

Community Colleges in South Africa? Assessment of potential from comparative international perspectives

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Abstract

While South African higher education has, in many respects, achieved remarkable achievements since 1994, a series of serious problems continue to beset the system, and a low internal (high attrition rate) and external (alignment with the employment market) efficiency. There also exist the problems of large scale youth unemployment and the policy of dual education and training which is not delivering results. Internationally one unique higher education has evolved these very same problems the Community College. This article traces the international track record of the community college and comes to a positive assessment as to its fit to the South African context.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Since 1994 South African higher education has been the subject of radical reforms. While in many respects the accomplishments of these reforms have been nothing short of impressive (cf. Wolhuter 2009), the following serious problems (all of which will be fully elaborated upon later in this article) persist:

- a low enrolment ratio,
- inequality with respect to access to and progress in higher education,
- high attrition rates,
- the problems to get higher education in tandem with the world of work, and
- the problem to accomplish a symbiosis between community and university.

These problems are by no means unique to South Africa. Internationally, one unique higher education institutional type – the community college has evolved, largely out of the need to address these shortcomings of higher education systems. The question then arises as to the suitability of the community college for the South African higher education scene.

AIM OF RESEARCH

The aim of this article is to assess the potential of inserting the community college model in the South African higher education landscape; by means of the track-record

of this institutional form worldwide.

The article commences with the historical trajectory of the community college: its pre-cursor in nineteenth century Germany and the proto-type in twentieth century United States of America (USA), which became the model that spread to the world outside the USA. Its track record in various contexts worldwide is then evaluated. That is followed by an analysis of the South African context. In the final part the fit of the institution, with its track-record in various contexts, to the South African context is assessed.

THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The precursor of the community college: the German *Volkshochschule*

The nineteenth century German *Volkshochschule* this term could best be translated as ‘the people’s institution for higher education’ could be regarded as the precursor of the contemporary Community College (Raby 2001, 2). The roots of the *Volkshochschule* were the popular lectures which professors Humboldt and Fichte gave outside the context of the university in the 1820s; the educational associations for workers; and the educational activities which emanated from churches and the Social Democratic Party in ensuing decades and the education programmes for adults which came into being within the context of the industrialisation towards the end of the nineteenth century (Kubly 1983, 4). Eventually, the *Volkshochschule* became the most pervasive form of adult education in Germany. The model inspired comparable post-secondary pre-university institutions elsewhere in Europe and North America (Raby 2001, 2).

The USA prototype

Tillerey and Wattenburger (as cited by Strydom et al. 1995, 6) use four periods to analyse the development of Community Colleges in the United States of America (USA): the extension of higher education (1900-1930), junior colleges (1930-1950), community colleges (1950-1970) and comprehensive community colleges (1970-present). However, it was not until the California Master Plan created a state system in 1960, that a prototype emerged in which Community Colleges became an integral part of the post-secondary education institutional fabric (Raby 2001, 2). From the beginning it was clear that the system headed for success: by 1965 there were 654 two-year colleges in the USA, 30 per cent of the total number of institutions in the USA (Strydom et al. 1995, 6). Two decades later, there were 1 350 institutions, 40 per cent of all institutions of higher education (ibid.). Currently there are 1 800 Community Colleges in the USA, with 12 million students (Raby 2010). The largest and fastest growing sector of higher education in the USA, they enroll close to half (46%) of all undergraduates in the USA (Anon. 2009).

The spectacular growth and success of Community Colleges could be ascribed to a number of factors. Their small size, their concentration on teaching (rather than

research) as core mission and the consequential presence of student support services and lower tuition fees make them ideally suited to give access to higher education to members of communities traditionally, excluded from, marginalised from or underrepresented at higher education institutions. They act as feeder institutions to other institutions higher up the hierarchy of higher education institutions and thus open the way for members of such sectors of the population. The strong education-community nexus makes them well positioned to provide recurrent education and retraining for adults in a system of lifelong learning. With their relative diverse student composition, they have proved themselves to be well equipped to provide intercultural and multicultural aspects of education indispensable parts of twenty-first century education (cf. Raby and Tarrow 1996).

