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To cite this article: Jo W. Badenhorst & Rachere S. Radile (2018): Poor Performance at TVET Colleges: Conceptualising a Distributed Instructional Leadership Approach as a Solution, Africa Education Review, DOI: [10.1080/18146627.2017.1352452](https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2017.1352452)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2017.1352452>



Published online: 11 Apr 2018.



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# POOR PERFORMANCE AT TVET COLLEGES: CONCEPTUALISING A DISTRIBUTED INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP APPROACH AS A SOLUTION

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## ABSTRACT

In South Africa the challenges facing the post-school vocational education system are daunting. There is a lack of coherence, resulting in fragmentation of the system. A Training Needs Assessment Study commissioned in 2014 revealed several major academic challenges facing college leadership. The most pressing issues were poor leadership and management skills and challenges facing lecturers in various aspects of teaching and learning, amongst which were blatant shortcomings in their capabilities to meet the competencies required for effective lecturing. This realisation led the researchers to hypothesise that ineffective and fragmented leadership and management practices may be to blame for this state of affairs. The researchers wondered whether an integrated and focused leadership model aimed at distributing ownership for student achievement should be implemented to produce better results. The overarching research question was: What are the main stumbling blocks in improving National Certificate: Vocational (NC(V)) students' performance at technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges; and how can a distributed instructional leadership approach be conceptualised to address the problems at institutional level? A qualitative research approach was used, which was mainly inductive, providing a clear understanding of the participants' views and capturing their perceptions in their own words. A phenomenological design was used as strategy of inquiry. The findings created an awareness for considering collaboration and the distribution of powers and capabilities to bring about a shared leadership vision in the quest for challenging poor performance at institutional level in a sector that is in dire need of positive outcomes.

**Keywords:** distributed instructional leadership; instructional leadership; phenomenological design; student learning outcomes; student performance; student support; technical and vocational education and training



Africa Education Review  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/raer20>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2017.1352452>  
ISSN 1753-5921 (Online), ISSN 1814-6627 (Print)  
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## INTRODUCTION

A well-functioning post-school vocational education system is a key lever for school leavers to break out of poverty and inequality and sustain a consistent development trajectory. With a record high unemployment rate in South Africa, school leavers are about to enter a world beset with uncertainty and volatility, where they will need every opportunity to realise their educational goals. To that end, an effective technical, vocational education and training (TVET) college system is a critical component of a well-established, good quality, post-school education system. A sound TVET college system can promote access to the labour market and increase labour productivity. In particular, the development of human capital can improve the country's competitiveness, innovation and economic growth (DED 2011).

In South Africa, however, the challenges faced by the post-school vocational education system are daunting. Amongst others, there is a lack of coherence, resulting in fragmentation in the system. This ultimately tends to cause disengagement by students, lecturers and eventually prospective employers (Field, Musset and Alvarez-Galvan 2014). Furthermore, the vocational system suffers from inadequate partnerships with business and industry and as a result, vocational training institutions are less equipped to respond to the skills requirements of employers and to the transition of young people into suitable jobs. Moreover, while quality issues of vocational systems globally abound (Hallinger and Lee 2013; Mohlokoane and Coetzer 2007; Nkosi 2012), in South Africa in particular, the nature of vocational system quality makes it very difficult to address issues of importance (Field, Musset and Galvarez-Alvan 2014, 30). Given these challenges within the context of an unclear, unstable and contested macro-economic policy, it is apparent that the South African TVET college system needs to be strengthened in order to provide access to high quality, differentiated, technical vocational education for all (Mitgang 2012). Since the challenges are so widespread and complex, they clearly need to be observed from different angles and perspectives. This article attempts to approach the problem from a leadership perspective, focussing on the four TVET colleges in the Free State, South Africa.

## THE PROBLEM CONTEXTUALISED

In South Africa the curriculum utilised to deliver vocational education is the National Certificate: Vocational (NC(V)), which was introduced by the Department of Education (DoE) in 2007 as a new, comprehensive curriculum with 14 fields of study. The intention with introducing the NC(V) was threefold: (1) to solve the problems of poor quality and low relevance of the previous vocational educational programmes which were offered; (2) to alleviate the chronic short supply of work placements available to students; and (3) to address the low technical and cognitive skills of graduates. To this end, a large amount of money was injected into the system – R1.9 million in 2006, R2.5 million in

2012, and an additional R17.4 billion in 2013 – to boost continued development (DHET 2014).

Despite this substantial funding, however, the TVET college sector has not delivered on the expectation of becoming institutions of choice and assisting in alleviating the plight of skills shortages in South Africa. Papier (2009) has noted the disappointing results and the dismal performance of students. For example, in 2007, a national certification rate of around 10 per cent was recorded. The success rate continued to be generally poor as evidenced by the 4 per cent throughput rate obtained in 2009 (DHET 2012). Although pass rates have increased gradually in recent years (2012–2016), the trend of poor performance still persists, with certification rates hovering between 29 per cent and 41 per cent. These figures can hardly validate the generous capital injection from the DHET. As Field, Musset and Galvarez-Alvan (2014) remark, the present mix of programmes and qualifications in the sector is complex to administer; frowned upon by the business sector; difficult for students and parents to understand; and often poorly quality assured.

