in the MEC appointing an official to conduct an investigation of the specific college. In the case of serious maladministration, an administrator could be appointed to assume the authority of the council, perform the council's functions and ensure the constitution of a new council (FET Colleges Act, Section 46) (RSA 2006).

The 2012 *Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training in South Africa* (DHET 2012) focused on employment and economic growth, and on the role of the higher and further education system in the pursuit of this goal. In terms of governance, this Green Paper proposed a differentiated system, according to which some college councils were given more functions than others. Colleges with the capacity to govern themselves through strong college councils would be encouraged to do so, resulting in their councils having greater decision-making powers. Colleges with weaker governing systems would be steered and supported centrally, and their councils would have limited powers until these colleges were able to develop the necessary capacity and systems as determined by the DHET.

4 For more information on organisational autonomy and further education and training colleges, the reader may consult the original thesis (Juan 2015).

A number of studies used FET colleges as the unit of analysis in examining governance at institutions for further education and training. Studies previous to the one on which this article is based, tended to attribute the problems that FET colleges faced to internal (college-level) factors, without giving consideration to the wider environmental context within which these colleges existed. College councils, being the main governing structure in FET colleges, were examined to determine their representivity, authority, functioning and capacity. A number of studies and reports made reference to issues that negatively affected the functioning of these councils. In contrast, the study on which this article is based provided a different perspective on the governance of these colleges by focusing on the influence of the external environment rather than the internal environment. The study in question found that the impact of these external factors on the governance of FET colleges had serious implications for any policy interventions that were aimed at the FET colleges specifically rather than at the FET system itself. This article, therefore, provides new insight into the external environments that influenced the governance of FET colleges (which were poised to play a key role in the development of South Africa) from 2010 to 2012.

FET Colleges in KwaZulu-Natal: Two Case Studies

This article focuses on two FET colleges in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, which is located on the east coast of South Africa. The two colleges were located in vastly differing contexts (one deeply rural, one urban) and were chosen as case studies as a means to understand the external environmental factors that impacted on governance in FET colleges in the province. Prior to 2012, FET colleges were under provincial governance; therefore they interacted with the relevant Provincial Department of Education and were interconnected with the provincial administration.

FET colleges in the country were subjected to a merger process before 1994, whereby the existing 152 FET colleges were merged into 50 multi-site “mega colleges” (Department of Education 2001). In 2011, there were nine FET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal, which provided further education for approximately 88 166 students (DHET 2013). As mentioned earlier, two colleges in this province were chosen as case studies, one located in an urban setting (College 1) and one in a deep rural setting (College 2). College 1 was established in 2002 through a merger of three technical colleges that served the White, Coloured and Indian population groups during the apartheid era (1948 to 1994). By the time of the data collection process undertaken for the PhD thesis upon which this article is based, College 1 had grown significantly and was housed on six campuses. College 2 was formed from the amalgamation of two technical colleges in 2002. At the time of the investigation, College 2 had seven campuses located in six separate municipal areas in KwaZulu-Natal.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research was developed based on the ecological and resource dependency model developed by Pfeffer and Salancik (2003, 90), which emphasises the environment and the challenges associated with responding to it (Rainey 2009, 108). According to Pfeffer and Salancik's (2003) model, the structural characteristics of an external organisational environment have an impact on the relationships between the actors in the environment. The three fundamental structural characteristics of the environment are: concentration, munificence, and interconnectedness (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, 90). Concentration refers to the dispersion of authority and power in the environment, and it is assumed that the greater the dispersion of power, the greater the probability of uncertainty in the system. Munificence relates to the availability or scarcity of resources for organisations in the environment. Interconnectedness refers to the nature of the relationships between organisations or actors within the environment (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, 90). This article focuses on the characteristic of concentration.

The variables related to concentration are the degree of regulation, autonomy and accountability. The *degree of regulation* refers to the legislated rules and control mechanisms that influence the behaviour of an organisation. (Cope, Goodship, and Holloway 2003, 185). This is closely related to the level of *autonomy* that an organisation has, as it is assumed that the greater the degree of regulation, the less autonomy an organisation has (Cope, Goodship, and Holloway 2003, 185).

