

EDITORIAL

10 Years of contributing to the professionalization of student affairs in Africa

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JSAA in a changing field of student affairs

The field of student affairs is continuously evolving to meet the changing needs of students and institutions in the higher education sector. Globally, there is a strong focus on enhancing student engagement and support through programmes, clubs, and extracurricular activities, aiming to foster personal growth, a sense of belonging, transferable skills and competences. Student mental health and wellness have become a priority, with colleges and universities expanding counselling services and providing resources to address the growing mental health challenges among students. Other forms of counselling, advising, as well as peer support, have also moved closer to the centre. Additionally, there is an increasing emphasis on creating inclusive campus environments through diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, which aim to promote equity, social justice, and support underrepresented student populations. Career development and employability are also key areas, with student affairs departments collaborating with career services offices on and off campuses to provide students with resources for career exploration and job placements. Lastly, the integration of technology and digital engagement has allowed student affairs professionals to connect with students through online platforms, virtual advising, and social media strategies. Many of these developments have been enhanced and accelerated by the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Student affairs in Africa mirrors these developments closely as it continues to adapt to the changing needs and expectations of students on the continent. At the same time, student affairs professionals in Africa and the global South more broadly, face unique contextual challenges in their work. Limited financial resources and infrastructure, unequal access to technology, and socio-economic disparities, all pose obstacles to providing comprehensive student support services. Creatively involving students in the provision of student experiences and services is increasingly becoming a recognised feature in African student affairs (Holtzhausen & Wahl, 2022). Additionally,

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addressing mental health needs, promoting inclusivity amidst diverse cultural contexts, and navigating socio-political landscapes, present challenges. Recognition and professional development opportunities tend to be limited. Nevertheless, student affairs professionals in Africa are dedicated to supporting students' holistic development and success, striving to overcome obstacles and provide meaningful support. The changing needs and expectations of students in Africa and the evolving nature of student affairs as a field and profession is also reflected in the publications of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (JSAA).

In 2013, JSAA launched with the double issue “The professionalisation of Student Affairs in Africa”. Over the years, the topics published in the journal closely reflected changes in the profession. In the earlier years, several issues focused on student engagement, student retention and success; student governance, leadership, and the student movement; student transitions and the first-year student experience; and co-curriculating student affairs. Later tutoring, mentoring and peer support became relevant topics; student residence life and living and learning; student mental health and well-being, and student counselling came into sharp focus. In 2021, JSAA published an issue almost entirely dedicated to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students and student affairs in Africa. Most recently, academic advising became a featured topic. A cursory overview shows that other key sectors of student affairs, including disability services and career services have also received some attention, as well as international perspectives and contributions. Few articles have been published on quality enhancement and over the ten years, there have been no articles specifically dealing with student sport; student clubs and societies (other than student political organisations); student volunteering, and other services that are often at the periphery of student affairs and frequently outsourced, such as student catering.

Since its inception, the editors have made efforts to ensure the high quality of the journal and promote its internationality and Africa-focus. Three years into its launch, JSAA was evaluated by the Academy of Sciences of South Africa and became formally accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training as a bona fide, subsidy generating scholarly journal. It also earned its badges from the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and African Journals Online (AJOL) and became co-hosted by the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). Among the African countries from which the journal has published great articles are: Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mauritius, Nigeria, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, and, of course, South Africa. However, it is noteworthy that this list excludes North Africa, francophone and lusophone Africa, and contributions from the African diaspora.

New developments anticipating the next 10 years

To commemorate the journal's achievements and the decadal milestone, the editorial executive decided to prepare a special issue that would take stock of the last ten years of research, scholarship, theory and practice reflection. The occasion of the special issue also provides space to announce several exciting developments.

Community of Practice – Student Affairs in Africa Research

To enhance the contribution that JSAA makes to African student affairs, the editorial executive started to consult key stakeholders around the establishment of a community of practice (COP) to support research and scholarship in 2021. A community of practice is a group of people who share a common interest and concern for something that they do, and they create modalities of interaction to learn together how to do this better. A first consultation meeting towards the establishment of a COP focused on developing student affairs research in Africa was held on 23 November 2021 in Pretoria. Participants included student affairs professionals and researchers from a range of universities, including the Nelson Mandela University, New York University (New York City and Shanghai), University of Pretoria, University of Venda, University of the Witwatersrand, as well as the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP), and the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) project of Universities South Africa (USAf).

It is envisaged that the Community of Practice for Student Affairs in Africa Research (COP-SAAR) will operate in various ways to support research and publishing on African student affairs by means of mentorship and professional development; webinars and virtual meetings; online and face-to-face research workshops, writing retreats, and events; and the co-production of research outputs, amongst others (see Figure 1).