A Training Needs Assessment Study commissioned by the South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO) in 2014 (HRDCSA 2014) revealed several major challenges facing college leadership. The most pressing issues that came to light were, firstly, management is, in general, poor and fails to offer proper instructional guidance to lecturers and students; secondly, lecturers display patent shortcomings in their lecturing capabilities; and thirdly, the NC(V) attracts large numbers of students with different levels of academic readiness, thus requiring lecturers to teach two very different cohorts of students in the same classroom (DHET 2012). This arguably causes high levels of frustration for both lecturers and students.

Since the inception of the “revamped” TVET sector, not enough has been done to address fundamental issues about the identity of the various colleges, the curriculum they offer, or the role they are expected to play (Geweir 2010). In the past, the government has sought to direct and drive transformation centrally in the absence of a longer-term strategy. With the implementation of the recent, more decentralised approach, colleges should now forge an own identity, allowing each the leeway to implement its own organisational structure (Blom 2016). This requires individual institutional problem diagnosis that would necessitate tailoring interventions from a “general menu to specific institutional conditions” (Kraak 2016, 19). However, leadership and lines of accountability are not clearly defined, which restricts decision-making and further adds to the instability of colleges. This scenario arguably impacts adversely on student performance through neglect of the core functions of teaching and learning which aim to enhance performance. In this regard, Wedekind and Buthelezi (2016) suggest that all the administrative and corporate service functions in colleges should jointly support the process of teaching and learning. By strengthening these functions, the probability of enhanced performance is increased significantly. Similarly, Singh, Manser and Mestry (2007) consider an array of organisational functions undertaken by motivated college

staff to be the catalyst for college functionality. For them, these are fundamentally lacking, and they propose the implementation of collaborative and collegial models of leadership as a solution. When considering effective leadership, they firmly believe that a culture which supports collegial forms of decision-making “matters twice as much as cognitive abilities such as IQ or technical expertise of individuals” (Singh, Manser and Mestry 2007, 545).

From the above, it is quite clear that there is little articulation between the layers of structures between management, administration, lecturing staff and students, which evidently adds to the institutional challenge of dealing with inadequate performance of students. This study argues that the notion of “distributed instructional leadership” presents an ideal opportunity to explore turnaround strategies to enhance performance at institutional level and create greater synergy between the different levels of staff. Consequently, the following overarching research question guided the study: What are the main stumbling blocks in improving NC(V) students’ performance at TVET colleges in the Free State as perceived by internal stakeholders; and how can a distributed instructional leadership approach be conceptualised to address the problems at institutional level?

Few empirical studies focusing on instructional leadership in vocational education studies could be located (e.g. Falk 2003; Falk and Smith 2001; Jäppinen and Maunon-Eskkelinen 2012); and when further narrowing the selection to research on *distributed* instructional leadership in vocational education settings, the availability of studies was equally limited. Consequently, the theoretical framework discussed in the next section provides an overview of how distributed instructional leadership is conceptualised both in the leadership literature as well as in the study.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is argued that effective leadership in education is that which speaks directly to student performance and leads to an improvement in student outcomes. Two important educational leadership theories which emerged from traditional models, and which have implications for this study, are *instructional leadership* and a concomitant branch of this leadership construct, *distributed instructional leadership*. For the purpose of the current study, those studies on instructional leadership in schools are regarded as also relevant to distributed instructional leadership in TVET colleges, since similar models of staffing and management are followed, with various campuses headed by campus managers (the equivalent of school principals).

Empirical research on leadership in educational institutions abounds. The literature reveals that instructional leadership is one of the methods that have been heralded to bring about change in student performance due to its link with increased student attainment (Bush 2013; Harris 2012; Spillane 2012) and to bring about a turn-around in poor performing institutions. Bush et al. (2011) single out instructional leadership as

one of nine leadership models, which is particularly significant because it targets the schools' central activities, namely teaching and learning. It differs from other leadership approaches because it focuses on the *direction* of influence, rather than its *nature* and *source* (Bush, Kiggundu and Moorosi 2011). Bryk et al. (2010) view instructional leadership as playing a key role as the driver of change for school improvement and student learning by involving other stakeholders. Principal leadership is singled out as a key mechanism for improving educational institutions and unsurprisingly, research on instructional leadership seems to focus almost entirely on the importance of the principal in guiding school reform and improving students' achievement (Sebastian and Allensworth 2012), neglecting the role of other role players in managing educational performance.

