

EDITORIAL

The first-year experience, student transitions and institutional transformation

Birgit Schreiber*, Thierry M. Luescher** and Teboho Moja***

Notions of foundation support for students have been critiqued as focusing on an *othered*, separated and identified group of underprepared students. Traditional approaches to first-year and foundation support frequently leave the mainstream status quo unchallenged and thus reproduce and reaffirm the very exclusionary structures and systems that foundation programmes aim to challenge. In South Africa, as early as 1986 (Vilakazi), 1988 (Nzimande), and 1995 (Ndebele), academic support was critiqued as focusing on students rather than challenging the institutional practices that require transformation. More recently, Akoojee and Nkomo (2007) have argued that higher education requires a focus on the system in order to achieve transformation goals. Kioko (2010) cautions against support premised on notions of assimilation and argues that student persistence and institutional success depends on the transformation of broad educational structures.

The emerging notion that the first-year experience is crucial to academic success in higher education has given rise to a focus in student affairs and higher education on the first-year experience (FYE). Conceptualisations of the FYE are located in at least three theoretical fields. Firstly, within adjustment frameworks of student retention and persistence the focus is mainly on students' adjustment in terms of behaviours, cognition and personal function, and attitudinal change, in order to adjust to the new demands of the higher education context (Tinto, 1997, 1998, 2014). Secondly, FYE may be conceptualised within stage models of student progression in which the FYE forms one stage through which students need to progress in order to engage with the undergraduate studies and to transition to work or postgraduate studies (Schlossberg, 2006). The third conceptualisation of FYE focuses on epistemological access to higher education. This is more than adjusting and potentially assimilating to the demands of higher education, and it is different from the normative changes expected at this developmental juncture. Epistemological access

* Executive Director of Student Affairs, University of Stellenbosch

** Senior Researcher and Assistant Director: Institutional Research, University of the Free State.
Email: jsaa_editor@outlook.com

*** Clinical Professor for Higher Education Studies, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development, New York University

and epistemological engagement (Harper & Quay, 2009) as key aims of an FYE, focus on enabling equitable participation in undergraduate studies.

These frameworks, models and critiques present the background for many of the papers in this special FYE edition of the *Journal for Student Affairs in Africa*.

- André van Zyl explores layers of students' socio-economic status and other variables and highlights the challenges and strengths within heterogeneous groups, arguing for nuanced institution-wide responses, and cautioning against a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Dallin Young's article argues for an institutional approach and makes valuable recommendations for horizontal and vertical integration in higher education so as to impact student persistence and success rates.
- The third research article by Jennifer Keup is based on a meta-analysis of American research on peer support and peer leadership. She concludes that engaging peers is a high-impact practice.
- Continuing the theme of engaging fellow students, Tracey MacKay demonstrates that recruitment strategies and training are crucial for the impact that tutors make on student performance.
- Jaffer and Garraway highlight the disjuncture between student and staff perceptions and expectations and how the difference between what staff mean and expect and what students understand and demonstrate contributes towards the barriers to shifting towards increased persistence rates.
- Jacobs and Pretorius focus on a discrete skill within the range of maths competencies and explore how their focused work impacts on overall student performance rates.
- Gugu Khanye concludes this edition of the journal with in-depth interviews with Brenda Leibowitz and John Gardner on the FYE and how to ensure that our focus shifts from deficit frameworks to systems changes.

This issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* thus continues, in greater depth, our engagement with a key theme at the intersection of student affairs and academic affairs. In this regard, previous issues of the journal have published case studies on academic development, such as Thembeke Shange's (2015) research article on the perceptions of engineering students, lecturers and academic development practitioners to academic development classes (Vol. 3, Issue 2), and we focused in a special issue on the work of Vincent Tinto (2014) on student persistence (Vol. 2, Issue 2). In addition, there have been a number of book reviews published by the JSAA on epistemological access.

In this issue, we publish two book reviews: Birgit Schreiber's review of *Strong Starts, Supported Transitions and Student Success* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) edited by Andrew Funston, Miguel Gil and Gwen Gilmore directly deals with the FYE theme. She finds that "through critical reflection, scholarship, research and insightful narrative, the editors and authors illuminate the profound challenges in employing transformative strategies to truly transform higher education", and concludes that "overall, the book is an extremely valuable resource for anyone in higher education who is committed to the complex tasks of realising the ideals of higher education as an equaliser".