The model

The Community College model, as it has taken shape in the USA, displays the following features:

- Level of education: Community Colleges offer education at the post-secondary level (Raby 2001, 3).
- Place in the National Qualifications Framework: Community Colleges provide a stepping stone towards higher levels of tertiary education. In the USA, Community Colleges provide the two years of tertiary education (Associate Degree) for those students who plan to continue their studies towards a four years Bachelor Degree. Such courses (Community Colleges' Associate Degrees) are then accredited by local universities.
- Curricula and programmes: Community Colleges are characterized by the diversity of their curricula and programmes. Elements of liberal, vocational and technical education exist. Besides a foundation education towards a bachelor's degree, a host of programmes are offered, including short courses and part-time courses for adults, in basic and adult education, as well as occupationally oriented programmes for those students who wish to work in a vocational, technical and business sphere.
- Student population: Community Colleges cater for students of all ages. Members of minority groups absent from or underrepresented at other institutions of higher education find educational opportunities at Community Colleges, making it an effective vehicle for advancing social justice (see: DeBard and Rice 2009). The reason for that are their open access policy, lower tuition fees, geographical proximity, and student support services being now readily available compared to other higher education institutions.
- Community nexus: Community Colleges are characterised by strong links with the community (local population, business and industry) and respond to the needs of that community.
- Governance: In the USA model, Community Colleges are governed by the

states. This facet varies in countries to which the institution spread (cf. Raby 2001, 3).

The spread of the Community College beyond the USA

From the USA the Community College spread to larger parts of the world. Community Colleges were introduced to Ontario province in Canada.

In the Caribbean the imperative to keep pace with challenges of worldwide change in the developmental process, and the human resource base requirement of that, have spurred the development of a host of post-secondary vocationally oriented institutions, though having a British education tradition, these institutions as in the case of Canada blended with home education traditions rather than fully replicating the USA Community College (cf. Wolf 2009).

Similarly, Europe, with its established educational institutions and systems (such as the *Ecole normales* in France, or the German dual vocational education and training system) precluded the USA Community College in securing a foothold in Europe. However, Ireland's modernisation drive during the past few decades, saw the establishment since the 1970s of 15 'Institutes of Technology', based in part on the USA Community College model (DoBell and Ingle 2009, 484).

However, in the new economies of Asia, the rapid, planned and deliberate pursuit of industrialisation in recent decades, and its need for a supply of trained human resources, provided a fertile soil for the more wholesale transplantation of the Community College model. In Taiwan, where the growth of Community Colleges can also be linked to the democratisation of the country and the need to build a civil society empowered to take part in public affairs and decision-making, the number of Community Colleges has increased to over 100, since the establishment of the first Community Colleges in 1998 (Chen and Wang 2009, 51). Vietnam began to turn away from socialist economies policies in 1986 and to embrace the principles of a free-market economy and the need for trained human resources which was spurred by the ensuing economic growth, as well as international influences on education in a more open policy atmosphere, led to the establishment of 9 Community Colleges between 2000 and 2002, followed by three more during 2005-2006 (Lam and Vi 2009, 91 and 98). In 2002, the first 10 Community Colleges were established in Thailand, one in each of the ten provinces of Thailand (Punthumasen and Maki 2009, 135). The aim was to improve the quality of life of the local people by enhancing opportunities to higher education, providing both education and training (ibid.). Presently there are 17 Community Colleges (Lam and Vi 2009, 99). In 1949, Japan changed the traditional 3 year professional schools to 2 year colleges, called *Taki-daigaku*, similar to the USA model of Community College. These institutions helped to provide a trained labour force in time for rebuilding the country after the Second World War (Lam and Vi 2009, 99). Similarly, in 1993 South Korea changed its post-secondary vocational training system by establishing 2-year colleges called Jeonmun Tehack or Chonmun Tahack. This kind of college provides a 2-year university programme in various fields of study for students graduating from general education or secondary

vocational schools. The Community College movement is a national phenomenon that has spread the wings throughout India (Alphonse and Valeau 2009, 79). Currently there are 213 Community Colleges in 19 states in India which provide education to empower the disadvantaged and the underprivileged including the urban, rural and tribal poor and women (ibid.). Community Colleges have also spread to China (cf. Postiglione 2009, 162) and outside Asia, to Zimbabwe (cf. Mpondi 2009, 7272) and Uganda (cf. Jacob et al. 2009, 338341) in Africa and Israel where the academic colleges or regional colleges were established on the American community college model (Davidovitch and Itam 2009, 375).

ASSESSMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL TRACK RECORD OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

From the international track record of the Community College much that is commendable emerges. Community Colleges contribute towards providing vocational education. In the USA for example, although a late-comer to Community Colleges (the major impetus was the Vocational Education Act of 1963), vocational education currently accounts for 54 per cent of all degrees and certificates awarded by Community Colleges (Cohé 2009, 42). With regard to developmental-remedial education (i.e. mitigating the deficiencies of students who leave high school, but having failed to learn the skills necessary for further education), the Community College has proved its worth too. These include reading and writing, mathematical skills, study skills, as well as English proficiency for nonnative English speakers. In the USA, all the Community Colleges offer remedial studies (Cohen 2009, 44). Nationally, in the USA, 29 per cent of the scheduled class sections in English and 32 per cent in mathematics are designated as remedial studies (Schuyler 1999). Studies generally have found that remedial programmes at Community Colleges are at least modestly effective in helping students overcome deficiencies in their pre-collegiate academic preparation and associated disadvantages (Pascarella and Torenzini 2005, 398).

Community Colleges contribute to community education too. These include adult basic education, contouring occupational workforce education, entrepreneurship training and several types of cooperative arrangements with other community agencies (Cohen 2009, 41). Unlike the vocational and remedial-development courses, few of these courses carry college credit. Most Community Colleges in the USA organise separate divisions for providing community education (Cohen 2009, 45). These even include programmes for inmates of persons (cf. Erisman and Contrdo 2005). This function of community education gave Community Colleges their *raison d'être* in Taiwan (Cohen and Wan 2009). In Taiwan Community Colleges played a noteworthy role in the building of civil society, a need that arose with the democratization of the country (ibid.). Similarly, in Thailand Community Colleges played their role in the modernisation and economic transformation of the country, by means of human resource development (Punthumasen and Maki 2009, 145). The Norway Regional Colleges, the United Arab Emirates' Higher Colleges of Technology, the Riverdale

Community College in Ireland and the Nova Scotia Community College in Nova Scotia all contributed to community development (Raby 2009, 25).

That Community Colleges are capable of fulfilling their mission to supply the human resources required for the rapid economic transformation and modernisation of a region, is evident from Lam and Vi's (2009, 103105) case study of the Tien Giang Community College in Vietnam, and from China. In the wake of the economic modernization and transformation of China foreign models were studied, with the view to expand China's wafer thin higher education sector. The 2003 human resources blueprint *Strategic Concepts for the Development of Chinese Education and Human Resources for the Next Fifty Years* led to the creation of Dazhuan institutions of specialised professional and technical higher education, (comparable to the Community College), both to supply the human resources required by a rapidly expanding economy, and as an avenue and catch-up institution for the envisaged increase in graduates from the senior secondary phase of the 9-year compulsory schooling (Postiglione 2009, 163). This document envisioned a growing enrollment ratio in the senior secondary cycle from the 54 per cent then (2003) to 73 per cent in 2010, 85 per cent by 2020 and 100 per cent by 2050 (ibid.).

One of the success stories of Community Colleges is their ability of linking students' education with their jobs after graduation. In the USA 7090 per cent of Community College graduates gain employment in jobs related to their training (Cohen 2009, 43). In India existing Community Colleges have a successful 75 per cent job placement (Alphonse and Valeau 2009, 94).

Another advantage of the Community College is its adaptability its ability to respond to local contexts and needs (Raby 2009, 31). One example would suffice the Linkage Model developed in Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe the Mapfure Self-help College (a Community College) and educators of the Bow Valley Community College (Canada) have developed one year career certificates and two-year diplomas in business, administration, health care and human services. This made-in-Zimbabwe training programme links the essential skills of basic literacy and mathematics as they apply in the workplace, with standard business and technical training. The Linkage Model also stresses the need to use business and industry feedback in the design of training curriculum. This ensures that the skills taught are the ones employers value (Mpondi 2009, 76).