The latest evidence, however, emphatically concludes that leadership works best when it is shared (distributed) in educational contexts, and leadership is more likely to succeed if the leader brings other people along into the same vision, enabling them to work together and trust one another (Hallinger and Lee 2013; Mitgang 2012). Within a distributed instructional leadership model, the principal is no longer the source of absolute authority. It implies sharing of power and decision making and therefore, at times, the principal may not have either positional or expert authority. If the distributed instructional leadership model is premised on the expansive involvement of staff in decision making and forward planning, then the redefined principal's role will be chiefly concerned with creating the conditions for others to lead rather than leading from the front. This is not to suggest that the principal no longer sets the strategic direction for the school, but rather to argue that the role is now to channel leadership capabilities of others to help manage the school. Importantly, distributed instructional leadership can be conceived less as a set of personal attributes or style and more as a practice enacted by people at many levels (Klar 2012).

## Distributed Instructional Leadership and Student Learning Outcomes

As the study focused on distributed instructional leadership as a means of addressing poor performance of students, it is significant that opinions on the relationship between distributed instructional leadership and student learning outcomes vary considerably. There are, however, a number of studies, although limited, that have explicitly explored the relationship between distributed leadership and learning outcomes. Two studies in particular highlight the link between distributed instructional leadership and student learning outcomes. Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) suggest in their study that distributing a larger proportion of leadership activity to teachers has a positive influence on teacher effectiveness and student engagement. The second study by Silins and Mulford (2002) likewise provides evidence of the key practices through which distributed instructional leadership influences student learning

outcomes. Their work concluded that “student outcomes are more likely to improve when leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community and when teachers are empowered in areas of importance to them” (Silins and Mulford 2002, 610).

With the above as background, the next section describes the research methodology followed to explore challenges posed by poor performance of NC(V) students, and, importantly, the need for a distributed instructional leadership approach to create a support system as a strengthening measure to combat poor performance.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative and contextual research approach was used in the study. The approach was mainly inductive, providing a clear understanding of the participants’ views and capturing their perceptions in their own words (Babbie 2015). A phenomenological design was used as the strategy of inquiry. The design involved both an interpretive perspective, primarily concerned with meaning, and a constructivist perspective, focusing on the feelings and beliefs of the participants. These perspectives are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** A simplified scheme of different perspectives, research strategy, data collection and analysis utilised in the study

Paradigm	Ontology	Epistemology	Data collection
Interpretive	Reality can be understood and interpreted but not predicted and controlled.	Knowledge arises from careful observation and individual interpretation.	Interpretative inquiry: open-ended questionnaires, site observation, field notes and interviewing.
Constructivist	Participants provided information-rich descriptions about their personal experiences and opinions regarding the poor performance of students.	Staff members and students who had first-hand knowledge and personal experience of factors impacting on student performance constructed knowledge through a process of meta –consciousness.	Phenomenological design involving four TVET colleges. Personal narratives, lived experience in varied, but related settings.

Data on the challenges experienced by each of the four TVET colleges in the Free State, South Africa were collected through document analysis (examining records of past results), focus group interviews and open-ended questionnaires. In addition, a number of site visits to each of the four TVET colleges were conducted in order to gather supplementary field notes to enhance the quality of the study.

A purposeful sampling technique was followed, where selected management members and NC(V) students at all four TVET colleges in the Free State (Goldfields, Motheo, Flavius Mareka and Maluti) participated in the study. In addition, staff members who are instrumental in compiling data relating to student achievement and tasked with implementing strategies to improve academic performance, were targeted. The sample consisted of 186 participants from the four colleges, made up of 82 NC(V) students; 76 lecturers teaching the NC(V) from levels 2 to 4; and 28 managers who were representative of various management categories, including senior lecturers.

As a follow-up, focus group interviews were conducted with nine students and nine managers representing the different campuses to generate additional information that assisted in forming an overall picture. Since each college had its own management structure tailored to the size and needs of the respective institutions, focus group participants were selected consonant with their job responsibilities at each particular campus. These included one Deputy Director, two Campus Managers, three Student Support Managers, one Head of Department and two Senior Lecturers. The student focus group was representative of all four colleges and assembled on a volunteer basis consisting of seven NC(V) repeaters from levels 2 to 4 as well as two students who managed to pass all their subjects in the previous academic year.

## Ensuring Validity of the Research

The validity of any study should ensure that there are interfaces between explanations of the phenomena which are studied and the realities of the world. Table 2 depicts the strategies used to enhance validity during the study.

**Table 2:** Strategies to increase and enhance validity during data collection and analysis in the study

<b>Data collection</b>	
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>
Participant language: verbatim accounts	Obtained literal statements of participants such as verbatim accounts of lived experiences, transcripts as well as information from documents.
Mechanically recorded data	Digital recorders were used.
Low – inference description	Precise and detailed descriptions of the participants were recorded and transcribed in combination with field notes and reflexion directly after each interview.
Member checking and participant review	Participants received the researchers' synthesis of all interviews and questionnaires. (Adapted from McMillan and Schumacher 2010)



<b>Data analysis</b>	
Validating participants	Participants validated the data analysis process by confirming the results of the data analysis throughout the process.
Avoiding subjective interpretation	The researchers worked as objectively as possible while analysing the data. Each researcher conducted own field notes for comparison afterwards.
Coding of data	The data was carefully coded and verified by an external coder. Generalisations were made by strictly focusing on the data to support any statements.
Avoiding selective use of data	Only data that could be supported by the research data was allocated value.
Avoiding unfair segregation of data	The researchers guided against their own expectations and preconceived notions about the research.
Avoiding researcher bias	*All steps in the data analysis process were verified by an external coder. (Adapted from Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, 116–121)

## Ethical Aspects

Ethical measures included obtaining permission from both the provincial Department of Education, the college principal of each college and the campus managers to undertake the research. Similarly, informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all the prospective participants (management staff, lecturers and students) after they had been informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, the risks, benefits, alternative procedures, and the measures implemented to ensure confidentiality (Creswell 2012).

