

## EDITORIAL

# Racism and Corona: Two Viruses affecting Higher Education and the Student Experience

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

### *Introduction*

This issue comes at a time when the world is in the grip of the Corona virus pandemic and on lockdown, and when there is a worldwide outrage over the continuous violation of black bodies and the injustice and inhumanity inherent in systems and practices steeped in racism. The corona virus and its impact on higher education, on students and Student Affairs and Services, and the devastating impact of racism in higher education and the student experience and the work it involves for Student Affairs and Services are the themes of this editorial.

### *Corona Virus*

At no time in history has Student Affairs and Services so widely, rapidly and deeply been impacted by a health emergency. Covid-19 as the illness is called, is challenging us to develop innovative responses to this global health threat while preserving and continuing to advance the overarching values in Student Affairs. As soon as students were rushed off campuses into lockdown, Corona shined a ghastly light on the pervasive socioeconomic inequities which render the educational project in Africa and across the world unreachable to many. Universities are unequally equipped to offer equitable learning experiences to all in the best of times. As much as the same are challenged to deliver functional online and blended learning and development experiences even under normal circumstances, the migration to emergency remote teaching and service provision has thrown open even deeper fissures.

What can be offered on campus with its superior infrastructure and facilities is far from the conditions that many students are faced with in remote locations at home.

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\* **Dr Birgit Schreiber** is 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

\*\* 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 Research Director in the Human Sciences Research Council, 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: tluescher@hsrc.ac.za

Much that determines connectivity here is far beyond the reach of a university's ability to mitigate and ameliorate. And if infrastructure, technological, and personal device and data challenges were not enough, there is naturally a greatly uneven readiness of Student Affairs and teaching staff to engage in and offer emergency remote development and support. To adjust from face-to-face teaching, learning and support to online provision is a significant challenge of adjustment (not only academic, but also social, familial and economic). Student Affairs finds itself at the centre of the challenge, but at a periphery of being able to mitigate it, even though Student Affairs is precisely the best equipped and positioned to assist with such adjustments.

Student Affairs professionals became the essential service providers in higher education as they continued to work on making sure students were safe while their academics were in progress remotely. They had to make sure that students move out of residences, travel home nationally and internationally, and that Student Affairs remain in contact with them and provide all kinds of services while working remotely.

In the time of crisis, Student Affairs is needed more and different services are required of its essential workers. Yet, how can we develop graduate attributes, diversity and leadership competencies, enhance student engagement and promote social justice values on the remote? How can we support those students who are in greatest need of support: differently abled students, students with mental and physical health challenges, students impacted by gender violence, students who face alienation and have epistemological access challenges, first-year students, first generation students and students with severe financial problems, and so forth. How can we empower our students when many are excluded from learning or are attempting to learn and develop in quite uncondusive conditions?

These questions and many more will be discussed in depth and across many different countries and institutional contexts in our Special Covid-19 Issue, Vol. 9 Issue 1. We will focus on the impact of Corona and the Covid-19 pandemic, as announced in the call for papers that we issued in March 2020 and which closed in May 2020. Set aside the challenges and tragedies that define the pandemic, it has been incredible to receive 112 submissions of proposals in response to this call from Student Affairs practitioners and researchers in 13 African countries (and others from across the globe). It has been painful and rewarding to select from these submissions 30 proposals to accept, of which we hope to publish at least fifteen fully developed and peer-reviewed papers in the special issue. To us, the response to this call evidences that Africa's Student Affairs has been moved to action and risen to respond to this challenge like never before.

### ***#BlackLivesMatter***

At the heart of Student Affairs work are the principles of diversity, equity, redress, social justice and inclusivity, which express themselves in our practices to give every student – irrespective of their race, gender, class, religion, ability, sexual orientation, ethnicity or nationality – a fair chance to succeed in their educational aspirations and develop into well-rounded citizens. Our anti-discrimination and diversity work would not be necessary, was it not that racism, sexism and so forth also infiltrate higher education.

The police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA, on 25 May 2020 led to a global outrage against the use of excessive force by police officers – particularly against black suspects. The #BlackLivesMatter movement has given much energy, inspiration and momentum to the demonstrations against police violence. In Africa, the wave of demonstrations has been linked with an outcry against police brutality during the Covid-19 lockdown in a number of countries. In South Africa alone, at least 10 people have died at the hands of law enforcement, typically in poor, black communities. At the same time, there are reports of spikes in gender-based violence and femicide across Africa. Irrespective of lockdown, from Lagos to Mombasa, from Alexandria to Cape Town, students are taking up these social justice issues more forcefully and widespread than we have ever seen.