As mentioned above, Community Colleges have a track-record of providing post-secondary education much cheaper than conventional forms of higher education (universities) and are much more accessible too. One reason for their enhanced accessibility is geographical proximity. In the USA every citizen is within 25 miles (40 kilometers) of a Community College (Raby 2010).

The Community College has a successful track-record in promoting social justice at the level of higher education. This could be illustrated by the case of the USA. The mission of the comprehensive Community College in the USA grew out of a social justice agenda that was advanced by the 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education, popularly known as the Truman Commission (DeBard and Rice

2009, 122). The Truman Commission offered a remarkable vision of an expensive, inclusive and diverse system of postsecondary education in the USA (*ibid.*), superseding the then selective, elitist system of higher education. At that time one of the forces working against a massive expansion of postsecondary education was the low secondary school graduation rates among minority groups. In 1940, just less than half of Caucasians graduated from high school (48%), compared to only 13 per cent of Afro-Americans and 16 per cent of Latinos (DeBard and Rice 2009, 122-123). The result was gross tertiary education enrollment ratios of 16 per cent of Caucasians, 2 per cent of Afro-Americans and 1 per cent of Latinos (*ibid.*, 123). One of the social justice imperatives of the Truman Commission was to increase minority enrollment, by creating a type of institution to meet their needs. The openness of the Community College entrance requirements, and relative low cost and comprehensiveness of its mission helped minority enrollment to reach 31 per cent by 2005 (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac 2005).

The Community College has also proved itself as a canal towards university education risk or disadvantaged students proceeding from high school via the Community College to university (cf. Cohen 2009, 46). In Canada there is even the interesting phenomenon of reverse transfer university graduates going to Community Colleges to get a job-related education (Wilson 2009).

With its USA origin, there is the obvious danger of the Community College advancing Northern hegemony (a caveat which will be returned to in the next section), yet the Community College's strong ties with the local community has enabled it to prove itself in being a counter-hegemonic force (e.g. cf. Chen and Wang 2009, 65) and for the same reason it has a demonstrable track record in promoting indigenous knowledge systems (e.g. cf. Punthumasen and Maki 2009, 145).

On the other hand, in spite of its overall successful track record, there are a number of caveats with respect to Community College too.

There is a well-neigh world-wide tendency to look down towards vocational education as inferior education (cf. Banya 2010, 18). This is also the fate of the Community College (cf. Cohen and Brauer 2003).

Community College is not universally the best agent to equalise access to higher education. In Egypt, Iran, Curacao and Zimbabwe limiting Community College access heightens competition and hence socio economic inequity (Raby 2009, 2829).

Getting the world of education in tandem with the world of work is a perennial problem (cf. Wolhuter 2003) no country or education system has been able to solve completely. The Community College too is not a panacea in this regard. Especially when combined with poor national planning corruption and a weak and/or unstable economy, many Community College graduates might find themselves unemployed (Raby 2001, 2829).

While the Community College can change and adapt faster than other forms of higher education, it is trapped in historical inertia and at times unable to adapt fast enough to changing context and demands (cf. Lam and Vi 2009, 108). Similarly, while they are considerably cheaper to maintain than universities, the Community

College still requires running costs and especially a capital outlay for establishing infrastructure; which might be difficult for poor countries to come by (cf. Lam and Vi 2009, 93 and 108).

Finally there is, in the Southern countries, always the danger of fostering Northern hegemony many Community Colleges in the South and the East have been set up as part of collaboration agreements with USA institutions (Raby 2001, 27).

SOUTH AFRICA: SITUATION ANALYSIS

Universities in South African came into being since the second half of the nineteenth century, under the auspices of the then British colonial administration. They all simulated the model of liberal-academic education bequeathed to them from metropolitan Britain.