In the simplest sense, *autonomy* refers to the quality of an entity's self-governing behaviour. In any given organisation, autonomy is determined by the organisation's ability to function independently. The process of giving more autonomy to public organisations has become prominent in the reform agenda in various countries (Verhoest et al. 2004, 101).

Based on the research done by authors such as Pollitt, Birchall, and Putnam (1998), Smullen, Van Thiel, and Pollitt (2001), and Christensen (1999), Verhoest et al. (2004, 108–109) constructed a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of autonomy, which, in their opinion, broadens the concept. They identified five dimensions of organisational autonomy: 1) policy; 2) structural; 3) financial; 4) legal; 5) interventional.

The dimensions of autonomy presented in Table 1 allow for the construction of indicators of autonomy. The extent to which each dimension is present in an organisation may be determined by a set of indicators specific to that dimension. The indicators of autonomy are discussed later in this section, with a focus on their specific application to the FET colleges. Legal autonomy was not examined in this study, as FET colleges were public entities.

Table 1: Indicators of the autonomy of a FET college

Dimension	Indicators
Policy autonomy	Ability to formulate policies Existence of policies Utilisation of policies in the colleges
Structural autonomy	Establishment of a college council Effective functioning of the council Extent to which council members are appointed by the government
Financial autonomy	Reliance on external funding Responsibility for own losses
Interventional autonomy	Existence of reporting requirements Possibility of sanctions Evidence of direct state interventions

Source: Adapted from Verhoest et al. (2004, 105)

Accountability, which is closely related to autonomy, is the extent to which an actor has to answer to a higher authority—legal or organisational—for its actions (Kearns 1998, 141). Thus, higher levels of accountability are related to lower levels of autonomy. In political and academic discourse, accountability is used as a conceptual umbrella that covers various concepts, including transparency, efficiency, equity, responsiveness, democracy, responsibility and integrity (Bovens 2007, 449). Managers of public organisations are often subject to multiple lines of accountability. In analysing the mechanisms of accountability in an organisation, two elements have to be examined: the actors, and the action that requires accountability. Using these elements, the various forms of accountability can be identified. Bovens (2007, 461) and Sinclair (1995, 221) have identified organisational, legal, administrative and social forms of accountability.

Organisational Responses to the Environment

Organisations do not operate in a vacuum; thus, influences from the external environment are expected. The course of action followed is determined by how an organisation assesses the environmental demand. Problems may arise that inhibit a certain course of action, such as misreading the interdependence of external groups and the importance of those groups, and misreading the demands of external groups. In addition, conflicting demands that the environment places on the focal organisation may require that certain demands are met while others are ignored. These problems can constrain the manner in which an organisation is able to respond to the environment. Typically, three responses are followed: compliance, adaptation or avoidance (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, 94).

Compliance refers to a focal organisation acceding to the demands placed on it by other actors in the system. The promulgation of a legal or policy environment does not necessarily mean that organisations are quick to comply with demands. Pfeffer and Salancik (2003) argue that this is the case when, even though compliance is important for maintaining the regulator-regulated relationship, such compliance may not be in the long-term interest of the organisation. They state that: “compliance is a loss of discretion, a constraint, and an admission of limited autonomy” (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, 94).

In most cases, the organisations that are responsible for the implementation of policies have to adjust their structures to the requirements of policy and to the demands of the environment. This is referred to as *adaptation*, where changes in organisational structure or ideology are made as a response to the demands of and uncertainty in the environment (Brinkerhoff and Crosby 2002, 29). This may involve changing the ways the internal structures of an organisation work or it may involve adjusting the manner in which an organisation interacts with its environment (Brinkerhoff and Crosby 2002, 29). Altering organisational structures may be difficult because the organisation may be dealing with numerous projects to which the existing organisational structure is tailored, and restructuring may require procedures that are not feasible for existing structures. Furthermore, the staff concerned may not have the necessary capacity to implement the new policy (Brinkerhoff and Crosby, 2002, 29). These factors have to be taken into account when managing the implementation of policy.