## Data Analysis

In order to analyse and interpret the data, a qualitative data-analysis process was followed during which the information was coded and categorised. Data from the questionnaires and the focus group interviews were organised in meaningful analytical units as described by Gay, Mills and Airasian (2011), and coded to signify each particular segment. An external coder was assigned to verify data. The process of *in vivo* coding was followed, in which the same codes were reapplied to similar segments of the data. The data was then structured by categorising the codes and identifying the main themes according to which the data was interpreted.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings focused on the main themes that emerged from the open-ended questionnaires and reading of the verbatim transcripts from the focus group interviews. Some categories identified during the coding process have been omitted owing to the low frequency of responses from the participants. The aim was to report the information as authentically as possible in order to “hear the voices” of participants loudly and clearly. To this end, liberal use was made of their direct words, both in written (questionnaires) and spoken (focus group interviews) form without editing errors in language usage. The participants were coded as follows:

- MQ – Management members: questionnaire
- MFG – Management members: focus group interview
- LQ – Lecturers: questionnaire
- LFG – Lecturers: focus group interview
- SQ – Students: questionnaire
- SFG – Students: focus group interview

### The Voice of Management

“Because of our workload we really don’t follow up.”

Professional development of college lecturers in vocational education is crucial to the success and effectiveness of the sector. In its report, the national education quality assurance body in South Africa, Umalusi (2014, 68) concluded that the majority of lecturers are ill-equipped to cope with the academic and social demands of vocational teaching. The major causes of this poor performance are outlined as the lecturers’ lack of subject expertise and their inability to meet administrative requirements to undertake practical work. Accordingly, the interviewees representing management emphasised the critical importance of capacitation of lecturers as a measure to improve both the performance of students and the effectiveness of lecturers. Some managers claimed that newly appointed lecturing staff are familiarised with the culture of the organisation as well as processes and procedures that have to be followed through a process of induction. However, a limitation that emerged from the induction process is the observation that it does not cater for induction holistically, including academic aspects – the focus seems to be more on human resource issues such as policies pertaining to leave management and the organisational staff code of conduct. One manager explained his concern:

I have realised that we currently only have the induction of the new lecturers, but is basically based on ... HR matters, so we also are busy with the compilation of our own induction manual ... which will be academic-based. It will also assist in the ... you know ... in orientating the

newly appointed lecturers because if it's only based on the policies of HR and there is nothing that specifically targets academic issues it fails to equip new lecturers in areas that really matter. (MFG)

Furthermore, a follow-up on the effectiveness of the induction programme in building capacity and making sure that new lecturers have successfully found their footing, seems to be done improperly:

What we need to do more is to maybe monitor the process ... and whether what we implemented is really working. Because of our workload we just do the induction and sometimes we really don't follow up whether the lecturer is still ... you know fine and what is it that we still need to do. (MFG)

As for mentoring and coaching, the participants were quite upfront with their responses and ranked these as crucial in curriculum management. Most examples that were related are in line with the basic tenets of instructional leadership and in particular, distributed instructional leadership. The participants proposed inter-campus and inter-college networking and collaboration on curriculum content and best practices as effective ways to share expertise and tap into the knowledge of subject experts at the different campuses:

... to form subject meetings where lecturers teaching the same subject – they meet and assist one another in the form of co-teaching and share experiences and the strategies and methods how to approach the different teaching methods. (MQ)

One of the questions was directed at the role of the principals and campus managers in facilitating the sharing of responsibilities between departments and across all institutional levels. From their responses it was evident that the job descriptions made provision for the sharing of responsibilities, but when probed further, particularly the principals acknowledged that the realities on ground level were far removed from the ideal. A lack of cohesion between the different levels and departments was clearly compromising their effectiveness as leaders. The following response of a principal highlighted the necessity for implementing a distributed instructional leadership approach very aptly:

We know it is a problem and we have decided to work on it. It is not something that can be achieved overnight and it is difficult to get everybody on board. Many staff members are uninvolved. We must start with our quality management. Quality management is much more than staff appraisal. They say the buck stops with me but one person cannot control everything. (MQ)

## The Voice of the Lecturers

“It is because they do not take NC(V) seriously.”

## Attitude and Motivation Levels of Students

Arends and Kilcher (2010) contend that the lecturer should create and maintain rich learning environments that are abundant in visual, auditory and olfactory resources. These environments can be the result of both lecturers' and students' endeavours to include a variety of elements aimed at stimulating the various senses. According to Hattie (2012), learning is premised on understanding what the students begin with, then acquiring a balance of surface and deep understanding, and finally helping them to take more control over their learning. In this regard motivation plays a key role. In essence, a student who is not focused and motivated can ultimately end up failing. Attitudes and perceptions about learning should be addressed first before teaching and learning can take place.