Student Affairs is part of these movements not only to assist students in impacting history and changing social and academic systems in effective ways, but also that participation in these movements become opportunities to empower our students as agents of social justice once they leave higher education. At the same time, similar issues have to be addressed within our institutions as students have called for the decolonization of higher education, which is a call to end racism in its various forms. Like the Corona virus, so must the scourges of racism and tribalism, sexism and homophobia, religious intolerance and classist discrimination spur us on to determined action.

### *Student Centring on the Lived Student Experience*

In our complex contexts, centring on the lived experience of students and seeking to understand how different students and student groups navigate their living and learning experiences, continues to be a major challenge for Student Affairs in Africa. Only by doing so can we collectively grow our knowledge base and develop best practices and relevant theory.

The student-centred development and learning experience is premised on the notion of the autonomous, independent student, who takes responsibility for their development and self-directed engagement with their living and learning context as part of a life-long process. Students are constructed as active participant and responsible members of the living, learning and development higher education community who construct meaning and relevance in and through their learning and development. The student's unique and prior experience, their assumptions, beliefs and attitudes about the world and the continued reconstruction of their worldview are at the core of the student-centred development experience. Student-centred learning and development is a recognition of the student's diversity, varied engagement and learning styles.

This issue of *JSAA* contains 7 articles which implicitly and explicitly foreground student-centred learning and development, and share the focus on different kinds of students' lived experiences. In particular, they study:

- Students with financial challenges;
- Differently abled students;
- Residence students seeking common ground;
- Student biographies;

- Students who become active in protests;
- Rural residence and non-residence students; and
- First-year students.

The diversity of students, multiple facets of student living and learning, and the complexity of different contexts highlight the significance of the notion of student centredness. This issue emphasises the vast range of contextual, institutional, social and personal readiness of students to engage with the development process.

### *In This Issue*

Sikhwari, Dama, Gadisi and Matodzi from the University of Venda report on their research of the textured impact of living and learning on their university campus, showing that experiencing the university by living and learning on campus is indeed generating better results for students than living off campus. They highlight the role of integration into the social sphere of the university as making a significant difference in the students' commitment, success and retention.

Mosia and Phasha illuminate the experience of students living and learning with disability and remind poignantly of the persistent inequities in our society and in HE. While this is widely documented, as laid out in their literature review, it continues to be a critical point in the struggle towards social justice and equity.

The experience of first-year students is the focus of a quantitative study by Uleanya and Rugbeer at the University of Zululand. It is during this period that adjustment is a crucial aspect of a successful completion of the first year and the authors demonstrate and make specific recommendations around the immense value SAS can make in this regard.

Pretorius and Blaauw in their article on subjective well-being of students add to the evidence on the role of context on student experience and conclude that the context of where and how a student is able to live and learn plays a significantly positive role in the overall student experience. In this study the subjective well-being of students is correlated to the sense of belonging and their academic experience.

The starting point of Qoza's article "Choreographies of Protest Performance as Recruitment to Activism" is the question, why and how student bystanders become involved in protest enactment. Analysing her observations and student protesters' reflections on the significance of "the vibe" or atmosphere, and its co-construction in protest performance, Qoza argues that participation in protesting may be more about co-enacting a performance – as in joining a group dance – than about identifying with a particular organisation's interests and demands.

Maseko and Stützner focus on the student residence leadership and the research questions focus on the collaboration of student leadership with institutional leadership around impacting transformation. The article elaborates on the shift towards dialogic conversation between all partners towards the pluralistic transforming space.

Masango, Muloiwa, Wagner and Pinheiro present the results of a study done on the biographical questionnaire and argue that knowing specific information about students

very early on their academic career enables SAS to tailor the responses into attuned and relevant support, right in time.

### *Two Literature Reviews and Two Book Reviews*

Following on from *JSAA*'s issue focused on living communities and residence life (*JSAA* Vol. 7(2)), we publish in the present issue two annotated reading lists of seminal historical as well as current Student Affairs literature related to student housing and residence life. They were respectively compiled by Nupur Goyal of New York University in Shanghai and Christopher J. Stipeck of NYU in New York.

We also publish two book reviews on the recently published book, *Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017*, edited by Thierry Luescher, Denyse Webbstock and Ntokozo Bhengu, published in March 2020 by African Minds, South Africa. This book is part of a book series on leadership in higher education established by the South African Council on Higher Education. Both reviews describe the book in different ways as a significant sociopolitical reflection and commentary – appreciating, on the one hand, the diversity of the student leaders and their reflections, and providing, on the other hand, a caveat around the danger of 'romanticising' the 2015/16 student protests known, *inter alia*, as #FeesMustFall.

### *And Finally...*

As customary in the first issue of the year, we want to thank our faithful expert peer reviewers, without whom this kind of indigenous knowledge creation would not be possible. The names of reviewers who helped select the articles published in our 2019 Volume 7 are listed in our 'Thank you to our reviewers'.

Finally, we also want to thank the Division Student Affairs of Stellenbosch University in South Africa for their generous contribution to making this issue possible.

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