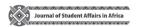# Equity and social justice in higher education

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

In *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2015), Manuel Castells discusses the new social movements of popular unrest, starting with the Arab Spring and Occupy movements that began with, and were accelerated by, "Internet social networks […] beyond the control of governments and corporations" and protested the economic and political corruption and social injustices prevalent in our world (Castells, 2015, p. 2). According to Castells, the new movements indicate a shift in power to those who can wield social media and thereby influence the "construction of meaning" (p. 5). The cyberspace of social media – representing a "space of autonomy" (p. 250) – is now being claimed by students for the movement for change in higher education in Africa, the USA and the world as a whole; student organising is taking on a new kind of form, which Luescher and Klemenčič (forthcoming 2016) call the "internet-age student movement". The new cyber-savvy student – horizontally engaged, organically organised above partisan lines but deeply connected to the real issues of social injustice – is changing the worldscape of higher education. The hashtag movements in South Africa of 2015, of which the best known are #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, are certainly the most prominent manifestations of the "internet-age student movement" phenomenon in Africa so far.

Students at the University of Cape Town spearheaded the #RhodesMustFall movement, calling for an institutional culture that reflects their Africanness to decolonise higher education in South Africa – including its curriculum – and for advances in equity and inclusivity. For many acute observers of higher education in Africa, these calls are reminiscent of those made in the early 1970s by post-independence governments and the professors and leadership of the first African universities that were based on the rationale that Africa needed African universities that support the developmental state (Yesufu, 1973). The millennial student is making a different call – to hold government and institutions

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accountable to principles of equity and social justice alongside their claims of supporting a developmental state. For South Africa's institutions, particularly its historically advantaged ones, the call is to transform their institutional cultures, which are frequently characterised as 'privileged'. Moreover, after having reclaimed the institution, and with the statue of Cecil John Rhodes having fallen, the new student wants access to affordable education – hence the #FeesMustFall movement's demands to government to deliver on the right to affordable education have become synonymous with higher education struggles in the developing world and reflect a global pattern of post-2009 student struggles against austerity and the rising costs of higher education to students. Fees have not yet fallen; but in South Africa, at least, fee increases have been halted for now and may soon be falling for good.

The issues in other African countries are not that different. Student protests over tuition fees, related matters of student funding and conditions of learning are commonplace. For example, in Kenya, University of Nairobi students demanded the immediate release of funds by the Higher Education Loans Board earlier in 2015; at Makerere University in Uganda, protests erupted yet again at the start of the new academic year in October, against university management's tuition fee policy; and at the University of Lagos in Nigeria, the death of a student by a falling power cable has sparked protests against the dangerous neglect of campus infrastructure and the lack of responsiveness and sympathy by university officials. In addition, students continue to play a traditional role as "extra-parliamentary opposition" in countries like the DRC and Egypt, putting their lives on the line for a better future for all. Sadly, the response by governments continues to be one of elevating the level of violence and tensions between students, university administrators and governments.

In the US, where small-scale protests have not really amounted to much in the decades since the major anti-Vietnam protests, students are also bringing about change in the higher education landscape. The #BlackOnCampus movement is an expression of the feeling of being unwelcome and under-represented on campuses that maintain hegemonic assumptions about privilege. Students are protesting over race relations issues and the lack of support for the under-represented black minority and potentially "invisible" groups. The recent University of Missouri protest by a student on a hunger strike is a case in point: the football team's threat not to play and to cause a big loss in university revenue led to the resignation of both the system president and the campus chancellor within days of the protests starting. In no time, other campuses joined to show solidarity with the protesting students. Students at Ithaca College renewed their campaign to push out their president for his failure adequately to address racial incidents on campus. At Vanderbilt University, students are calling for the dismissal of a professor whose column last January regarding the incidents in Paris are said to be anti-Islamic. Support for Missouri students has also been reported from Smith College, where students and professors joined the protest. Students at the University of Iowa wore black clothes and rallied at the Old Capitol.

Student activism has been re-ignited in a new and powerful way and university leadership is responding quickly to meet or address the demands being made. Similar to #RhodesMustFall, Princeton University students have demanded that Woodrow Wilson must fall, and a sit-in in the president's office has led to a commitment to remove Woodrow

Wilson's name from campus due to his racist tendencies and advocacy for segregation. Townson University and Occidental College students also made demands that are changing their institutions (Jaschik, 2015a; 2015b).