From the research findings it emerged that the students displayed different levels of motivation, different attitudes about teaching and learning, and different responses to specific classroom environments and instructional practices. In particular, a lack of motivation was a key concern among all participants. The lecturers were in agreement that deficient levels of motivation were the main source of their frustration. A lack of motivation indisputably led to the unwillingness of many students to learn, their poor attendance and their lack of interest in their studies.

They don't do well. It is up to the type of person. They are children. Not ready to face the real world and take responsibility for themselves. (LQ)

I don't know why ... I don't know what it is with these kids. They come in, they sit...they sit. I say: Take out your books! Two, three times. Then I start. They look out of the window. I ask questions to get their attention. They just look at me. Blank. I say, "Please, this is YOUR life. I passed my courses long ago. Now it's up to you. Where do you want to be in ten years' time?" This is so frustrating. (LQ)

They don't care because they don't pay. NSFAS pays. They don't even use the money for their studies or books. They buy cell phones, airtime ... but you will see this everywhere, not just at (name of college). It is all over the country.

The mixed composition of classes leads to a situation where some students are neglected, especially those who are "slow to comprehend" and those who tend to withdraw in class because of struggling with the content. This inevitably leads to feelings of hopelessness and despondence. One lecturer remarked:

I think the composition of your class plays a very big role ... because we have a bunch of Grade 9's, and then you also have Grade 10's, ag ... Grade 9's and the Grade 12's in the same class. It's human nature that most of your lecturers will eventually start pushing those guys that are too slow, push them aside and start concentrating on those ... the guys that's always answering. That's just something that's natural. The composition of your class will affect your ... your results. (LFG)

It is remarks such as these that validate how a distributed instructional leadership approach would encourage lecturers to employ the support of their supervisors and student support services to alleviate their plight.

## Student Readiness and the Level of Difficulty of the NC(V) Programme

According to Schunk, Pintrich and Meece (2008, 59), teachers should focus on teaching their students the appropriate cognitive skills to master academic tasks and at the same time ensure that students have the motivational resources, including appropriate self-perceptions of competence to engage in these tasks. In a DHET report (2011, 1) it was stated that academic achievement by students is likely to take place in an environment where there is support in terms of correct programme choices, proper orientation and academic support. At TVET colleges the problem of student readiness is compounded by a lack of proper career guidance and student support services and additionally, the composition of classes (Gewer 2010). Furthermore, there are no college specific selection criteria for admission of students. Instead, colleges rely on the national admission policy which allows students from different grades, and therefore different levels of academic readiness, to enrol for the same course (e.g. NC(V) level 1).

This situation demonstrates the lack of coherence and co-operation between student admissions and student support services at colleges which could be dealt with very effectively by employing distributed instructional leadership practices. Another area of concern was the general observation that the readiness levels of students admitted to TVET colleges was questionable. The consensus amongst both lecturers and management staff was that the students admitted to the NC(V) programme are generally not sufficiently equipped at school to make the transition to the programme successfully.

I think the admission system is not fair to some of the students, for example a matriculated student is compelled to commence at level 2 even though the particular student has far better knowledge to a student who passed grade 10 and this can lead to a serious psychological disturbance. (LQ)

The general opinion expressed by lecturers and managers clearly revolved around the difficulty level of the NC(V) and the inevitable consequences of poor performance. The consensus was that the NC(V) programme is pitched at a much higher level than the school grade of comparative level. A workshop lecturer had the following to say:

So I want to say even the syllabus is very very ... there is so much content that they need to know within only ... I want to say in seven months, six months they must know all those things and that's really ... for me the focus must be more on the practicals. (LFG)

You see ... I think ... let me tell you what I think. I went to a technical high school, many years ago [chuckles]. I know exactly what they can do and what they cannot do. The guys in Pretoria

have no idea what these kids can do. Who sets the standards? The high, clever people? Let me tell you, get me there. I'll tell them they are chasing a pie in the sky! (LFG)

Another area of concern relates to the role of formal student support services at the campuses. Dedicated units for student development – evidently prioritised by the DHET – are responsible for benchmarking tests, student placements at the beginning of the academic term, academic support services and coordinating sports activities and events. Lecturers seemed to be aware of the activities of student support services at the campuses, and although a referral system for academically challenged cases is in place, lecturers expressed their frustration with the lack of proper implementation of the system. Once again, distributed instructional interventions would go a long way in addressing these frustrations. The following two responses capture the general feeling of participants from the lecturer focus group:

We do all the paperwork, we go through the whole rigmarole, but nothing happens. We don't have time to do individual remediation. I don't know why they are here. We don't get feedback. Why ... now you tell me – how does this help? How do I know what they do?