Organisations can also respond to environmental pressure by *avoiding* influences that may constrain behaviour (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, 92). This may also occur in an environment of competing demands, and organisations have to then choose which demands are the most crucial to meet—and therefore strategically avoid the others. Instead of satisfying all of the demands of one entity, an organisation may first attend to one set of demands and subsequently to another set, depending on the immediateness of those demands. It is a matter of strategic choice as to which response to follow.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research adopts a constructivist, interpretive philosophy which asserts that knowledge regarding phenomena is constructed by the people who are involved. The main aim of such research is to understand social life and the meaning attached to it (Schurink 2009, 241). A case study research design was employed in this investigation as it was considered the most appropriate methodology to answer the research questions. This type of design allows for the use of multiple variables from multiple sources of data (Meyer 2001, 346). It was therefore considered appropriate as the investigation into governance required a research design that could be used to analyse a complex construct involving multiple actors, behaviours and processes.

The case studies involved two FET colleges located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. In order to gain a more thorough understanding of the external environmental factors that impacted on governance in FET colleges, it was felt that at least two cases, embedded in different contexts, should be investigated. Initially, the criterion for selection was the location (either rural or urban) of the colleges or most of their campuses as it could indicate differences in context. This criterion was revised later to base the selection on experiences of multiple deprivation. The FET colleges selected were located in vastly different contexts: the one (referred to as College 1) was located in an urban setting; the other (referred to as College 2) was located in a deep rural area. As indicated, the selection of the case studies was based on the colleges' experiences of multiple deprivation—a measure of a society's health—which is defined as an observable and demonstrable state of disadvantage (Townsend 1993, 53). From this perspective, socio-economic conditions are used to measure deprivation; people may be said to be deprived if they do not have sufficient conditions of life. This measure provided a better means of differentiating FET colleges as it took into consideration a number of environmental conditions of deprivation: income and material deprivation; employment deprivation; education deprivation; health deprivation; and living environment deprivation (Cosser, Kraak, and Winnaar 2011, 131).

The South African Index of Multiple Deprivation (SAIMD) (Noble et al. 2015) was used to classify all geographic areas in the KwaZulu-Natal province. Based on the map obtained, the main administration campuses of FET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal were placed into two categories: those less deprived and those more deprived. Subsequently, one college from each group was selected as a case study: College 1 was classified as less deprived, being situated in an urban setting and having more resources available; College 2, which was located in a rural setting, was classified as more deprived.

With a view to providing rich, in-depth descriptions, the use of multiple sources of data was essential. This involved using numerous types of evidence, a variety of informants and multiple interviews. Multiple sources of data would also allow for triangulation and replication (Babbie and Mouton 2004, 282). Secondary sources, in the form of various policy documents⁵ that each of the two FET colleges had developed, were collected in 2012.⁶ The review of these documents provided insight into the various forms of internal governance at these colleges. As a further data source, interview and survey data from a larger study (i.e. Cosser, Kraak, and Winnaar 2011) were also used. The study referred to was in the form of an audit of the FET college sector in South Africa, and was

5 These policy documents included policies relating to governance and management, curriculum and assessment, moderation, research, student support, student administration, information and communication technology, finance, and human resources.

6 In 2012/2013, significant amendments were made to the legislation that related to FET colleges. The results of this study reflect the conditions in the sector prior to these changes having been effected.

conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2010 (Cosser, Kraak, and Winnaar 2011).

Two sets of interviews with college principals, chairs of each college council, and the colleges' management teams were conducted to gather data for this investigation. Semi-structured, open-ended questionnaires were utilised for each of the interviews. The first set of interviews was conducted in 2010 for an HSRC study (Cosser, Kraak, and Winnaar 2011), whereas the second set of interviews was conducted specifically for the research undertaken in 2012. These included interviews with the principals and the management teams of both colleges. In 2012, five interviews were conducted. All interviews (those conducted in both 2010 and 2012) were held at the main administrative campuses of the respective colleges.

When analysing the data, pattern matching was used. Furthermore, explanation building was employed. This refers to a specific type of pattern matching, which aims to develop explanations about the case being investigated (Yin 2004, 127).

