

SPECIAL ISSUE: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

## Developing professionalism from within and outside: Reflections of editors of the Journal of Student Affairs in Africa at 10 years

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### ABSTRACT

The 10th anniversary of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) is a good occasion to ask in what ways the editors of JSAA think they have contributed to achieving the journal's aim to contribute to professionalizing student affairs in Africa. Using four reflective accounts of six editors of the journal, this article analyses the editors' reflections on their professional pathways and the role the journal played in them; how they contribute to the professional development of their peers by means of their editorship; the challenges they encounter and lessons they have learned; and the visions they have for the future of the journal. By applying Evetts' (2003) notions of professionalism, we identify different types of professionalism signified in the reflective accounts. We find that the agency of the editors combines standards, ethics, and operating procedures of publishing with principles and commitments indigenous to African student affairs. In this regard, the JSAA-led professionalization process combines both elements of professionalism 'from within' and 'from outside'. We further highlight commitments of the editors to well-being (of students, staff, and communities), professional development and excellence, deliberate inclusivity and social justice, and a focus on relevance in the African student affairs context.

### KEYWORDS

*Academic publishing, higher education, professionalism, professional development, scholarship of practice, student affairs, reflective practice*

### RÉSUMÉ

Le 10e anniversaire du *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) constitue une bonne occasion de demander de quelle manière les rédacteurs du JSAA estiment avoir contribué à la réalisation

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de l'objectif de la revue visant à professionnaliser les Œuvres Estudiantines dans les universités africaines. En utilisant quatre récits réflexifs de six rédacteurs de la revue, cet article analyse les réflexions des rédacteurs sur leur parcours professionnel et le rôle joué par la revue dans celui-ci; comment ils contribuent au développement professionnel de leurs pairs grâce à leur poste de rédacteur ; les défis auxquels ils sont confrontés et les leçons qu'ils ont apprises ; et les visions qu'ils ont pour l'avenir de la revue. En appliquant les notions de professionnalisme d'Evetts (2003), nous identifions différents types de professionnalisme exprimés dans les récits réflexifs. Nous constatons que l'action des rédacteurs combine les normes, l'éthique et les procédures opérationnelles de publication avec des principes et des engagements propres aux services aux étudiants africains. À cet égard, le processus de professionnalisation dirigé par le JSAA combine à la fois des éléments de professionnalisme « de l'intérieur » et « de l'extérieur ». Nous soulignons en outre les engagements des rédacteurs envers le bien-être (des étudiants, du personnel et des communautés), le développement professionnel et l'excellence, l'inclusion délibérée et la justice sociale, ainsi que l'accent mis sur la pertinence dans le contexte des services aux étudiants africains.

## MOTS-CLÉS

*Publication académique, enseignement supérieur, professionnalisme, développement professionnel, recherche sur la pratique, services aux étudiants, pratique réflexive*

## Introduction

The *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA) was established in 2013 and is currently one of the few specialist journals on higher education in Africa. Whereas research into higher education in Africa, and specifically in South Africa, has a relatively long history dating back over 100 years and the *South African Journal of Higher Education* was established as early as 1987, the overall number of publications on higher education in Africa has greatly increased since 2001 (Zavale & Schneijderberg, 2022; Bitzer & Wilkinson, 2009).

The journal was established to deal with the dearth of student affairs publications and the slow pace of the professionalization of student affairs in Africa. A specialist journal was seen as “an opportunity for developing and sustaining a student affairs profession [...] whose time has come” (Tshiwula, 2013, p. v). These comments of the first patron of the journal, Prof. Lullu Tshiwula at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, reflected the vision and mission of the founding editors, who stated boldly on the journal's website:

*JSAA aims to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs in African higher education. It strives to be the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain in universities on the African continent [...]. (JSAA, 2023)*

With the declared purpose of the journal to contribute to the professionalization of the field of student affairs, several questions arise: What is the meaning of professionalization? By what process do the editors of the journal hope to contribute to achieving this? What forms and levels of professionalism are envisioned that would signify professionalization of the field?

An underlying premise of professionalization is that for a field of practice to be considered a profession, there are certain requirements for the knowledge base, and importantly, the professionalism expected of its practitioners. Editorship represents a very specialized role within a profession; in the context of JSAA, it involves being an actor in the process of professionalization itself. At the same time, editorship comes with its own challenges and needs for professional development to be capacitated for this role. Taking these questions as points of departure, this article presents and analyses a set of reflective accounts by some of the editors of JSAA.

