

EDITORIAL

Towards a professionalisation of student affairs in Africa

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On a global scale, the *1998 World Declaration on Higher Education (WDHE)* calls for national and institutional decision-makers to “place students and their needs at the centre of their concern”, particularly as higher education expands and improves in developing countries. In response to this call, UNESCO has begun to elaborate ways in which student affairs and services in higher education can give effect to the World Declaration with the publication of the manual *The role of student affairs and services in higher education* (UNESCO, 2002) and the best practice guide *Student affairs and services in higher education: Global foundations, issues and best practices* (Ludeman, Osfield, Hidalgo, Oste & Wang, 2009). This comes at a time when African higher education has been undergoing a continent-wide revitalisation and massive expansion, leading to the emergence of the first national systems of mass higher education on the continent (in a context where, however, most systems remain largely elite, with participation rates well below 15 per cent), much and widespread institutional massification, and in many countries a bifurcation of higher education into public and private universities and colleges, and government-sponsored and fee-paying students (Mohamedbhai, 2008).

In the introduction to UNESCO’s best practice guide in student affairs, Ludeman *et al.* (2009) argue that in addition to mainly classroom-based delivery of higher education,

There is increasing evidence that higher education also must address the basic personal needs of students by providing a comprehensive set of out-of-classroom student services and programmes commonly referred to as student affairs and services. These efforts should be designed to enable and empower students to focus more intensely on their studies and on their personal growth and maturation, both cognitively and emotionally. They also should result in enhanced student learning outcomes [and] help to assure students’ success in higher education and their subsequent contributions to the national welfare. (p. iv–v)

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Ludeman's reference to "personal growth and maturation, both cognitively and emotionally", to enhancing "student learning outcomes" and assuring "student success" as part of the purposes of student affairs, points to a notion of student affairs that goes far beyond a services model which in its scope and focus is limited to the provision of support services. It thus challenges the separation of student affairs staff from academic staff and the core mission of the universities, and suggests a model of student affairs which may best be conceptualised as "a scholarship of practice" (see Carpenter, 2013, in this issue). Thus, if there is an incipient process of professionalising student affairs in Africa, it would appear wise to consider models of professionalism that reflect the state of the discipline and best practice as well as a student development framework that embraces human development theories such as the holistic development theory. Systems of higher education in Africa need professionals who can help create an educational setting that would "address the individual's intellectual growth as well as her personal growth to enable the student to mature and become a full participant in civil society" (Gillepsie, Braskamp & Dwyer, 2009, p.446).

Scholarly and professional developments in African student affairs

There is growing interest in professionalising student affairs in Africa. For example, in the last decade, academic programmes with a focus in student affairs have sprung up in a number of African universities. At Eduardo Mondlane University (EMU) in Maputo, Makerere University (MAK) in Kampala, and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town, programmes have been developed and are being delivered as part of successful North–South and South–South collaborations. This development of programmes in higher education studies and student affairs – and the demand that has been shown both by students and prospective employers (such as national ministries, regulatory bodies and university administrations) – reflect training needs that clearly go beyond the 'on-the-job-training' model that is otherwise so prevalent, and point towards specialised and high-level skills requirements entering the profession. This is supported by research conducted in new and existing centres, in research programmes focused on African higher education, and in a growing literature on higher education and student affairs in Africa.

The scholarly field of higher education and student affairs is clearly developing – if still only in pockets – on the continent. Concurrently, professional associations in student affairs are also developing. Among them are the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS), founded in 2010, the Association for College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I), the Southern African Association for Counselling and Development in Higher Education (SAACHDHE), as well as national associations such as the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP) and the National Association of Student Development Practitioners (NASDEV). Many of these associations hold annual or bi-annual conferences which include insightful presentations sharing professional reflection on good practices and research relevant to the profession more broadly. In addition, a first African Student Affairs Conference was held in 2011, which included student affairs professionals from countries across the continent such

as Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda. This was followed by a smaller conference of student affairs professionals and student leaders from across east and southern Africa in the same year. Most recently, some of the associations have ventured into new areas: publishing and training (with regard to the latter, see Dunn & Dunkel, 2013, in this issue).

