

GUEST EDITORIAL

The First-Year Experience (FYE): Moving Toward a Well-Defined Field of Study in South Africa

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For too long, South Africa has watched from afar as global FYE scholarship continues to establish and consolidate itself. Now, with the recent array of initiatives to establish the FYE academically in South Africa, including the establishment of the South African National Resource Centre for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) in 2015, the prospects for the FYE as a well-defined field of study appear especially bright. This special edition of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* chronicles the FYE in South Africa as an aspiring academic community that is poised for future development.

This FYE edition of *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* represents a significant milestone for the First-Year Experience (FYE) in South Africa. It is the second edition of the journal which is devoted exclusively to matters of the FYE. As such, this journal edition shines a spotlight on the FYE and helps to give this relatively ‘new’ area of study the rigorous academic attention that it rightly deserves. Thanks are due to the journal for supporting a sustained focus on the FYE. From initially serving as a small subset of the teaching and learning literature, it is now possible through such a journal edition to imagine the FYE as a thriving and well-defined field of study in the next two decades. The kind of academic support that the *JSAA* represents will ensure that the field continues to flourish.

This edition features an interesting collection of papers that addresses a wide range of topics of intrinsic interest to fellow FYE academics and practitioners. The articles are all drawn from different universities in South Africa and are all unmistakably national in character. This suggests that a national body of uniquely South African literature is now in the making.

The collection of articles assembled in this journal edition does not represent a cohesive portrayal of the state of the FYE in South Africa. Rather, it represents different snapshots of varying dysfunctions and fissures in the complex environment of South Africa’s higher education sector. The issues in this collection of articles are case-study based but they are not particular to South Africa. There is a universality to these issues that will resonate with all higher education professionals, both locally and globally.

Ian Scott’s macro-level analysis of the factors affecting student success in South Africa provides a compelling framework for the collection of articles in this journal. Scott is clear that the higher education sector is not structurally designed to support a strong focus on

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student success. He strongly advocates long-term systemic change and offers a number of key insights in this regard. The other articles in this edition all address different aspects of the student experience which afford the opportunity for South Africa's institutions of higher education to engage in self-reflection about the extent to which institutions are addressing the multi-faceted needs of students.

Nosisana Mkonto's case study of retention officers at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) reveals insights about the student experience that institutions of higher education would do well to integrate into a fine-grained understanding of the challenges faced by students. Mkonto's data is qualitatively rich and draws on the voices of students in a way that clearly elucidates the difficult circumstances under which some students navigate the institution. Some of the data is poignant, for example the quotation, "*I am not sure whether to drop out with my studies or not, I have been diagnosed with a dreaded disease. What is a point of studying if I am going to die in any case?*" (Mkonto, 2018, p. 71).

In a similar vein, Subethra Pather and Nirmala Dorasamy write about the sobering gap between students' expectations of university life and the realities with which they are actually faced when entering the institution. The article recommends the implementation of first-year experience programmes as a means of bridging the gap between expectations and reality for students.

Mpho Jama provides a study of generic skills training in the medical curriculum at University of Free State (UFS). Jama has previously written on stress amongst medical students.

Tracey McKay and co-authors Anban Naidoo and Zach Simpson make a valuable contribution to this edition with their informative account of student funding and how the matter of financial access to higher education influences prospects for student success. This article is timely in the context of current student protests over the matter of funding and the prevalent atmosphere of instability in the higher education sector.

Academic monitoring systems are one of the most important tools used by institutions of higher education to ensure the retention of students. Toward this end, Rubby Dhunpath and Vino Paideya provide a case study of the academic monitoring system at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The authors apply systems thinking – a useful conceptual tool for approaching complex phenomena with a holistic mindset and a sense of how the different elements of a system relate to the system as a whole – to their analysis of academic monitoring systems at UKZN and arrive at a sophisticated critique of current academic monitoring systems at the institution.

The work assembled in this journal edition of *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* provides food for thought for any higher education professional with an interest in institutional change. This edition allows for a consideration of a number of pressing questions. In line with Scott's call for transformative change of the higher education system as a whole, questions can be asked about the current suite of student success initiatives underway at South Africa's universities and the extent to which they can be seen as ameliorative as opposed to truly transformative. Given the vast amount of institutional energy and attention invested in student success initiatives by the sector as a whole, it is worth considering whether current interventions are in fact designed toward addressing symptoms in the

manner of a ‘band-aid’ rather than attending to underlying systemic problems. In light of the various social problems, such as poverty and hunger, which form a central part of the student experience, institutions must also consider how to engage closely with society in order to help support students more effectively. Paideya and Dhunpath point thoughtfully to the imperative of engaging with “the nature of education of a societal system, a system interacting with other societal systems embedded in a rapidly and dynamically changing macro society”. This edition underlines the fact that a first-year experience programme can stand at the forefront of innovation and transformative change for both society and institutions of higher education.

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