The knee-jerk reaction of university leadership should be of concern to student affairs professionals more than ever, due to the need to focus on their role in advancing not only awareness of issues of social justice but also of enabling students to become constructive agents of change and to challenge visible and invisible structures that maintain inequities, to "imagine a different future" and "use knowledge for social transformation" (Osei-Kofi, 2011, p. 393). For us in the student affairs profession, there is the realisation of the power of the student voice when there is lack of proactive and constructive use of established mechanisms in addressing students' concerns. Student affairs professionals should take heed of the knowledge available on student activism and advise university leadership accordingly. Thus, it is well known that the violent repression of student protests is a key factor in increasing the size and militancy of student movements and that, in the long run, repressive strategies are highly counterproductive: the ways in which student activists articulate their concerns tends to be conditioned by the response they expect (Altbach, 1991; Luescher-Mamashela, 2015). Engaging with the theoretical foundations of student affairs is one of the hallmarks of a professionalised practice.

It is important for diverse students to feel welcome, receive support and be included in the campuses on which they study, not only for the sake of middle-class notions of "comfort" and "feeling at home", but also for delivering on equitable access and acknowledging and supporting diversity and inclusivity as values in themselves. In the article on international students' experiences at an East African university, Janice Rasmussen shares lessons about what it is like to be a student in a foreign country; the article highlights the need to provide the necessary support and a sense of welcome. The article by Ana Naidoo and Juan-Claude Lemmens of the University of Pretoria focuses on intervention strategies for supporting first-year students. This contribution introduces our focus on the first-year student experience that we will pursue in depth in the first 2016 issue of the Journal. Support for students is indeed critical for ensuring epistemological access, and the article on the attitude of engineering students, lecturers and academic development practitioners towards academic development classes by Thembeka Shange from the Tshwane University of Technology speaks equally to those issues. Epistemological access is also a key topic in the book review included in this issue (see below).

The increasing diversity of the student bodies at universities, along with the rise of identity politics in general, has long been acknowledged as a challenge for student affairs; in South Africa, with its history of apartheid institutionalised racism and colonial-era social conventions of racial discrimination and exploitation, addressing the legacy of apartheid in general and academic segregation in particular is a key aspect of a transformation agenda based on the principles of social justice and equity. While the common-sense notion of transformation in South Africa – even in higher education – has become closely associated with the 'numbers game' of demographics, the article by Shose Kessi and Josephine Cornell shows a much richer, deeper dimension that remains largely unaddressed. 'Coming to

UCT: Black students, transformation and discourses of race' uses a powerful methodology, Photovoice, to analyse the racialised discourses embedded in the institutional culture of the University of Cape Town, a historically white university. Kessi and Cornell's article expands on earlier findings by Zimitri Erasmus and Jacques de Wet (2003) about the burden of black students at historically white universities to do all the 'race work' – for example, naming 'race' and problematising the racially biased nature of social relations, the university environment and the curriculum to which white staff and students are blind. The article also relates to points made by John Higgins (2007) that a core problem of institutional culture is the pedagogical culture and culture of transmission in South African universities, which must address "the reality of the uneven distribution of cultural capital" (p. 116). In our view, however, the latter point needs revision and further investigation. We would argue that it is less an "uneven distribution of cultural capital" and much more a deeply biased validation of only one racialised kind of cultural capital: what is typically referred to as 'whiteness'. Kessi and Cornell's article illustrates this in the quotes they provide of students' reflections on a set of photographs taken at UCT. In so many ways, the article captures the sense of disappointment and injustice experienced by black students that has given rise to the #RhodesMustFall movement.

In the US, which has a similar history to that of South Africa, the protests noted above, such as #BlackOnCampus, are awakening calls to engage with race issues that are often ignored in the hope that they will go away. Indeed, identity politics will be with us in student affairs for as long as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and so forth are used as grounds for 'othering' and discriminating unfairly, including and advantaging some and excluding and disadvantaging others. The field of 'transforming' is as wide and diverse as the student affairs profession and also reaches deep into the core of the academic realm. While professionalisation is not a panacea, an amateurish approach to student affairs is fast approaching its best-before date.