Annsilla Nyar reviews a ‘classic’ in South African higher education studies: the 2009 book *Higher Education in South Africa: A Scholarly Look Behind the Scenes* (Stellenbosch, Sun Press) edited by Eli Bitzer. She starts her review by explaining why it is important to review the book, specifically in this issue of the *JSAA* on the FYE. On the one hand, Nyar shows the strengths of the book with its particular angle, broad range of topics and diversity of contributors. On the other hand, taking a closer look at the book from the FYE angle, Nyar points out that some key issues in the field of higher education are clearly underplayed, particularly matters of student access and success, affordable education, graduateness and, more generally, transformation. Her reasoned assessment leads her to conclude that “the relative absence of important areas of analysis in the collection of contributions divests the book of a contemporary feel in terms of the broader contexts and concerns in which it places itself and perhaps even speaks to some blind spots within the academy itself”.

Nyar’s measured review of Bitzer’s book is a welcome critique of a book that remains widely used – including as prescribed reading in the syllabi of a number of professional qualifications in higher education in South Africa – but clearly needs revision in order to regain currency for the changing higher education context. In our last issue of *JSAA* (Vol. 3 Issue 2), we dealt at some length with equity and social justice in higher education, identifying them as key concerns underpinning the ongoing student struggles in South Africa and giving direction for the road ahead in the development of higher education in Africa and the role that student affairs will be called to play. Neither in student affairs nor, more broadly, in the academy can we afford to have blind spots in these areas.

Finally, we would like to thank one of the supporters of the establishment of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* for her three-year service: the first patroness of the journal, Emeritus Professor Lullu Tshiwula, formerly Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Student Affairs at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Among her many achievements during her office as DVC at UWC is that Prof. Tshiwula established the first Doctoral Programme in Student Affairs in South Africa as an international collaboration between UWC and California State University, Fullerton. Prof. Tshiwula’s support for the professionalisation of student affairs in Africa – which is also signified by her patronage of the *JSAA* – has been unwavering.

For the *JSAA* Editorial Executive,
Birgit Schreiber, Thierry Luescher and Teboho Moja

References

- Akoojee, S. & Nkomo, M. (2007). Access and quality in South African higher education: The twin challenges of transformation. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 21(3), 385–399.
- Bitzer, E. (2009). *Higher Education in South Africa: A Scholarly Look Behind the Scenes*. Stellenbosch: SUN.
- Harper, S. & Quay, S. (2009). Beyond Sameness, with Engagement and Outcomes for All. In S. Harper & S. Quay (Eds), *Student Engagement in Higher Education*, pp. 1–15. London: Routledge.
- Kioko, J. (2010). Foundation provision in South African higher education: A social justice perspective. In C. Hutchings and J. Garraway (Eds), *Beyond the University Gates: Provision of Extended Curriculum Programmes in South Africa*, pp. 76–96. Proceedings of the January 2009 Rhodes University Foundation Seminar.

- Kift, S., Nelson, K. & Clark, J. (2010). Transition pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE – A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1–20. DOI:10.5204/intjfyhe.v1i1.13.
- Ndebele, N. (1995). Maintaining domination through language. *Academic Development*, 1(1), 3–5.
- Nzimande, B. (1988). From disadvantage to deinstitutionalisation: Disaggregating liberal universities and some implications for academic support programmes. Paper presented at the ASP Conference, University of Cape Town, December 1988.
- Schlossberg, N. (2006). “Moving In, Moving Through, Moving Out”: Nancy K. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. *Process of Adult Development* (27), Research paper: Student Development Theorist. Retrieved January 1, 2016, from <http://www.victoriaestrella.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/02/web-site-4.2-schlossberg-transition-theory.pdf>.
- Shange, T.G.C. (2015). Perceptions of Engineering students, lecturers and academic development practitioners about academic development classes at a university of technology. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 3(2), 33–44. DOI: 10.14426/jsaa.v3i2.134.
- Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 599–623.
- Tinto, V. (1998). Taking research on student persistence seriously. *Review of Higher Education*, 21(2), 167–177.
- Tinto, V. (2014). Tinto’s South Africa lectures. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 2(2), 5–28. DOI: 10.14426/jsaa.v2i2.66
- Vilakazi, H. (1986). The need for a revolution in education. Proceedings of the Aspects 7 ASP Conference, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.