## **Professionalization and professionalism**

The sociology of professions distinguishes conceptually between professionalization ‘from within’ and professionalization ‘from above’ (McClelland, 1990) to signal that professionalism can be internally enacted to assert the autonomy of a group of practitioners and contest the power of bureaucracy (Fournier, 1999), or it can be externally imposed (e.g. by regulatory authorities and standard setting bodies) as a means of control. Traditionally, the process of professionalization from within is seen as a more legitimate form of ‘professionalism’ (McClelland, 1990) as it is driven by practitioners and their clients in a context of professional autonomy. Meanwhile professionalization from outside or ‘above’ is seen as a method of control, involving the imposition of external standards on a practice and thus limiting autonomy for the benefit of external accountability. As Evetts (2003, p. 408) outlines,

*where the appeal to professionalism is made and used by the occupational group itself, ‘from within’, then the returns to the group can be substantial... however, when the discourse is constructed ‘from above’/ [‘the outside’], then often it is imposed and a false or selective discourse... used to promote and facilitate occupational change (rationalisation)... a disciplinary mechanism of autonomous subjects exercising appropriate conduct.*

In accordance with more recent scholarship (Wilkesmann et al., 2020), these two forms of professionalism are not necessarily seen as dichotomous. Taking the reflections of JSAA editors as data, it should be interesting to show how in an emerging profession the dichotomy between professionalism from within as against professionalism from above/ outside is reflected.

## **Reflective practice as method**

Among the different modalities of publishing in JSAA is the reflective practitioner account, which is defined as an article that intentionally reflects on professional practice and does not need to include detailed consideration of theory and literature, but should rather focus on ‘learnings’ (JSAA, 2023). In keeping with Luescher’s (2018) proposal for how to structure reflective practitioner accounts for JSAA, this article has the following intentions: first, we seek to understand the background of editors, their professional pathways, and their entry into the role of editorship as a process of professional

development. We also want to understand their reflections on editing a journal as professional practice and agency in a professionalization process.

In this respect, a few current editors of JSAA were asked to produce personal reflective accounts against the following parameters:

1. Professional history and interest in African student affairs research and publishing.
2. First contact with JSAA and professional journey with the journal.
3. Reflection on key personal experiences, lessons learned, and challenges encountered as editor of JSAA.
4. Vision for the journal.

By giving only these pointers (and a word limit), the idea was that, relatively unfettered and unobstructed by existing scholarly and professional literature, the editors would be able to reflect on their professional pathways and roles as journal editors of JSAA. They would thus give a personal and frank account of their professional backgrounds and journeys into and through the practice of scholarly editing, for their own benefit, that of their peers elsewhere, and that of future editors.

Four reflective accounts from six editors were received, comprising of one joint reflection by the founding editors and current editorial executive, Prof. Teboho Moja, Prof. Thierry M. Luescher and Dr Birgit Schreiber, as well as three individual reflections by Dr Annsilla Nyar-Ndlovu, Dr Henry Mason, and Dr Angelique Wildschut respectively. They are presented in full below, followed by an analysis guided by the four original reflection parameters, as well as an interpretation of the findings in terms of the question of what type of professionalization process the agency of the editors signifies.

### **Reflection 1 by Prof. Teboho Moja, Prof. Thierry Luescher and Dr Birgit Schreiber: The transformative journey of building a journal: Encouraging others to reflect, research, and publish**

As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of our *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, it is an opportune moment to reflect on our achievements and outline our vision for the future. Over the past decade, our journal has been dedicated to exploring the unique challenges and opportunities facing students and institutions in Africa, promoting inclusive practices, and driving positive change in higher education. We are writing this reflection jointly as we have been working together for a decade to develop the journal to this point in our aim to contribute to the professionalization of student affairs in Africa and student and institutional success.

#### **Conceptualising the journal and constituting the executive**

In the beginning, it was Birgit and Thierry, supported by Tonia Overmeyer at the University of the Western Cape, who jointly developed the idea and conceptualised a first business and launch plan for a journal. The original idea was to develop a platform to publish the proceedings of the 2012 annual conference of the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP). However, this idea rapidly

evolved and JSAA was born in the course of 2012/13 with the realisation that the time for such a specialized journal had come.

Teboho joined the team soon after the basics of JSAA were conceptualised. She says it was easy to join this endeavour as she had been working in the field for decades and had become a professor of higher education and student affairs at New York University in the early 2000s. She knew a lot about the profession of student affairs internationally, in Africa, and in South Africa. To her, the idea of encouraging African practitioners in the field to publish was clearly appealing as it advances the practitioners, the students, and institutional success.