Yes, they have a programme and stuff ... but for me, I think they should make it compulsory. Like on Tuesdays they have the study skills sessions. Students can go if they're interested, but they don't. They're not serious. It's there, but it's not effective.

## The Voice of the Students

“I think they are killing us, Sir, they are killing us.”

Klar (2012) justly observes that teaching requires much more than knowledge and the desire to teach; it also requires a solid grasp on motivational techniques, leadership and conflict resolution skills, human psychology, and the ability to think on one's feet. Lecturers are also managers of their classrooms and they are therefore expected to demonstrate managerial competencies. These competencies are sets of knowledge, skills, behaviour and attitudes that are needed to be effective in a wide range of settings (Hellriegel, Jackson and Slocum 2005). A lack of empathy from lecturers and the failure of management to pay attention to student concerns may be an indication of a lack of management capacity.

The students indicated that continuous motivation is an effective input that guarantees equally effective output of academic achievement. It was noticeable that the students sense that they are taken seriously when they feel at liberty to “open up”, or that when they receive individual attention, their results tend to improve.

One aspect which surfaced from the students' responses in particular was the general attitude of lecturers. The students very much lamented the insolence of some of the lecturers who seem to be “lost” in the teaching profession or whose reasons for the choice of teaching as a career are questionable. This is demonstrated by their

lackadaisical approach in tending to students. These observations from students suggest a lack of monitoring by supervisors and underscores the need for a distributed instructional approach to encourage positive and meaningful interaction between managers, lecturers and students.

The following quotes from students during the focus group interview seem to summarise the general feeling of disappointment:

Okay, in a certain subject, nê, the lecturer is always ... Ok, in the class ... It's sign and go, sign and go most of the time. He does not give us more attention, like to emphasise ... the theory maybe or the practical part of it. So it's a big challenge, if you study alone you need a lecturer to emphasise something that you don't understand it. (SFG)

Yes Sir, I think ... when it comes to the lecturers who discourage other students, it's where management failed us. Because I think there are some lecturers who are hired who did not do psychology, first thing. Because if you are a lecturer you teach students you have to know what to say and what not, you don't come in front of me and tell me that I am going to fail at the end of the year. What do you think is happening to me? You are killing the ... those people that the management I think hired who did not do psychology I think they are killing us, Sir, they are killing us. (SFG)

When probed about utilising the services of the student support units for academic assistance, the students appeared to be either ignorant about the support opportunities offered, or they simply did not consider them as a possible avenue to address their challenges in this regard. This lack of synergy between student support and student performance suggests that support services at the participant colleges are either dysfunctional, or not mobilised and marketed effectively among students. This presents another flaw which necessitates the distribution of responsibilities to encourage different departments or sections to collaborate and bring about a shared vision for enhancing student performance.

No, Meneer [Sir], I don't know ... I didn't think of that. I don't know if they will help us. But I think they will, but no, we must find out. (SFC)

At a more practical level, students who took part in the study expressed their concern at the non-availability of some critical resources that are needed for practical work in the workshops, which impedes effective learning. This point drew a considerable number of responses, of which the following are quite vocal:

Our problem is only on the workshops ... our problem is on the workshops, we are doing nothing at all, we are doing nothing at all this year and on electrical workshops where we sometimes find problems when we are doing projects, we do not have some of the parts. We are supposed to wait for the parts...that is only my problem, especially in the electrical workshop, which is heavy current there is totally nothing, we are doing nothing. (SFG)

## Discipline, Dedication and Commitment

A student who is disciplined, dedicated and committed to learning has a better chance of success. According to Hattie (2012, 103), “an often needed requirement for learning to occur is ... a commitment to want to know and understand”. The participating students asserted that focus and paying attention are very important factors as these keep them well organised in their endeavours to learn. The following responses are testimony to the reality of commitment:

I passed all my subjects in ... I am doing NCV level 4 IEC. So I think it's just for a person to develop that discipline, you know ... dedicate time to studies no matter what happens around you, just discipline yourself and sit down and you know ... prioritise your time. That's all it is. (SFG)

I am doing IT level 3 three this year. Last year I couldn't write the final exam coz I was hospitalised when they were writing final. So I missed like four subjects. I applied for supplementary, luckily I passed all my subjects. There is no massive reason behind all this. I think I am just lucky because I am too lazy to study. There is no massive reason, really Sir, I think I am [laughing] I am lucky because me I am lazy to study. (SFG)

Significantly, there was considerable disparity in the responses from the three groups of participants. It is notable that students throughout have attributed their failure to progress to the next level predominantly to lecturers who lack the ability to motivate and encourage them, and a lack of resources. Similarly, lecturers emphasised students' inability to take responsibility for their studies, their near non-existence of motivation and their (lecturers') own frustration with departmental policy on admission requirements, which seemingly set them up for failure. Unsurprisingly, the lecturers were the only participants who failed to accept any form of responsibility for the performance of their students, thereby raising suspicion about the isolated functioning of the different staff levels and sections, and particularly the failure of leadership and management to prioritise their monitoring function to identify weaknesses in this area. The link between student performance and staff engagement with students in the classroom has been well reported (Leithwood and Seashore Louis 2011; Robinson 2011). As a case in point, Carey-Butler and Myrick-Harris (2014) found that students' decisions to persevere or withdraw from college depend on their successful academic integration within the classroom. Part of this successful integration was dependent upon the favourable daily interactions between staff and students. In view of findings like these, it is highly probable that pedagogical and interpersonal factors in the classroom setting may have a recognisable impact on poor performance of students.