Findings

The findings of the study—all relating to the external environment—are presented under the themes that were identified, namely, concentration of power, and multiple lines of accountability (which relates to the characteristic of concentration). A second set of findings relates to the responses of the colleges to the external environment within which they were situated.

Concentration of Power

The concentration of power was determined by initially identifying the various actors involved (including the colleges themselves): DHET, private companies, sector education and training authorities, other educational institutions, other government departments, the Further Education and Training Colleges Bargaining Unit, and the community (DHET 2012).

It was found that power within the governance system was concentrated at one main point (i.e. there was a locus of power). The FET colleges operated in an environment where most of their actions and processes were regulated by some form of legislation or policy, which pointed to a high degree of regulation by the state. This was particularly the case with regard to financial matters. As one principal stated:

Funding is still a problem ... you [are] a public institution so you will be driven by public requirements and you must respond. You are a public servant, but you are driven by the powers that be. (Principal of College 1)

The heavy dependence on state funding (around 50% of funding for both colleges came from a state subsidy) pointed to a low level of financial autonomy (Cosser, Kraak, and Winnaar 2011). In addition, the dependence on an external organisation for funding was exacerbated by the colleges' reliance on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). This is a scheme through which the DHET provides bursaries for students who are academically worthy and/or who lack the necessary financial support. Funding from other sources (e.g. investments) and other organisations was thus limited.

The high degree of regulation by the state had limiting effects on the autonomy of the two colleges. By implication, the power of each college council, as the primary structure of governance, was significantly limited. With regard to policy autonomy it was found that, although Section 10 of the FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006) stipulated that FET colleges had to either formulate their own distinct college statute or adopt the standard college statute, College 2 had done neither, whereas College 1 had adopted the standard statute but was not using it as a policy document to guide the institution. This calls into question the utility of the standard statute, as colleges might have adopted it because they were required to have a statute, but it might be that they did not actually implement it. The experiences of both colleges pointed to the ceremonial nature of a standard statute, as the FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006) ultimately took precedence in matters of governance.

There was evidence of direct state intervention at both colleges, as both principals were suspended by the DHET in 2003 and 2009 respectively. The principal of College 1 was suspended following allegations of financial mismanagement. In this case, the council chairperson stated in an interview that,

when the rector of the college was charged and suspended, there was no communication between the province and the council. The council was only informed post-suspension.
(Chairperson of Council of College 1 2010)

The level of interventional autonomy was determined by examining the degree of governmental control that influenced the decisions of the colleges in relation to the following: existence of reporting requirements; possibility of sanctions; and direct state intervention. An analysis of the data suggested that the colleges had a low level of interventional autonomy; direct state intervention was legally permitted and occurred on at least one occasion (i.e. when a principal was suspended). A high level of interventional autonomy would have been observed if the colleges had been free from state intervention.

Existence of Multiple Lines of Accountability

Accountability was considered to be the extent to which the colleges were required to answer to a higher authority—whether legal or organisational—for their actions. The multiple lines of accountability in respect of both principals and management staff were

identified as an area of concern. Many interviewees cited this as a hindrance to governing FET colleges as it affected their ability to function efficiently. Principals, in particular, indicated that the system of having “two masters” caused difficulties. One principal explained:

[I get] instructions from the council, or DoE [Department of Education]. It is confusing sometimes, as it is not clear of [sic] whom to listen to. (Principal of College 1 2010)

A council chair elaborated on this matter:

It does not make sense for the [principal] to report to a shareholder [e.g. the province]. The [principal] should instead be accountable to the council. Currently there is a dual system of accountability, as the college is accountable to the province and the council. There needs to be a move into one coherent system. There is, therefore, a concern regarding structure and systems of governance. (Chairperson of Council of College 1 2010)

Another principal stated:

The role of the province is not clear to colleges. However, through their control over finance, they exercise overall control over colleges. (Principal of College 2 2010)

Formal lines of accountability existed between the principal, college council and college staff at College 1. According to the college’s draft policy on governance and management, the principal was the accounting officer for operations within the college. The principal was accountable to the council as well as to the state. However, as the principal was both appointed by and remunerated by the state, there was a greater degree of accountability to the state. This complex structure of accountability is represented in Figure 1.