In this manner, the 'core' of the first editorial executive of JSAA was constituted, with Teboho as editor-in-chief, Birgit as book review editor, and Thierry as journal manager. In this triumvirate, each of us brought their respective strengths to bear. Teboho brought her strategic leadership skills, her ability to prioritise, focus the team, her seniority in the field, and her extensive international network. As a senior South African student development professional in the field, Birgit brought her network to the team, her incredible capacity to get tasks done at the highest level of professionalism, and her ability to mobilise resources and strategically employ them. Having published and knowing the student affairs literature to a T, Birgit also became the book review editor of the journal. Finally, as a trustee of an academic publisher, Thierry brought his interests and publishing skills to JSAA. Having trained under a political philosopher and worked in the higher education policy sector he brought both rigorous academic training with him as well as writing for policy and practitioner audiences. He became the journal manager and thereby assumed responsibility for the day-to-day running of the journal, linking up with the technical teams, and triaging all manuscripts from submission via the editors towards publication.

In the editorial executive that was formed in this manner with our diverse origins, skills, experiences, and interests, we have worked together for over a decade to move the journal from an idea to becoming a respected, accredited and indexed, specialized journal in the field of higher education in Africa (Google Scholar, 2023; Zavale & Schneijderberg, 2022).

### **Developing leadership skills and mastering the process of knowledge production in Africa**

The journey of leading and developing a professional and scholarly journal from scratch is a daunting one, full of challenges and learning. Each of us in the editorial executive have had similar and unique experiences. Teboho describes stepping into the role of editor-in-chief as an exhilarating and challenging experience and notes how she has come to appreciate the profound impact taking this role can have on one's professional path, whereby the role of an editor moulds individuals into well-rounded leaders, offering a unique platform for personal and professional development.

Each of us has gained immense insights into the complex and challenging process of hand-holding and mentoring budding authors and their submissions to publication. It has been our practice to develop, coach, and mentor practitioners and emerging

researchers into published authors. Our developmental approach has grown the knowledge base and the pool of researchers and authors on student affairs in Africa, but mainly in anglophone Africa. It is our goal to expand access for scholars in francophone, lusophone, and Arabic Africa as well.

We have worked tirelessly with emerging authors and have enabled a platform for practice – not only as content and knowledge generation in the field of professionalization, but also as practice for reflection, research and writing for publication about the field of professionalization.

At the same time, the process has been transformative for us and left an indelible mark on our respective professional paths. Successfully starting and developing a journal to this point acting as editors, has given us new knowledge and skills in the editing and publishing field, leadership and management skills, and it has greatly expanded our understanding of the profession and our networks within it – in South Africa, Africa and the world. In 2022, we presented a paper at an international conference about the opportunities and pleasures of knowledge creation, editing, and journal management, in the African context, and also reflected on the hurdles and enablers. While much has become easier, especially with open-source knowledge sharing platforms such as the open journals system, it is the laborious process of attracting and encouraging researchers and mentoring them towards final publication that has challenged but also enriched us. And then there are the perennial financial woes. To have done this while upholding gold standard open access has been a formidable task.

### **A vision for the future: Developing skills, fostering excellence, and prioritising diversity**

Over the past decade, JSAA has evolved into a trusted source of knowledge and platform for fostering intellectual discourse that is high in demand as evident in the number of publication requests we receive and the article downloads we record. It has also become a platform in the profession to hone the skills of authoring, reviewing, and editing research in student affairs in Africa. Over the years there have been a dozen guest editors, over a hundred authors and peer reviewers, almost a thousand registered users, and several thousand readers. The journal has recorded over 1,700 citations in the past ten years.

Looking forward, our vision is to continue pushing boundaries, encouraging research, mentoring authors and supporting their publications, and solidifying the position of JSAA as a beacon of excellence and relevance in our field. This ten-year celebration gives us an opportunity to invite the professional community to join us to shape a future that is driven by a commitment to intellectual curiosity, inclusivity, and societal impact.

Our aims and ethical commitments remain relevant and shape our vision for the future: diversity and inclusion are cornerstones of a vibrant and equitable academic community. In the coming years, our journal will prioritise showcasing diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences. We will continue to actively seek contributions from underrepresented groups and regions, amplifying marginalized voices and promoting inclusivity within and access to our pages. We will also continue to struggle to keep

the journal open access for all, so that the ability to pay does not become the criterion of whether a colleague can publish or read JSAA. Furthermore, we continue to work towards enhancing diversity within our editorial board, ensuring that it reflects the richness and complexity of the South African, African and global community of student affairs research and practice.