Turning to technical-vocational before the discovery of diamonds and gold, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the labour market in South Africa was uncomplicated and craftsmen were trained only for a few traders. The end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century saw the beginnings of apprenticeship training, as well as technical colleges (providing secondary education, and some tertiary vocational education). In 1967 a new institution, the technikon was created to provide advanced technical education to supply in South Africa's urgent need for technicians (Kruger 1986, 193).

With the dawn of the new educational and socio-political dispensation in 1994, government faced the problem of technikon education being widely perceived as inferior education. This was compounded by the fact that universities could bestow degrees, but technikon diplomas only. Government decided to change the binary higher education system to a unitary higher education system. The technikons were upgraded to technical universities.

To supply the economy with skilled human resources, government envisioned a dual system of vocational education and training, based on the German model (cf. Wolhuter 2003). *The Skills Development Act* (Act 97 of 1998) made provision for this system, and for skills development tax to be paid by employers into Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs).

At present the higher education sector in South Africa is beset with a number of serious problems. Between the secondary and tertiary education levels a huge disjunction exists. Of the 334 745 students who passed the National Senior Certificate Examination 2009, only 109 706 (or 32.77%) qualified for university admission. South Africa's gross tertiary enrolment ratio of 15 per cent is low compared to other upper-middle income economies, as has been revealed by a recently published comparative study (Wolhuter et al. 2010, 202203). Universities get many more applications than the number of students they can admit (Kruger 2010, 6). In the 2010 matriculation examination 126 371 candidates passed with university admission, while at all the South African universities there were only place for 40 000 new students (Smit 2011, 15).

Access to tertiary education is very unequal along the dimensions of population group, gender, socio-economic descent and geographical distance. Black, Coloured,

Indian and White students constitute respectively 61.0 per cent, 63 per cent, 7.4 per cent and 25.3 per cent of tertiary enrolments; while they make up respectively 79 per cent, 8 per cent, 2.5 per cent and 9.6 per cent of the population (Wolhuter 2009, 64). Geographic distance from a university is strongly negatively correlated with university enrolment. This holds even for the most affluent sector of the population, as founded by Van Wyk (1977) (admitted by a dated study). It has been confirmed recently (for all sections of the population) by Paterson and Arends (2006, 114). Moreover, this factor seems to affect female students more than male students, thus exacerbating gender disparities (cf. Paterson and Arends 2006, 115).

Within tertiary education there is a massive attrition problem. Only 22 per cent of students complete their studies in the prescribed time (James 2010, 9) pointing to expensive inefficiency. Furthermore Black students are affected disproportionately, by the attrition problem, thus aggravating inequalities (cf. Gower 2008-2, 15). The attrition problem could be traced to a number of factors such as the unaffordability of higher education for students from poor households and the fact that even many of those who passed the matriculation examination with university admission are academically insufficient equipped for university study, especially in as far as their basic numeracy and literary skills and command of English are concerned, as showed by tests on the 2009 first year chart, the results of which enjoyed prominent media coverage recently (e.g. cf. Rademeyer 2009-1; Dibetle 2009).

Of the many matriculants who do not proceed to tertiary education many fail to secure a job. In October 2010 the Human Sciences Research Council said in releasing its audited financial results for 2009/10 that fewer than half of all 2010 matriculants would not hold a formal job before they turned 24 (Fredericks and Petersen 2010, 5). A study done by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) and the Ford Foundation found that in 2007 2.8 million of the 6.7 million youth between 18 and 24 years were without work and training (Rademeyer 2009-2, 1). Only 35.3 per cent of them were enrolled at an institution of tertiary education (ibid.).

Though at much reduced proportions, unemployment amongst tertiary graduates exists too. While making up less than 3 per cent of South Africa's unemployed, in 2006, the graduate unemployed still represented approximately 200 000 individuals (Business Leadership South Africa 2006). Of all people in South Africa with higher education qualifications, 8.9 per cent are unemployed (Rademeyer 2010, 6). A recent study commissioned by Higher Education South Africa (HESA), surveying employers, found that graduates fail to meet the expectations of employers (Pretorius 2009, 1). The report recommended a more porous boundary between higher education institution and industry/business (ibid.).