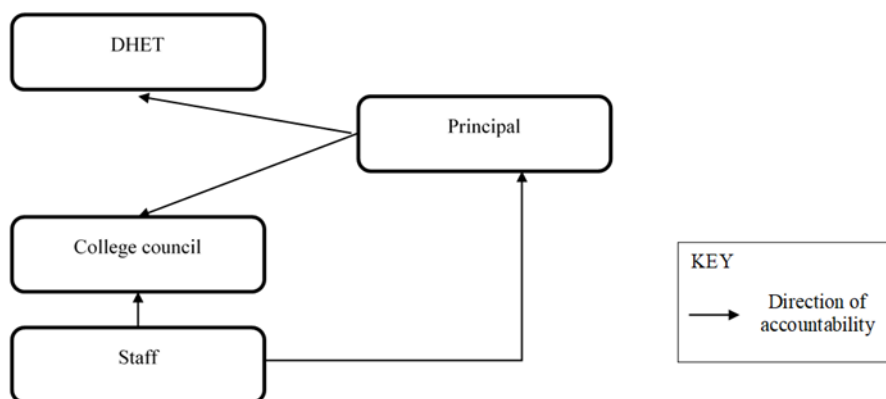


Figure 1: Structure of accountability at College 1

The principal of College 1 had a performance agreement with the DHET, signalling a form of accountability. This agreement detailed performance targets in areas critical for skills development and further education and training. For FET college principals, these targets were distilled in the form of individual performance targets, and a principal acted as a representative of the organisation. However, the college council did not have a performance agreement with the DHET.

The principal of College 2 also had a performance agreement with the DHET, and formal lines of accountability existed between the principal, college council and college staff. However, the situation was complicated as the principal and the top management (the Acting Deputy Director of Curriculum Services and the Acting Deputy Director of Student Support Services) were council employees and were acting in their positions. However, during the interviews with the Acting Principal, the Acting Deputy Director of Curriculum Services, and the Acting Deputy Director of Student Support Services in 2012, the interviewees acknowledged that the greater accountability was to the DHET. This was due, in part, to the lack of direct oversight by the college council, as some members of the council were located a considerable distance from the central office. This complex accountability structure is represented in Figure 2.

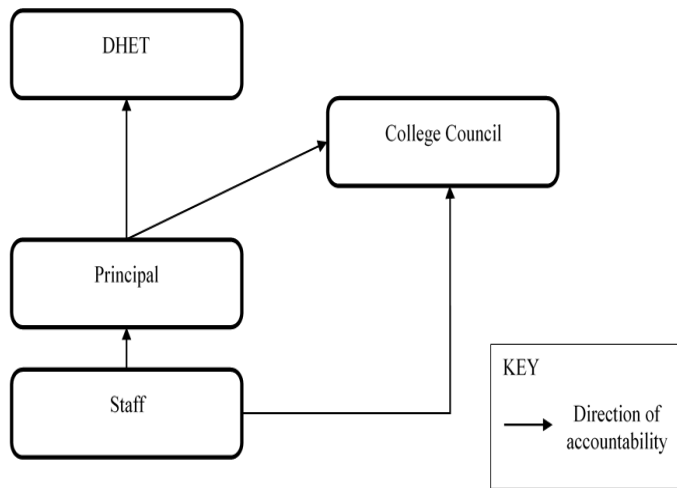


Figure 2: Accountability structure at College 2

In the policy environment, the DHET had a substantial degree of authority. Through the imposition of extensive reporting requirements and direct intervention in colleges, it was apparent that the DHET exerted this authority; thus, power was concentrated in this department. Such concentration of power limited the governance action the colleges could take. The fact that the DHET held the purse strings in that it controlled resources meant that its power was even more concentrated.

The overall findings regarding the effect on colleges of power concentration are summarised in Table 2. The extent of the different types of autonomy and accountability were determined based on the research results and were categorised as low, moderate or high.