As a journal committed to intellectual and relevance enquiry, we recognise our responsibility to drive positive societal impact. We will actively seek research that is relevant and addresses pressing social issues in our academic community, issues facing diverse students in diverse contexts, the problems and solutions faced by student affairs professionals across Africa and the world. We want to encourage evidence-based policymaking and its implementation, and contribute to sustainable development. Our goal is to bridge the gap between theory and practice, academia and profession, as we continue to support efforts that contribute to wholesome student experiences, student development and success.

Student affairs professionals are the lifeblood of student living and learning on and beyond our campuses. Over the next decade, our journal will establish mentorship programmes, provide dedicated support, and create platforms for networking and professional development. We will prioritise publishing and promoting the work of African student affairs professionals, recognising their contributions and nurturing their growth. By fostering a supportive environment for professionals in the field, we aim to cultivate the next generation of thought leaders and ensure the longevity of a professionalized community of practice. With all this in mind we are particularly proud of the impending establishment of the 'Community of Practice: Student Affairs in Africa Research' spearheaded by JSAA with support from the Human Sciences Research Council, SAASSAP and colleagues of the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) project of Universities South Africa (USAf).

Our journal's vision is rooted in our commitment to excellence, inclusivity, access, professionalism and societal impact. JSAA will continue to prioritise amplifying African voices in the field of student affairs. We will actively seek contributions from scholars, practitioners, and graduate students across the continent, fostering a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. By highlighting African scholarship, research and practice, we aim to shed light on the unique challenges, innovative practices, and success stories in student affairs that are specific to Africa. This focus will not only contribute to knowledge production but also foster a sense of pride, ownership, and relevance within the African higher education community and will inspire student affairs practitioners, students, and institutions across the globe.

## **Reflection 2 by Dr Annsilla Nyar-Ndlovu: There is significance in being a journal that represents African higher education**

My first contact with the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* was facilitated through Dr Birgit Schreiber, then based at Stellenbosch University, and a stalwart in the field of student affairs. The journal was then hosted by African Sun Media, a Stellenbosch-based publishing house. I served as a guest editor for the journal in 2016, 2018 and

2020. As such, I went on to develop a cordial relationship with African Sun Media. I was able to supplement my own knowledge about the finer-grained aspects of the editorial process. I also realised the importance of support for the editorial process. In particular, I benefitted from exchanges with Ms Davida van Zyl, who proved to be as detail-oriented as I myself am – all in the quest to produce high-quality writing that is as reasonably error-free as possible.

When the journal moved to the University of Pretoria (UP), I also benefitted from the support of colleagues such as Ms Heather Thuynsma and Ms Makone Maja. Ms Maja was unfailingly patient during my initial (clumsy) attempts to navigate and master the online journal management system. Ms Maja has regrettably since moved on from the journal. I am grateful for all the assistance that I have received thus far from the University of Pretoria.

First-year experience falls within the aims and scope of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*. As I work primarily in this field, many of the submissions to the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* that are related to this burgeoning field of study, have been assigned to me. First-year experience may be defined as a field of study which focuses on efforts made by institutions of higher education to ease issues of transition and offer various means of support for university students in their first year of study and beyond. Such efforts often take the form of programmes, which are intended to help students excel both socially and academically in the first year of study and beyond, with the overall aim of systematically addressing high rates of student attrition (Barefoot & Gardner, 2018; Greenfield et al., 2013; Tinto, 1993). While the field is well-established internationally, it is less developed in South Africa. Accordingly, an important part of my work with the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition is to deepen and strengthen research and scholarship in the field of first-year experience at a national level.

My association with the journal has been helpful in terms of my own professional position in the field of first-year experience. I am able to remain engaged with much of the emerging national literature that is often submitted to the journal for possible publication. I have also been able to bring my own network of first-year experience scholars, both national and global, to the journal. I am glad that the work of two leading global first-year experience scholars, viz. Jennifer Keup and Dallin George Young (both US-based), has been featured in the journal.

Having served as a member of the journal's editorial board for two years now, I am able to critically reflect on some of the learning that has taken place for me. I have long wrestled with the idea of a coherent identity for African scholars, given the sheer diversity of the continent and the longstanding divisions between scholars on the continent. There is no or little established tradition of collaboration at a continental scale. At best, collaboration happens between different regions and not at the broader level of the continent. One may ask: What does it mean to be a journal in Africa, and as such, what does it mean to be an African journal? What would it mean for the journal to have a modern African identity?