Yet at the same time social analysts, economists and politicians complain about a serious shortage of skills human resources (cf. Wolhuter 2009, 67). For example, only 700 engineers join the profession each year, though the economy needs 11 000 to join (Anon. 2007, 12). The dual education and training system clearly fails to deliver. In 2007 South Africa needed 12 500 artisans in apprenticeship compared to the then 5 000 (Anon. 2007, 12). To complete the picture, by 2007 R3.8 billion

procured from the skills levy paid by employers, lied unused in the accounts of the 22 SETAs (De Lange 2007, 1).

CONCLUSION THE WAY FORWARD

The question then is how to address youth unemployment problems besetting South African higher education: low enrolment ratios, inequality in access, participation and survival, and low internal (high attrition) and external (alignment with employment market) efficiency.

Various solutions have been proposed

- Building more universities, and increasing enrolments even further i.a. by making tertiary education free, is frequently set as a goal. For example, in 2007 the then Minister of Education announced that government plans to increase university enrolments to reach the 100 000 mark in 2010 (Rademeyer 2007, 6). In January 2011 the state president announced government's intention to provide higher education free (Nkosi 2011).
- Similarly, a drastic expansion of Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges, have been envisioned, for example by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, shortly after the creation of that portfolio in 2009 (Nzimande 2009).
- The admission requirements of universities have been enticed and suggestions of lowering these have been made, for example by the Minister of Higher Education and Training in 2009 (SAPA 2009), and by the Secretary-General of the African National Congress in 2010 (SABC News 2010).
- Extending the prescribed time for bachelor degrees to four years have been proposed by example by HESA in 2008 (Gower 2008-1, 1).
- National service for the youth has been suggested, for example by the Minister of Defence in 2010 (Anon. 2010, 1).
- Finally, Community Colleges have been mooted at the time of the restructuring of South Africa's higher education in the 1990s to 2001 after which scholars of higher education in South Africa, for the past decade became silent on the topic of Community Colleges by four studies by Strydom et al. (1995), Zuma (1996) Creative ASSOCIATES international (1996) and Hoppers (2001).

Of the above proposals serious questions could be asked about the first five. While there is clearly a need to increase university enrolments in order to get South Africa upon a par with other upper-middle income countries and to gear the country for the needs of the twenty-first century, increasing university enrolments will not solve the problem of the internal inefficiency of universities. Likewise, while FET Colleges enrolments should be increased to provide education for the large segment of the young population who dropped-out of school before completion of their secondary education FET-Colleges (which provide secondary and further, but

not higher education) cannot supply human resources requiring higher education. Lowering admission requirements will aggravate problems of internal inefficiency and extending bachelor programmes to four years will saddle-up universities with the task of remedial education which is not the function of a university, and would be an expensive way of fulfilling a function which could be rendered much cheaper by another type of institution. Elsewhere in Africa where they have been tried, National Youth Service Schemes could not get-off the ground (Wolhuter 2007) and in any case, while such schemes might make a dent into youth unemployment, they cannot provide the education and training required by a twenty-first century economy.

That leaves one option – the Community College – which has a successful international track record increasing and equalizing higher education access and participation much cheaper than the university, and in aligning higher education with the employment market. The caveats of the institution, in the international experience could all, at least to some extent be obviated in the South African context:

- while the tendency to regard vocational education as inferior to academic education is present in South Africa too, accreditation of Community College qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework and ensuring that Community College education provides a channel to university education for more advanced education, can go a long way towards addressing this problem
- giving bad communities and industry/business sufficient say in the governing of Community Colleges, can likewise assist in ensuring that the institutions' education are aligned with the needs of the employment market
- a large enough amount of Community Colleges will ensure that the education provided does not create a new inequality as in countries with a limited number of Community Colleges
- concerning affordability SETA funds (which are, after all, earmarked for many of functions performed by Community Colleges) could go a considerable way to meet the costs of Community Colleges, as could involvement by the private sector (it should be kept in mind that on world-wide scale, the private sector is responsible for 30 per cent of tertiary education provision).

From the international experience and from the situation analysis portrayed in this article, the Community College seems to present the best way to haul South African higher education from its present quagmire and to spearhead it into the future.

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