

## EDITORIAL

# Student Affairs in Complex Contexts

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While the Western world – with Brexit, Trump, Festung Europa, and so forth – seems to be increasingly retreating into narrow nationalism, the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* is connecting African academics, executives and administrators and is becoming an evermore accessed international, African platform for publishing research on higher education and Student Affairs in Africa. In this issue, we do not only publish several commentaries on the recent Global Summit of Student Affairs and Services held in October 2016 at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. We also publish contributions from Ethiopia alongside articles from Australia, the USA, and universities in South Africa (University of the Free State, University of Johannesburg). Moreover, the first 2017 issue will be guest edited by colleagues from the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS), which will look beyond the African continent with contributions from Australia, Canada, China, Europe and America.

Dissatisfaction and frustration with political leaders have sent students pouring out into the streets, demanding free education in South Africa, demanding an increase on higher education funding in Ireland and protesting the presidential election outcome in the US. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Minister of Higher Education has ordered a freeze on fee increments following student protests, while in Niger student protests have pushed the government to agree to provide additional funding for higher education. On the African continent, there are various challenges facing Student Affairs professionals, for example, providing support to students whose payments by the Tanzania's Higher Education Student Loan Board (HESLB) have been delayed due to administrative problems in providing correct student data and student results. In Egypt, there is need to support students returning to institutional residential life at the Al Azhar Seminary where the facility was closed for two years. There is need to support Student Affairs colleagues, academics and students in Nigeria where unpaid salary increments threaten the educational project.

Higher education the world over requires our support in order to ensure that it survives these turbulences. Unrest tends to focus our attention on crisis and survival, forces

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discourses into binaries, essentialisms and absolutes. Student Affairs is a key role player in highlighting the complexities and creating safe spaces which engage divergent views, promote courageous conversations and counter the global trend of narrow nationalism and confrontation. Violent unrest creates uncertainty and a retreat into the familiar which are symptoms of the narrow nationalism we see across the globe. The unrest derails the focus from substantive issues and focuses our attention on the ‘drama’. Aggressive and bullying tactics overshadow the demands for accessible and equitable education and Student Affairs needs to assist our collective re-focus on putting pressure on the key issues: funding, access and equity.

The global shift towards knowledge based economies has accelerated massification especially in Africa; increasing intra-continental student and staff mobility and a privatisation and commercialisation of higher education. There is a complex interrelation between the political unrest within higher education and these trends: on the one hand, increasing student activism is a typical massification phenomenon; on the other hand, student and staff mobility, and privatisation, often have a contrary effect on student mobilisation for political action (see Luescher, 2016). Student Affairs’ roles in this context are manifold; among them is to ensure that graduates will have benefited from the higher education experience – even in difficult times – as a personal transformation experience that enriches their personal, familial, communal and professional lives as fully formed critically constructive and engaged citizens. Student Affairs will need to anticipate and find innovative ways to adjust to the possible resulting shifts of increase in private higher education service providers and less overall funding.

What lessons can be shared from professionals working in the field and what research agendas emerge from those experiences? The community at large, some political leadership, non-government organisations and in some cases labour unions have supported the issues around fees, affordability, the public-private good dimensions, access and equity. Academics and university managers face the challenge of engaging students in a meaningful process when they are under tremendous stress and support services are limited, more especially so in African universities.

This issue of *JSAA* publishes articles that reflect the complex context and the important role of Student Affairs in manifold ways. For instance, the massification of higher education, especially in developing country contexts, is typically accompanied by an increase in graduate unemployment. There are several reasons for this, including that graduate supply may outstrip the ability of the economy to grow and absorb graduates, the quality of graduates in general, and a skills mismatch between labour market demand and graduate output (Altbach, 2011; Reddy *et al.*, 2016). Student Affairs has the potential to impact directly on the potential of graduates to find work opportunities in at least two ways: providing entrepreneurship training, and career guidance and counselling. The latter is often a marginal service provided by Student Affairs (and in some faculties) despite its importance. The research article by Abera Getachew (Ambo University, Ethiopia) and Gobena Daniel (Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia) published in this issue precisely shows that career development is important for students to better understand their personal

values, clarify their goals and career choice direction, and improve their job searching skills, all of which improve their employability. This ties in with entrepreneurship and leadership training for students, engaging them in critical dialogue on social and economic issues that affect their responsiveness to community, national and global issues. Their academic lives and social lives need to be interwoven more seamlessly in a comprehensive conception of personal transformation.