Table 2: Characteristics of autonomy and accountability found in the case studies

Autonomy	Dimension	Features
	Policy	While FET colleges were able to specify rules, standards and norms concerning processes, policy instruments and objectives as indicated in the standard statute, the application thereof was limited. There was thus a moderate level of policy autonomy.
	Structural	FET colleges were not shielded from influence by the government through lines of accountability, and the DHET could bypass the college councils. Structural autonomy was thus low.
	Financial	FET colleges were highly dependent on governmental funding of financial resources, and the revenue that they generated was limited. In addition, FET colleges were not responsible for their losses, as the state bailed out colleges because they were public institutions. Financial autonomy was therefore low.
	Interventional	The government controlled the FET colleges by influencing any decisions through reporting requirements and auditing provisions against externally set goals, as well as by threatening to impose sanctions or intervene directly. Interventional autonomy was therefore low.
Accountability	Dimension	Features
	Organisational	Principals had a performance agreement with the DHET as it was the representative of the FET colleges. External accountability was thus high.
	Legal	Specific responsibilities were conferred, either formally or legally, upon the principals, management and council of each FET college. Accountability was based upon detailed provisions in the FET Colleges Act. A moderate to high level of legal accountability was exhibited.
	Administrative	External financial supervision and control were maintained by the DHET through audit requirements. Administrative accountability was therefore high.
	Social	No formal evidence was found of any relationship between colleges and citizens or civil society to whom the college was accountable for its performance. However, pressure from the community might have led colleges to alter their practices and decisions. There was thus a low level of social accountability.

As indicated in Table 2, neither college possessed a great deal of structural and interventional autonomy due to the power the state had to intervene. This lack of autonomy was aggravated by the dependency of the colleges on state funding for survival, leading to their financial autonomy being low. The moderate level of policy autonomy was the exception as colleges had the power to specify norms, standards and rules; however, the application thereof was seen to be limited.

Responses to the External Environment

Responses to the power dynamics in the environments of the two colleges were found to follow the three patterns identified earlier in relation to organisations' responses to characteristics of the environment, namely, compliance, adaptation or avoidance.

Compliance

Both FET colleges complied with some of the demands that the external environment placed on them. The demands that the DHET placed on the colleges were directly related to funding; finances were heavily regulated and carried a high threat of sanctions.

The colleges also exhibited compliance with regard to the establishment of structures. For example, as required by the FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006), both FET colleges established certain structures of governance, including a college council and committees. The establishment of structures was an aspect that was relatively easy to comply with.

Perverse compliance, which is denoted by an absence of proactive acceptance of the policy changes imposed by the external environment, was identified. The common instance of this behaviour exhibited by both colleges related to the development of the college statute. The FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006) provided an example of a statute that could be used as the basis for the colleges to develop their own statutes. It was found that College 1 had adopted the standard statute without any amendments, whereas College 2 had neither formulated a statute nor adopted the standard statute. As discussed previously, the adoption of a college statute was regarded as a ceremonial action, as the FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006) ultimately took precedence in governance matters. Both colleges might have perceived the policy demand to formulate a college statute as one that could be avoided without negative consequences.

Adaptation

Adaptation is indicated by any changes in organisational structure or ideology in response to the burdensome demands and uncertainty of the environment (Brinkerhoff and Crosby 2002, 29). The major adaptation found in respect of the case studies related to the structure of the council of each college. The FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006) stipulated that a college council was required to function as a single unit, but the study found that this was not the case at either college.

At College 1, the term “council” was used to refer to the external members of the council who were appointed by the MEC. The staff representatives, student representatives and principal were seen as council auxiliaries. This was as a result of the use of the authority that the FET Colleges Act (RSA 2006) afforded to a council. The situation was different at College 2, however. At College 2, the members of the college council made up the primary governance structure, whereas the staff and student members acted as constituency representatives. The external members of the council performed a functional role in that they approved the action that the internal members of the council had taken. This was a direct consequence of the geographic location of the council members; College 2 was located in a deep rural area, which made attendance of council meetings difficult.

Avoidance

Organisations can respond to environmental pressure by avoiding influences that may restrict their behaviour. It was found that the two colleges had avoided updating their policies; College 2 had avoided doing so since 2006 and College 1 since 2009.⁷ This was a concern, as these policies had not been revised to incorporate the changing public policy environment. Both colleges admitted that the respective policies were outdated and required review and revision.