JSAA launch issue: The professionalisation of student affairs in Africa

It is within this context that the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)* has been established as a platform for critically engaging with these developments by means of encouraging, supporting and disseminating high quality research and professional reflection from a diversity of national and institutional contexts. The *JSAA* is an independent, international, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary academic journal, established to serve the broad range of associations and professionals, institutions, centres and individual academics and researchers in the field. The *JSAA* publishes scholarly research and reflective-practitioner discussions about the theory and practice of student affairs in African higher education. It ultimately strives to become the foremost scholarly and professional journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain in higher education on the African continent. As such it will be an indispensable resource for the executive leadership of universities and colleges dealing with student affairs, deans of students and other senior student affairs professionals, as well as institutional researchers, academics and students focused on the field of higher education studies and student affairs.

In the call for papers for the launch double issue of the *JSAA*, contributors were invited to engage with questions around the incipient professionalisation of student affairs in Africa. Specifically invited were critical contributions engaging with the notion of professionalisation, professionalism, and their meanings in relation to the practice of student affairs; explorations of the nexus of student affairs theory, policy and practice in the African context; explorations of theory development, professional trends and academic programmes related to student affairs in Africa; conceptual discussions of student development, and key enablers and inhibitors of student development in Africa; as well as case studies of innovative practices in student affairs in African higher education and related relevant contexts, and high level reflective practitioner accounts.

The response has been both overwhelmingly positive and expectedly skewed. The skewness relates mainly to the institutional location of authors. Some of the authors are located in American universities, but have spent time in Africa conducting research on student-related issues, whilst others are located in Africa but mainly in South Africa. This has been expected not only due to the institutional location of most of the founding editors of the journal (and the invitation is for authors and editors from across the continent to join) but also because of the levels of development of the profession and scholarly field in the United States (as against elsewhere in the world). To balance the skewness, peer-reviewers were selected from the African continent as well as from the international community.

The responses received to the call for papers and in reaction to the establishment of the *JSAA* were overwhelmingly positive. One of the notes in support of the establishment

of the journal is published as preface to the launch issue: the letter of support by Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Lullu Tshiwula of UWC, who has also become a patron of the journal. Tshiwula writes that

the space for this journal in the theatre of ideas is long overdue, and its potential for growth in the intellectual space is immense. (p. vi in this issue)

This intellectual space has now become inhabited by a first set of contributors.

Conceptualisations of the student affairs profession

The opening articles by Carpenter and Haber-Curran and by Selznick both engage with definitions of student affairs as a profession – and find that student affairs does not fit the strictures of traditional professions (such as medicine) very well. Nonetheless (and from different perspectives), both arrive at the intermediary conclusion that professionalisation in the African higher education context is both possible and desirable, and should not necessarily follow the American model. According to Carpenter and Haber-Curran, the traditional American service model has resulted in a conceptual separation of student affairs from the academic core mission of universities, which ought to be avoided in the African context. Rather, by asking a series of questions, they propose that “student affairs professionals should engage in what can be called the scholarship of practice” (p. 3 in this issue):

What if student affairs professionals fully embraced a role as practitioner-scholars engaging in practice in a thoughtful and intentional way that is both informed by research and informs research? (Komives, 1998)

What if the notion of scholarship expanded beyond just the scholarship of discovery to also include the scholarship of integration, application, and teaching and learning as argued by Boyer? (1990)

And what if student affairs practice were approached interdependently with academic faculties and departments rather than independently or dependently?

In elaborating their conception of what constitutes a scholarship of practice, Carpenter and Haber-Curran illustrate ways in which professional associations, professional preparation programmes (such as those mentioned above) and professional/scholarly publications like the *JSAA* can infuse scholarly values in professional practice.

Selznick’s focus on how best to professionalise student affairs leads him to a close examination of the work of Noordegraaf on professional development with reference to the notions of ‘constructed professionalism’, ‘practices-in-transition’ and ‘hybrid professionalism’. They conceive of professionalisation as a dynamic, evolving and contingent process that involves an intentional, flexible and reflective application of theory in practice, in a context of empirical and normative complexity and ambiguity. Selznick applies the

proposed professionalisation model in suggestive ways to career counselling and distance education, as two functional areas which respectively hold opportunities for adaptation and collaboration. He concludes on a high note:

African practitioners trained to be adaptive and collaborative may very well chart courses that will inspire the international student affairs community to reinvent practices in the name of greater student success and access. (p. 20 in this issue)

How to enhance the professionalisation of student affairs is approached in different ways by the articles of Gansemer-Topf, and Dunn and Dunkel. The former proposes assessment, i.e. the formalised process “to gather, analyse, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional or agency effectiveness” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996 in Gansemer-Topf, 2013, in this issue), as “a critical component in raising the stature of student affairs professionalism”. Thus, while practices such as assessment are performed in the first place as a means to show accountability and suggest improvements, they play an important role in establishing the legitimacy of the profession in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders.