One may refer to the debate about higher education in Africa needing to reinvent itself with its own unique historically based identity (Cross & Govender, 2021; Cross & Ndofirepi, 2017; Letseka, 2019; Adésinà, 2005). Most universities in Africa are currently not fit for purpose. In fact, the key role of many African universities was historically about the creation of civil servants for colonial regimes (Zezeza & Olukoshi, 2004). This was the classical role for many African universities, and this now needs to change to one that is defined and conceptualised by the continent and those universities themselves. In this way, perhaps the goal of defining and becoming 'African universities' rather than 'universities in Africa' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016, p. 50) can go some way toward being realised.

Regretfully, the submissions from the rest of the African continent have thus far been somewhat limited. This has also made me acutely aware of the need to bring an African perspective to the field of first-year experience, as well as to critically unpack the contours of an African perspective on higher education on the continent. The reality is that much of the leading published literature (i.e. that which is extensively cited and quoted), originates from outside the African continent. Now this is true not only of the field of first-year experience, but of the field of student affairs and higher education more generally.

To my mind, this is only a matter of time. In time, the journal is certain to attract more African contributions. However, this is also about the editorial board being focused and intentional about developing a journal that is more uniquely 'African' (i.e. investing sufficient time in encouraging African contributions, reaching out to various African research consortia, becoming involved in African research networks, and making good use of the existing networks that members of the editorial board already have).

I see value for the journal in serving the interests of African scholarship and representing African higher education. The journal can also do much to convey the reality of African student affairs and higher education as it exists in multiple countries and higher education contexts. Unfortunately, despite many decades of research, literature and activism in the field of decoloniality, the continent still tends to be seen in terms of sweeping generalisations and stereotypes. Two competing discourses about the continent tend to dominate (i.e. that of the 'hopeless continent', characterised by civil war, corrupt leadership, disease, suffering, and then, of late, the resurgence of an 'Africa rising' narrative which uncritically extolls the continent's supposed potential for growth and development). This journal, with its emphasis on critical scholarship and research, can help to eventually steer away from problematic discourses, in order to understand the multi-faceted reality of student affairs, and higher education on the continent. It is hoped that in time the journal can be seen as an epistemic base from which Africans view and understand student affairs and higher education on the continent, particularly in a cross-disciplinary way.

The developmental mandate of the journal is also admirable. Thus far the journal has seen a range of contributions from authors in various fields, locations and career stages. It is possible that in time students and junior scholars will be intentionally

invited to submit their work, and develop further experience in the world of research, scholarship and publishing.

In summary, it may be worth noting that during my time with the journal, I have also had some personal introspection about the benefits and drawbacks of open access publishing. My personal opinion is that open access publishing is undoubtedly the way of the future. For those of us who are middle-aged higher education professionals, it feels like we have lived through a revolution in academia, and there is undeniable appeal in the widely expanded access and the lack of associated prohibitive costs that comes with open access publishing. However, having observed firsthand the immense labour involved in academic research and publishing, one wonders if it will be possible in the long term to continue to operate without costs. Or if the journal should be considering the pursuit of alternative operating models. Perhaps the ten-year anniversary of the journal might be an opportune time to start this conversation.

### **Reflection 3 by Dr Henry Mason: Lighting a fire: A personal reflection on the role of student affairs and the JSAA in enhancing holistic student success**

As I reflect upon my experience in the field of student affairs, I am reminded of the proverb coined by William Butler Yeats: “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” In my professional journey starting from when I completed my internship at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in 2003, I have held steadfast onto the belief that student development and support (SDS) is integral to enhancing student success. Moreover, student affairs is critical if we hope to play a part in preparing future-ready graduates. When we consider that higher education allocates life chances but that only a small percentage of South African adults have a tertiary education, one of the lowest on the African continent, the enormity of our responsibilities as student affairs practitioners becomes palpable (DHET, 2013; Van Zyl, 2016). Hence, delivering impactful services to support students is non-negotiable (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Scott, 2018).

#### **My journey as scholar of counselling and development**

As a reflective practitioner who adopts an empirical stance, I draw heavily on scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Hutchings, & Shulman, 1999). SoTL involves conducting research focused on practice, thereby understanding and improving student learning experiences, which are then disseminated, contributing to the broader body of knowledge. In line with the basic tenets of SoTL, I approach my work from the vantage point of scholarship of counselling and development (SoCD), which provides a framework to bridge the apparent divide between academic and practitioner work and nurture an environment where students’ personal and academic development needs intertwine with empirically informed practice (Cilliers, 2014). In other words, my work within the student affairs milieu combines research (scholarship) and practice (counselling and development) to foster holistic student success and emphasizes subsequent dissemination of empirical findings.