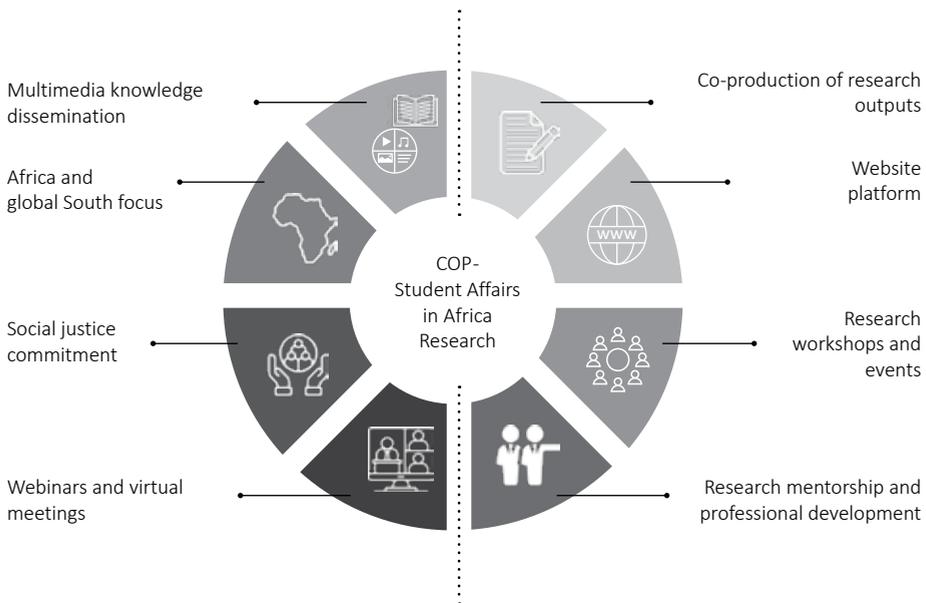


Figure 1: Modalities of the COP-SAAR

Source: Icons by Adrien Coquet Rusma Ratri, Dicky Prayadawanto, Sergey Demushkin, Happy Girl, ProSymbols from Noun Project

At present, the initiators of the COP-SAAR are JSAA and the Equitable Education section of the Human Sciences Research Council. Any individuals, organisations and institutions who wish to sponsor, participate in, support, and contribute to the COP-SAAR are cordially invited to contact the editorial executive and join via the JSAA website. The community of practice will officially be launched at the first JSAA general meeting in the second half of 2023.

Website updates, JSAA awards, and downloads

To accommodate the new developments at JSAA, the website has been updated with additional tabs. The 'Community of Practice' tab includes basic information about the COP-SAAR, information about forthcoming and past events, downloads, as well as links to other student affairs journals. Another new tab labelled 'Awards' anticipates the bestowal of JSAA awards for research excellence. As of the end of 2023, the journal will give recognition to the most outstanding contributions in several categories to authors, reviewers, editors and other contributors. Further information will be provided by the end of 2023.

Furthermore, JSAA/COP-SAAR will host its first general meeting towards the end of 2023, including a workshop on scholarly publishing. This will be an open online event intended to celebrate the ten-year anniversary, past, current and future developments and strategy, launch the COP-SAAR, announce the first JSAA research excellence awards, and hold an online workshop. All stakeholders, authors, reviewers, readers, colleagues and friends are cordially invited.

JSAA facelift, article history, and abstracts and articles in other African languages

As evident in this issue of JSAA, the journal's 'look and feel' has been updated for the first time since its inception. This was occasioned by the need to accommodate additional information on an article's title page. First, the history of each article will now be included to disclose when an article was first received and when accepted. Provided that JSAA editors take a developmental approach to editing, and JSAA only publishes two issues per annum, the duration from first submission to acceptance and publication may be quite long. We find that many editors ask for revisions of manuscripts in the vetting stage, that is, before the manuscripts are submitted to peer review, in order to enhance the chances of successful review.

Second, to enhance the accessibility and reach of the journal beyond the anglophone academic world in Africa and beyond, JSAA will forthwith publish all articles with a second abstract and keywords in an official African language other than English. The default language for the second abstract is French, and JSAA is happy to have found in Dr Dominique Mpewa, who is a lecturer in the Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences at the University of Maryland, USA, an expert translation editor to help facilitate this. Authors who wish to publish their second abstract in an official African language other than French are welcome to do so, and they will need to supply their translated abstract with a confirmation from a language professional. Furthermore, JSAA wants to pilot the publication of articles in official African languages other than English.

However, the practicality of this (in terms of language competence of editors, reviewers, copy-editors, and so forth) will need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. In the case where an article is published in an official African language other than English, the default language of the second abstract and keywords will be English.

Articles in this issue

In keeping with the theme of this special issue, there are three contributions (in addition to this editorial) that specifically deal with the ten-year anniversary of JSAA, and particularly its aim to contribute to student affairs professionalization and professionalism. The first is a research article by Angelique Wildschut and Thierry Luescher that analyses ten years of publications in JSAA to identify the professionalization discourse evident in JSAA. Their study finds that publications on the professionalization of student affairs in JSAA strongly draw on the traditional notion that professionals should espouse certain 'traits' such as high-level knowledge and skills, qualifications, and so forth. The article critiques this notion in relation to developments in the sociology of professions. It also looks at the intersection of the professionalization discourse with the discourse on social justice in the journal.