Lastly, management staff highlighted capacitation of lecturers as a crucial strategy for improving poor performance. The responses from the students, lecturers and management are summarised in the following table together with corresponding proposed distributed instructional solutions for consideration by leadership.

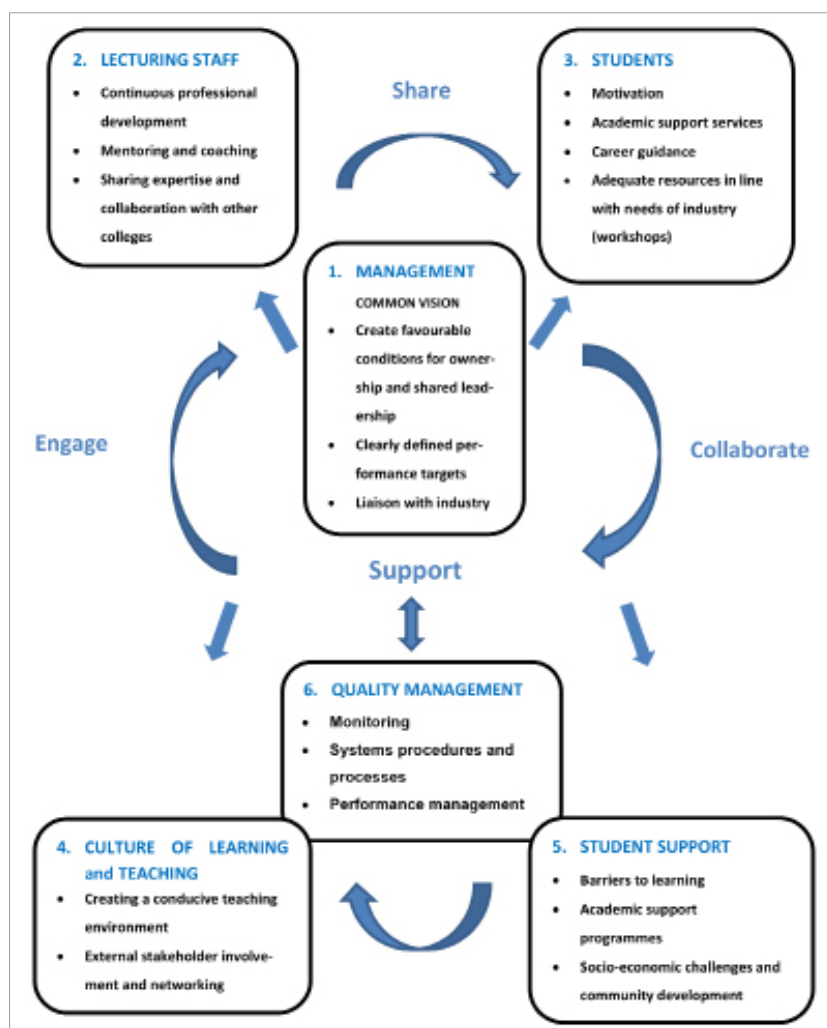


**Table 3:** Summary of responses and implementing distributed instructional leadership practices as remedy

<b>Management: Essence of responses</b>	<b>Possible solutions embedded in a distributed instructional leadership approach</b>
<p>Capacitating lecturers through training, coaching and mentoring on aspects such as instructional practices</p> <p>Shortcomings in induction and orientation practices of new lecturers</p> <p>A need for follow-up and monitoring</p> <p>Quality management</p> <p>The crucial role of strong leadership</p> <p>Lack of cohesion across levels</p>	<p>Utilising a whole-school (college) approach, leadership should involve all stakeholders at the different levels to establish a shared vision and take ownership of student performance.</p> <p>Addressing lack of cohesion by distributing responsibilities, creating open channels of communication: vertically, horizontally and diagonally.</p> <p>Capacitate, empower, monitor staff and follow up continuously and consistently to keep momentum.</p> <p>Strengthening staff accountability for performance in all sections.</p> <p>Assessing accountability against implementation of strategic and operational plans, based on distribution of responsibilities and collaborative instructional management practices.</p>
<b>Lecturers: Essence of responses</b>	
<p>Inconsistency in admission requirements.</p> <p>Duality of students questionable.</p> <p>Difficulty level of NC(V).</p> <p>Students not ready to face real world and take responsibility.</p> <p>Poor attendance of students.</p> <p>Lack of motivation of students.</p> <p>Frustration with academic support services.</p>	<p>Better articulation between student support services, college leadership and college administration in terms of admission procedures, placement of students and formalised continued support from date of registration to completion of course.</p> <p>Stronger collaboration between student support services, managers and lecturing staff (referral system) to address academic difficulties, poor attitudes and dwindling levels of motivation of students.</p>