The notion of holistic student success assumes that students are holistic beings and that efforts to offer SDS-related support ought to address the person as a whole (Cilliers, 2014; Sinclair, 2019). The former implies, *inter alia*, that one should support students in developing cognition-oriented skills to enhance academic success while also considering non-cognitive factors, such as hope, optimism and resilience, as critical metrics within the academic project (Eloff & Graham, 2020; Van Wyk et al., 2022).

Student affairs has been described as existing on the periphery of the academic project (Peltier, 2014). Against such a backdrop, a respected educational and empirical outlet, such as JSAA, creates the launchpad for practitioners to embody practitioner-researcher roles and validate their work via peer-reviewed publications.

### **Engaging with JSAA**

During the latter part of my academic journey, JSAA has been an invaluable resource. My association with JSAA, as a published author and an editorial board member, has been enriching. Engaging in critical discourse and learning from fellow researchers in the field has broadened my perspective and enhanced my scholarship. The journal serves as a conduit for exchanging innovative ideas, best practices, and empirical research, further advancing the student affairs academic project.

Navigating the additional workload of editorial tasks alongside my existing work-related responsibilities has been challenging. However, the rewards outweigh the challenges, as contributing to the JSAA allows me to contribute to the field's growth and address the evolving needs of practitioners, researchers and students. My vision for the JSAA is to become the journal of choice for individuals working in the South African, African, a broader student affairs context. By expanding its publication frequency, the journal could deliver a higher volume of quality reflective and empirical work each year, ensuring its relevance to practitioners and students alike.

In conclusion, my academic journey reaffirmed the significance of student affairs in promoting holistic student success. As an advocate for the SoCD, I firmly believe that student affairs plays an integral role in shaping students into well-rounded individuals who can serve and offer the solutions we, as a country, continent and world, require.

For me, JSAA has fostered professional growth, facilitated critical dialogue, and disseminated knowledge. Moreover, it has forced me out of my comfort zone to consider alternative perspectives and embrace challenges in the field as opportunities for growth. By addressing the challenges and expanding the journal's reach and impact, we can collectively elevate the field of student affairs and meet the diverse needs of our students.

As we continue this journey, may we remember that student affairs is not a peripheral endeavour. Also, let us be reminded that students are not mere metaphorical buckets we aim to fill with facts and figures; instead, we ought to strive collectively to light a flame that ignites the path to educational excellence among student affairs practitioner-researchers and students alike.

## **Reflection 4 by Dr Angelique Wildschut: Professionalization with purpose: A personal reflection on the role of JSAA in professionalizing student affairs and services**

As a recent addition to the JSAA editorial team, I feel quite privileged to offer some fledgeling reflections on my involvement in the publication. I was approached to consider joining the editorial team only two years ago and I had no hesitation in confirming my willingness to be a part of JSAA. As a sociologist of professions, I was especially interested to engage in one of the key objectives of the journal, which is the professionalization of the field of student affairs and services. As stated, the journal “aims to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs in African higher education by publishing high-quality scholarly articles, research and reflective discussions by academics, professionals, researchers and students about student affairs and services in African higher education” (JSAA, 2023). In this regard Ludeman and Schreiber (2020, p. 62) also note that “professionalisation is one avenue for the domain of Student Affairs and Services (SAS) to develop its identity and strengthen its impact in HE in the service of student and institutional success in regions globally”, furthermore and almost most more importantly they recognise that “SAS needs to develop local and embedded professionalisation approaches ... to inform discourse, theory and practices nationally and internationally”.

### **My journey in relation to SAS**

My professional journey has involved scholarship on higher education, particularly in relation to equality of access and labour market outcomes within the South African context. Here the perpetuating disparities in access, navigations through higher education and into the South African labour market have been laid bare multiple times and in multiple ways. In my short three years of experience as research manager in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme in South Africa, research consistently highlighted that while there has been significant progress in extending access to students from the most disadvantaged households, this disadvantage follows these students in the system throughout their higher education experience. This stark reality is true for their academic performance (Wildschut et al., 2020) and in their transitions to the labour market (Wildschut et al., 2019). Finding persisting inequalities in labour market outcomes corresponding with a hierarchy among higher education institutions in South Africa, even while controlling for race and gender, confirms that social inequalities continue to shape access to the best universities as well as the labour market returns to higher education. It is urgent to ensure that all higher education institutions offer quality education to all students. As Marginson (2016, p. 430) notes in highly unequal contexts, such as South Africa, the role of higher education in promoting social mobility requires a “much stronger focus on building more equal institutions with broadly allocated social value”.

