

## EDITORIAL

# Towards Student Well-being and Quality Services in Student Affairs in Africa

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Two themes define this issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*: student well-being, and the provision of quality Student Affairs services. The themes of student well-being in general, and mental health in particular, have become prominent in higher education in recent years, and Student Affairs is implicated in the solutions. In this issue, a more systemic approach – with less hyperbolic and reductionist notions – is put forward to illuminate not only the incidences, but also the contributing factors to student mental health and well-being along with its correlates in academic achievement and recommendations for intervention. The articles in this group cover the topic broadly and inclusively across the fully student lifecycle and from different theoretical, methodological and empirical standpoints.

Amongst the articles on student well-being, mental health and academic achievement, the first two articles take as their starting points prevalent social problems in their respective countries and how they impact on student attitudes and well-being. Against recurring incidents of xenophobic violence in South Africa, Akande, Musarurwa and Kaye present their findings of a study of student attitudes towards, and perceptions of, xenophobia at a university in Durban. They find traces of xenophobic perceptions and attitudes particularly amongst first-year students from low income areas. In reflecting on their findings, they reaffirm “the importance of educational institutions in intercepting negative ethnic/racial sentiments” and call for interventions that reach into the communities with, for example, dialogue sessions.

The second article was prompted by the high level of unemployment in Zimbabwe since the economic downturn; it studies the mental health of unemployed graduates. The research by Mutambara, Makanyanga and Mudhovozi shows that factors like age, gender,

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marital status and period since graduation were significant for explaining variations in psychological distress and optimism amongst unemployed graduates, and that optimism was a significant factor in enhancing general health. An important learning for student affairs professionals here is that so-called ‘outduction’ programmes may need to include not only career counselling but also prepare graduates for the eventuality of unemployment.

Melese Astatke’s article examines the relationship of emotional intelligence and help-seeking behaviour with the academic achievement of first-year students at a teacher training college in Ethiopia. Melese finds that emotional intelligence and academic and psychological help-seeking behaviour have a significant positive impact on students’ academic achievement. The implication of this finding is clear: student affairs practitioners, along with academic and administrative staff and parents should work on promoting students’ emotional intelligence and encourage students’ help seeking behaviours as this is not only good for their own well-being, but also enhances their academic achievement.

A positive correlation between better health and academic achievement is also suggested by the article by Morris-Paxton, Van Lingen and Elkonin. Their interest is specifically on students from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds and they argue that the incidences of educational failure that such students often face in higher education could be lessened by instituting a holistic health promotion programme within the first year of study.

Finally, do we really know who our students are as they enter university, asks Hundermark? Her study conducted for the Humanities’ Teaching and Learning Unit of the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa sought to better understand the backgrounds of new first-year students, as well as to proactively determine the factors that may place them at risk academically. However, rather than reporting on actual survey result, Hundermark reflects on the process of research. She thereby provides a number of recommendations to inform future praxis, both in researching students and designing interventions that can be implemented to address risk factors that students present.

A last contribution on the topic of mental health is presented by Schreiber where she puts forward the notion that students are active collaborators in the work on well-being and mental health. The publication, *University World News*, reports on a number of university responses to mental health, which Schreiber critiques as theoretically unsound. She highlights the importance of systemic conceptualisations and emphasises the role of professional care, rather as against using monitoring mechanisms by lay university staff without professional training in matters of mental health and well-being.

The second, smaller theme in this issue engages with the question of the quality of student affairs services in Africa. It showcases two different approaches to assessing quality. The first gauges the extent of service quality by means of a survey with final-year undergraduate students at Ethiopian public higher education institutions. Using a modified version of the SERVQUAL questionnaire, Lodesso, Van Niekerk, Jansen and Müller assess three dimensions of service quality perception or satisfaction: expectations of service quality; perceived experience of service quality; and the importance of service quality at their university. The results were sobering: “the majority of the elements that constitute

attributes of service quality were perceived by students to be very poor". Given the need to target resources in a constraint environment, the authors recommend that institutions identify those service areas that have *high perceived importance scores* and *low perception scores on service experience* in order to redeploy some of the resources and implement measures to improve service quality where it is perceived to be the most important.

The article by Luescher in this theme critically reflects on a quality enhancement process that was conducted at a South African university in 2015. The article shows how the Student Affairs Review was designed with reference to a number of procedural and substantive principles, and implemented by means of a process of internal self-evaluation and an external panel assessment. Considering the aspirations of the review with regard to the professionalisation of Student Affairs at that university, alignment with social justice commitments, and initiatives towards co-curricularisation, the article also critically highlights potential pitfalls in the design and implementation of quality enhancement processes.

Perhaps as important as the case study of the quality enhancement process itself is the methodology by which Luescher reflects on the intervention. *JSAA* has been seeking to encourage student affairs practitioners to critically reflect on their practices and specifically provides a platform for such reflections. Now, Luescher's article proposes a way of conceptualising a reflective scholarship of practice in Student Affairs in Africa and method to conduct reflective practice studies aimed at building a relevant knowledge base. We hope that student affairs professionals from across the continent will find this framework a useful tool for writing reflective practice articles on their day-to-day student affairs work.

In our on-campus section, this issue reports on two interesting events that have taken place recently and in which African student affairs has played a key role: the Southern African Federation of Student Affairs (SAFSAS) and the Global Summit of Student Affairs (IASAS-NASPA). Both events reach beyond national-local issues and foreground the importance of collaborations across entire regions. The SAFSAS event brings together the Southern African region and the IASAS-NASPA event in Chile this year, brought together student affairs professionals from 32 countries who translated UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals into local applications.

Finally, we publish two book reviews. The first book reviewed in this issue is edited by Sherran Clarence and Laura Dison and entitled *Writing Centres in Higher Education: Working in and across disciplines* (2017, African Sun Media). Across its diverse chapters, the book reviews the historical development of writing centres in South Africa and – uniquely – the theoretical and pedagogical approaches used in writing centres. While it draws its examples and cases specifically from the experience of writing centres in South African universities, the book reviewer, Annsilla Nyar, argues that the themes and issues expressed in the book will have a much wider resonance.

The second book review discusses Jonathan Jansen's book, *As by Fire: The End of the South African University* (2017, Tafelberg). Trowler, a senior higher education scholar, takes a critical and academic perspective on the book and offers interpretations that illuminate the controversial reception this book has received.

For us as the *JSAA* editorial executive, we have welcomed the enthusiastic contributions of our new Journal Manager, Maretha Joyce, who has taken on the pre-publishing aspect of the work. Since the 2017 recognition and approval of *JSAA* as a DHET-accredited scholarly journal, the work for the editorial executive has taken on huge proportions and we are very grateful that Ms Joyce is supporting our work.

***How to cite:***

Luescher, T.M., Schreiber, B. & Moja, T. (2018). Towards Student Well-being and Quality Services in Student Affairs in Africa. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(2), v–viii. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i2.3317