Our role as Student Affairs professionals also includes the identification of at-risk students and supporting them towards academic success. The massification of higher education increases the diversity of students overall and brings growing numbers of first generation students, rural and working class students, into the African higher education sector. Mpho Jama's research with at-risk students in a South African medical school illustrates the 'interwovenness' of students' academic and social lives whereby a student's socio-economic background and harsh present realities may impact negatively on academic performance and, in turn, "poor academic performance can lead to an array of other social and psychological problems, such as withdrawal of bursaries; and the type of psychological problems, [...] that some students experience" (see Mpho Jama's article in this issue). Razia Mayet's article focuses on the effectiveness of learning development interventions for at-risk students, particularly insofar as such interventions change students' attitudes and confidence levels and help them to develop the competences necessary to succeed academically. Both articles thus continue the topic of the previous *JSAA* issue (Vol. 4 Issue 1), which specifically focused on academic development, students' transition to higher education and first-year experience.

The professionalisation of Student Affairs, to which this journal seeks to actively contribute, is imperative in our context. Initiatives, such as IASAS' peer mentoring programme for Student Affairs practitioners is therefore highly welcome (see Eva-Marie Seeto's article in this issue). Against this, it also remains crucial to reflect on the diversity of pathways into the profession and how the professional identities of Student Affairs practitioners are shaped by formal and informal relationships with academic and administrative staff and students and reflective practice, along with formal professional training and development (see Darren Clarke's reflective article in this regard). How do we as professionals make the choices we make and become involved in Student Affairs, and what narratives do we share that can strengthen what we do as professionals?

The books reviewed in this issue focus on higher education leadership with specific focus on Kenya (Michieka, 2016, reviewed by Claudia Frittelli) and on the various strategies employed to understand conflict, especially higher education strategies with a focus on interfaith conflict (Patel, 2012, reviewed by Jon Dalton). Both books are uniquely relevant to our current context in terms of much needed leadership development and conflict resolution.

The third book reviewed by Thierry M. Luescher revisits the 'Reitz incident' of 2008 at the University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa, which at the time sparked the establishment of the national Ministerial Committee on Progress Towards Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education

Institutions. ‘Reitz’ has come to be synonymous with persistent racism and transformation failure in South African higher education. The book *Transformation and Legitimation in Post-apartheid Universities: Reading Discourses from ‘Reitz’* (2016, Sun Press) by J.C. van der Merwe and Dionne van Reenen takes an in-depth look at the history, context and discourses of transformation at the UFS, residence cultures and ‘Reitz’, and it thereby makes an important contribution to our understanding of the student experience of on-campus life, residence cultures and initiation practices, what is meant by ‘deep transformation’ in complex, transitional social contexts, and the pitfalls Student Affairs professionals and university leadership encounter in the process.

Finally, as we approach 2017, *JSAA* has moved from being an African Minds ‘incubator journal’ to being a fully-fledged and ‘grown-up’ scholarly journal of note. *JSAA* was initiated in 2013 at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) by Dr Birgit Schreiber, Dr Thierry M. Luescher, Prof. Gerald Ouma and Ms Tonia Overmeyer. After initial discussions, Prof. Teboho Moja came on board as Editor-in-Chief and lent her experience and expertise to the journal idea. In addition, the UWC Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs, Prof. Lulu Tshiwula, gave her support as journal patroness at the time, and Ms Allison Fullard, Deputy Director: UWC library, provided the technical know-how and ensured that *JSAA* would be hosted as the first fully Open Access journal of UWC on its newly created e-journals platform. Starting with this issue, *JSAA* has become part of the Stellenbosch University stable of e-journals, and is now hosted by the SU library. In addition, the copy-editing and related production processes are now performed by African Sun Media.

We are also happy to announce that starting from 2017, *JSAA* will be indexed in ERIC, the Education Resources Information Center online database maintained by the U.S. Department of Education. All *JSAA* issues starting with Vol. 1 (2013) will be fully indexed and available full text from ERIC.

We appreciate your continued interest in and support of *JSAA* and hope you will enjoy and benefit from the contributions published in this issue.

## References

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