For me this has put into perspective the critical role of a strong and empowered student affairs and services profession that can act as catalyst for changing the way in which marginalized students are supported across institutions, but also to feed into

processes to change institutional cultures that monopolise advantaged outcomes for some and not others.

### **Engaging with JSAA**

I think the editorial executive felt that my experience in the sociology of professions could also contribute to the journal's development. Since joining I have contributed two pieces to this scholarship together with Thierry Luescher: one to this issue of JSAA, and the other to a chapter in an upcoming edition of *New Directions in Student Services Series*. This exercise allowed me the opportunity to delve deep into the discourse of student affairs as profession and the professionalism established through JSAA over the ten-year period of JSAA's existence. Our study reflecting on the role that JSAA is playing in the professionalization of student affairs in Africa illuminated two core aspects that I feel can guide the journey for the next few years.

Importantly, in our study we found a strong social justice discourse in the journal (stronger than that of profession and professionalism) that undoubtedly draws from and aligns with student affairs' declared developmental and social justice aims (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Schreiber, 2014). At the same time, we also found that the discourse on profession and professionalism draws much more on the traditional notions associated with professionalization (high-skills, knowledge, qualifications, quality assurance, standards) and less so on the notions associated with social justice.

I think the journal has a strong thought-leadership and legitimating role to play in the professionalization of the field. In this regard it is imperative to expand the discourse of professionalization, not only by virtue of empirical and vetted knowledge on student affairs across the world but, as we argue, strengthened critical engagement of the notion of profession and the kind of professionalization that the field wants to reflect. Thus, we urge the journal to robustly engage on the traditional notions of professions and professionalism and how it can be shaped by the social justice context and realities of Africa.

A recent article in the JSAA aims to do exactly that in arguing for a more collaborative and democratic view of professional work that would be a counterpoint to the traditional notions of professionalism that are elitist, paternalistic, authoritarian and detached (Holtzhausen & Wahl, 2022). Such scholarship can help shape and be more reflective of the type of professionalization we seek for student affairs in Southern contexts, a professionalization guided by social justice and not social closure, which tends to be the hallmark of professions the world over.

### **Discussion: Professionalization through publishing**

The unique personal histories, reflections on their careers and pathways, and perspectives on their roles as editors and the contributions that JSAA can make to student affairs in Africa, bring to light the complexities of the student affairs professionalization process. Professionals need to engage with a multiplicity of views and perspectives to move beyond partial truths and embrace a more holistic conceptualisation of student affairs. Through the shared space of a publication like JSAA, student affairs professionals from

diverse backgrounds can identify, address, and create awareness of critical realities affecting staff and students within the African higher education milieu. As a collective, the editors agreed that the ten-year anniversary of JSAA should highlight unique insights and establish a new foundation in their quest to unify diverse role players under the student affairs umbrella to enhance students' well-being and success. The editors' reflections show in various ways how they view the journal's contributions in this regard, by means of professional development, commitments to peer support in a context of 'excellence', deliberate inclusivity and social justice, and a focus on relevance in the African student affairs context

There is a strong sense of mutual learning in the process of taking the role of editor in all four reflections. Teboho Moja, with all her experience and seniority as a professor of higher education, refers to the immense and transformative experience of serving as journal editor while engaging with emerging and established researchers and practitioners. Jointly with the other two editorial executives, they note how acting as editors has given them "new knowledge and skills", "expanded [their] understanding of the profession" and enhanced "[their] networks within it". Likewise, Annsilla Nyar-Ndlovu indicates how she benefitted from her association with the journal in her own professional position in the field. She speaks of being able to engage with "the emerging national literature" even prior to its publication and having been able to bring her "network of first-year experience scholars, both national and global" to the journal. She also notes how she started out navigating the daunting journey of editorship by learning on the job and receiving guidance and support from publishing professionals, while supporting others in their journeys towards publishing. Henry Mason emphasizes the importance of SoTL and SoSD as avenues to augment practice with rigour through scholarship. As a reflective practitioner, he notes how JSAA has been "an invaluable resource" and describes his work with JSAA as "enriching" through broadening his perspective and enhancing his scholarship. In all cases the learning associated with being an editor required learning about the ethics, standards, and established processes of editorship, the rigours of academic publishing, key processes such as peer review, and so forth, requiring an assimilation into the professional culture characteristic of genuine scholarly publishing.