The latter article by Dunn and Dunkel reports on the different models of competencies for student housing officers and the establishment of the Southern African Student Housing Training Institute. It demonstrates, by way of a very practical example, how the professionalisation of student affairs can be enhanced through competency development and international collaboration facilitated by a professional association, in this case the ACUHO-I.

As noted above, the professionalisation of student affairs in Africa comes in a context of the rapid expansion of access opportunities which poses additional challenges to student affairs professionals. The article by Yakaboski and Birnbaum elaborates on the variety of challenges higher education institutions face as they expand and try to provide access to masses of students in one particular country, Kenya. The challenges range from a lack of professional training to problems with leadership in the institutions, and therefore beg for more training and professionalisation of the services to be provided in order to address problems that are unique to a university located on the African continent and the country’s cultural and historical legacies and practices.

This issue’s thematic engagement with “the professionalisation of student affairs in Africa” is concluded with the reflections of a former student leader from the University of Cape Town, Thami Ledwaba, on the contribution of student affairs to student life, student leadership, higher education and society.

Beyond the profession: Researching student affairs in Africa

Gyampo’s research article on student activism and its contribution to the quality of democracy in Ghana shifts the focus from looking inward at student affairs as a profession to the big picture of the relationship between higher education and democratisation in Africa. Gyampo’s article shows the changing dynamic between student activism and democratisation from confrontation to dialogue, and its changing organisational form,

which has become aligned to Ghanaian multipartyism. Research into students' political engagement on and off campus has come into focus in African higher education with the understanding that student engagement with democracy, diversity and social justice is an important part of the university's civic role and contribution to the attainment of graduate attributes related to citizenship.

The article by Gyampo is a good example of research conducted in the field of higher education studies which is relevant to student affairs. Its publication in the launch issue also illustrates our commitment as an Editorial Team to publish articles that fall within the journal's scope and that pass the journal's rigorous processes of editorial vetting and double-blind peer review as soon as they are ready, even if they do not directly relate to the thematic core of the issue. While the *JSAA* will typically have a thematic core, there will be articles in every issue – research articles, reflective practitioner accounts, and book reviews – that respond more broadly to the interests of authors and readers.

The book reviews chosen for this issue also reflect diverse themes. Fourie reviews Williams' *Strategic diversity leadership; Activating change and transformation in higher education* and emphasises the book's value in terms of straddling the theoretical domain of diversity while also engaging with practical challenges around implementation and experiences. Bozalek reviews *Beyond inclusion: The practice of equal access in Indian higher education*. She highlights the book's significance in terms of filling the "gap in knowledge about the intersection between social justice and higher education" (p. 81 in this issue). She highlights the critique of 'skills development' as a response to access issues, as seen in the chapter by Zacharias in the book, which is a chronic issue that student affairs needs to grapple with. Clearly, as Bozalek points out, levelling the ground regarding access issues is about social justice, and this book is a 'must read' for everyone concerned with its intersection with higher education. Lastly, Fouché, a seasoned therapist who focuses on the intersection of career and narrative therapy, provides a useful summary of Maree's book *Counselling for career construction* which illustrates a range of related interventions, theories and practices in student affairs.

Lastly, we would like to take this opportunity to thank all the contributors and peer-reviewers, our esteemed members of the *JSAA* Editorial Executive and the *JSAA* International Editorial Advisory Board, the layout editors from African Minds and the technical team from e-publications of the University of the Western Cape. Our thanks go also to the many supportive colleagues we spoke to in the course of the conceptualisation and establishment of the journal, and most especially to Ms Tonia Overmeyer who was a pillar of strength and a bundle of joy to work with in the initial development phase.

On behalf of the Editorial Executive,

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