

## EDITORIAL

# Rethinking higher education: Public and private synergies for student success in Africa

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This issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* arrives at a pivotal time in the discussions around higher education and student success in South Africa and on the continent. The seismic global disruptions of recent years (like AI, geo-political madness and climate wars, and so on!), combined with the ongoing structural challenges within African post-school education systems, compel us to ask hard but essential questions: What kind of higher education systems do we need to serve our students and our societies better? And critically, can we afford to ignore the growing role of private higher education in that future?

Our feature article by Ahmed Bawa and Linda Meyer, 'Becoming more private: Broadening the base of South African higher education', courageously engages with these questions. It interrogates the long-standing public-private divide in the South African higher education sector and explores how declining government funding, siloed and ill-articulated institutions, and systemic socio-political inequality make the emboldened participation of private higher education not only viable but inevitable. The authors argue that a truly functional and future-oriented system must enable coordination, collaboration, and shared responsibility between all HE actors, public and private alike, toward a unified national learning agenda (and extending this into all Africa).

The rest of the issue builds on this theme of rethinking structures and support for student success across African higher education.

Jonker and Rues present a health and wellness intervention programme designed to help students navigate 'ICE' (isolated, confined and extreme) events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme integrates design thinking and the Nadler-Tushman model to improve student well-being, with recommendations in areas of communication, food security, and digital wellness tools, important contributions to building institutional resilience.

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Van der Walt explores what motivates students to participate in peer mentoring when financial incentives are removed. Based on experiences from the Vaal University of Technology, the study finds that esteem, altruism, and skill-building drive volunteer mentors; it also identifies morale challenges, suggesting changes to programme design and recognition practices.

Manatsa and Khumalo spotlight residence advisors (RAs) at the Durban University of Technology and their pivotal role in supporting student academic success. Although often untrained in academic advising, RAs function as first responders to students in distress. The authors advocate for structured training and recognition of these key student success agents within Living and Learning Communities.

Mtshweni investigates how a sense of belonging shapes first-year students' institutional attachment. The study finds that social adjustment partly mediates this relationship, while emotional adjustment does not, highlighting the importance of designing environments that foster community and identity from the first year.

Maboep et al. examine how individual counselling within a problem-based learning (PBL) programme can support at-risk pharmacy students. Focusing on a historically disadvantaged university, the authors show how proactive, personalised interventions can reduce attrition and improve performance, underscoring the power of targeted academic support in inclusive education contexts.

Phiri and Nalwamba look beyond the classroom to consider student activism and climate action. Drawing from Malawi and Zambia, their study introduces the concept of 'bounded agency' to explain how students, despite institutional and cultural constraints, find creative ways, through grassroots organising and digital platforms, to advance environmental advocacy.

Hilal explores student extracurricular activities in the GCC region, focusing on Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University. The study identifies wide disparities in implementation and motivation across institutions and calls for clearer policy frameworks to ensure these programmes are fully integrated into the student development agenda.

Campbell and Abrahams share insights from a WhatsApp-based character strengths intervention for South African university students. The low-cost, scalable programme showed strong impact in building students' self-awareness and goal alignment, pointing to the potential of digital micro-interventions to enhance student well-being and engagement.

Grayson et al. describe Gateway to Success, an extended orientation programme launched at Wits University in response to the challenges of COVID-19. Using agile project management and institutional collaboration, the programme has evolved into a cornerstone of the university's strategy to support new students academically and socially during transition.

We close with a book review by Dr Sibeso Lisulo, reflecting on *Widening university access and participation in the Global South: Using the Zambian context to inform other developing countries* by Edward Mboyonga. The book offers both case-based insights and transferable strategies for inclusion and equity that higher education leaders across the continent would do well to consider. In keeping with the subject's title, the book review, like parts of the article by Phiri and Nalwamba, focuses on the Zambian context

and provides invaluable insight into this system, that offers many lessons for the rest of the continent.

As this issue illustrates, student success is not merely a matter of programme design, it is a systemic concern. This invites us to examine the assumptions, architectures, and power dynamics that shape our institutions. Whether we are talking about health, belonging, leadership, activism, or orientation, we must look not just at what we do within universities, but how our systems are organised, and how public and private actors can align for the broader public good. This alignment will necessarily raise questions about purpose, equity, access, and what kind of higher education architecture we need for a just and thriving Africa.

Rethinking higher education in Africa thus requires us to think across several levels or units of analysis – from the micro, individual level of student experience and student success, to support for different groups of students and rethinking the roles of residences, for example, in the academic and social engagement of students. It includes the meso level of institutional diversity and complementarity, and at the macro level, the purpose of higher education in Africa. We started this editorial with reference to the growing polarisation we see in the world – from “geopolitical madness” to conflicts around migration and increasing climate-change-related conflicts. Universities in Africa have to create transformative leaders (with the values, knowledges, attitudes, skills and networks) to respond to the fast-changing context and create peaceful, prosperous and equitable societies. Contributing to this as student affairs professionals, scholars and researchers, gives meaning to our work. And if our institutions fail to deliver on the promise of freedom, peace and prosperity, then they might as well be trade schools.

To return to this issue: We are proud to see our initiative of encouraging authors to publish their titles, abstracts and keywords in a second language bearing fruit. For the first time, we have such contributions in Arabic, isiNdebele, Nyanja, and Spanish, as well as again Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu, sePedi, and Shona, amongst others. We hope to grow herewith the academic vocabulary of higher education and student affairs in Africa.

Finally, an alert for the next issue: guest-edited by Dr Henry Mason, TUT, and another one coming up guest-edited by Dr Gugu Kanye, UFS – two great issues to look forward to.

Enjoy the read.

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