<b>Students: Essence of responses</b>	
<p>Need for understanding and empathy.            Being taken seriously when “opening up”.            Relationship of trust with lecturers needed.            Lecturers are negative, causing discouragement.            Lack of effective instruction and individual attention.            Lecturers are hired “who did not do psychology” (read: lack of empathy).            Management “fails us”.            Lack of sufficient materials (parts) to complete practical training.            The need for self-discipline and dedication.            Acknowledge elements of laziness.            Do not consider or are ignorant about academic support from dedicated support units.</p>	<p>Concentrate on building emotional responsiveness of lecturers towards students.            Focus monitoring of effective instructional methods, performance accountability and student-lecturer relations in a parallel endeavour to enhance the teaching and learning experience.            Promote and market different facets of student support services that strive to develop students academically (e.g. study skills, differentiated and targeted learning support) socially (e.g. cultural and sport activities) and emotionally (offering compulsory short courses on aspects such as self-image, nurturing, resilience, time management, conflict resolution).            Strong commitment from leadership and management on securing the availability of sufficient resources (materials) to complete practicals in line with requirements of industry.</p>

What transpired from the research is that certain areas of concern which were highlighted by participants are difficult to address since they relate to policy issues at national level, such as admission requirements and curriculum content and development. These concerns can nonetheless not absolve TVET colleges from their responsibility to implement measures to fully utilise the available human resources to work on a turnaround strategy at institutional level. Based on findings from both the literature and responses of participants, a picture emerged in Table 3 of areas where a distributed instructional leadership strategy can be implemented fruitfully to bring about change in an effort to combat poor performance. To this end, the following dimensions of distributed instructional leadership can be considered by management teams at TVET colleges who wish to establish a culture of shared responsibility for managing teaching and learning to improve the success rate in the NC(V) programme.



**Figure 1:** A distributed instructional leadership framework

The above framework of distributed instructional leadership can certainly be expanded and refined, but the emphasis on deliberate interaction between the areas of management, learning and teaching, support and quality management is pivotal. These are subsequently linked to the constructs of engagement, support, sharing and collaboration. To put it differently, a distributed instructional leadership approach would ensure active engagement between the different components (shared leadership; continuous professional development of staff; support services for students in collaboration with lecturers and liaising with industry). Importantly, a distribution of instructional leadership will then provide the basis for *leadership* as opposed to

focusing on individual leader *traits* and *attributes*. Emphasis is placed on key qualities of interactive processes (involvement in key activities) that foster positive learning of knowledge and about identities, and so contribute to enhanced networks, relationships and collective action. Stakeholders should continuously answer the following questions in an attempt to stay on track:

1. Are there favourable conditions for distributed ownership and management in relation to learning and teaching activities and adequate resources?
2. Are all stakeholders sharing a common purpose, and is it associated with shared envisioning activities, processes, procedures and policies?
3. Are the relevant aspects, such as knowledge of skills and shared or congruent values, present in a common vision?
4. Are the opportunities where these interactions occur explicitly and systematically embedded in a distributed instructional leadership context?
5. If this is the case, how effectively can the links between the internal and external networks (colleges and employers) in the community be built and maintained?

## CONCLUSION

Little new knowledge has been generated about either the indicators of distributed educational practices that envisage positive student outcomes (Jäppinen and Maunon-Eskkelinen 2012), or the approaches that leaders in the vocational educational sector can take to effect outcomes that should ultimately respond to the skills requirements of employers. Consequently, the implicit aim of the study was: (1) to explore the main stumbling blocks in improving NC(V) students' performance at TVET colleges as perceived by internal stakeholders; and (2) to conceptualise the implementation of a distributed instructional leadership approach to ultimately improve performance of TVET colleges. The data was interpreted in accordance with the main tenets of distributed instructional leadership as discussed in the theoretical framework and findings from the leadership literature. The first part of the aim was summarised in the first column of Table 3. In the second column of Table 3, leadership strategies to address poor performance in the NC(V) programme were conceived, followed by a suggested framework for distributed instructional leadership at colleges (Figure 1). Instead of being prescriptive, the framework aims to be directive towards conceptualising tailored collaborative strategies and shared perspectives in challenging poor performance consistent with the unique identities of the various colleges. It suggests changes "from within" to help transform a sector that is in dire need of positive outcomes.

In South Africa, there may be numerous social, educational, political or ideological motivations behind decisions taken to advance a particular set of ideas. In this regard, the study had certain transferability limitations which might influence the effective application of the strategies in other college contexts. For one, it is located in a specific

geographical area and there might be an interplay of factors which are not necessarily applicable to colleges in other provinces. Second, due to a lack of resources and expertise some colleges may not be able to fully identify with the framework as it proposed here. The researchers still believe, however, that the findings can make a significant contribution when a distributed instructional approach is implemented in accordance with the unique circumstances of each institution. It is hoped that this will lead to improved insight and management practices for the enhanced performance of NC(V) students at TVET colleges.

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