The second article with a ten-year anniversary focus presents four reflective accounts of six JSAA editors, wherein they reflect on their professional pathways into editorship; what they have learned; and how they feel they have contributed to the professionalization aim of the JSAA. The article shows editing as a rewarding and challenging experience, beneficial to the editors and their professional development as well as the authors they work with. It also discusses how the editors' reflections indicate two types of professionalism: one that proceeds 'from within' the emerging profession and another that introduces standards, ethics and procedures 'from outside' in the professionalization process.

The third contribution is a report on a new professional development programme for student affairs practitioners established by Universities South Africa (USAf). The campus report feature describes the launch of the Student Affairs and Student Success professionalization programme developed and organised by USAf's HELM project. It is a sector-wide training programme for student affairs and related staff, professionals, and practitioners, who want to develop their competencies in the field of student affairs, development and support.

In addition to the three contributions dealing with the professionalization topic of this anniversary issue, we are publishing six more research articles and a reflective practice article in this issue. Three articles deal with the student transition into higher education, the first-year experience, and related interventions to support student success. Three reflect on matters related to student challenges, mental health, and well-being, in the context of Covid-19, while the last one tests the trustworthiness of a psychometric instrument, the Satisfaction with Life Scale, for studying student well-being in the African higher education context.

Vuyokazi Mntuyedwa's article explores the benefits of peer group support for first-year students who live in residences to support their transition from school to university.

Using focus group interviews and thematic analysis, she uncovers several benefits of peer group support, including a sense of belonging, academic support, and closer engagement.

The study by Disaapele Mogashana and colleagues evaluates the benefits of life coaching for at-risk undergraduate Chemical Engineering students. The longitudinal study uses one-on-one semi-structured interviews with ten students who had participated in the intervention from their first year to their fourth year of study. The results indicate that the intervention enabled students to mediate academic and non-academic constraints.

The next article also deals with first-year students, the transition from high school into university, and interventions to increase the chances of student success. Nokuthula Tlalajoe-Mokhatla and her co-authors study fifteen medical students who participated in a six-month remediation programme. Their study finds that the top five social learning and integration factors were underpreparedness, self-management, alienation, confidence, and academic advice; and self-awareness and self-management were identified as complementary skills that could help address these factors.

The article by Andile Samkele Masuku and colleagues investigates student mental health during Covid-19 using a mixed-method approach. It shows how the different effects of the pandemic impacted students. They include such varied experiences as breadwinner job loss; campus closures and the need to vacate residences; and the move to online-based methods of teaching and learning. It also looks at academic challenges experienced by students in the online and home-based learning environment, and the varied coping mechanisms used by students. A call is made for universities to learn from the experience of the pandemic and provide adequate resources to better support student success.

The Covid-19 pandemic also provides the context for the study of Raisuyah Bhagwan, which explores challenges encountered and support measures implemented by social workers of a South African university to enhance the well-being of students. It employs an integrative body-mind-spirit model as its guiding theoretical framework, semi-structured interviews to collect data, and thematic analysis to analyse them. The study finds that students were profoundly affected by the pandemic. It identified five themes in the data, including academic difficulties; stigmatisation of infected students; caring for the quarantined students and controlling the spread of the virus; support groups for students; and strategies to deal with mental health challenges.

The study by Clarisse van Rensburg and Karina Mostert tests the validity and reliability of psychometric properties of the Satisfaction With Life Scale for studying first-year university students' well-being in a South African university. They find item bias and invariance in several measures and thus advise psychologists and practitioners to take care when applying this or any other concepts and instruments from Western countries. They recommend that the trustworthiness of such instruments should be tested for their transferability and applicability in contexts such as African universities.

A reflective practice account comes from Angelique McConney, who reflects on the insights she gained by using innovative ways to address the mental health needs of

students having limited resources available during the Covid-19 pandemic. She discusses online psycho-educational workshops and peer helpers as student-led initiatives to expand the reach and capacity of mental health support during a period of great stress. This reflective article shares the details of their virtual workshops and the insights gained from the process.

At the same time as JSAA is celebrating its ten-year anniversary, so is the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS), which has been growing alongside JSAA in a quest to strengthen the profession. IASAS held its 2023 summit in Rome, Italy. From the occasion, JSAA publishes here two reports.

Finally, we have included two book reviews, which introduce books that are interesting and relevant to Student Affairs practice in Africa. The first is a collection by international scholars and students who reflect on their experiences in far-away settings. It is entitled: *Crossing Borders, Bridging Cultures: The Narratives of Global Scholars* (STAR Scholars, 2023). The book is edited by Krishna Bista, Bo Zhang, Uttam Gaulee, and Birgit Schreiber, and reviewed by Patricia C. Timmons and Rajendra Bista.

The second book is reviewed by Ronelle Carolissen. She writes about the book *Being at Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions* edited by P. Tabensky and S. Matthews (UKZN Press, 2015). The book explores the question of transformation, decolonisation, and related challenges, and confronts the obdurate institutional cultures and structures in the South African higher education sector.

This JSAA 11(1) anniversary issue is a culmination of our commitment to students, institutions, higher education and social justice in Africa. By way of this 10-year anniversary issue, we hope that our readers are emboldened to advance higher education and thus social justice, for a better life for all in Africa.

With kind regards

The Editorial Executive

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