

EDITORIAL

Student Affairs in a Traumatic Year

Birgit Schreiber,* Teboho Moja** & Thierry M. Luescher***

The year 2020 is a year that we will remember globally in higher education as having been most unusual, indeed, traumatic. If at the beginning of 2020 the year had a hopeful ring with plenty, as it comes to an end it is hard to just try and make sense of the extent that the experience of higher education has been changed so incisively within a short time for both staff and students. And the signs are already there that the post-COVID-19 period will not be short of new challenges either. Challenges like addressing the increased mental health issues students suffer due to the crisis, illness, loss of loved ones and more. Moreover, there are many student groups whose ability to learn has been severely impacted by the pandemic and lockdown, including students from poor households, rural students, and students with special needs. As we noted in our last editorial, for these students, the campus environment and the services offered by Student Affairs departments is normally able to level the ‘playing field’ of learning. It will require yet another extra effort by student affairs professionals, academics, administrators, fellow students and the communities and families to ensure that these students can catch up and have access to the same quality and quantity of learning opportunities within supportive contexts over the course of their studies as others who have been less impacted.

The first-year experience (FYE) holds for many student affairs professionals a special place. One group of students that has been particularly impacted by the campus and national lockdowns imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic have been first-years. For much of the year, COVID-19 has robbed this cohort of first-year students of the thrills and fears, joys and cries, of a ‘normal’ first year. In those universities that start their academic

* Dr Birgit Schreiber is a member of the Africa Centre for Transregional Research at Alberts-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg, Germany, and the Vice-President of IASAS and a member of the JSAA Editorial Executive. She is a Senior Consultant for Higher Education Leadership and Management and for Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Email: birgitschreiber@sun.ac.za; birgitdewes@gmail.com

** Prof. Teboho Moja is Clinical Professor of Higher Education, New York University, U.S.A. She is also a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, South Africa, and an Extraordinary Professor at the Institute of Post-School Studies, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. She is JSAA’s Editor-in-chief. Email: teboho.moja@nyu.edu

*** Prof. Thierry M. Luescher is the Research Director for Post-schooling and Work in the Inclusive Economic Development Division of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Cape Town, and Associate Professor of Higher Education affiliated to the University of the Free State, Mangaung/Bloemfontein, South Africa. He is a member of the JSAA Editorial Executive. Email: tuescher@hsrc.ac.za

year the second half of the year, the impact has been less profound. But in higher education systems like South Africa's, where the academic year starts in the course of February, first-year students experienced just a few weeks of induction into university life on campus.

The FYE provides the central theme of this issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*. It is the mission of *JSAA* to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs *inter alia* through the development of partnerships with professional organisations in the field. In this spirit we are pleased to host for the third time an issue guest edited by Annsilla Nyar of the South African National Research Centre of the First-Year Experience at the University of Johannesburg. Her first guest-edited issue titled "The first-year experience, student transitions and institutional transformation" was published as *JSAA* 4(1) in 2016 and the second issue "First-year experience in perspective" in 2018 as *JSAA* 6(1).

Indeed, *JSAA* has been proudly associated with a number of guest editors over the years, starting with "Student power in African higher education", *JSAA* 3(1) of 2015, which was jointly guest edited by Thierry Luescher, Manja Klemenčič and James Otieno Jowi. This was followed by "Tutoring and mentoring", guest edited by Nelia Frade in 2017 and published as *JSAA* 5(2), and most recently *JSAA* 7(1) on "Space, language, identity and the student movement" guest edited by Philippa Tumubweinee and Thierry Luescher.

A guest-edited issue allows *JSAA* and the guest editor to focus attention on a specific theme and enables a particular kind of depth of scholarship. It mobilises a number of researchers, employing a range of research methodologies and frameworks to focus on that theme, thus advancing scholarship in this domain. This, too, is what Annsilla Nyar has done with this her third guest-edited issue, and *JSAA* is proud to be playing a part in developing the scholarship on the first-year experience (FYE).

In addition to the eight research articles and the reflective practice article on the FYE guest edited by Annsilla Nyar, this issue includes a campus report on the Stellenbosch University Experiential Education Conference which explored the intersection of experiential learning with student success. This was a particularly timely and topical conference as we are moving into an era of distance- and online-learning which raises major concerns about the developmental experiences in the social and community domain of higher education.

As in every issue, we are happy to publish in this issue the review of a book relevant for student affairs professionals in universities in Africa and beyond. Birgit Schreiber reviews *Engaging Students: Using Evidence to Promote Student Success*, edited by Francois Strydom, George Kuh and Sonja Loots, which was published in 2017 by SunMedia Bloemfontein. With this book, the editors have been able to bring together an impressive set of contributions that illustrate in so many ways the importance of having good data to understand the student experience, enhance student engagement and ultimately improve student success. Schreiber argues: "It is a must-read for Student Affairs practitioners, not only in Africa, but in all contexts that seek to offer teaching and learning opportunities that advance equitable participation of the learning in the learning process."

We would like to thank a number of members of the International Editorial Advisory Board of *JSAA* and our reviewers. As we are gradually preparing the move of the Journal

to the University of Pretoria, we would also like to acknowledge yet again the support we have received over the last four and a half years from Stellenbosch University which has not only sponsored a number of issues but also generously hosted and administered the journal on their library's e-journal platform. In this regard, a special thank you goes to Ms Paulette Talliard of Stellenbosch University's Library and Information Service and the tireless support of Maretha Joyce.

How to cite:

Schreiber, B., Moja, T. & Luescher, T.M. (2020). Student Affairs in a Traumatic Year. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 8(2), v-vii. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v8i2.4451