Between the 2007 and 2010 financial years, College 2 did not submit the required reports to National Treasury, as the auditors had resigned. In addition, the college did not submit its 2011 audit reports to the Auditor-General in time. At the time of the data collection, it was found that this had not resulted in sanctions by the DHET. This lack of consequences for non-compliance may have perpetuated the avoidance behaviour exhibited by the college. This does, however, strengthen the accountability requirement to the government.

The findings from the college case studies illustrated that FET colleges were not always willing to comply with external environmental demands. Instead, the institutions strategically opted to avoid these demands and/or to adapt to them.

Discussion and Conclusion

The case studies illustrated that different FET colleges in South Africa operated in very different contexts. The findings suggested that the concentration of power in the environment had an impact on the manner in which policy was implemented at the FET colleges and the ways in which these colleges were governed—and thus on the colleges’ display of organisational autonomy. These findings were in line with the theoretical framework developed by Pfeffer and Salancik (2003). The dimensions of autonomy put

7 This was the finding in 2012 when the data was collected.

forward by Verhoest et al. (2004) proved useful in explaining the concept of autonomy. The findings of this study suggested that a combined application of the said framework and dimensions would be suitable to determine the concentration of power in the South African context and that it might be useful within the discipline of public administration and management.

While FET colleges were able to specify rules, standards and norms concerning processes, policy instruments and objectives in the standard statute, the application thereof was limited. Therefore, these colleges had a moderate level of autonomy. The high degree of regulation and oversight by the DHET limited the real power of college councils, while, at the same time, conferring on them considerable authority and responsibility. This had serious implications for the degree of autonomy that colleges possessed in becoming responsive organisations. This finding was in line with Brinkerhoff and Crosby's (2002) argument that policy implementers require power, authority and capacity to plan and make decisions regarding policy implementation. However, decision-makers at higher levels of the system often subjugated their power, which reduced the autonomy of the two institutions surveyed.

With regard to accountability, the DHET, as an external stakeholder, occupied the most powerful position, as the colleges were ultimately accountable to it. Accountability structures within the colleges differed. College 2's actual accountability structure was partly the result of the lack of direct oversight that was exercised by the college council. This was ascribed to the fact that some council members were located some distance from the central office and they were therefore unable to be more involved in overseeing the governance of the college. Consequently, accountability by the college (principal and staff) to the college council was minimal.

Interestingly, both colleges exhibited a mix of compliance and avoidance responses. At face value, these responses may be viewed as organisational failings. However, it is argued that these responses may be considered as expressions of non-sanctioned autonomy.

Government policy seemed to be contradictory, fluctuating between allowing too much and too little autonomy, which had inherent consequences for the governing powers of the FET college councils. For example, much responsibility and authority were devolved to the college level to manage college finances; however, colleges were fully accountable to the government for how their funds were spent. The governing power of FET colleges was further limited by the level of munificence in the system. The colleges exhibited limited capacity to raise their own revenue and they were heavily reliant on the state for funding. This financial dependency empowered the state to control the actions taken by the FET colleges.

The study highlighted the need for the state to recognise the impact of the external environment on the governance of FET colleges and the manner in which policy was implemented at colleges. This article, which is based on the study, suggests that the state should take cognisance of this finding as it relates to all current technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges. An implication of this finding is that the external environment of the college sector, together with the internal environment of each particular college, needs to be given serious consideration when analysing the issues and problems associated with these institutions or organisations. Of note is that the different context within which the two surveyed colleges were located, placed different demands on these colleges. The current public policy framework and funding models do not take such different demands into consideration, and this issue warrants attention and further investigation.

Any national government intervention must be cognisant of the policy implementation challenges that policy demands and regulation have on FET (now TVET) colleges. Failure to take this into account will lead to ongoing and increasing governance practices of avoidance and adaptation rather than compliance.

This article presented an analysis of two South African FET colleges as case studies and it provided an overview of the policy context within which these colleges operated during the period 2010 to 2012. Further studies could build on the results of this study and examine the current situation at TVET colleges, as well as the changes that have occurred since the completion of this study in 2012.

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