The other side of the coin is how the editors speak of the developmental mandate of the journal and their role of encouraging and supporting prospective authors to bring a manuscript to the point of publication. Luescher notes how being part of the process of building a field, professionalizing student affairs through research and publication, was appealing to him. Birgit Schreiber and her colleagues aver that they "worked tirelessly with rising authors" in order "to develop, coach, and mentor, practitioners and emerging researchers into published authors". Angelique Wildschut highlights how her motivation as editor is grounded in a commitment to help redressing the legacy of inequality by building "a strong and empowered student affairs and services profession that can act as catalyst for changing the way in which marginalized students are supported across institutions". At the same time, the added responsibility of *pro bono* editing also requires significant sacrifice from the editors. Although not explicitly stated, much of the

editorial work occurs after hours and is, to a great extent, a labour of love, and an ethical necessity for the editors.

Regarding a vision for the journal, the contributors agree on their commitment to the professionalization of student affairs, highlighting African concerns, taking a developmental stance, and the importance of indigenous knowledge being produced via student affairs research and scholarship. They reaffirm their commitment to excellence, inclusivity and open access, professionalism, and societal impact. With respect to the journal's Africa-focus, Nyar-Ndlovu critically asks about the journal's identity: What is involved in being a journal "in Africa" and being an "African journal"? She argues:

*I see value for the journal in serving the interests of African scholarship and representing African higher education. The journal can also do much to convey the reality of African student affairs and higher education.*

Finally, Mason suggests that a greater impact can be made by increasing the number of issues JSAA publishes a year, and Moja, Luescher and Schreiber's reflection envisions JSAA becoming a platform beyond its current format. They commit JSAA to hosting a community of practice on African student affairs research in the next decade.

Overall, the reflections of the JSAA editors also show how in an emerging profession the dichotomy between professionalism 'from within' and professionalism 'from outside' (or above) can be complementary. On the one hand, there are the insights and learnings the editors gain by working with manuscript authors in the editing process, their commitment to developing their upcoming and established peers, developing the knowledge base of the field while assimilating and upholding the high standards required from scholarly publishing. On the other hand, they also talk of their commitment to the 'clients' of student affairs, namely students, and particularly to student well-being and student success as a greater purpose. They refer to their commitment to professional ethics, professionalism in service to the students, communities and society, as well as the social justice mandate of student affairs, diversity and the journal's Africa-focus.

## **Conclusion**

This article reflects on a collective aim from a multiplicity of perspectives: the quest of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* to contribute to the professionalization of African student affairs. It does so from the perspective of the specialized role of editorship in a scholarly journal within an emerging profession. Through four reflective contributions by six of JSAA's editors, this article shows that editorship comes with a range of challenges and needs for professional development to be capacitated for this role. At the same time, the editors also show how their role is enriching and rewarding, and essentially one of helping their emerging and established peers to become accomplished in an important facet of professional life: conducting research, authoring scholarly articles, and publishing in their field.

The reflections contribute to an understanding of the professionalization process of which JSAA is part involving both forms of professionalism – from within and from outside. As profession insiders, the editors and their journal operate from within and

using an indigenous process to professionalize the field. However, they do not only refer to values, commitments and processes indigenous to student affairs in Africa. They also talk of processes and standards applicable to scholarly editing and publishing that are more or less universal, and professional ethics from beyond the African context. Thus, the multiple learning processes referred to in the reflections are both indigenous and exogenous, involving intrinsic and extrinsic values, principles and commitments. The JSAA-led professionalization process is therefore neither a case of professionalism ‘from above’, nor one that would be complete if guided only ‘from within’ (Evetts, 2003). Both have a legitimate role to play as professionals find ways of engaging both external standards and control with an internal improvement drive, here at the case of developing professionalism through publishing.

An underlying emphasis on promoting well-being for all emerged strongly from the editors’ reflections. In this context, the concept of well-being should be understood broadly as a positive state experienced by individuals and societies or, with reference to this article, more especially by students and the university community, the local communities they serve and society, to be able to function and flourish. Well-being ought to be conceptualised holistically and emphasize inclusivity; in the case of the editors’ reflections this includes, for example, the needs of first-year students entering higher education, the relevance of student development and support initiatives, equitable access to university within a social justice discourse, learning to navigate the challenges of scholarly publishing, and the overall thriving and sustainability of student affairs within an African context.

### **Ethics statement**

All author reflections are auto-ethnographic and informed by their personal ethics of professionalism and truth-telling. All authors agree with the contents of the article. No formal ethics clearance review was conducted.

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