Thus, we submit that at the heart of the current upheavals in higher education are the principles of social justice and equity – in particular, equity in education. As we know, equity and equality are two concepts that are often used interchangeably even though we know they are not. Equity is about the recognition that a differentiated response is required to enable parity of living. Within critical social theory, Nancy Fraser (2009) and Joan Tronto (2013) discuss ethics of care and participatory parity as a key aspect of equitable living and that a range of varied responses to conditions of living as well as transformative approaches are required to address the structures that maintain inequities. Bozalek and Carolissen (2014, p. 16) suggest that we need to "create opportunities for people to participate on an equal footing", and that this is an expression of recognition of diversity of living. It is a lived form of social justice.

In African student affairs, the current developments leave us with a number of questions: What is the next #movement? Will the South African phenomenon of #movements, which started at one institution, spread to others and eventually galvanised in a nationwide #FeesMustFall movement, mobilise continentally across the African cyberspace? Equity and social justice in higher education are continental – indeed global – concerns. How will

student affairs rise to the challenge? We are sure to continue keeping an eye on the current developments and publish the contributions that will advance a professional reflexivity about, theoretical engagement with, and empirical understanding of this.

We close off this issue of the *JSAA* with two invitations to our readers to engage with the diverse literature spanning the field of student affairs. The first is the review of Ursula Wingate's (2015) book, *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case of Inclusive Practice,* reviewed brilliantly by Thengani Ngwenya. According to Ngwenya, Wingate's book "is not just another textbook on academic literacy but an incisive critique of the often taken-for-granted conceptions of academic literacy and its role in curriculum design and pedagogy" (p. 61). He argues that the book shows that epistemological access is deeply intertwined with academic literacy; that academic literacy is far more than a set of reading and writing skills to be delivered to 'disadvantaged students' to be able to cope with higher education; and that Wingate succeeds in proposing a more egalitarian and transformative approach to academic literacy based on the language socialisation and socio-cultural theory. If this sounds like jargon, Ngwenya assures readers that the book is "eminently readable" and "will appeal to both experts and novices working in the field of academic literacies in higher education" (p. 61). Our second invitation to read is a set of three reading lists for practitioners and scholars of student affairs in Africa, which were compiled by Tom Ellet, Birgit Schreiber and Travis York respectively.

This is the third anniversary issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*. We started this journey in 2013 and are deeply grateful to all contributors, editors and peer reviewers for continuing to share their knowledge and invest their time and expertise in our common quest to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs in Africa. We are also indebted to our colleagues at the University of the Western Cape Libraries and e-Publications and at our publisher African Minds, who have taken responsibility for the professional and technical aspects of the publishing of *JSAA* since its launch.

In its first three years, the *JSAA* has grown immensely. On the one hand, we now have a growing stock of research articles of increasingly high quality; on the other hand, we have found ourselves having to reject a number of articles or redirect articles that did not match the scope of the *JSAA*. Of most concern, we detected this year two cases of serious plagiarism in submitted manuscripts, which confirmed our practice of putting submissions through plagiarism detection software. The growth of the *JSAA* is also evident in statistics provided by Google Analytics: the *JSAA* has a readership that hails from all continents. Indeed, among the top 50 countries from which the journal was accessed, there are several from the African continent from which the open-access, online version of the *JSAA* is accessed: Botswana, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. It further includes users from all other BRICS countries (of which China tops the list), as well as from other countries across the globe such as the United States (which overall tops the list), Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom. We had over 4 500 new users of the website in 2015 alone (not counting the surge in users when this issue goes live), of which over 240 have registered on the website to receive regular notices.

As members of the Editorial Executive of *JSAA* we remain fully committed to the *JSAA*'s mission "to be the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain in universities on the African continent". Thus, in the course of 2014, *JSAA* was evaluated and included in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and this year we have started the process of being evaluated and indexed in African Journals Online (AJOL), the world's largest online collection of African-published, peer-reviewed scholarly journals (see www.ajol.info). Our medium- and long-term goals are to gain endorsements and accreditation by institutional, professional, national and continental bodies such as the South African Department of Higher Education and Training, and to have *JSAA* included in all relevant international indices. As we continue to monitor the *Journal*'s impact, we find that published articles are also increasingly surfacing in citations. There is a well-known lag in citation impact of works published in the Humanities and Social Sciences; yet, given our focus on quality, relevance and accessibility, we are confident that our contributors will find themselves affirmed in the choice of the *Journal* as a manner of inserting themselves into a global scholarly discourse on student affairs in Africa and beyond.

We hope you will enjoy this issue, and dare to enter the debates and contribute an article.

For the Editorial Executive,
Prof. Teboho Moja, Dr Thierry M. Luescher and Dr Birgit Schreiber

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